

They never came back

SALAM RAJESH

The day the cranes stopped visiting Loktak lake was a sad one. Is there any way to get them to return?

SARVESH



Loktak lake.

Oinam Birathoi is a fisherman who lives on a floating hut on Loktak lake in Manipur. Interesting, isn't it? He earns his livelihood by fishing. He has a small hut built on floating biomass, which is locally known as *phumdi*. Birathoi lives in this hut with his family and he fishes every day. Birathoi is a wildlife enthusiast. He is very concerned about the safety and welfare of the coots that come to visit the Loktak lake every winter. These migratory waterfowls stay in a part of Lake known as Birahari Pat where Birathoi lives. To him, the birds are a part of his life. He has made it his business to see that the birds do not fall into the hands of poachers.

Sitting in his floating hut, Birathoi recalled what his grandfather told him when he was young. "Grandfather once told me that during his time, the Loktak Lake was full of migratory birds from October to April. There were literally thousands and thousands of these winter visitors from far-off places. He told me it was indeed with much difficulty that he and the other fishermen manoeuvred their small dugout canoes among the crowding waterfowls. In fact, they had to plug their ears to shut out the deafening noise of the birds!"

"He told me that the Nganu-thanggongs (Brahminy ducks) and the Wainus (cranes) used to visit these parts in great numbers. You could see large flocks of these birds," Birathoi said, with a gleam in his eyes.

But, sadness crept into his eyes. "That was a long time back. Now, after the Loktak lake was turned into a vast reservoir for the Loktak hydroelectric power project, commissioned in 1983, the cranes have stopped coming here," he said. The high water level maintained for the hydro project submerged the low-lying marshy areas, which were frequented by the cranes. The favourite habitats of the cranes disappeared under water!

"The Wainu chara, a variety of wild grass which was said to be a favourite food of the cranes, became scarce with the changing ecosystem of the lake. Then, again, the population of fish in the lake decreased drastically.

Earlier, migratory fish species coming upstream from the Chindwin-Irrawady river system in Burma used to breed in the lake and adjoining wetlands, but their passage was blocked by the Ithai barrage of the Loktak project. Perhaps this was why the cranes chose to look for another home somewhere else," he said.

"We have many popular folk stories that sing the glory of the cranes.

In fact, the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy produced a popular ballet 'Wainu pareng' (A garland of Cranes) which featured the grace and beauty of the cranes, and the sad plight of these elegant birds.

"Today, thanks to the Loktak hydro project, the cranes are just a part of a story. They no longer exist in our midst. Our children and their children will never know how the Sarus crane or the hooded crane looked like. It's sad, very sad."

We understand Birathoi's sadness. Without a doubt, cranes are matchless in beauty and grace. Manipur has lost a precious asset of nature all because of the selfishness on the part of humans.

Can we ever hope that the cranes will return one day to their favourite shores of the Loktak lake?

What can I do?

Well, you can do a lot ...

- Write an essay about the cranes in your school magazine.
- Ask your schoolteacher about the elegant cranes. There are many stories and pictures about them.
- Send a drawing of a crane to your local newspaper asking people to protect the cranes.
- May be you can write a small letter to the editor asking the Government not to destroy the homes of the cranes while taking up developmental projects.
- And you can visit the Zoo with your friends and learn more about cranes and the other wildlife.

Perhaps you can put up a poster of cranes in your living room and tell your visitors about these birds. .

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh/National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan