

Monsoon magic

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Even the most crowded cities can have plants and animals and if you observe closely, you will notice the transformation as seasons change.

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Make a difference at this year's celebrations.

What can I do?

Everyone can do something to protect patches of nature in cities. Find one nearest to your house or school. Closely observe it, ask your teachers and parents to help you identify the plants and animals seen in it. Find out if there is some threat to the area, like garbage being thrown into it, and try to speak to those who might be responsible. Write to the local authorities (or get your school or parents to write) asking them to protect the area.

In Pune my bedroom window overlooks a little wetland. Just a basketball court size of marshy land, which to the casual eye would appear to be lifeless except for some grasses and insects. In May and early June the reeds and bulrushes had fallen down as if bulldozed over, having dried up in the heat. I was wondering if we'd lost the wetland, and would soon see some developer coming to make a multi-storey building.

Imagine my pleasant surprise, when on returning from a trip in late June, I noticed a magical transformation. There was a flurry of activity in the grass patch. A couple of showers, and the reeds had come back on their feet, the brown rods of typha plant were swaying in the wind, and cottony flowers were flying all over. Water had gathered and could be seen through the dense grass, with a Pond heron sulkily walking through it.

There are now small open patches of water on the side of the grass, shining like silver in the sun. Baya weavers, Spotted munias, Yellow-eyed babblers are all busy pecking at the vegetation,

taking material for nesting. Some of them are trying to find appropriate reeds on which to start a nest. A solitary Ashy wren-warbler has been, well, warbling away!

Transformation

A lapwing has been sitting quietly on a grassy patch next to the wetland, either ready to lay eggs or already incubating some, while its partner is on guard a few metres away.... occasionally bursting into noisy flight when alarmed by what it considers an approaching threat.

White breasted waterhens, the only ones to live in the wetland through the summer, continue to protect their corner of the patch. Little green bee-eaters are making sallies above the reeds, in search of an insect feast. Koels, a Plaintive cuckoo (a monsoon visitor), and parakeets have been loudly advertising their presence from nearby trees. Dragonflies, damselflies, beetles, butterflies, and other insects are plentiful.

A friend of mine even saw a mongoose dart away into the bushes near the wetland. I would not be surprised if there is a resident snake or two, though none has been gracious enough to show its presence to me yet.

At night, the area is dark and I can't see anything from my window. But there is a loud cacophony from the area that tells me that nightlife is almost as active. A few toads are calling for their mates, and the lapwings call late into the night (when do they ever sleep?). The occasional sound of nightjars (birds so called because of their incessant and loud calls through the night) breaks the monotony of the toads.

When we think of `wildlife', we think of going to national parks to see tigers and elephants. But wherever we live, there is wildlife. Even the most crowded cities can have plants and animals surviving amidst the human chaos. And if you observe closely, you will notice some magical changes taking place as the seasons change.

The problem is that we are greedily eating up even such small patches of nature.

Preserve wetlands

Waterbodies and wetlands such as the one under my window suffer the most, as we drain them out to make buildings, or pollute them till they die. Small areas of wild vegetation along roads, in parks, or between buildings, are gobbled up because we want concrete sidewalks and pathways everywhere, or because we want to replace them with `civilised' bushes that we can control. With them disappear the mongoose, the jungle cat, the peafowl, the partridge, the waterhen, the bullrushes and reedmaces, and a thousand other plants and animals that we could so easily live with.

I fear that the wetland behind my building might meet the same fate, but I will do whatever I can to see that it does not!