

# The secret of birds of a feather

What we saw at Pashan Lake in Pune was like the changing of guards

By Anuradha Arjunwadkar

When we reached Pashan lake, west of Pune city, around 5 pm on that February day, we could see lots of birds in the intermediate and far distance. They were floating, sauntering and feeding on the banks of the lake, or among the water hyacinth plants crowding nearby. On a small island not far from us stood a few stunted trees. Large portions of their dark trunks had been painted white, encrusted as they were, over the years, with the stark white droppings of generations of birds. They stood with their leafless branches raised up to the blue skies, where a few white clouds had gathered. Dark birds, larger than crows, and with longer necks, could be seen perched on every branch of the bare trees. Curiously, they were all of a kind, with no exception. The cormorants are



Cormorants assemble on 'whitened' branches. PHOTOS: ASHISH KOTHARI.

called 'water-crows' in the local vernacular.

Occasionally, more such birds arrived in ones and twos, and there was some jostling as they crowded in to land on the same branches, but none flew away. Were they resting, I wondered. None of them had stretched their wings out to dry,

as they must do every time they emerge from a bout of feeding in the water to keep themselves light enough for a flight. For cormorants, you know, are not endowed with oil glands as are ducks and many other birds. So they cannot water-proof their feathers. And wet feathers are heavy, just as wet clothes are!

## Dry wings

These cormorants must have got out of the water earlier, we guessed, and their wings were dry. Beyond the trees, there were white egrets, black coots, brown-streaked pond herons and other kinds of water birds too, some of them feeding in the water or on the banks of the

lake. But the cormorants were not feeding. We wondered whether any of the other birds might fly up to roost on the trees.

But none did. Birds of this species remained isolated, elevated above the mixed groups of other species in the water and on the banks of the lake,



Grey herons at Pashan lake.



like a squad of guards in dark uniforms!

Just then the setting sun, emerging from behind a cloud, threw a magic spell on the lake. It dyed the snowy plumage of the egrets a luminous orange-gold, and lent an ethereal quality to both, the marshy bank and the avians on and around it. Some birds continued to feed oblivious to the dramatic change, while others stood about perhaps enjoying the magic of the evening as we did.

Soon the glow began to fade. The sun had by now vanished below the horizon and it was twilight. My friends began to wander slowly away from the white-treed island across the

water. Reluctantly, and with my eyes still riveted upon on the cormorants, I slowly followed them, when I saw a cormorant unexpectedly take off from its perch. It flew in a direction away from the setting sun. As I stopped in my tracks and gazed in wonder, calling to my friends, another one followed as if on cue. And then two more, and in no time the entire flock was airborne, resolutely headed east! As we watched them flying in a rough V formation, they receded from us, and were soon reduced to specks over the far horizon. But the drama for the evening was not over yet, for we saw them followed by many flocks of more specks – other cormorants that also took off at sunset, from other ponds and streams, and flew east – hundreds of them!

## Long flight

City dwellers have often reported seeing these flocks of

birds flying west in the early morning, and returning from where they came in the evening. My group had also observed them from time to time. But this was the first occasion that we had seen them take off on one of these long flights. One can only guess where they might be roosting for the night. But if I ever come across the place, and see them in the dim light of dawn, take off with the rising sun, leading the daylight over the city, I will certainly share that experience with you.

Looking back at the lake, we saw some of the other birds slowly emerging from the water onto the banks. In the low light, they almost merged into the background. But the deserted, dark-trunked trees with their white decoration became the centre of our attention. They remained, photogenic and forlorn, looking accusingly at the afterglow of the sunset which seemed to have caused their bereavement. What a contrast from the scene of the cormorant-crowded branches!

But they did not remain so for long, for soon, an egret flew up from the bank and settled on one of the branches. Again, as if on cue, other egrets rose from the vicinity and found perches on the branches of the trees centrestage! It was as if a squad of guards in dark uniforms had been replaced by ones in white uniforms!

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