

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Bar-headed Geese Beckon

Last Sunday, we visited Asan barrage for bird watching. We arrived at Asan with bated breath; would there be too much mist for us to watch birds? When we arrived, the mist covered the water's surface, like a blanket of white smoke. The urgent "quacks" of waterfowl let us know that the birds were already active. Only a few minutes after we arrived, the mist began gradually evaporating with the sun's heat. In front of our eyes, the mist lifted slowly. A wondrous sight unfolded before our eyes. Hundreds of ducks dotted the water's surface-Asan's winter migrants had definitely arrived!

We spent the whole day watching birds at Asan recording nearly 100 species of birds. Amongst the really pretty ducks, and one of my favorites, was the Red-crested Pochards, which were present in large numbers. Numerous other ducks were sighted-Shoveller, Pintail, Common Teal, Spot-bill Duck, Common Pochard, Tufted Pochard, Ferruginous Pochard, Mallard, Gadwall, Ruddy Shelduck...lovely!

During the course of the day, we spotted an uncommon visitor-the Baer's Pochard (*Aythya baeri*). This duck is very similar to Ferruginous Pochard, but using the spotting scope that we were carrying, we were able to identify the Baer's Pochard. This duck, though considered a vagrant to northern India, but has been seen at the Asan Barrage in previous years. This uncommon duck is listed as "Critically Endangered" on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, so I was delighted to see at least 3 individuals at Asan.

Our wonderful day of birding was still to be concluded. I was looking for another of my bird favorites-the Bar-headed Goose (*Anser indicus*). Late in the day, scanning the barrage area with the spotting scope, Anchal, my wife, spotted a flock of nine Bar-headed Geese on the opposite bank! A tall, regal-looking goose, the Bar-headed Goose has a white head, adorned by two black bars on the head, very much like a corporal's stripes. The stripes very much belong-the goose, with its erect regal posture, slow measured movements remind me of army personnel-correct, upright, proud!

The goose is seen every year at Asan, but never in large numbers. The goose breeds in central Asia, but winters in South Asia, including India. Records exist of the goose passing over the high Himalayas during migration, making it one of the highest-flying birds in the world! There are unconfirmed reports of a flock of Bar-headed Geese being seen flying over Mount Everest! Wow!



Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi@gmail.com

Making a difference: During our visit, we were pleasant surprised to find quite a few people interested in looking at the birds through our binoculars and spotting scope. We pushed them to observe the birds and identify them using our bird guidebook! Its time for you to make a birdwatching visit to Asan Barrage! Carry a pair of binoculars and purchase a bird guide before you visit. Better still; use the services of trained birdwatching guides at Asan. These are members of the local community at Asan, who have been trained by the forest department. So not only will you enjoy birding, but you will also provide the locals with some earnings (and hence an incentive to conserve).

Photograph caption: Bar-headed Geese

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