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## Postcard from Mumbai—My garbage dump

It's one in the afternoon and bird life has slowed at my garbage dump in Chembur, Mumbai.

The dump, an elevated concrete structure with metal grating doors on the upper side, was built for everlasting life, as our wet waste disposal unit where wonderful life giving compost is born. It's a paradise for breeding insects: larvae, grubs of different shapes and sizes that crawl around while adults flit, fly, or jump; a lavish spread for insectivores and omnivores. Squeezed between a mango on one side and a large kamini on the other, amidst a plethora of potted plants, providing hiding space for man and others alike.

We are into the 56th day of the nationwide lockdown, hiding fearfully behind masks and doors, trying to escape from the dreaded Corona virus. Braving it out only for bare essentials. After dealing with all housework, we search the screens, our senses straining for news of a remedy, but alas!

During this period I decided to visit our garbage dump regularly. Am I scavenging too? Yes, maybe for some insight into our backyard's natural world where life goes on without much ado.

Armed with a camera I now spend many hours hiding behind plants to catch the latest, observing the relations between the denizens of this micro-habitat. Gradually the complex relationship between all the visitors, including myself, started to unravel and become apparent.

The metal grating allowed most birds through, but not crows. Yet crows hung around trying their luck, a fruit peel or other tasty bits and pieces could have been carelessly left outside. Invertebrate omnivores, they try everything, including harassing others who have salvaged a beak-full of food, like the mynahs or bulbuls. Two species of crow lurk here. Large-billed Crows, glistening in handsome black, are usually solitary, or in twos. They hold their ground even against a murder of four to five House Crows, who respectfully keep their distance. But House Crows

will try to unnerve their larger opponent who are comparatively slower and ponderous in their approach. I found my presence kept the crows of all hues at a distance. This threw open the gates for the others.

Mynahs and the Red-vented Bulbuls pattered around fearlessly, diving into the depths of the dump. For the mynahs, getting in and out was difficult due to their size. On one occasion I saw a mynah struggling to escape from the inside, as I approached with stuff to add to the rotting heap. Mynahs were careful in my presence, but bulbuls were nonchalant. Their interest in this space has been, at best, occasional. The absence of crows and the presence of mynahs and bulbuls seemed a cue for the Magpie-Robin to swoop in, chasing all away.

The Magpie-Robin seems a paradoxical mixture of aggression and shyness, firmly chasing away all other birds, but scooting at the mere glimpse of me or the camera. With the progress of time, I am allowed a little more access, but only a wee bit more. The magpie-robins have also been in song, as males chase each other, or occupy vantage points, singing lovely courtship serenades. On occasions they have been seen collecting sticks or carrying food, hopefully for a waiting brood.

Under my gaze the doors open for Tickell's Flycatcher. In the early days, until the tenth of April, it scrapped with a female Paradise Flycatcher, and then later jostled with Fan-tailed Flycatchers. The Tickell's is built in the style of a thickset boxer of the flycatcher world. Flashily dressed in a hoodie of shimmering blue-grey, from head to tail, and a rich rufous apron from chin to mid-abdomen, even though its sweet metallic notes belie aggression. It's hunting strategy is to sit still and then erupt into a quick short sally to capture its prey. A success rate of one in five dives seems pretty good. As time progressed I realized that I was actually seeing Mr. and Mrs. Tickell's Flycatcher. It was great to catch them displaying on a couple of occasions, within a few feet of where I sat. Unfortunately I did not see any signs of their

nest, though I caught them hunting in tandem for many days. No young have been seen either.

Dashing out from a perch, twisting and turning in midair to pluck insects out of thin air, the female Paradise Flycatcher is a striking combination of pointed black head gear, and rich rufous body. She kept dive bombing the Tickell's, but to no avail. She preferred to perch on the mango or the kamini offering a commanding view of the entire area. On many occasions I looked up to find her sitting a few feet above my head. Once she came within six feet of me and performed maneuvers 'for my eyes only'. I was bewitched, but she had other ideas. The last I saw of her was around the sixth of April. Hope to see her again this winter.

The bravest are the Ashy Prinias. Crows and Blyth's Reed Warblers give them a tough time. The dump provides for easy, satiating meals compared to the lurking dangers. Here were two individuals that pranced around in the plants, and before you knew it they were on the dump, long tails swishing left to right as they peeped below the grating for a hiding morsel.

The Blyth's Reed Warbler inhabiting the area was extremely shy and would not let me within ten meters. I saw very little of it, but its hard 'chuck, chuck' calls were easy to follow through the shrubs till mid-April.

In shining black, wearing a necklace of white pearls on a black collar band on their whitish abdomen—their tails a Japanese fan in the hands of royalty—their shrill, complex call of 'Ti-tede-tede-ti-de' piercing the silence: I watched the Fan-tailed flycatchers (see photo on back cover); they were nesting in a bamboo thicket. Carrying twigs and cobwebs initially, later hurriedly carrying grubs, insects, throwing caution to the wind. Aggressively riding on the backs of crows or spinning circles around coucals and cats, harassing them into retreat. Now since mid-May they are frequenting the dump. The area they chose is quite disturbed, being the entrance of housing societies, where people and macaques wreck havoc regularly.

The fantails are now letting me in very close as parental duties no longer make them wary. They take chances of coming to the dump despite the scolding Tickell's, being very quick and even-tempered, with no time for petty squabbles. Hunting is a hoppity, skippity, jump, and dive after their prey that is plucked in mid-air. Tail flared in varying degree balancing the maneuvers. For all the energy this bird exudes, it's strike rate must be high in order to replenish all those calories. When the Tickell's Flycatcher's aggression became unbearable, they resorted to skimming around the mango's trunk, chasing their prey in a manner where they are unchallenged.

Cats, monkeys, squirrels, and also a mongoose have all come looking for goodies.

Squirrels pass by checking for a worthwhile snack, hustling along the limbs of the mango, ever watchful for suspicious characters, like myself, that the world at large must be warned about in a high-pitched, repetitive, 'chit chit' that resonates until the danger passes. They jump playfully from the building to the mango and circling the area in an aerial acrobatic feat.

A mongoose has been spotted many a time over the years. We surprised each other at the dump, till he sauntered away nonchalantly. Thus began a ritual bringing us face to face time and again, sometimes just three meters apart. One day I hope to get him in my frame.

— Badruddin Ali

## Letter to the Editor

### Is the Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* moving higher up in the mountains? Withdrawal of two elevation records from Nepal

Thapa et al. (2020) reviewed the records for Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* from Nepal and India to assess the evidence of the upward altitudinal movement of peafowl in the mountains. They used secondary data from eBird lists from Nepal, where 2,275 m in the Berekot area in Karnali (Bhusal 2016), and 3,532 m in Lantang National Park, Nepal (Gurung 2013), were mentioned as the range of elevation. The authors used the elevation of the location for which checklists were entered in eBird ([www.eBird.org](http://www.eBird.org)).

For further confirmation, we contacted the observers in Nepal to discuss their sightings and elevation details. These observers confirmed that the altitudinal elevations of peafowl greatly differed from the elevations mentioned in Thapa et al. (2020). Bhusal (2016) recorded peafowl in the Berekot area where the actual elevation is c.1,000 m asl (contra 2,275 m asl), and Gurung (2013) confirmed that his record was from Chitwan National Park (c.100–815 m asl), but had incorrectly marked it as Langtang National Park as they were birding from Chitwan to Langtang during that trip. So far, the confirmed highest elevation record of peafowl in Nepal is 3,196 m from Pyuthan, western mid hill (Khanal et al., in press).

We also contacted the corresponding author of Thapa et al. (2020) who accepted that the elevations they had taken were obtained from the eBird dataset (Lalit Kumar Sharma, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 30 June 2020). We here request that the altitudinal elevation records mentioned in Thapa et al. (2020), from Nepal, be withdrawn. However, this does not impact the results and conclusions of that letter, as Peafowl has been recorded above 3,000 m in Nepal.

In general, the location accuracy of checklists/observations on citizen science platforms varies and we recommend caution while using them directly without assessing for potential errors. Effort and distance in the checklist is a good indicator of the accuracy, particularly while dealing with records in mountainous, non-uniform terrain and habitat. Other species in the same checklist are other useful indicators. Finally, it is always recommended to contact the original observer to verify the accuracy of these observations and make required adjustments, or entirely drop them, before analysis.

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