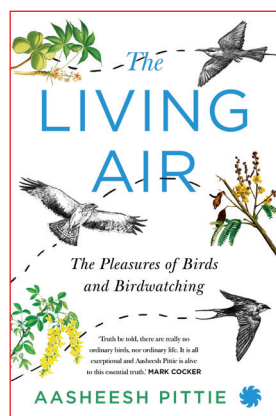


## Book review



### *The Living Air: The Pleasures of Birds and Birdwatching*

**Aasheesh Pittie.**  
2023.

Published by Juggernaut, 2023.  
Pp. 1-296

Visit any popular birdwatching site near metro and large cities in India these days, and one is likely to encounter scores of bird photographers dressed in military style camouflage clothing, and armed with expensive digital cameras. More often, these 'birders' are there to photograph a few 'target' species, whose names vary with seasons, locations, and their relative rarity to a region.

Increasingly, birders are not limiting their search for birding trophies to the city or state where they live. They seek out rarities and the urge to tick and photograph 'lifers' motivates visits to far-flung areas of our country to bag rare avian trophies. The pictures are shared on social media platforms - Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. Scores of communities on social media platforms cater to networking needs of birders and photographers, with 'Indian Birds' community on Facebook having almost half a million members, perhaps the largest and most popular. Many bird photographers have become social media celebrities, thanks to the high quality and rarity of their photographs.

Prior to the advent of digital photography and ubiquitousness of social media platforms in our lives - both growing over the last 15-20 years - birdwatching was a gentle, leisurely, and an unhurried activity. One carried a binocular, often a cheap Russian make, along with the old guidebooks with poor illustrations. Most took notes, which they referred on return to obtain more accurate identities of confusing birds, as well as to capture observations of bird behavior and maintain records after every trip.

Aasheesh Pittie has been birding for over four decades; his birding companions have included many stalwarts of yesteryears - Humayun Abdulali, Siraj Taher, Zafar Futehally, etc. A passionate bibliophile, Aasheesh is also the chronicler of published works and writings on Indian ornithology. His earlier publication '*Birds in Books - Three Hundred Years of South Asian Ornithology*' (2010) is a definitive compilation of the vast body of published work on the ornithology of our region over last three hundred years. For last twenty years, Aasheesh has been editor of the bi-monthly *Indian Birds* - a well-respected journal for scientific writings and notes on ornithology of the Indian subcontinent.

His new book, *The Living Air*, is a compilation of Aasheesh's writing and published essays during his birding journey over

the last three decades. He shares vividly the joys of observing common birds in his neighbourhood, and equally the thrill of seeing India's rarest bird, the Jerdon's Courser. Through his notes, Aasheesh takes us along on 'slow birding' trips to his favourite sites and trails around Hyderabad, where he lives. We share his gentle joys of birdwatching by gaining intimacy with the landscape in its multiple hues. There's no ordinary or common bird for Aasheesh; every species is unique and beautiful, and he writes about each with an unhindered passion. Simultaneously, he laments the loss of bird habitats around us, lost to ever growing urban sprawls, and our need for 'development'.

Aasheesh's approach to birdwatching is a contrast to the competitive sport birding has become for some - a quest to obtain the best or rarest pictures - which sometimes puts a lot of stress on birds at few sites where the species are likely to be seen more easily. But the growing number of birdwatchers and advancements in technologies also has brought in many advantages. eBird has effectively channelized the efforts of this army of birders to voluntarily contribute data on distribution of species into their portal. This has undoubtedly helped in our enhanced understanding of birds. Bird tourism is supporting economies in select areas.

The solution to a challenging scenario where the interest of the bird may not always be at the center of things, may thus lie in positively channelizing the power of our growing tribe, promoting non-intrusive birding behaviours, and always keeping the wellbeing of birds at the forefront. That is where Aasheesh's book is a valuable reminder - it makes us think, makes us remember that the joys of birdwatching are found in silently connecting with nature and its unfathomed complexities. Our new age birders will perhaps take a leaf out of this book, enjoy birdwatching as a break from life's humdrum, to feed our soul by connecting with nature in its multifarious hues.

— Kanwar Bir Singh  
Email: [singh.kb@gmail.com](mailto:singh.kb@gmail.com)