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On a wild chase

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The Tollygunge Golf Club threw up a surprise. With jackals, barbets, orioles, and a great variety of large trees, it was a veritable zoo.

The Tollygunge Golf Club, in the populous suburb bearing the same name in southern Kolkata, is spread over a hundred acres. Their clubhouse is 220 years old. This premier golf club of India offers a haven to not only golf, tennis, squash, swimming, riding and amateur equestrian sports enthusiasts but also to nature lovers and a variety of flora and fauna.

The jackal population on this property is what took me there in the sweltering heat of May. On any given day, one can hear talk of the jackals, or the *shiyal*, as they are called in Bengali. These

animals have always lived in the club, hiding in burrows by day and coming out at night to scavenge or hunt.

Kolkata-based wildlife consultant Kushal Mookherjee set out to meet these Golden jackals, whose current population within the club is about 25, distributed among three jackal packs.

Nature galore

On the way to see the jackals, I spotted a white breasted kingfisher, the state bird of West Bengal, a blue-throated green barbet, and the coppersmith barbet. As we passed a powder puff tree, Kushal *da* pointed out, though not native to India, the rose ringed parakeets loved feasting on its flowers.

Soon, we arrived at a wooded patch, where he showed me the burrows dug by the jackals. Coming out of the thicket, Kushal *da* whistled to the jackals that came out in response, for they knew they would be treated, as always, to a few biscuits. Kushal *da* told me that scarcity of food and shrinking territory led to intense conflict between the three packs. This year, however, the club has seen a healthy population of jackal pups.

Moving on, we noticed a number of *rufous treepies*, the most colourful members of the crow family, flying from tree to tree, which was a worrisome fact, as they eat nestling of other birds. Another matter of concern, was the arrival of blacknaped orioles in the winter and spring months, as they drive away the golden orioles, which are seen through the year.

Right outside the boundary of the club was the Tolly's Nullah, as it is popularly called today, which Kushal *da* told me was actually the river Adi Ganga or original Ganga which flows into the Bay of Bengal through the Sundarbans. It got its name from Colonel William Tolly, who collected toll from boat passengers travelling between Kolkata and Sundarbans.

Many other species like frogs, toads, geckos, the Indian mongoose and a healthy population of rat snake, have also made their home on the golf club grounds.

We saw the Nagalingam or the canon ball tree, from South America. At the parking area, stood a huge Jacaranda tree in bloom providing relief in the heat of the day. The Casuarina tree near the clubhouse reminded me of a poem where the poet reminisces the Casuarina tree of her childhood under whose branches she and her siblings played.

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