

## Party in a Avian World...!!

Just the thought of spending an entire day in the search of as many birds as possible was fascinating !! Although it seemed like fun, this was an observational study for collecting data about avian life in and around Mumbai. This was The HSBC sponsored 4<sup>th</sup> Mumbai Bird Race wherein Birders, in groups of 5-6, had to look and document as many bird species as possible in a day and reach Maharashtra Nature Park, Sion with their records. This year the number of teams was whopping 65, meaning more than 300 birders would be involved in searching birds around Mumbai at the same time!!

I had missed the occasion last year but was determined to participate this year. I, along with my wife, Dhanashri, and few other friends formed a group named "House Sparrow" (I guess, we feel the scarcity of even House Sparrows these days, don't we??). Group ideally was supposed to have an *Expert Birder* which organizers normally manage to give to the best possible extent, depending on the availability. But, since no expert was left to lead us, Adesh Shivkar, one of the organizers asked me to lead my team. I knew I wasn't a so called expert but I also knew I wasn't a poor birder ☺. So, "House Sparrows", lead by a so called expert in me left Kalyan at the dawn of 17<sup>th</sup> Feb when the rest of the city was enjoying a deep Sunday sleep.

From the beginning itself I had decided NOT TO VISIT hot birding spots like Karnala, Uran, Sewri, Airoli creek etc. I was keen at covering the less frequently visited areas of Murbad region and hence took the Kalyan – Mamnoli – Murbad route. White throated kingfishers, Long-tailed Shrikes and Black Drongo's were ready to welcome us once we left the busy and polluted city. Just when we left Mamnoli, Indian Grey Hornbill passed the highway. This was my first encounter with Hornbill in THIS AREA (Yeoor forest, Karnala has abundant of them). Without even giving me a chance to take out the camera, it flew away. By the time we took the turn for Barvi dam just before Murbad, our list had gone to about 15.

Now it was an interesting route indeed, for we had left the Kalyan - Ahmednagar highway and were driving through the interior roads, free from traffic. Some birds indeed don't need many things for their livelihood - just enough trees/ water for feeding and / or nesting and quietude seems to suffice. Soon, variety of birds started rising with Munias, Flycatchers, Black Ibis, Babblers, Warblers, Plum headed parakeets, Woodpecker, Chloropsis etc. Each one of us started running after the birds in different directions ...some to photograph, some to see and other to just listen to the calls. Oriental Magpie Robin, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo and Gold-fronted Chloropsis alias Leaf bird are masters of mimicking calls of different birds. Sometimes,

just listening to a call, you don't recognize which bird you are actually listening to. A pair of Gold-fronted Chloropsis was happily feeding on a Palash tree when notorious Crows tried to trouble them. I guess, these Crows spend their entire life in troubling other birds. I wish human beings soon start liking flesh of Crows and Pigeons instead of Flamingoes just to balance the ratio of birds 😊😊.

I could photograph Gold-fronted Chloropsis from a much closer distance than my photograph taken earlier and hence felt quite happy. Even, Greater Indian Crow Pheasant – normally a shy bird – gave nice poses while basking on a tree. Its Red eyes were catchy. White throated kingfisher, nowadays a regular photographic object for me, was enjoying the morning on a leafless dwarf tree. I could in fact spot it from more than 200 feet distance entirely due to the fantastic light falling on its peacock-blue colored feathers. Just when I thought I had my shot, it flew away from a branch but not before giving me a decent flying shot.

While I was busy shooting Chloropsis and Kingfisher, Dhanashri & Mangesh were busy spotting Munias, Finches and such small birds. Identifying these small birds is not a very easy task, for many of them have a similar coloration, soft calls and above all, they are extremely restless. Dilip was enjoying his newly bought Sigma 170-500 mm lens along with Mangesh Deharkar and Rohinee – both equipped with their Canon Digicams.



[Gold-fronted Chloropsis – Female](#)



[Red-throated flycatcher - Female](#)

Soon, I decided to explore the other side of road with thicker forestation mainly to shoot in isolation. Some birds are sensitive to human movements more than the noise. Hence, it was important for us to make slow movements and less noise, and still keep our excitement at its highest peak. Here, I spotted Red throated flycatcher – female, busy collecting the nesting material. The forestation being thick, light wasn't enough but still I managed a decent shot.

Twelve km journey from Murbad to Barvi dam came to an end and as we decided to move towards GP Tank, we spotted the first raptor in the form of White Eyed Buzzard. It was sitting on a tree 50 feet away from us. For raptors, that was close indeed. I didn't waste time capturing it in my camera. From the same spot, we heard Crested Serpent Eagle calling from high up in the firmament. This bird has a peculiar call and a chance of any decent birder missing it on call is rare. Another bird of the 'Crested family' seen is Hoopoe. Those who want to see a stylish bird should watch this bird with its crest full open. Dilip badly wanted a good shot but somehow he couldn't manage one as the bird had plans to keep running away from him all the time (☺☺).

Soon we reached the Shiva temple near the junction of Barvi dam road and Kalyan – Karjat road. The lake behind the temple hosts waders like Cotton pygmy ducks, Coots, Pond herons, Red wattled lapwings. We moved ahead and reached isolated area of GP tank. Location of this lake, though small, I must say, is fantastic with Tavli hill bordering one side juxtaposed by Malang gad. Indian roller alias Blue Jay (State bird of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) was ready to pose for us on a perfect perch. This bird is blessed with quite remarkable array of colors and the more you observe it, the more you fall in love with it...amazing!! We took numerous pictures of Blue Jay and I even got a good flying shot!!



[Indian Roller alias Blue Jay](#)



[Common Stonechat - Male](#)

Pallid Harrier and Short-toed Snake Eagle (my first encounter with this bird) made their entry flying over the lake area in search of a prey. Tired of the search in that hot afternoon, Short-toed Snake Eagle decided to take a rest on pylon nearby, making us leave the lake area. It was 2.30 pm then and our stomach started complaining. We returned to Kalyan and had our lunch. I then decided to send Mangesh Phatak along with Dilip and Mangesh Deharkar to show them Kalyan creek area birds while I, along with Dhanashri and Rohinee came home to fill up the Bird Race entry form for the list of birds seen.



[Northern Pintail, Spot-billed Ducks](#)



[Black winged stilt](#)

The trio from Kalyan Creek returned with the sightings of Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Curlew Sandpipers, Shikra, Blue-tailed bee-eaters, Red Munia, Black winged stilts etc helping our list grow to a final figure of 82 different bird species!!

In the evening we had a nice get-together at Maharashtra Nature Park where all people from Birding fraternity submitted their records of the day. Each team briefed for 3-4 minutes about their birding for the day and then winners were declared. Dr. Vaibhav Deshmukh and team, last year's runner up, grabbed the 1<sup>st</sup> prize this year with a fantastic figure of 172 bird species. Parag Damle and team got the prize of Bird of the day award for recording a rare Black Capped Kingfisher near Revdanda.



[Short-toed Snake Eagle](#)



[Pallid Harrier – Female](#)

All in all, it was a great experience to be in the avian world for the whole day . It has always been a pleasure to be in nature, but in addition to this pleasure, the recording of birds gave tremendous satisfaction of helping the birding community have latest data of the avian life in and around Mumbai !!!

--- Abhijit Avalaskar (20<sup>th</sup> Feb 2008)

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