

Mudskippers dance and curlews trigger a 'curfew'!

The wet and swampy mangroves in Gujarat's Kachchh district throw up welcome surprises

By Sujatha Padmanabhan

Its big protruding eyes stared unblinkingly ahead as I leaned forward to take its photograph. To get close enough I had to balance myself on one leg, clutching my camera and other field-trip paraphernalia, not a very easy task for someone with an arthritic knee. I held my breath. If my foot moved one inch forward I would have had wet, squelchy mud all over my shoe. As I pressed the camera button I felt the mud around me suddenly shake. I almost lost my balance, but just almost. There was not just one but many of them around: mudskippers! Like their name suggests, they suddenly started to not just move but skip around on the mud.

We were at the westernmost



A Eurasian curlew.



edge of Kachchh district of Gujarat and had stopped to look at a small patch of mangroves. It was a really small patch and I got off our vehicle with a deep sense of disappointment. I had seen almost impenetrable mangrove forests at Pichavaram in Tamil Nadu as well as in the Andaman Islands. This was just a small area with

some mangrove trees and I wondered what we had travelled this distance for.

King of fish

How wrong I was! The dance of the mudskippers enthralled us as we watched them skip

and walk about in the mud. Mudskippers are a kind of fish that can live both on land and in water. You find them in the inter-tidal zones in mangrove habitats. During low tide when the water levels go down is when you see these fish on

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A Mudskipper in a mangrove in Gujarat. PHOTOS: AUTHOR.

land. They are adapted to living out of water as they are able to breathe through their skin. They also fill their gills with water before coming on to the land, which gives them the oxygen they require.

In all my earlier travels, I had

just the briefest glimpse of these quaint creatures. And here I was, just a few feet away from a large number of mudskippers, watching them use their two fins to move on land. The area was wet and swampy. Yet they not only skipped around, but occasionally also flipped themselves over with ease.

Moving on

A fish that lives on land and walks about! I could have watched these mudskippers till the tides changed, but we had to move on. A little ahead we came across an intermediate

egret, a big, white bird that was stalking its prey. It moved ever so slowly and silently and finally got its catch. These egrets are not confined to mangrove areas and are found in other habitats as well.

The species that are found only in mangrove habitats are uniquely adapted to the conditions here: the land gets covered with sea water every day with the coming in of the tides, a high salt content in the soil. These conditions make the area swampy and saline. Trees that grow here are adapted with special roots. Some have roots that help them take in

oxygen from the air as the mud here has less oxygen and some others provide them additional support in swampy soils.

Seed miracle

However, one of the most interesting coping mechanisms is how these trees propagate. If their seeds were to fall down, they would in all likelihood get carried away by the tides. Instead the seeds germinate on the parent plant, and only when the sapling is big enough does it fall off. It now has a better chance of fixing itself in the swampy soil and hence a higher probability of propagating.

It was dusk by the time we finished walking around the mangrove patches. We headed towards the shores of an inlet. Luckily for us, just before the last light faded away, we spotted another creature of estuaries and mangroves...the Eurasian Curlew! It walked about probing the soft, wet mud for small invertebrates with its long, curved beak. Suddenly, a distant memory returned of learning collective nouns in an English class...a group of curlews is called a curfew!

I smiled, happy to be seeing at least one!

(The writer is a member of Kalpavriksh which is coordinating the series.)