

Birds of many feathers feast together

Read about the mixed hunting party – a burst of activity

By Ashish Kothari

A sudden movement on the forest floor 20 feet ahead of me caught my eye. Peering through my binoculars, I noticed a roundish head with large pair of eyes, the rest of the body hidden among fallen leaves. A split second later, even as my brain processed the image to come up with an identification, out shot a small owl, sallying up and catching something in mid-air, then flapping silently to a nearby branch to savour its meal. The bird was now fully visible, its identity revealed: a Jungle Owlet, one of the smallest of Indian owls.

Even as I admired its startlingly yellow eyes and bold body patterns, the corner of my eye noticed another quick movement close to where the owl had been rummaging around on the forest floor. I swung my binoculars there, and was just in time to see a



The Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch commonly participates in a bird flock. PHOTOS: AUTHOR

black and yellow bird behaving somewhat similarly. And then, a small bird with a chestnut belly followed suit.

Acrobatics

Over the next few minutes, I was entertained by the acrobatics of a dozen birds of several species as they indulged in

an aerial feast of dragonflies and other insects. There were Black-lored Tits (with bright yellow cheeks and a punk black-and-yellow hairdo), Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches (with the enviable ability of walking upside down on the underside of branches), Great Tits (a sober black-and-white



compared to the others), and Grey-hooded Warblers (with a startling yellow bottom).

What I was seeing in the forests of Sitabani in Uttarakhand was a mixed bird flock, also often called a mixed hunting party. Often, in India's forests, you can walk for half an hour and see almost no birds. Then suddenly, there will be an explosion of activity around you as a dozen or more species emerge as if out of nowhere. You have to scramble to fix your binoculars on each and as your brain tries to identify them all, you may be able to sympathise with a slow computer trying to download dozens of documents at the same time. By the time you think you're beginning to get a handle on things, the flock will disappear just as suddenly as it appeared. Silence and stillness reign again.

Odd group

Mixed flock often have a bewildering diversity of shapes, sizes, and colours. Hornbills, drongos, orioles, woodpeckers,

tree pies, flycatchers, tits, nuthatches, sunbirds ... they can all be part of a single flock. Now why would such an odd assembly hang around together?

According to ornithologists, those crazy scientists who study birds with strong binoculars and equally strong neck disorders, mixed flock is nature's way of ensuring food and safety to several species. Each species within the flock has its own food 'niche' (i.e. a preference not shared by most other species), some going for berries, some for other fruits, some for seeds and nuts, some for insects, some for nectar, some for flowers ... and so on. Even as one hunts for its



The Green magpie is one of the larger birds that joins a bird flock.

MIXED FLOCK IS NATURE'S WAY OF MAKING SURE THAT BIRDS GET FOOD AND PROTECTION

favourite, it may help others to find theirs; a hornbill hopping along a fig tree branch to get at the fruit will disturb lots of insects that its insectivorous co-travellers will swoop up. And if any of the birds spots a predator, it will give the alarm to all the others, and together they will make good their escape.

The flock is also constantly on the move, exhausting the

food in one patch of forest and quickly moving to another. On the way, it can be temporarily joined by more stationary birds, like the owl above.

What I saw in Uttarakhand had less than 10 species. This is a mini-flock. Birdwatchers in the Sinharaja forest of Sri Lanka have observed up to 40 species in a single flock! And at least one birdwatcher jerked

his head around so many times to identify all the birds, he had to have neck surgery (ok, just joking!).

Next time you walk in any forest, keep a look-out for these mixed flock, and wish them happy partying!

(The author is with Kalpavriksh which is coordinating this series.)