

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

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The Pretty Painted Storks

What better way to usher in the colourful, festive season of Christmas and New Year than to spend time with your loved ones, in a lovely location, amongst creatures that you love! I did just that over the last week, having spent five days with my family, watching birds in the picturesque Keoladeo Ghana National Park, arguably India's best known bird sanctuary!

Keoladeo Ghana National Park, is located in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, and was the last known Indian wintering ground of the Siberian Crane. Unfortunately, these birds were last seen at this Park in 2002, and since then, have not been recorded in India.

Our bird watching visits are normally leisurely, and we don't have the frenetic fervour of many fellow twitchers. We don't have target species that we just have to see. For us, birding, is more about soaking in the area's natural beauty, its ambience, its sounds and scenes. The early morning mist at Keoladeo, which typically cleared up later in the day, was like the trailer of a movie. The dense mist only allowed you to fleeting peek at a bird, before it was swallowed up in the swirling mist. A call here, a call there-what was that bird? As the day progressed, the mist lifted, and the birds were then seen in all their splendour, accompanied by raucous calls and some musical ones, too. And the main movie began!

Amongst the most visible and spectacular birds was the Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*). A large heronry of Painted Storks lines the main road inside the Park and provides a terrific view, which even a non-birder cannot ignore! Large numbers of juvenile birds sat on nests built on *Prosopis juliflora*. The adult storks spend the day searching mainly for fish and frogs. While they feed on these, they also take food back for the juveniles. On quite a few occasions we watched as adult Painted Storks landed on the nest, regurgitated fish for the young ones,



and stood back and watched with pride as the the young birds scrabbled for the food! The juveniles were almost as large as the adults, and we wondered why the young did not feed themselves, and instead had to rely on their parents. Dependent kids or loving parents!

The Painted Storks know exactly how pretty they are! The adults pose often, as though knowing that visitors to the Park will love to photographs them. And photograph them we did. Including a trio that posed glamorously for us (see pic)!

Our stay at Keoladeo was made even more pleasurable by the our mode of transport-cycles! For five days, we wandered about the bird sanctuary on rickety cycles, hired at the sanctuary gates. The squeaks of the cycles competed with the squawks of the birds!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: The New Year beckons. Personal green resolutions anybody? Lots to pick from, though! Crucial, though, is that whatever actions you pick, follow through with them for the whole year, nay, your whole life!

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