

Getting High on Birds: the Himal Kalasutra Bird Festival

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Bar-throated Minla



Grey-bellied Cuckoo

“S hhh what call is that?” A high-pitched, repeated call had started somewhere ahead of us, the bird hidden by dense foliage. “Cuckoo?” asked someone. I was going to answer in the affirmative and add some information when another call broke out from the forest we’d just left behind. I asked “And what about that?” There was a moment’s hesitation, then another person whispered “Also cuckoo?” And a fierce retort from the first speaker, “Arre, how can both be cuckoos?”

That was my cue. Asking everyone to gather around in the middle of a small grassy patch we were standing on, I explained that both were cuckoos, but different species. In fact, over the course of that day we heard two more, and were eventually able to identify the calls of the Large Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococyx sparveroides*, the Eurasian Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, the Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus*, and the Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus optatus*. This was the somewhat easy part, because these birds were obligingly calling all around us; it was many of the other tricky calls that were making us go cuckoo!

I was up in the Munsiri area of Uttarakhand, taking part in a week-long event focusing on birds. Hosted by the village

of Sarmoli, the Himal Kalasutra Bird Festival was perhaps India’s first such event planned by, with, and primarily for local communities. The Sarmoli and Shankhdhura villages, local groups Himalayan Ark, Himal Prakriti, and Maati Women’s Collective, the children’s initiative Jungli School, and the Delhi/Pune based group Kalpavriksh, collaborated to organize it. Financial support came from the Department of Science and Technology, and the Bombay Natural History Society. The Uttarakhand Forest Department provided binoculars and resource material, having already been the inspiration for the Festival through its own two-year long series of bird camps culminating in a state-level Bird Festival earlier this year.

The Festival consisted of serious bird identification sessions in the field and indoors, as also art and craft activities, folk tale and story telling, and illustrated presentations relating to birds. About 40 villagers from Sarmoli, Shankhdhura, Khartoli, Madkot, and Naya Basti from the Gori valley, and another six from rural communities in Nainital and Almora districts, were joined by about 20 visitors from various parts of India and some from France. A separate contingent of 36 children belonging to the



Himal Kalasutra Bird Festival participants

Jungli School (a creative learning space based in Munsiari) took part in birding and fun activities. Also present were other local and national organizations, including Monal, Van Panchayat Sangharsh Morcha, and Bhoomi, and even a few devotees of the nearby Gayatri Mandal!

Three of the Festival days were spent in intensive birding, spending several hours a day out, helping participants to pick up identification and behaviour observation skills. Walks were through various kinds of habitats, including subtropical and subalpine forests, grasslands, wetlands, farms, and human settlement. Malika Viridi, E. Theophilus, and K. Ramnarayan of the local groups mentioned above, readily shared their in-depth knowledge of local ecosystems and human interactions with them. Members of Maati not only enthusiastically participated in the birding, but also ensured that all participants were fed and looked after with the characteristic warm hospitality of the hill people.

Over 60 species were spotted or heard during the Festival, including six species of cuckoos and five of raptors. For me, one of the best experiences was matching the English and local names of birds, the latter often so much more evocative of the bird's appearance or behaviour. We even made up some names, like *Dimagi bukhaar* from the colloquial name, Brainfever bird, of the hawk cuckoo. And a lot of time was spent listening to bird calls, first real ones out in the field, and then digital ones as rehearsal. Several times, participants happily accepted the challenge of imitating their favourite calls!

Participants also learnt about and enjoyed the interaction of birds with their habitats. A profusion of species on the flowering Loranthus, a mixed flock of about 15 species flying about in bewildering diversity amidst the oak and horse chestnut trees, a Mountain Hawk-eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis* flying overhead with a baby bird in its claws, the Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Hypopicus hyperythrus*

making rings of pockmarks around trees in search of sweet sap, and many other observations made the walks that much more memorable.

Behind the enjoyment and fun of the Festival was a serious intent. Sarmoli village has experimented with community-based ecotourism over the last decade or so, the fulcrum being a number of homestays managed by women, and organizing trekking expeditions. If birding skills are added to the repertoire of the local people, it would serve three purposes: help in informal monitoring of the ecological health of the area, enhance the experience of visitors, and provide an additional source of earning as bird guides. If these also involve local names and folk tales and other aspects of nature-culture links, it could also maintain a connection with and pride in local knowledge and culture. All this would hopefully lead to an integration of better conservation and enhanced livelihoods.

The Festival was followed by the Mesar Forest Fair, an annual event in which local people gather to celebrate together, with song and dance, games, and exhibits on conservation and culture. The bird festival having just preceded it, pictures on birds and birding by the participants were prominent, and some were even goaded to try out their birdcall imitations in front of the public!

The Festival was such a hit that a number of participants from other parts of Uttarakhand have requested a similar event in their areas. Residents of Madkot, from the Askot Wildlife Sanctuary area, even suggested that this could help convince people in their area to stop hunting. A decision to host bird festivals in Madkot, Ranikhet, Naya Basti, and Khartoli was taken. Some of Maati Sangathan's women confidently stated that they could be resource persons in these, having participated in three birding camps so far (two previous ones having been organized by the Uttarakhand Forest Department, mostly for local staff and guides).

Confidence is one thing, actual capacity quite another. So every once in a while I'd ask local participants to name a bird we saw, or identify a call we could hear. From day one to the last day of the Festival, there was already a marked improvement in identification. A bit more practice, and many of these people could well fit into the role of bird guides for visitors! And if their own local knowledge is revived and recognized, and local names given as much importance as English and scientific ones, there is no reason the women and men of Sarmoli and neighbouring villages cannot be considered wildlife experts in their own right.

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