

Birds on Indian postage stamps

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India has a rich and varied avifauna. The beauty, diversity, and uniqueness of the birds of the Indian landscape have naturally made an impact on Indian culture, both ancient, and modern. Many birds find mention in Sanskrit Hindu literature and Prakrit Buddhist literature. While the Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* gets pride of place in Indian culture and history, and is the national bird of India, other birds like Brahminy Duck *Tadorna ferruginea*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*, and many others, appear as prominent motifs in ancient texts.¹ The Shahin Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, and the Pied Myna *Sturnus contra* appear or find mention in Mughal works of art and literature. Kalidasa, the famous Sanskrit poet, frequently used bird imagery in his poetry and plays. His *Meghdoot* is a sensuous poem about a lover exiled from his beloved during monsoon. The poet uses a bird breeding in that season, to describe the character's feelings.² Small wonder then that birds are an important and recurring motif on the postage stamps of India.

How many bird stamps are there?

Postage stamps on birds are common and collecting 'birds on stamps' is a very popular umbrella theme amongst thematic philatelists. Worldwide, according to Kjell Scharning, a prominent collector of bird stamps of the world, there are 28,411 postage stamps on birds as of 7 January 2011 with hundreds being added each year. To date 3,637 species of extant, and 49 species of extinct, birds, are depicted on stamps. Of these 731 stamps depict more than one species, and 161 depict birds that could not be identified with reliability.³ Instead of just collecting stamps 'country-wise', a birdwatcher could have a great time collecting only postage stamps on birds.

The first Indian bird stamps

Birds seem to be absent in the stamps of the British-India era. These were formal and mostly featured the heads of ruling regents. Very few decorative stamps were issued and there appear to be no stamps with nature-oriented themes during this era.

The very first bird that appeared on Indian stamps was a postal carrier pigeon, which appeared on the 2-annas and 14-annas stamps of 1 October 1954, celebrating the centenary of

postage stamps in India. Since the image is symbolic, most bird stamp websites do not display this stamp. This was followed by the 1966 Children's Day stamp, again depicting a symbolic pigeon, this time representing an apostle of peace. The next year a stylised *Garuda* (eagle) caricature was printed on the 1967 stamp of artist Acharya Nandalal Bose. Many such pictorial representations have emerged over the years.

For the first Indian stamp to explicitly depict a bird species as its subject, we have to wait fourteen more years. This was the 20-paise Red-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*, the first of a set of four commemorative bird stamps published on the last day of 1968. The other three stamps portray the Brown-fronted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos auriceps*, White-browed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps*, and Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja*. The Crimson Sunbird stamp showed a pair and clearly indicated the phenomenon of sexual dimorphism. The artwork is by G. M. Henry and has been taken from early versions of Salim Ali's *Indian Hill Birds* and *Book of Indian Birds*.

The choice of these birds for the first Indian bird stamps may be considered unfortunate, being neither typical, nor common, nor even significantly rare. Even worse, these stamps were printed with simplistic captions such as, 'Woodpecker', 'Babbler', 'Sunbird', and, 'Blue Magpie', despite the fact that the birds chosen were not typical examples of each taxa and that each of these 'umbrella names' covered a number of species. However, on the positive side, these stamps had both English and Hindi (in Devanagari script) names on the stamps, a very good practice which continues to this day. Unfortunately the practice of using scientific names on stamps has not caught on in many countries including India.

In 1971, a 20-paise stamp was issued on Raja Ravi Verma, the celebrated nineteenth-century artist of Travancore. The painting depicted was an oil painting of Princess Damayanti talking with the Royal Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* about her paramour Nala. This was the first stamp, which showed a clearly identifiable bird species, not as the subject nor as a stylised pictorial, but in a cultural context. However the poet's fancy has caught on a bird that is not generally found in India today! Perhaps the Sanskrit word "*hansa*" was interpreted in English, as "*swan*", and a picture of that bird was painted out of ignorance of the fact that the right bird would have been its cousin, the Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*.

In 1989, a curious stamp was issued—it was the first one to honour avian government servants, more specifically the postal carrier pigeons, which were then still in service in Orissa. In 2001, bird cartoons made their appearance—four se-tenant⁴ pairs on Panchtantra tales were issued, and two of these depicted birds.

1. Pande, Suruchi. 2010. Personal communication & lecture taken on ethno-ornithology of Indian birds; 7th Certificate Course in Basic Ornithology. Ela Foundation & Abasaheb Garware College of Sciences and Arts, Pune.
 2. Wilson, Horace Hayman, 1814. "The Mégha Dúta, Or, Cloud Messenger: A Poem, in the Sanscrit Language". Calcutta: College of Fort William. 159 pp. Retrieved 11 November 2010. (URL: <http://www.archive.org/stream/mghadtaorcloudm00wilsgoog#page/n0/mode/2up>).
 3. Scharning, Kjell. "Bird Stamp Statistics." Theme Birds on Stamps (URL: <http://www.birdtheme.org/statistics.html>). Retrieved on 5 January 2011. (Latest statistics: by email, dated 7 January 2011).

4. In philately, the term "se-tenant" refers to a block of commemorative stamps printed together on the same sheet but differing in design, color, value, or overprint. Ref: The Free Dictionary (URL: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/se+tenant>). Retrieved on 5 January 2011.

These stamps illustrated the much-beloved tales of 'the crow and the snake', and the 'tortoise and the geese'.

Definitives

Initially the few bird stamps issued had been commemorative stamps—these are large, captioned, pictorial stamps, which are printed in a limited quantity and valid for use in a fixed period. Sometime after its issue, a commemorative stamp is no longer available at the post office counter, being replaced by the latest commemoratives; and also because these stamps are immediately purchased by philatelists. There is another category of stamps—smaller, simpler and duller, with minimal text inscription on them, which are printed in large quantities and reprinted over a number of years. These stamps are called definitive stamps and these are the common stamps of India, workhorses, which bear the brunt of the postal workload.

The first definitive bird stamp was a 50-paise stamp issued in 1974 as part of the fifth definitive series, and it depicted a flying Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*. Later a 25-paise definitive stamp on poultry was issued as part of the sixth series in 1979 and depicted the economic importance of birds for the first time on Indian postage.

The eighth definitive series had an array of birds; the Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* in blue with value one-rupee, a pair of Asian Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* in colour with the costliest Indian value of Rs 50/- which is still available and the Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* in brown on the Rs 4 value, again still in use.

Conservation-related bird stamps

In 1975, a second series of commemorative bird stamps followed showing a Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*, Western Tragopan *Tragopan melanocephalus* and Monal Pheasant *Lophophorus impejanus*. The Western Tragopan, besides being the state bird of Himachal Pradesh, has an IUCN status of 'Vulnerable' and is the first endangered bird to figure on Indian stamps.

India's protected areas now began to appear on stamps: the pride of place, very naturally, being given to Keoladeo Bird Sanctuary in Bharatpur; the stamp appeared in 1976 with a Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* flying over a tree where three other storks are perched. The stamp was based on a photograph taken by late S. Devhare.⁵ This natural activity depicted on stamps was more aesthetically appealing than the stationary subjects of previous bird stamps. This was the first occasion when the postal department associated itself with the conservation movement in India.

A stamp of great interest was issued to commemorate the first International Symposium of Bustards, which was held in Jaipur in 1980. It shows a pair of Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigricaps*. This landmark symposium spread great awareness for the need to conserve the four bustard species in India. Issued at the time when Arab sheikhs used falconry to hunt Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata* in India, this postage stamp might have been the first exposure the common Indian had to this endangered bird. The stamp was issued with a first day cover, an information brochure, and a special cancellation that had a bustard in the centre and the words, 'International Symposium of Bustards, Jaipur,' both, in English, and in Hindi. Incidentally, networking at this conference

was directly responsible for the impetus to establish the bustard sanctuary at Nanaj, Sholapur.^{6,7,8}

A little later, a stamp illustrating a pair of Siberian Cranes *Grus leucogeranus* with a juvenile, foraging in the waterlogged blocks of Keoladeo was issued to commemorate the International Crane Workshop on 7 February 1983. The stamp's design was based on an oil painting by Diana Pierce, kindly loaned by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. A photograph taken by George Archibald, the doyen of the International Crane Foundation, formed the design for the first day cover. Badar Makhmoo designed the cancellation. Needless to say, the postage stamp helped bring publicity to yet another endangered species. It also highlighted the importance of wetlands in general and Keoladeo Ghana in particular.⁹ Unfortunately the same sanctuary is now fighting for its survival and the Siberian Crane is no longer seen in Bharatpur.

1983 was the centenary year of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), which was then at its acme with Dr Salim Ali having the attention of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself, and guiding the course of Indian conservation on a number of issues. The centenary was marked by celebrations, release of books, the inauguration of the ENVIS centre, etc. Among these activities was the release of a beautiful stamp on the society depicting the mascot of its logo—a Great Indian Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*.¹⁰

In 1985, the Indian Postal Department began a series of single value commemorative stamps called, 'Wildlife Conservation.' A total of three stamps were issued as part of the series—White-winged Duck *Asarcornis scutulata* in 1985, Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in 1988, a couple of years after its rediscovery (Bhushan 1986),¹¹ and the Likh Florican *Syphotides indicus* in 1989, a bird associated with the pioneering work of the late Dr Ravi Sankaran, who studied it at Dudwa. Intriguingly, the text for the philatelic insert of this stamp, associated with the issue of the stamp, has been contributed by Dr Salim Ali.¹² Sadly, no more bird stamps have appeared as part of this series.

Antarctica

The continent of Antarctica has a special fascination for Indians, being the southern boundary of the Indian Ocean. The Indian involvement with Antarctica began in 1981 when the first Indian expedition to the Antarctic was launched. Since then, regular expeditions have been conducted to the continent. The Indian Antarctic Program is multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional in scope and participation, and is under the control of the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research, Ministry of

5. Personal communication, Dr Satish Pande, December 2010.

6. "Indian Birdwatching." Indian Birdwatching (URL: <http://www.birdfair.org/indian-bustard.htm>). Tourism and Wildlife Society of India. Accessed 05 January 2011.

7. "Great Indian Bustard." (URL: <http://www.indianpost.com/viewstamp.php/Alpha/G/GREAT%20INDIAN%20BUSTARD>). Indian Post. 01-11-1980. Accessed 5 January 2011.

8. Email exchange on Green Teacher's forum (URL: <http://www.greenteacher.org/forums/index.php?topic=10.0>).

9. "Siberian Crane." Nature/fauna. (URL: http://www.indiapicks.com/stamps/Nature_Fauna/NBL_1076_Siberian_Cranes.htm). Accessed 5 January 2011.

10. "Bombay Natural History Society." Nature/fauna. (URL: http://www.indiapicks.com/stamps/Nature_Fauna/NBL_1097_Indian_Hornbill.htm) Accessed 5 January 2011.

11. Bhushan, Bharat, 1986. Photographic record of the Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser *Cursorius bitorquatus*. J. Bombay Nat. History Soc. 83 (4): 159–162.

12. "Likh Florican" (url: <http://www.indianpost.com/viewstamp.php/Alpha/L/LIKH%20FLORICAN>). India Post.com, 20-12-1989. Accessed 5 January 2011.

Earth Sciences, Government of India.¹³ Scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India, such as Dr S Sathyakumar, have occasionally accompanied these ventures. The first extralimital bird to appear on Indian stamps was once again a barely distinguishable penguin, on a 1983 se-tenant stamp, commemorating the First Indian Antarctic Expedition. When the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctica Treaty (1991) was promulgated, India Post issued a pair of stamps, both of which depicted penguins. The Rs 5.00 stamp shows a group of Emperor Penguins *Aptenodytes forsteri*, and the Rs 6.50 stamp has a map of Antarctica along with a pair of Adelie Penguins *Pygoscelis adeliae*. The latest bird stamp on this topic was released on 19 December 2009 as part of the international philatelic campaign, "Climate Change 2009: Preserve the Polar Regions and Glaciers," and shows the Gentoo- *Pygoscelis papua* and Emperor- *Aptenodytes forsteri* Penguins.¹⁴

Endangered species issue of 1994

Philatelically, the most interesting issue of all was the endangered species issue of 1994. The birds were: Andaman Teal *Anas albogularis* (Re 1.00), Oriental Stork *Ciconia boyciana* (Rs 6.00), Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* (Rs 8.00), and Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* (Rs 11.00). These stamps pictured an endemic bird, two endangered migrants, and an extinct bird. The Pink-headed Duck was thus the first extinct bird to be commemorated on Indian postage stamps. The printing of these stamps was given to a private printer. The ink used by the printer was water soluble and defective. The poor quality led to the stamps being withdrawn after they had been introduced into service, but not before some stamps had been sold over the counter. Today specimens of these stamps sell for exorbitant sums of money on account of their rarity.¹⁵

Migratory birds

India is a winter home to hordes of migratory birds from central Russia—in fact we are the ultimate destination of the Central Asian–Indian Flyway. It was appropriate that a series on these birds was issued in May 2000. The choice of birds spanned the major families: Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus*, Garganey *Anas querquedula*, Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*, and White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*. Of these, the Rosy Starling is in the 'highlighted category' of birds, which is the focus of MigrantWatch (www.migrantwatch.in). The philatelic occasion of Indepex Asiana held in 2000 in Calcutta was celebrated by release of a miniature sheet on the very same migratory bird stamps—a miniature sheet being a small decorative sheet with only one stamp of each type included.

Endemic birds

The very first bird series of 1968 (mentioned earlier) had the endemic White-browed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus*

schisticeps whose Indian subspecies *horsfieldii* is listed as endemic by the BNHS ENVIS.¹⁶ Four other endemic birds have appeared on Indian stamps to date, namely, Andaman Teal *Anas albogularis*, Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*, Black-chinned Laughingthrush *Garrulax cachinnans*, and Manipur Bush Quail *Perdicula manipurensis*.

Raptors

As far as raptors are concerned, more than 20 bird stamps were issued and more than 45 years of independence had passed before India issued its first stamps showing raptors. A very fine series of four values of Rs 2.00, Rs 6.00, Rs 8.00 and Rs 11.00 was released on the penultimate day of 1992. The birds of prey chosen were Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, and Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. While these birds are not typical or common raptors, they are striking, and the stamps look good. The latest raptor to be depicted is the Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, which appeared on a postage stamp issued on 5 June 2010, along with Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity. Incidentally, the same set had another stamp that also depicted the first Indian owl species—Indian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bengalensis*.¹⁷

Latest trends in Indian bird philately

Recently birds have not appeared on stamps dedicated to themselves but as motifs on stamps showing a landscape or protected area. The Satyr Tragopan *Tragopan satyra* appeared as an adjunct to Sela Lake, perched on the shore in one of the five values of the April 2006, 'Himalayan lakes,' set. More appropriately, birds embellish three of five stamps of the National Parks commemorative set of January 2007. All these are beautifully crafted stamps showing the panorama with vegetation, animals, and birds. The three stamps containing birds are those of Bandipur-, Kaziranga-, and Periyar- National Parks.

Indian Bird Stamp Statistics

The number of bird stamps that India has issued depends on how you define the term "issue". As per the avian philately site of Kjell Scharning, "Theme bird on stamps" (<http://www.birdtheme.org/index.html>), India has issued a total of 107 bird stamp issues, up to 5 January 2011 (including design repeats in various forms). Of the stamps depicted on the site, there are only 59 unique designs depicting 51 different species as counted by the author. These exclude stamps with trivial bird imagery.¹⁸

Usually a particular postage stamp design is first issued in a sheet form with typically five stamps in six or seven rows. Postage stamps, which form parts of sets, are typically also issued as miniature sheets where one of each stamp in the set is printed in a pictorial sheet. These miniature sheets are extremely picturesque, and some people collect only these. Also, sometimes booklets containing a few stamps, typically four to ten (depending upon the booklet design), are also issued.

13. "India in Antarctica", Website of National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research ([url: http://ncaor.nic.in/](http://ncaor.nic.in/)). Accessible through menu path Antarctica - India in Antarctica. Accessed 5 January 2011.

14. "Climate Change 2009: Preserve the Polar Regions and Glaciers", International Stamp News ([url: http://www.stampnews.com/stamps/stamps_2009/stamp_1239739632_238093.html](http://www.stampnews.com/stamps/stamps_2009/stamp_1239739632_238093.html)). Accessed 05 January 2011.

15. Rainbow Stamp News, Monthly stamp e-bulletin, July 2009 Issue No. 19 ([url: http://rainbowstampnews.blogspot.com/2009/07/shimla-july-2009-issue-no_6782.html](http://rainbowstampnews.blogspot.com/2009/07/shimla-july-2009-issue-no_6782.html)). Accessed 5 January 2011.

16. "List of endemic birds". ENVIS Centre on Avian Ecology, Bombay Natural History Society, ([url: http://www.bnhsenvis.nic.in/Endemic%20Birds/Endemic%20Birds%201.htm](http://www.bnhsenvis.nic.in/Endemic%20Birds/Endemic%20Birds%201.htm)). Accessed 5 January 2011.

17. "Stamps 2010", India Post ([url: http://www.indiapost.gov.in/Netscape/Stamps2010.html](http://www.indiapost.gov.in/Netscape/Stamps2010.html)). Accessed 5 January 2011.

18. Scharning, *ibid*.

Some authorities consider these various types of issue of the same stamp design as different, yet others club them together as a single stamp issue.

Shortcomings of Indian bird stamps

India has 12.6% of all avian biodiversity in the world with 83 endemic species. Our nation has the entire gamut of biological habitats—mountains, glaciers, plateaus, grasslands, tropical and temperate jungles, arid lands, marshes, coasts, deserts, and islands. Yet, the Indian Postal Department has depicted only 51 species in 59 designs on stamps of Indian birds. India lags far behind many countries, which do a much better job of showcasing their native avifauna.

1. **Numbers.** Compare India Post's output with the staggering issue of 470 postage stamps by the world's leading bird stamp issuer, Gambia (reputed to issue stamps for earning revenue rather than use), United States of America (326), and New Zealand (238). As of date, 134 countries have been listed on Scharming's website (see above) - as having issued more bird stamps than India (107). It is curious that the vast majority of countries which have issued more stamps than India having a poorer avifauna than ours.
2. **Choice of species.** No central process or continuing line of thought is evident. Stamps on a particular theme, such as birds of prey or migratory birds, were usually issued in a four-value set with no additional sets or stamps issued further on the theme. In some cases, bird stamps on notable species were issued to commemorate a conference or organisation rather than the bird itself, the best example being that of the Great Indian Bustard, an endangered species that truly deserves a stamp on its own accord but which got one only on account of a symposium. One suspects that this was also possible only because the symposium was sponsored by the government at national and state level - namely the Tourism Department, Wildlife Society of India, Government of India's Central Arid Zone Research Institute, Rajasthan Government's Department of Tourism Development Corporation. The choice of many species is esoteric - the average Indian knows few of these birds. Till recently, none of our commonest birds had found a place, barring a miniscule Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* in the 2007 stamp on the Periyar National Park. This has only been rectified in the latest bird stamp issue of two Rs 5.00 stamps on 9 July 2010, one with a Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, the other, a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. These are both handsome commemorative stamps and show off the species to good effect.
3. **Quality.** Few of India Post's bird theme sets have been carefully chosen, crafted, or sustained, as a series. In isolation, the sets seem nice, but they pale when one sees the best from the rest of the world. Plus, there is always some lacuna. The choice of birds, the colourfulness, the naturalness of pose, the choice of philatelic values—none of the series really stands out either philatelically, or even ornithologically. As a patriot, bird lover, and philatelist, I wish that we could have a really good long-term bird stamp programme. There is tremendous scope for improvement, which I hope and pray, takes place.

Collecting bird stamps

Thematic philately is concerned with collecting stamps on a subject rather than on a single country, time or place, which is

the domain of classical philately. Birds on stamps comprise a major thematic subject. Legitimate philatelic material on a theme include, not only stamps and first day covers, but also brochures, miniature sheets, specimens (of stamps, not skins!), sheetlets, assays, proofs, errors, etc.¹⁹

Initially, collecting bird stamps of all kinds gave me great pleasure. Now I intend to focus on a smaller group of birds whose stamps alone I intend to collect. The owls, raptors, ducks, parrots, and water birds, have such wide variety that concentrating on such a clade may give greater pleasure than the random collection of bird stamps. One may even restrict oneself to a single species, such as the Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, Secretary Bird *Sagittarius serpentarius*, or Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. One well-known thematic collector has restricted himself to the collection of a single species—the Coelacanth *Latimeria chalumnae*, comprising less than a dozen stamps ever issued. Although the last example I have quoted is of a fish, albeit a very special and interesting one, it just goes to show that the world of bird stamps can provide a niche for all types of micro-themes also.

Indian bird stamps are a small handful and it is not very difficult to make a complete collection over a few years. Another variation of this theme could be collecting stamps on Indian birds (as opposed to bird stamps from India). This would be much more satisfying, open the milieu to a large number of countries and at least a few thousand stamps in scope.

Thematic philately however, as with classical philately, is predominantly obsessed with philatelic purity, having exhibitions, the possession of rare and unusual material (referred to as 'star' material), and is largely devoid of the kind of innocent pleasure that young philatelists might delight in. However, to enjoy collecting bird stamps one does not need to be preoccupied with the minutiae of philately - proofs, errors, unusual cancellations, and so forth. Bird stamps being easily available, usually cheap, and having been issued in vast numbers, it possible to have a collection to enjoy as a naturalist rather than as a philatelist. Since, as previously mentioned, there are in excess of 28,400 stamps with birds on them, with more than 3,600 species of birds depicted on stamps, it is perfectly possible to cater to one's most esoteric interests.

Happy collecting!

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19. The term sheets, booklets and miniature sheets have already been explained in the text. Sheetlets are small sheets having a smaller number of stamps of one design. A first day cover (FDC) is a decorative envelope specially printed for the first day of issue. It may contain a brochure or handout giving details of the stamp. An FDC can be used as a normal envelope with the specific stamp or other stamp stuck on it. Philatelists prefer to add the concerned stamp and get the FDC cancelled with a special cancellation designed for the first day of issue only. Specimens are samples of the stamps or postal stationery sent to postmasters and postal administrations so that they are able to identify valid stamps and to avoid forgeries. They may be overprinted or perforated with the word 'specimen'. Assays, proofs, and errors are concerned with the printing of stamps and it is recommended that these be researched independently by interested persons as there is a lot of material to be learned about them.

