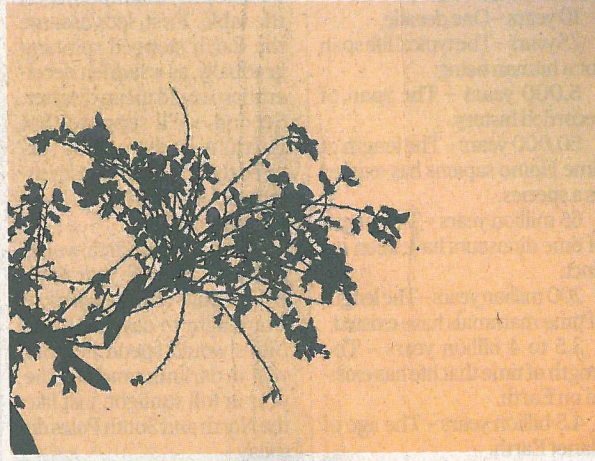




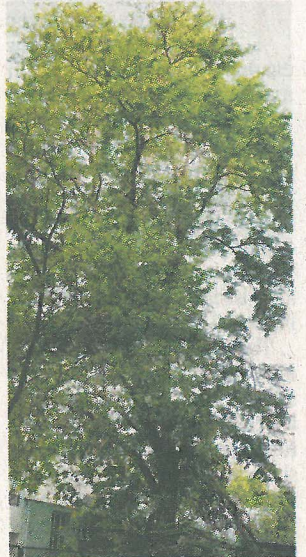
Green pigeon, a regular visitor. PHOTO BY AKASH TRIVEDI



Millettia at sunset. PHOTO BY AKASH TRIVEDI



Purple sunbird feeding at the 'mall'. PHOTO BY KANHAI PATEL



The 'mall'. PHOTO BY AKASH TRIVEDI

Welcome to the mall that's open 24x7x365

There are no elevators here, because multiple entry and exit points are present at all levels!

By Pranav Trivedi

The visitors are early and many. From the first rays of light to the last glow of the evening, they arrive in groups. They come in all shapes, sizes and colours. There's fun with food and music as in the malls. And if one wants to name this happening spot, the most apt name would

be 'Lavender Burst' or 'Mauve Magic' based on the most predominant colour on display. By the way, the mall has got a peculiar shape, rather uncommon to most shopping plazas, and to a first-timer, it may appear rather curious. The whole structure rises in tubular shape and continues to rise — two-storeys high — before spreading out horizontally. There are no elevators, because multiple entry and exit points are present at all levels. And, this mall is open 24x7x365!

Well, if your curiosity has carried you this far, let me reveal the name of this so-called mall. It is a TREE called Millettia!

Also known as Pongamia (locally as *Karanj/ Kanji/ Honge*), this gorgeous tree stands in a neighbouring garden. The 45-ft tall tree seems

to be meditating and largely at peace with itself. But, in spring it reveals the joy it's been holding within, for the entire year, through an exuberant burst of mauve flowers. Like a high-powered magnet, it draws hundreds and hundreds of birds.

After the onset of flowering, the ageing leaves are replaced by lavender flowers. Each day, along with the dry leaves that descend like a golden shower are loads of dry flowers — purple and pale. In delight, I watch the change that announces the arrival of spring, accompanied by a frenzy of bird activity and a live orchestra.

Winged wonders

The red-vented Bulbuls are regular visitors, so are the Rose-ringed Parakeets, Common Mynas and Brahminy Starlings. A very vocal and

frenzied flock of Rosy Starlings, preparing to fly back to their cold homes in Europe and far off central Russia, bring the mall alive with their loud and lively chirping.

Another visitor — the Golden Oriole, a pretty bird with a sweet whistling 'pi pi piu' call — announces its presence al-

most every day. A pair of treepies arrives with the usual curiosity and indulgence of the crow family, inspecting and probing the tree and its visitors like 'security guards', often leading to some form of resistance and mobbing from the bolder occupants like the Jungle Babblers.

The migrant Ashy Drongo is the 'stuntman' of the mall — hovering and sallying gracefully near the extremities to catch insects.

Another bird that follows a similar course of action is the Green Bee-eater. A shimmer of iridescent blue, and you know that Purple Sunbird has arrived to relish the constant supply of nectar that is on offer for almost for 3-4 weeks.

The most special guest to this most special place is the Yellow-footed Green Pigeon. Often a flock of up to six birds arrives and can be seen shopping in the mall for furniture (read twigs), for nest construction. Their inquisitive and musical call "wooo..wu..ku..wu..ku" remains one of the most cherished memories of the spring for me.

Coppersmith Barbet is the

official singer of the mall with its single-note song 'wuk...wuk...wuk' being played on loop.

Koel, three species of doves (Eurasian Collared, Laughing and very rarely Spotted), and Greater Coucal are also among the guests. Very rarely, does a Shikra disrupt the usually busy, harmonious proceedings here. The marauding Jungle Babblers fill the tree like a bunch of rowdy youngsters, causing a few ruffled feathers here and some uncalled-for alarms there.

Creatures great & small

A troop of langurs is a frequent visiting party with bewildered, curious infants jumping up and down and energetic juveniles breaking branches and hanging from all possible angles.

Squirrels are almost full-

time occupants here — always busy feeding among bunches of flowers. On a typical busy day, our Millettia mall could have up to 200 visitors at a time!

Most visitors find food here, some find material for their homes and some just come and rest for a while. It appears as if they are all here to join the tree in welcoming the approaching spring as a community celebrating life itself.

This three-week-long bird-fest provides an opportunity to connect with nature.

I'm most grateful to the Millettia tree for being there and to the garden's owner for loving it and keeping it despite the fact that he doesn't live there!

(The writer is Director of Conservation, Snow Leopard Trust. The series is co-ordinated by Kalpavriksh.)

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