

Urban birds can be the ideal ‘canary in the mine’ if we are willing to accept their signs

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• In this interview, ornithologist Aasheesh Pittie speaks about birds in India’s urban spaces.

Generalist birds that feed on trash generated in urban areas are under threat, feels Pittie.

Pittie also highlights the importance of citizen science. Urban birders will be able to collate data and alert administrators about changes in species composition, he said.

Bird diversity and numbers could be the ideal ‘canary in the mine’, giving information about how habitats are faring in urban areas, feels Aasheesh Pittie, editor of the bi-monthly journal, Indian BIRDS. Pittie, an ornithologist, has also indexed a monumental bibliographic database, South Asian ornithology. In conversation with Mongabay-India during his recent visit to Goa to deliver the third Carl D’Silva Memorial Lecture organized by GBCN (Goa Bird Conservation Network), he spoke about his reservations related to bird photography, urban birds, threats to their habitat and how to protect them.

During your lecture on deeper birding, you highlighted how traditional birding is taking a back seat due to bird photography. But then one has to move on with technology. So, how does one maintain the balance?

*Do not let photography be the be all and end all of your birding activities. When you are into bird photography you have to learn about the bird, its characteristics, where you will find it and then take up the camera. Nowadays it has become like a lust — where you have to photograph irrespective of whether the bird is feeding, breeding, etc. After a while you may stress that bird so much that a raptor may come and kill it. The balance is internal. It is when you start believing that the bird is most important and not the photograph. **Aasheesh Pittie is an ornithologist and editor of the bi-monthly journal, Indian BIRDS. Photo by Arti Das. What are the immediate threats to urban birds in India and how to curb it?** Habitat destruction is the main threat — and urban planning, which exists not for nature but for humans. Also now there are walkways and restaurants built around some ponds, which ultimately lead to the shrinking — and killing — of these wetlands. These things should be prevented. Most of the times it is because nobody objects and public opinion is weak. In urban areas, old trees should not be cut down and we should grow certain species of trees and local plants that attracts birds. Water bodies should be monitored and kept clean. If we can keep nature in mind while zoning and urban planning than we can salvage something.*

Are there any specific species of urban birds which are under threat?

*Most affected are the generalist feeders like crows and mynahs as they feed on trash. Their population will plummet as now all our trash is toxic. There are birds that feed in polluted areas — whether it is the water body, where drainage is flowing or the garbage which leaches into the ground and water areas. Also in Hyderabad, where I stay, I have observed that the common crow is no longer common in some areas where they used to be common. They are so common so one thinks why count them? It was similar with vultures but then suddenly their population dropped. **You mentioned that bird census is an integral part when it comes to habitat conservation especially in urban areas. And also during the lecture you mentioned that 99 percent of data is collected by amateurs in India. So speaking about documentation, where do we stand today? Is ornithology still in a nascent stage in India?** Counting birds over a period of time enables us to understand if there are any fluctuations in the populations of species. Based on such data authorities could take conservation decisions. The importance of such data, collected over several decades, is visible, at least in the UK, where ornithologists could tell the government that there have been catastrophic drops in the populations of several species; and the government responded to try and remedy the situation. Since urban areas are the most threatened by infrastructure-related habitat change in India [not to say that most other habitats are not], such a census would help birders form a firm basis for their comments on the status of bird species. As the number of birders, across India, has increased exponentially in the past few years, so has the number of checklists being uploaded to online platforms like eBird. This is a good sign, as eBird encourages birders to upload numbers of birds seen. The other organised pan-Indian census is the Asian Waterbird Census in January every year, the Salim Bird Count and the Backyard Bird Count. I may be wrong in saying so, but these are by and large urban-centric. So, the birdlife of a large part of the country goes uncovered and unrecorded. This is where a push is needed.*

*[Many cities across India have seen a decline in their sparrow population. Photo by Mani Shankar.](#) **While speaking about house sparrows, you informed that in a few pockets its population has increased. Can you name such areas?** The one place that comes to mind immediately is the megapolis of Mumbai. One would have thought that given the reasons for the sparrows’ decline that are doing the rounds, Mumbai would have lost her sparrows. But that is not the fact. They seem to thrive there. I feel that the sparrow needs a small patch that is left by itself, not interfered by anyone, with scrubby vegetation, loose dry sand, etc., where they can dust bathe, and ramble around in. They also need small trees or hedges to roost in. Besides these, if they have access to nooks and crannies they build their nests in, they survive. Of course, lacing our surroundings with pesticides and insecticides does not help them, for that [insects] is what they feed their young, which do not survive such a diet. I would stick my neck out and state that sparrows can be found outside every major Indian city, at distances of 50–100 km. You mentioned that pigeons cause respiratory diseases in humans, mainly in urban areas where they are found in large numbers. The increased population is because of overfeeding (due to religious beliefs) and non-availability of predators. What could be solution for this? Also do these birds affect other birds? Solutions exist, but in India, the will is absent. People tend to shelter behind religious dogma rather than common sense in this case. Pulmonologists should alert urban municipalities about the pulmonary diseases these birds cause. Municipalities should educate people about this and prevent them from feeding them in public spaces, fining them if required. Hawkers should not be allowed to sell pigeon feed and should also be fined. Western urban centres have resorted to building nests for the birds, where the eggs are replaced with dummies; spreading food that is coated with chemicals that prevents them from breeding; and imposing heavy fines on both hawkers and people who feed the birds in places like Trafalgar Square. In India, I feel that spiritual heads of our religions should counsel followers of the deleterious effects of pigeons. Pigeons bully other birds and hound them away from food scattered by people, from water-baths and even from nesting areas. One should realise that the feral pigeon population in cities is entirely due to artificial feeding that misguided people indulge in. The blue rock dove or commonly just known as a pigeon, has well adapted to the urban landscape with the help of humans. **Photo by Ajay Zula.** [Do you believe that urban birding should be taken seriously and scientifically as we are witnessing urbanisation in the country and in the world like never before?](#) Of course. The shift of human population is already placing a huge burden on the urban environment. It is a well accepted fact that natural life, be it birds, insects, reptiles, plants, amphibians, etc., are the best indicators of the health of the environment. So a strong mesh of urban birders will be able to collate data in real time and alert administrators about changes in species composition. Bird diversity and populations could be the ideal ‘canary in the mine’ if we are willing to accept their signs.*

Banner image: Red-vented bulbul by Abhinav Srivastava. First published by Mongabay on 2 Oct. 2018