

Paradise lost and found in Keoladeo

The tiger's message – a healthy ecosystem will attract more animals, big and small, feathered and furred

By Seema Bhatt

The park director is driving us in his jeep, a very special privilege. There is an aura of tension. We are searching for the tiger in Keoladeo. Yes, that's the name – Keoladeo or Bharatpur, as it's popularly known. The famed wetland is a haven for migratory and other bird species. The tiger is an anomaly. This 27-sq-km park cannot accommodate a large carnivore but this young male has made it its home after having walked several hundred kilometres from the Ranthambore National Park.

What's simply amazing is that the tiger has made it way through fairly densely human-populated areas in between two national parks. What brought it to Bharatpur is a million-dollar question, but some of the obvious answers include



NESTING TIME: Painted storks. PHOTOS: AUTHOR

good and protected habitat, an abundance of prey and no competition from any other large predator.

Dense forest

Keoladeo Ghana or the Bharatpur National Park is in Rajasthan and gets its name from Keoladeo (Shiva). It was known as 'Ghana' (which means dense) due to the thick vegetation in the area. The park is fa-

mous for its birdlife. The VIP visitors have been the Siberian Cranes.

These are snowy white cranes with black-winged tips and naked red faces. They are smaller than the native Sarus Cranes which have stopped appearing for many years now due to a combination of factors. Firstly, there's very little water, inadequate food and shelter. Secondly, the Sarus cranes

were being hunted along their migratory route.

The national park is a natural depression, said to be part of a riverbed. The story goes that it is the Yamuna which used to periodically get flooded. In the 18th century, it is said that the riverbed was modified when a series of canals were built to regulate the water.

A dam – the Ajan Bund – was constructed by the then ruler,

Suraj Mal, and the area was developed as a duck shooting reserve in 1899. Lord Curzon himself inaugurated the first duck shoot in 1902. But the record for shooting the largest number of birds is held by Lord Linlithgow, the then Viceroy and Governor General of India. He shot 4,273 birds in one day.

Hunting was banned in India in 1972. This area was declared a national park in 1981.

Water shortage

The park has been facing an acute shortage of water due to the drought in the area, but the main reason is because water has not been released from the Ajan bund.

Water released from the dam is captured by the upstream farmers and not allowed to flow to the park. As a result, the wetland habitat of Keoladeo has shrunk. The tree, *Prosopis juliflora*, dominates the area once inundated by water (a choice habitat for nesting birds).

The main source of water is a temporary reservoir, ie, the Ajan bund, situated 500 m southwest of the present border of the park. Earlier, the Ajan bund got water from the Gambhir and Banganga river systems, at the confluence of which the National Park is located.

However since the '80s, the Gambhir has been the only source. Water brought into Ajan bund is retained for a few days so the silt can be deposited and released into the park and the surrounding villages in July-August.

The time of water release to the park is vital for the growth of aquatic plants, breeding of heronry species and the overall seasonality of ecological events. The quantum of water received is undoubtedly the most important factor in the survival of wetlands, and to some extent, of the upland forests.



The water flows, beautifying the Keoladeo Ghana again.

Nature, a winner

Many alternative water sources are now being explored. But nature seems to have saved the park. The monsoon exceeded its normal limits last year; surplus water was released to the park from Ajan. No sooner did this happen than the park blossomed – the Keoladeo of yesteryears was in the spotlight. The park authorities have done a remarkable job of removing the 'prosopis'. Water is back to where it belongs, and so are the birds. In October, I saw hundreds of painted storks nesting. These birds seemed to have rescheduled their nesting season. Dawn and dusk bring a cacophony of bird calls – music to my ears. It was nearing a full moon which attracted thou-

sand of migrants. As winter approaches, more migratory birds will arrive in full force, ensuring that the park regains its lost feathered splendour. Now for big question. Will the VIP visitors – the Siberian Cranes – ever return to the park? Maybe the regained glory of the park will attract these special guests once more.

Did we see the tiger? No, we didn't but that could be because of the healthy undergrowth. Besides, the tiger may have been watching us, invisible to our eyes. In a nutshell, the tiger has given a clear message: a healthy ecosystem will attract more animals, big and small, feathered and furred.

(The writer is with Kalpavriksh)