

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Festive Red Avadavats

The Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival at Asan Conservation Reserve wound to a successful end on 9 th. February, 2014. More than 700 people, including 400 students watched birds under the careful eyes of 25 expert bird guides from far-flung locations such as Agora, Binsra, Pangot, Nanda Devi, Corbett, Kaladhungi and Rajaji. Interestingly, most of the visitors to the festival were watching birds for the first time. The guides had the job of herding the visitors on the allocated trails, getting them to identify their very first bird themselves, and enjoy the euphoria that followed, a joyful “I identified a bird myself!”. And hope that these first small steps would lead to a whole lot of people taking up birdwatching as a hobby!

A trip to Asan Conservation Reserve throws up many gorgeous bird sightings. At the bird festival, we were at the edge of the Asan River, when a flurry of birds flew up from our feet. We had spotted a lovely bird called the Red Avadavat (also called the Red Munia or the Strawberry Finch). The Red Avadavat (*Amandava amandava*) is a tiny bird, smaller than a sparrow. It is a member of the finch family and is a seedeater. Male birds in breeding plumage are a gorgeous red colour, spotted with white, while the female birds are brown with a red rump. In the non-breeding season, the male resembles the female. Even in the non-breeding season, the bird has a bright red bill, and eye, and is easy to identify.



Unfortunately, the Red Avadavat's beauty makes it a victim. It is a popular cage bird,

and even today, birds are captured from the wild to sell as pets. In years gone by, these birds were exported for the pet trade from Ahmedabad (called Amdavad by the locals) and the bird gets its scientific name “amandava” from this city.

If you want to see the Red Avadavat, watch the marvelous, but endangered Pallas’ Fish Eagle, spot the elusive Common Goldeneye duck, observe the Western Reef Egret, a vagrant, which is normally seen at India’s western coast, but has landed up at Asan instead, head for Asan this weekend, and you will not be disappointed. Who knows, you might just find a new, interesting hobby for yourself and a pastime that will follow you well into retirement!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: Visits to festivals, with a large congregation of people has its own downsides, especially the litter that accompanies crowds. We made a special effort to get the school students who attended the festival to ensure that they don’t litter, and appropriately placed dustbins meant that people had already place to dump their “*kacchra*”. Unfortunately, one of the offenders at Asan was the press and media themselves! On a few occasions, I found members of the press and media eat their food, and tip over the empty plates and glasses to the Yamuna River below. I was aghast, and had to point this out to them. Just goes to show that everyone, especially the press needs to be sensitive to keeping our surroundings clean.

Photograph caption: Male Red Avadavat in breeding plumage

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