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ECOWATCH

Return of the pelican

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The increase in the number of pelicans is news to cheer.

The nests are close to each other and the adult pelicans jostle with each other. Pelicans need undisturbed places to reproduce. They will abandon their nests at the slightest provocation.



Photo: Theodore Baskaran

Good news: Nesting birds at Nalapattu, Andhra Pradesh.

EARLY one morning, driving across Mutukadu Bridge on our way to Mamallapuram, we noticed on our right what looked like a large white flotsam in the lagoon. Viewed through binoculars, it resolved into a flock of pelicans indulging in communal feeding. These birds form a sort of flotilla, drive the fish with heavy beats of their wings to shallower waters and then scoop them in their beak, which is used like a landing net.

Thanks to the Internet, birders have been informing fellow twitchers of the frequent sightings of pelicans in recent months, in and around Chennai.

Frequent sightings

Dr. Shantharam recorded having seen nearly 200 sitting on the pylon in Pallikaranai. Once a rare visitor to Vedanthagal, pelicans are now nesting there in hundreds. From around Bangalore and Mysore, birdwatchers have been filing similar reports about pelican sightings. Good news.

A large water bird, the size of a turkey, the pelican has a long neck and a huge bill. An extendable gular pouch attached to this bill made Dixon Lanire Merrith write his famous limerick on the bird and its unmistakable beak. Here it is: A wonderful bird is the pelican/His bill can hold as much as his belly can/He can store in his beak/Enough food for a week/I'm damned if I know how the helican!.

The Grey pelican, the variety we are taking about, is found in lakes and lagoons. Its short legs and squat body has earned the bird its Tamil name Koozhaikada. It has come to symbolise our wetland habitats.

Important spots

In addition to Vedanthagal, there are a number of spots where the pelicans breed in this part of the country. At Kokkare Bellur near Mysore, their annual breeding spectacle attracts many visitors. In Nalapattu and Uppalapadu in Andhra Pradesh, there are plenty of pelicans every season. Nalapattu, just 95 km from Chennai, offers the best facility to observe their nesting activity. The barringtonia trees are not far from the

watchtower and you get a ringside view. You get unobstructed view of some nests.

The nests are placed close to each other and the adult pelicans jostle with each other. The nest itself is quite skimpy, an elementary platform made of sticks and twigs. But the pelicans are hard sitters, with both the male and female sharing the brooding duty.

Koonthankulam, near Tirunelveli, is a refuge where they nest annually. There are at least 15 sites in Tamil Nadu where these birds breed annually. Pelicans need undisturbed places to reproduce. They will abandon their nests at even the slightest provocation.

While breeding pelicans need a lot of food, to raise three or four ravenous nestlings exclusively on fish is no mean job. The adult bird first swallows the fish. On reaching the nest, it regurgitates the half-digested fish to the nestlings. This year, the Forest Department stocked the Vedanthangal Lake with nearly 50,000 fingerlings to help the nesting birds.

Some birders wonder whether sighting these birds in a few places could indicate recovery. Bangalore-based ornithologist Dr. Subramanya, who has been meticulously documenting pelicanries all over India for nearly two decades, says that these sightings indeed augur well for the status of this magnificent bird.

Making a comeback

We have reason enough to believe that the pelicans, which symbolise our wetland habitats, are making a comeback. He points out that the increase in pelican numbers in South India is also due to the large number of breeding sites where raising *Acacia nilotica* has provided places to nest.

A decade ago, the sighting of this bird was a rare occurrence. For instance, in 1991, only 13 birds were seen around Bangalore. Now you see them almost the year around and once a birder saw a flock of 240 in a single tank in one day.

However, the overall picture of waterfowl is not so happy. The Wetland International, an outfit monitoring the status of waterfowl the world over, says that 62 per cent of water birds in Asia are on the decline, the main

reason being habitat destruction.

Veteran birder Lavkumar Kachar from Ahmedabad laments that the majestic Sarus crane (the Krauncha bird of the Ramayana) is on its way out.

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