

Diplomacy at Dawn: My notes from watching birds, nature's winged envoys

Amit Narang, IFS, is India's Ambassador-designate to the Sultanate of Oman. Writing in Times Evoke, he discusses his insights from bird watching in Delhi:

Photos Courtesy: Amit Narang

The sound was unmistakable. That resonant voice, the rising crescendo, those incessant three notes. Though groggy at 5:30 AM, I knew the guest I'd waited for over a year had finally arrived. While I dashed out impetuously, camera in hand, the common hawk cuckoo, perched gracefully on a gulmohar tree, gave me a calm and patient viewing. Known more famously as the papeeha, this is the quintessential Indian monsoon bird, its call, a paean to the rains.



The papeeha thus anointed itself 78th in my list of birds called 'Winged Envoys of Chanakyapuri': <https://bit.ly/WingedEnvoys> This is a catalogue I've curated for over a year, tabulating birds in the heart of Delhi's diplomatic enclave. The project has taught me a great deal about birds, of course. But it's also given me some insights about human beings which I'd like to share with you.

Having lived and travelled over five continents as a diplomat, appreciating nature has become a habit. But nothing had prepared me for my own city's birds once I started exploring them. The endeavour took wing (quite literally) during March 2020's pandemic-induced disruption. Suddenly, with traffic halting, the enormous ambient noise of the city also ebbed. The environment became more serene — and the birds themselves felt this, growing more at ease. I saw a small Siberian stonechat, which migrates from Russia to India to escape the cold, emboldened enough to venture into the city's centre. As I devoted myself to bird watching in my free hours, I found over 25 species



A LITTLE KING: The white-breasted kingfisher has a startling cape of blue



INDIA'S NATIONAL BIRD: An Indian icon, the stately peacock is at home in Delhi

flourishing in just our residential complex. This led to a rabbit hole of discovery, learning and great fun.

So far, I've catalogued 79 species, all in the green environs of Chanakyapuri. The list includes the quotidian but delightful myna, bulbuls, koels, sparrows, crows and peacocks alongside the exotic wagtail, shikras, drongos, hornbills, bee-eaters, flycatchers, robins and cuckoos. Some of these wonderful birds are residents, some are visitors from Africa, Europe or Siberia, who delight one with a sudden viewing and then, as unexpectedly, leave.

The project showed me how unaware many of our urban folk are about our natural surroundings. In our daily grind, we rarely notice, let alone appreciate, the other living beings sharing space with us. This is especially true for our avian neighbours, who despite their rich beauty and unique ways, live alongside us as though in a parallel universe. But it isn't the birds that are hiding in plain sight — it's us, living with our eyes wide shut. Yet, watching birds makes pragmatic sense — birds are acutely sensitive to ecological change, their presence or absence indicating the state of the environment. To be cognisant of birds is to be cognisant of our environment.

The project also reinforced how even our most bustling cities have rich biodiversity in the form of animals, trees, birds and insects. Drawing from this bounty, we should build ecological

awareness as part of our urban psyche. In a climate-stressed world, better awareness of nature is the first step to protect it — as is often said, 'To be able to care, you must be aware'. The project



tries to demystify bird watching as well. Frequently seen as the preserve of bird-nerds, who lug around expensive cameras or binoculars

to the nearest water body, bird watching can be intimidating for some — the very idea that you must 'go somewhere' to watch birds creates a distance between humans and avians, 'othering' birds and removing their existence to a different, aloof space. However, as Winged Envoys shows, you can happily bird watch in your own neighbourhood.

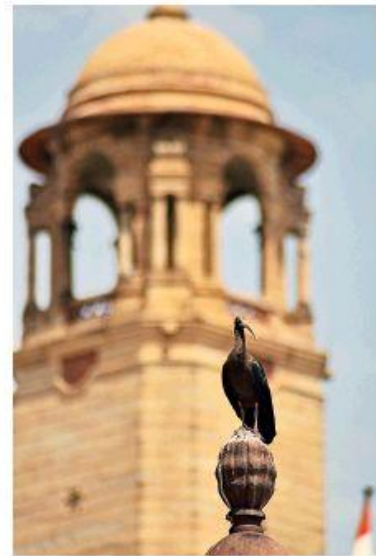
You may want a camera with a long zoom lens. Professional birding lenses are typically of focal lengths 400 mm and beyond. However, I manage with a regular 70-300 mm lens. What is essential is reading — a good guidebook, like 'Birds of the Indian Subcontinent, helps.

Many websites and apps are available as well. I use 'Merlin', developed by Cornell University, which has an amazing photo identification feature. Most of all, you need curiosity, patience — and the ability to rise very early, as birds themselves do.

KNOCK-KNOCK: The black-rumped flameback woodpecker is often heard across the capital



Bird watching has also helped me develop another skill. You start listening more keenly to the world around you as each bird has a unique call or song. Listening helps identify species since we often hear birds before we see them. It also adds beautiful layers of sound to our world, emphasising how we live in a magical environment which offers us multiple joys. Bird watching



BEYOND POWER CORRIDORS: A red-naped ibis perches in South Block

helps us improve ourselves and our world. A universe more aware of its surroundings is a more peaceful and centred place. Appreciating nature's treasures generates a mindfulness



IN DEW-DRENCHED DELHI: The Eurasian hoopoe with its exotic cap visits often

greatly needed in today's headline-and-deadline-charged world. This gives us the inner energy to lead more harmonious, happier and more productive lives. Being a bird of passage myself, I know I will always rise with the lark to discover more winged envoys in my neighbourhood, wherever that should be.

Views expressed are personal