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# Noise pollution drives away birds from Karnala sanctuary

101 By Gunvanthi Balam 18/1/99

MUMBAI: It's early yet this winter morning, but Salim Ali's Birds of Bombay are a flutter in the Karnala bird sanctuary in Panvel. A crow-pheasant scuttles into the shrubbery at the intrusion of human footsteps. A parakeet screeches. A rather more amenable pond heron, however, stays put in its muddy pool of water, watching us lazily as we cross the cement bridge that takes us over the little pool into the hills beyond.

There's no getting away from the constant drone of traffic on the nearby Mumbai-Goa highway, but somehow this heightens the cadences of the jungle — the bird-song and the soft, scuffling sound of Hanuman langurs at play in the canopies shading the trails. The harmony is fleetingly disrupted by the yelp of stray dogs that insist on following us for a bit. Their feathered friends fly off the handle at the sound of their canine voices, but settle down when the doggies eventually turn tail. Fortunately, there are no two-in-one-toting tourists around just yet.

Climbing up the leafy trails leading to

Karnala fort (Funnel Hill) with birdwatcher Bhargav Vaishnav of the nearby Yusuf Meherally Centre, we get to see a number of birds — a golden oriole that forms a bright spot in the greenery, a black drongo with its broad blue stripe glinting in the dappled sunlight, a pair of purple-rumped sunbirds, a male paradise flycatcher, its white tail flashing through the air, some parakeets, kingfishers and green barbets.

All year round, Karnala is shaheen falcon country, as Mr Vaishnav points out. But we don't see the formidable raptor this morning.

In winter, however, many migratory birds grace the scene — some woodland species from the Himalayas, like the blueheaded rock thrushes, grey drongos, tree pipits and leaf warblers, a few Western Ghat species like the haircrested drongos and pittas, Nilgiri wood pigeons and greyheaded mynahs.

"There's a pitta," Mr Vaishnav says, as the bird flits by. But despite the binocs, this city-slicker misses it, as also a heart-spotted woodpecker, which cannot be easily seen outside Karnala.

These sweet creatures notwithstanding,

the nature walk reveals that things are not entirely idyllic in "Bombay's very own little bird sanctuary," as ornithologist Humayun Abdulali calls it. The pathways climbing up to the thumb-shaped pinnacle that distinguishes Karnala fort are pock-marked with plastic litter and shards of broken beer bottles. The leaf cover on the ground is scant, and several small trees have had their lower branches lopped off.

And up in the ancient fort that oozes martial history, the old water tanks located under the pinnacle hold almost as much polythene and paper as water — "the disgusting discards of a careless consumer society," as naturalist-academic Parvish Pandya, another Karnala regular, puts it.

"Our picnickers and poachers are up to no good, and Salim's and Humayun's world is under siege," laments Mr Pandya, who teaches at Bhavan's College and has researched the avifauna in Karnala. The 4.8-sq km bird sanctuary, which was notified in 1971 as a result of Humayun's lobbying, is under pressure from increased tourism, environmental pollution and degradation, admits Nitin Kakodkar, deputy conservator

of forests, Thane.

This is borne out by the fact that birdlife here is on the decline. In the 1970s, Humayun Abdulali's checklist for this tiny forest, just 20 minutes from Panvel station, comprised 144 different species of birds. Today, the count is down to about 105 — "That's what our birdlisting team found some months ago. Of course, they did not take into account warblers and raptors, which require experts to study them. But the count could be better," says Mr Kakodkar.

According to the conservator, the bird population has been hit by noise pollution and habitat destruction. "The traffic on the highway here has trebled in the last ten years, driving away some species." Indeed, recent studies in Europe have shown that the noise of highway traffic drowns the mating calls of birds, resulting in less procreation.

It also forces the birds to leave their habitat for more peaceful surroundings, which they often never find in this over-urbanised part of the world.

"Also, the habitat is being degraded by

local headloaders, who cut down branches to feed fuelwood to the farmhouses and dhabas that have mushroomed in the vicinity recently. This means that there is less leaf fall, and thus a thinner humus layer on the forest floor — which means less nourishment for the forest and its animal-life," says Mr Kakodkar.

"Given that there are only three forest guards to patrol the sanctuary, these poachers routinely get away with murder."

However, the committed Mr Kakodkar is expediting measures to nurture the languishing sanctuary and to educate the public about its value. "We are going to expand the sanctuary from 4.8 sq km to 12 sq km and improve the habitat in the expansion zone by planting bird-attracting trees like the Indian coral, Bombax and fruit trees there. We also plan to increase the interpretative activities in the sanctuary," he says. "Meanwhile, it would help vastly if visitors refrained from littering the place and making a noise, and if they concentrated on quiet birdwatching instead of loud merry-making."

# Romeo on the forest balcony

101 20/6/99

By Vithal C. Nadkarni

**KARNALA:** You feel lost as you cruise down the Mumbai-Panaji road, in pitch darkness, through miles of vast, still forest. Then suddenly, like a ghostly Garuda with a twisted neck, the white concrete bird sign stands out momentarily in the beam of your headlights. You've arrived at the Karnala bird sanctuary.

It's long past midnight by the time you finish dinner at the dhaba outside the sanctuary and settle into the forest lodge. "I wouldn't go past that concrete bund in the dark if I were you," cautions the forest officer on duty.

"Why? Are there tigers lurking around?" you ask with growing excitement.

"No," he replies. "There might be snakes. But I'm more worried about the prospect of twisted ankles and sudden falls suffered

birds. Unlike their grey and black city cousins, which hum and wheeze asthmatically, these forest Romeos produce mellow whistles that go merrily up and down the scale.

Melodious as the green pigeons are—the males wear maroon shoulder patches—Mr and Mrs Shama eclipse them all. Like children in Victorian homes, these forest thrushes are often heard and seldom seen. The loud and

Illustration by Vithal C. Nadkarni



clear notes of the shama, however, are quite at odds with the melancholy image that many Urdu poets attribute to the bird.

Moreover, the shama's characteristic stance—the long graceful tail is cocked jauntily above its jet-black head as it hops around the shady ravines and

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