

MP

March 5  
The Tribune

The Haryana Wildlife Department proposes to set up a wildlife sanctuary at Morni on 4882 hectares (around 12,000 acres), as this area is rich in flora and fauna. This area includes Khol Raitan, a protected forest area in Belwali, Mandana, Asrewali and Bir Ghaggar. Originally, the Wildlife wing of the Forest Department had earmarked an area of over 50,000 acres. It was, however, asked to shrink the proposed area under the sanctuary to 12,259 acres

Nov 20, The Tribune

#### Winged visitors are here again / Bipin Bhardwaj

With winter setting and the mercury falling, the winged visitors from Siberia are here again. This time the guests are on schedule and they will be watched by bird lovers in various wetlands, parks and sanctuaries located in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Union Territory of Chandigarh and some other parts of the region.

The first flock of these migratory birds that arrived last month-end was joined by another flock in the first week of this month.

A record number of over 30,000 migratory birds of over 45 species have arrived in the Pong Dam reservoir in Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh and over three times more are expected.

After the Bhatnagar Sanctuary, the Pong Dam reservoir is the only place where the red-necked grebe halt every year. The most common species of the migratory birds that descend here include ruddy-shell duck, bar-headed geese, mallard, coot, pochard, pintails and gulls.

These birds come from China, Siberia, Central Asia, Pakistan and Ladakh and halt here en route their destinations in the country, Himachal Wildlife and Forest authorities said.

The migratory birds were also spotted in Renuka lake in Sirmour and Rewalsar lake in Mandi district. After being cleared of the huge growth of hyacinth on the water sheet by the Army authorities, the Harike Wildlife Sanctuary in Ferozepore, Punjab, has attracted 25,000 to 30,000 birds of various species so far. The wild growth had engulfed a section of the water body leaving little space for the rehabilitation of the birds. Apart from Sultanpur National Park near Gurgaon, Bhindawas Wildlife Sanctuary near Jhajjar in Haryana, Kanjli, Breta, Hargobindpur, Thein Dam, Ropar, Chhat Bir Zoo water feature and some other known wetlands of the region have also received flocks of these birds.

As per the reports of the Haryana Wildlife department more than 1,500 migratory birds of 25 species, including four avocets, three purple herons, four marshall's ibis, a Jaccana, cormorant many more were noticed in Sultanpur National Park and Bhindawas Wildlife Sanctuary last week.

During a visit to the Chhat Bir Zoo the Tribune Team saw the water feature dotted with more than 3500 migratory birds. There was a flutter of wings as Tribune lensman Karam Singh targeted his camera to shoot them. Birds that have arrived at Chhat Bir Zoo include tufted pochard, mallard duck, wigeon, shoveller, common teal, pintail duck, gadwall, Indian moorhens, nakta, spot bill, brahminy duck and painted stork, confirmed Mr Vinod Sharma, Chief Warden, (Zoos), Punjab.

Lotus had covered over 40 per cent of the lake area last year. But this year that cover has been removed and the vast water sheet has attracted more birds this year, he claimed.

The arrival of the migratory birds is less in Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh because of the ongoing water sports and the visitors who throng this tourist spot frequently.

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**The tribune Pong Lake: Popular with winged visitors**

**Rajendra Rajan**

IT'S a winter morning. An intense cold breeze grips the visitors as sun begins to unfold gradually on the vast Pong reservoir. Winged guests from Siberia and Central Asian countries slowly start descending on the blue waters. By noon one can see the entire expanse of the Shahnahar barrage dotted with dark 'pearls'. Being one of the largest man-made wetlands in the country, Pong Lake in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh attracts more than 230 species of migratory and resident birds. Renamed Maharana Pratap Sagar Bandh a few years ago, the reservoir offers an opportunity to nature lovers to meet some of the world's most exotic birds.

The artificial Pong Lake is spread over 307 sq km. It is 41.5 km long and 19 km wide during rainy season. The HP Government has declared the Pong reservoir as a sanctuary for the protection and propagation of wildlife, while the Ministry of Environment declared it a national wetland in 1994.

As early as in 1920, a British Police Officer recorded 27 species of birds around the Beas river. Prior to 1976, the Beas flowed in the region. Thousands of families were displaced for the construction of Pong Dam.

The lake is an excellent feeding ground for certain insectivorous, herbivorous, wading and diving water birds. Some of the common birds visiting the lake are Brahminy ducks, sarus crane, black-necked grebes, red-necked grebes, large cormorants, Indian shag, darter, eastern grey heron, pintails, large egrets, little egrets, cattle egrets, black stork, bar-headed goose, mallards, gadwalls, wigeons, shovellers, common pochards, white-eyed pochards, tufted duck, Indian moorhens, Indian purple moorhens, coots, great black-headed gulls, black-headed gulls, little gulls, river terns, osprey and marsh harriers. The red-necked grebe was sighted in this wetland for the first time in February 1989.

The wetlands in Europe and North and Central Asia freeze during winters and the food supply becomes inadequate under snow cover. Millions of water birds after breeding in summer undertake journeys along the major river valleys over the continent of Asia and the western Pacific regions to spend winter in more congenial climatic conditions of the Indian subcontinent. A massive number of migratory water birds visit the Pong wetland every year and add to the natural beauty of this area. They generally start reaching Pong Lake from October onwards and begin their journey back during the end of March. According to the survey done by the wildlife wing, about 70,000 migratory birds were counted during the year 2000-2001.

The census of migratory birds in the Pong reservoir is taken in February every year by the wildlife wing of the Forest Department. The entire lake area is divided into eight segments. Rowing boats are used to avoid any disturbance to the birds while counting their number. Census records show that the number of waterfowls has increased considerably over the last three years. As per the survey conducted in February 2002, there were as many as 1,14,082 migratory birds. It was found that the number of bar-headed geese and pintails had gone up considerably. A number of bar-headed geese, Brahminy ducks were found in green fields. Black stork was sighted on December 14, 2002, after a period of about 15 years. It is generally found in marshes, freshwater lakes and fields. This bird was seen in a small pond on the shore of the lake.

Black stork, a carnivorous, breeds in Eurasia and is a winter migrant to northern India. White stork and white-necked stork were also sighted this year in the sanctuary area after a long period. Intensive patrolling and supervision is being done in and around Pong Lake to shield these winter guests from poachers.

The Pong reservoir has four islands: two of which — Rainsar and Karu — have plenty of space apart from a congenial habitat for the winter guests. All the four islands with rich flora and fauna provide an attractive base for the birds.

Despite its various attractions — migratory birds, water sports, angling, etc — Pong Lake continues to remain a secluded spot. This may be because of security restrictions around the dam area. However, the state government has endeavoured to bring Pong Lake on the international tourist map. A spacious and beautiful restaurant was opened two years ago. The construction of civil terminal at Pathankot airport is likely to give an impetus to the flow of tourists to the Pong wetland. The reservoir is about 70 km from Pathankot.

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MIGRATORY BIRDS ARE LEAVING THEIR HABITAT A WHOLE MONTH IN ADVANCE

# Frequent fliers exit the Pong dam transit lounge

The drought is driving out the birds from this picturesque region in Himachal Pradesh. ASHWANI SHARMA reports

**D**YING rivulets are not the only signs of worsening conditions in this picturesque area. The birds are also fast disappearing. Water levels at the Pong Dam lake — north India's largest habitat for migratory birds — is at its lowest ever and despite record arrivals last November, the early migration of the birds from the reservoir area is being attributed to unfavourable weather conditions.

By mid-February, the bird count has been reduced to almost half the number of their arrivals. Scientists from Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), say this is unprecedented. The lake was declared a bird sanctuary in the early '80s and as a national wetland in 1994.

Pong dam, the largest manmade wetland in northern India, came about as the result of the construction of a dam on the River Beas for hydel and irrigation purposes.

Fed by five major streams emanating from the Dhauladhar ranges in the Kangra valley, the lake — which now also awaits to be declared an international wetland — measures 314 square km.

It attracts over 60,000 birds every year and provides them a diverse habitat, from marshy areas to deep swamps. After water receded by nearly 180 sq m, the birds have been deprived of their feeding grounds. With the climate getting warmer, the birds have been forced out of their habitat a whole month in advance.

This has got scientists worried. Dr H.S. Mehta, director of the Solan-based,

high altitude zoology field station of the ZSI reveals that teams have been sent to Pong dam to study the impact of the soaring temperature and drought conditions on early bird migrations.

The Himachal wildlife department census conducted last December claims an arrival of 81,848 birds this season, which P.K. Gupta, the range officer says was highest ever. ZSI authorities however dispute the claim. The exact bird count, they say, was just little more than 50,000 birds, of which over 20,000 have already migrated.

Gupta says early migration of the birds, first was noticed in mid-January, and subsequent investigations by senior wildlife officials confirmed a large chunk of these birds having left their habitat. Gupta defends the wildlife census as being most accurate and claims that 50,000 birds are still around.

According to Dr Sanjeeva Pandey, current director of the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP), who had done in-depth studies on migratory patterns of waterbirds at the Pong dam bird sanctuary, a total of 54 bird species have been recorded, of which 39 are now common. The number of species have been fairly stable since 1988.

Wildlife officials categorise bird species also on the basis of their migrations. A few are local species, moving down to the sanctuary from nearby habitats in search of feeding grounds after some of their traditional sources dry up. One category moves in from the higher

mountains, including Tibet and Baluchistan. Finally, there are those coming in from Siberia, North China and Mongolia. It is this category, which is very sensitive to the rise in temperatures and make a quick exit when the climate turns hotter.

Dr Virender Sharma, the former principal scientific officer for the Himachal Pradesh Council for Science and Technology. He suggests the need for studying the migration of birds at other wetlands to arrive at some conclusions for the present, rather unexpected, departure. Heat and receding water levels are also reasons, Dr Sharma believes.

Purshotam, a boatman at Pong reservoir who has been observing migratory patterns of the water birds for the last 22 years, claims the pre-summer departure of the birds is perhaps the first he had ever seen. A large track of marshy land, which had once been a feeding ground, is now totally parched this time. The lowering of the water levels has made more land available for cultivation.

In fact, some parts of this region which were once wetlands are wheat fields today and look like they are a part of Punjab! "Normally the water level is at 1,340-1,352 sq ft in February. This time it stood at 1,310 square feet as on February 15," says Purshotam.

This has enabled farmers like Randhir Singh and Bilbir Singh — both brothers — to sow 350 kg of wheat seed in the dry shores. But there is no guarantee that they would be able to harvest a good crop as a result.



The duo are witnessing drying of the crop because of the lack of rains. Local panchayat pradhan, Jeet Singh Pathania, observes that since the entire belt is currently experiencing severe drought with practically no rains since the last monsoons, the water level at the lake was bound to fall as its feeding rivers have also dried up. If such conditions continue, then lake could be seriously affected. "The arrival of the migratory birds will also get adversely affected," he fears and hopes against hope that the rains will bless the hills.

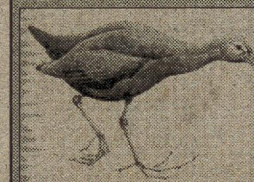
Environmentalists have another cause for worry: human interference, par-

ticularly farming, is posing a threat to migratory birds.

The Bareheaded Geese, which feed on green shoots of winter crops like wheat and maize, destroys the crops and farmers use various methods to eliminate them.

The state's minister for science and technology, Rajan Sushant, who early this month convened a meeting of various stakeholders, including the local communities, has advised government agencies to revise their earlier approach and involve the local people at every step in their attempts to protect the migratory birds.

## How's this for a birdie?



A Purple Moorhen

Terns, Warblers and Babblers. Coots were particularly plentiful in number. There were and estimated 28,000 of them. Cormorants were next, at 27,000.

THE Rednecked Grebe was spotted for the first time in India at Pong dam, while the Blackheaded Gull, the Great blackheaded Gull, and the Herring Gull are uncommon.

More common bird species include: the Barheaded Goose, the Brahminy Duck, the Ruddy Shelduck, the Pintail, the Cormorant, the Egrets, the Indian Sarus Crane, the Gadwall, the Heron, the Pochards, the Coots, the Shovelers, the Black Stork, Skylarks, Purple Moorhen, Indian Moorhen, Blackbellied

*Handwritten: 15/2/74*

## Drought forces birds to leave Pong sanctuary

**DHARAMSALA, FEB. 14.** The drought-like condition in and around the Pong bird sanctuary has forced a majority of the migratory birds to leave the wetland early this season.

Premature departure of migratory birds from the Pong lake was being attributed to the early rise in temperature and paucity of feed due to long-dry spell in the region. According to the official census carried out in December last, an all-time high of 80,000 migratory birds had been recorded, but with the exodus of brahmini ducks, coots, mallards and bar-headed gulls much before their usual departure time, the number of birds in the lake alarmingly went down to about 60,000.

Since these birds are very sensitive to climatic conditions, they leave if the weather hots up, Range Officer (wild life) Mr. P.K. Gupta, said here. Normally these birds begin to arrive in November and their population peaks during December, January and February.

They leave the sanctuary by March. According to Mr. P.K. Gupta, about 50 bird species visit the lake. They fly in from Tibet, central Asia, Europe, Siberia, Baluchistan and the snow-bound areas of Himachal Pradesh.

Among the migratory birds that visit the sanctuary are coots, Brahmini ducks, black-headed gulls, pin-teals, common pochards, cranes, cormorants, bar-headed gulls, mallards, large egrets, red-eye pochards, common grey teals, red-necked grebe, tuft ducks, gadwalls and Indian river tern besides local species.

UNI