

Highlights from the Uttar Pradesh Bird Festival 2015

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The Uttar Pradesh Bird Festival 2015 was spearheaded by the Honourable Chief Minister of the state, Akhilesh Yadav, and managed by the Uttar Pradesh Eco Tourism and Forest Departments. It was held from 04 to 06 December 2015 at the National Chambal Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh. Nikhil Devasar was the event consultant, under whose guidance the Festival successfully took shape. The world's leading ornithologists associated with the Indian Subcontinent, plus veterans in the field, scientists from India and around the globe, experts and professionals in the fields of photography, art, and technology, school and college students, wildlife enthusiasts, locals, and many from the Indian bird-watching community, were present in one of the largest congregations for birds on Indian soil. The main objectives of the Festival were to focus on the avifauna of the state, to highlight its incredibly diverse natural heritage, to generate mass awareness about wildlife conservation, and to promote its eco-tourism endeavours. The Festival offered a perfect cultural melting pot to celebrate the natural heritage of Uttar Pradesh, and India.

On the first evening most guests arrived for dinner, under a single canopy of the specially erected dining pavilion, giving a marvellous opportunity to meet idols, mentors, and old friends. There was a spirit of camaraderie in the air, and an atmosphere of excitement. The tailor-made birding camp, aptly named 'Sarus Village', on the sprawling grounds of Chambal Safari Lodge, near village Jarar, at Bah, Uttar Pradesh, hosted one hundred tents that housed invitees, and participants for the next three days.

Early mornings were reserved for a solid four-hour session of exhilarating birding, guided by excellent naturalists from Bharatpur (Rajasthan), many of whom are stationed at Keoladeo National Park. Birders were divided into three groups, each

covering a different area and habitat, during the three-day birding extravaganza.

On the first morning, my group was scheduled for birding from boats along the Chambal River, which is part of the National Chambal Sanctuary. The morning was slightly foggy, but soon a pleasant sunshine broke through and revealed a South Asian river dolphin *Platanista gangetica* as well as marsh crocodiles *Crocodylus palustris* in the water, and gharials *Gavialis gangeticus* basking in the sun on a sand-bank. A pair of Bonelli's Eagles *Aquila fasciata*, an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* successfully hunting, and an Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, as well as good views of a Black-bellied Tern *Sterna melanogaster*, and a Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* were the highlights of the day. The Plain Martins *Riparia paludicola* were accompanied by a couple of Pale/Sand Martins *R. diluta/riparia*, challenging to identify in the field, and prompting some inconclusive discussion as usual! The sand-banks and shores were dotted with a selection of waders, including a flock of nine Great Thick-knees *Esacus recurvirostris*, and waterfowl, including Lesser Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna javanica*, Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus*, and Ruddy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea*, gave close views.

After-birding hours were reserved for lectures featuring prominent ornithologists. Eminent professionals conducted simultaneous, interactive workshops, which gave the participants a first-hand experience to learn, and hone their skills. Jackie Garner, and Dr Pete Marshall demonstrated the art of sketching and painting birds. Giri Cavale, and a team from Leica Sport Optics conducted sessions on photography, and digiscoping respectively. Each workshop inspired and encouraged participants to practice, and pursue the skills learnt.

The bird-ringing station was an absolute favourite among the participants, ornithologists, and dignitaries alike. Dr Balachandran and his team from the Bombay Natural History Society conducted live demonstrations, and thanks to his incredible expertise, we learnt all about the art and science of bird-ringing. Each bird was carefully examined, measured, weighed, ringed, and released, allowing stunning close-up views of birds in hand—to the delighted audience—obviously a fitting case for better than two in the bush!

School children, clad in their school-uniforms, were escorted by their teachers to events each day, and were especially fascinated by the bird-ringing sessions. There were special events in which they could participate: painting, quiz, and essay-writing competitions, including wildlife and bird conservation awareness programs conducted by the Centre for Environment Education (CEE). They also participated in a walkthrough of the Festival marquees. They were thrilled with these educational excursions, and it was wonderful to see their enthusiasm. The Festival also attracted local bird-watchers from throughout the state of Uttar Pradesh, to go on a birding spree, and celebrate the Festival in the field, honouring it in the best possible way—by birding!



Photo: Chana Widawski

57. Local children enjoy birding with Per Alström.



58. Spreading the joy of birding - local children thrilled to scope out birds.

On the second day, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow organised bird-walks in all districts and ranges of the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department. It is heartening to see the tremendous amount of participation by local birders, school and college students, and teachers and government officials—adding great value to the bird records database, and helping raise the collective awareness about conservation issues in their local communities and neighbourhoods.

One of the major attractions of the Festival was a photography exhibition, featuring exquisite works by the best photographers in the country. Another crowd-puller was the incredible bird and wildlife paintings exhibited by Dr Pete Marshall, and Pratim Das. The Festival also hosted a number of stalls in the grounds, where attractive memorabilia, books, and souvenirs were displayed, and sold by organisations supporting conservation activities, including BNHS, and WWF-India. Newly designed 'Early Bird' teaching tools and pocket-guides were sold by the Nature Conservation Foundation to help introduce kids to the wonderful world of birds and to raise them into compassionate adults, who in turn learn to appreciate and care for their natural heritage.

The inaugural bird talk was by Carol Inskipp on '*The threatened birds of India and Nepal*'. It was deeply inspiring, and laid emphasis on why it is important to classify each bird's status on a nationwide- or state level. Carol highlighted how a collective effort by a larger community can contribute to the conservation of threatened species through systematic large-scale surveys involving amateur birders under the supervision of scientists. This talk was followed by '*Raptor field identification*'



Photos: Chana Wrdawski

59. Women and children at the photo-exhibition with their kids.

by Rajeev Mathew, enriched with his personal field-sketches and observations. Dr Pramod Patil explained the urgent need for protection of bustards with a special focus on the Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*, and emphasised the tragedy of their rapid decline. Dr Asad Rahmani of BNHS highlighted '*The threatened birds of Uttar Pradesh*', and spoke unequivocally of the endangered species in the state, expressing that the need of the hour was increased conservation efforts; he mentioned the progress achieved till date. Dr Martin Kelsey spoke passionately of his '*Love affair with warblers*'. His talk began with a slide full of *Acrocephalus* warblers, and the bold letters LBJs or 'Little Brown Jobs' followed by seven question marks! He kept the audience on the edge of their seats explaining identification techniques and bird-song complexities, and adding exciting bird-trivia, and interesting anecdotes.

By sundown the sessions were wrapped up for the day, and we gathered for dinner accompanied by traditional performances of ethnic folk dance and music by participants from Mathura, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. Celebrations soon turned into joyful revelries, and the evening was filled with interesting conversations, as people took advantage of this opportunity to informally chat with such illustrious figures of Indian ornithology. Every discussion either started, or ended, on an unanimously cheerful 'bird' note. With their energy restored after dinner, many people went to spotlight for owls, and to look out for Asian palm civets *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus* and other wildlife that lived in and around the village. The spotlighting highlights of all three days were the Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata*, Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, and Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena*. The goodnights were usually said past midnight, in spite of the early 0400 hrs start each morning.

There was usually no need for an alarm, as everyone was up and about much before the scheduled time for a quick, healthy breakfast. Our groups were soon ushered to the parking lot, and on Day 2 ours was scheduled for the Blackbuck Safari, near Paprinagar village in Pinahat Tehsil, Agra District. A pair of Red-necked Falcons *Falco chicquera*, seen practicing a cooperative breakfast hunt, was a major highlight of the morning. A Northern Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*, Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*, juvenile Indian Spotted Eagle *Clanga hastata*, and Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* were some of the other good birds. The blackbucks *Antelope cervicapra*, and Nilgais *Boselaphus tragocamelus* gave majestic views, against the contrasting backdrop of bright yellow mustard fields. We soon changed location to a different habitat, of fields adjoining sand ravines, where we saw several Tawny- *Anthus campestris*, and Tree Pipits *A. trivialis*, a few Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks *Eremopterix griseus*, Hume's Short-toed Larks *Calandrella acutirostris*, and Bimaculated Larks *Melanocorypha bimaculata*. A flock of feeding Black-breasted Weavers *Ploceus benghalensis*, and a pair of Variable Wheatears *Oenanthe picata* gave good views.

Kicking off the main program for the day, Jim Lawrence, of BirdLife International, spoke about the excellent work of the Bombay Natural History Society in India, and about their close partnership with BirdLife International for conservation efforts throughout the country. He emphasised that the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme is diligently working on threatened Indian species such as Great Indian Bustard, and Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti*, and protecting the Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*. Through this programme, a special fund, the BirdLife Fund for Threatened Indian Species, has

been established. Jim Lawrence emotionally acknowledged the support of Per Undeland, who was seated in the audience, for setting up this fund. Per has been the BirdLife Species Champion for Great Indian Bustard since January 2013. His contribution to ornithological studies, especially in the Harike region in the mid-1990s, is of tremendous significance and it is gratifying to know about his continued interest in our region.

Jim Lawrence enthusiastically declared that the Government of Uttar Pradesh has agreed to support BirdLife International as a beneficiary, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the government for the said commitment of protection of endangered species in the state. There was a sense of optimism in the air about the bright future for conservation output in years to come. Tim Appleton, as co-founder of the British Bird Fair, the aptly named 'grandfather of bird-fairs', echoed similar sentiments, and highlighted the importance of bird-fairs to gain international support, media recognition, and in turn raise awareness for conservation funding, and the promotion of eco-tourism.

The Honourable Chief Minister, Akhilesh Yadav, passionately addressed school-children in the audience and laid great emphasis on the participation of young people as they are the future of our country. He also announced his intention to make the Uttar Pradesh Bird Festival an annual affair. He highlighted that birds are an important part of our ecosystem and spoke about his commitments towards conservation efforts in the state. A coffee-table book, *Birds of Uttar Pradesh*, produced by the Times Group and the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, was also released on the occasion.

Nigel Redman spoke about his favourite group of birds, '*Chats of the Indian subcontinent*'. He nostalgically reminisced about his first visit to India in 1978, when he saw his first Siberian Rubythroat *Calliope calliope* at Bharatpur, and also recalled the privilege of meeting Sálim Ali there. His delightful talk took us on a birding expedition through the Indian Subcontinent, illustrated with stunning photographs, and supplemented with updated maps from the recent book, '*Robins and Chats*'. Tim Inskipp presented '*The history of bird species mapping in the Indian subcontinent*'. The talk delved into the complexities and challenges for systematically mapping records, since Hugh Whistler's initiative in the early 1900s, and covering subsequent works of different authors till date. He also shed light on the advantages and drawbacks of modern-day, real-time mapping methods such as eBird. Dr Per Alström delivered an enthralling talk on '*How to identify Indian Pipits*'. He enlightened birders about the intricacies of identification techniques, especially through recognising birdcalls. Every birder in the audience had

their bins out, pointing at the projector screen to have a better look at the illustrations! Rounding off the day, Dr Dhananjai Mohan spoke about '*Katernia Ghat as a birding destination*'; showcasing its great potential and leaving the audience planning their upcoming trips there!

Next morning, Day 3, our group visited the Sarus Crane wetlands near Saifai village in Etawah District. Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, found by a different group on day 1, was a major highlight, alongside another local rarity, the Smoky Warbler *Phylloscopus fulgiventis*. Coupled with several Moustached Warblers *Acrocephalus melanopogon*, Paddyfield Warblers *A. agricola*, and Blyth's Reed Warblers *A. dumetorum* we had much to discuss. At one point there were 23 Sarus Cranes *Antigone antigone* in a single field, perhaps half the size of a football ground. A flock of Eurasian Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*, a pair of Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*, a single Ruddy-breasted Crake *Zapornia fusca*, and numerous Bluethroats *Luscinia svecica* stood out among other species.

The final day's talks included Dr Pamela Rasmussen speaking about her path-breaking '*Mystery of the Forest Owlet - Reconsideration, Revalidation, and Rediscovery*'. The talk took us through her personal quest on how her team's research helped unravel one of the greatest ornithological frauds ever committed. She used original material from her research, including data, photos and specimen x-rays, to illustrate the fascinating talk. One key take-away from her talk was her argument against discarding museum skins after digitizing them, as each specimen can be an important piece of evidence, especially to understand more about the Meinertzhagen fraud. Anand Arya showcased a marvellous, and locally focused photo-talk on '*Sarus Hatchlings*'. Pratap Singh expressed his passion for '*Bird song in India*', and inspired birders to practice the art of bird sound recording. Ben King, known for the historic rediscoveries of the Forest Owlet, and the Rusty-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis*, regaled the audience with his personal experiences, and interesting anecdotes, '*Reminiscences of a veteran birder*'; those who were present will always be reminded of Ben when tucking in to their Christmas Dinners! Ian Barber from the RSPB then spoke on the '*Role of RSPB in India*', summarising its key projects on vulture conservation, and work on critically endangered species such as Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius*, Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*, and Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*.

The Festival culminated with quizmaster Bikram Grewal's spellbinding, and light-hearted quiz, which threw some very tricky questions at the audience. It was then wrapped up with a round of group photographs and everyone looking forward to a final evening of myriad conversations on everything bird-related. The wonderful words of Jim Lawrence provide a fitting ending to this piece: birds are fantastic ambassadors of our environment and we have a moral imperative to act through events like bird-fairs to raise awareness for conservation around the world.



Photo: Nikhil Devasar

60. CM Akhilesh Yadav interacts with organisers and participants.

