

Postcard from airports

From goshawks to 'gashawks': birding and plane spotting around the world's airports

My 16-year old son, Amrit, and I are an odd pair: He spots planes, I, birds. Both are avid in our pursuits. We don't miss a chance to stake out the world's airports for 'gashawks', goshawks, and everything in between. The plane-spotting coterie Amrit is embedded in can be as fanatical as some birders. They have their Internet groups, list servers, and websites. Like birders, they extend their hospitality to total strangers, and are eager to share their passion.

Bernie Proctor, an amicable Aussie, took a photo of our massive Airbus A380's touchdown and e-mailed it to us just as we were exiting customs, captioned, 'Welcome to Sydney, Amrit! And we had not even met the guy! A red carpet welcome could not have made us feel better. Soon we were scouring the airport outskirts for vantage sites. Of course, I was off after birds [146]. I saw my first fairy-wrens, fig birds, and honey-eaters in the scrub by runway 34L, just as my son was snapping photos of 777s and A340s. The fig bird was gorging on some yellow fruit from a small tree under the Air Traffic Control tower. I marveled at the pranks of the willie wagtail, a delightful fantail flycatcher, which was oblivious to the deafening roar of a DeHavilland Dash-8 powering for take-off just yards away. Unlike Indian *Rhipiduras*, this was prancing by a trashcan far from vegetation, catching midges.

Airports may be the last place a birder contemplates visiting. After all, with the risks birds pose for jet engines, airports are not exactly designed to be bird friendly. However, for the avid birder, airports can be interesting because: 1) they are usually far from the city, amidst rural environs, 2) they offer good habitat for open-country and grassland birds, and 3) travelers are unlikely to be familiar with even common birds in exotic places, and airports offer their first introduction to native avifauna.

I have occasionally dashed outside an airport with my binoculars between connecting flights in quest of a new bird. My first pied water-tyrant, a tyrant flycatcher with a penchant for wetlands, was just outside Trinidad's Port of Spain airport. I got back just in time for my connecting flight to Tobago, and upon arrival in Tobago, I had my first encounter with caribbean martins under the eaves of the Arrivals building. In South Africa's Johannesburg airport, I spotted a widowbird, with its freakishly long tail undulating over grasses, just before our bus whisked us away into the bush. Belize City (Central America) airport is a good



146. The author dwarfed by a 'gashawk' while pursuing goshawks. Photo: A. Kannan.

place for fork-tailed flycatchers. Birders en route to the off shore islands must make a quick trip to the fences outside the airport to see these handsome birds, which do not occur in the islands.

Two much sought-after birds in Arkansas (USA), short-eared owl and Smith's longspur, are often seen near runways, especially old military landing strips like Arrowhead in Fort Chaffee. This slightly overgrown area offers perfect habitat for these winter birds. On cold windy mornings, the longspurs huddle in depressions left by wheels. The rut marks are spotted with their droppings.

One morning, Amrit and I climbed St. Thomas Mount, Chennai (India), to catch early arrivals to nearby Meenambakkam airport. Local boys clustered around us in curiosity. As the early morning 'heavies' zeroed in on Runway 25, I reacquainted myself with prinias in the scrub by the iconic church. Singapore's Changi airport area can be productive as well. It was a treat to sit by breezy Changi Beach Park and hone my weak gull-identification skills, while virtually every few seconds a jumbo jet flew low overhead toward Runway 20R behind us. I am often amused when Amrit says he got a "life plane". When he yelled out, 'Garuda!', I thought he meant the brahminy kite, which frequents Changi's marshes. He was referring to the handsome-liveried Garuda Indonesia 737 that had just arrived from Jakarta.

New York's bustling JFK airport area can also be good for birders. The wetlands by Jamaica Bay at the end of Runway 13R seasonally teem with waders. Last summer, I photographed semipalmated plovers in handsome breeding dress, when Amrit had a field day with jumbos thundering overhead immediately after take-off. The jets bank sharply to port after getting airborne, probably to avoid booming over neighborhoods, giving plane spotters at nearby Charles Memorial Park great profiles.

Of course, we get euphoric seeing planes with bird logos, like Air Jamaica with its doctor bird or TACA with its scarlet macaw. We pursue our quarries while airborne too. I saw my first scarlet ibis from 915 m (my only life bird from a flying plane) as we circled above Caroni Swamp, Trinidad. The myriads of brilliant scarlet crosses wheeling above green mangroves were unmistakable. We once tracked a Delta 767 flying alongside at cruising altitude above the Atlantic. Like a little toy, the jet kept pace with us for nearly an hour before we lost it amongst the clouds.

In this post 9/11 era, people watching airports can arouse suspicions, especially when they are crouched by runways for hours. Our local Fort Smith, Arkansas, airport has an Army Air National Guard base with a squadron of A10 Thunderbolts. I once drove Amrit to the check post to photograph the warplanes parked on the other side. Within seconds, we were accosted by polite but stern military guards and turned away. That was not the end. Hours later, police were looking for me at my work place. The guards had noted my car number and alerted the police for 'suspicious activity'. The Dean of our college was baffled when uniformed cops showed up asking for me. I had some explaining to do. They were all in good humor after that. A cop even offered to take us right up to the warplanes next time.

So if you get stuck in a boring airport, remember, there may be interesting birds nearby. And once in a while, pay attention to those other flying marvels, the great big airplanes.

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