

Terns are numerous. The small Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus* is dainty in flight and fishing habits. Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* arrive in large numbers. They sometimes have a few Lesser Crested Terns (*Sterna bengalensis*) with them. Then there is the beautiful Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* with its dagger like stout red bill, perceptibly larger than the rest.

There are always the aerobatic kites looking for that dropped morsel. Handsome Brahminy Kites *Haliastur Indus* in their rufous attire and white aprons do regular rounds.

Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, with amazing fishing ability and powerful flight are constant companions. Picking up fish at will from the shallow waters and then sitting on a distant outpost, devouring it in peace.

Lurking on the transmission towers, Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* bide their time before swooping down on some unfortunate victim. The grace and speed compel you to follow their flight whatever your sensibilities.

As winter fades into summer and temperatures rise, it's time for these migrants to leave for their breeding grounds. Another change is in the offing as all ready themselves for the journey.

There is a sudden urgency in flight. Large groups take to the air zigzagging around the mudflats in a united frenzy. Individuals are seen stretching their wings and performing sudden leaps in the air. Mock battles ensue for territory.

Costumes undergo change.

Lesser Sand Plovers smarten up in a red wash on their breast bordered by a black band. The godwits also turn up in a splash of red. The gulls and terns too undergo changes to their plumages.

So one is witness to breeding plumages and their intermediary stages.

Then slowly as March warmth raises into April heat these colonizers start departing.

Another season seems to be ending leaving behind stragglers, residents and the flamingoes that stay on till the monsoon.

As of now there is a veil of uncertainty hanging over the existence of Sewree bay. The state government has planned a sea link between Sewree and Uran, which is to start where the jetty and marsh are today. How will it affect the bay life? Will the flamingoes still come here? Will the passage migrants get affected? Will the cycle of life on the bay continue unaltered? Questions abound.

P.S: The flamingoes have been late this year (2006) and are still to arrive in numbers though a few have been sighted. This could be due to late breeding in Kachchh, though we have no confirmation on their breeding status this year.

The Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* is on its way out

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In the first International Crane Workshop at Bharatpur, I had been the odd man out, demanding that the Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* should be accorded top priority, where conservation action would be initiated. At that time, everyone else was top beat since there had been the largest ever concentration of nesting pairs in the Keoladeo Ghana National Park (Rajasthan, India). To me this was something not to be exulting about; rather the red lights were blinking to warn of problems ahead. Such large birds as Sarus just cannot nest successfully in close communities since there would be tensions between the adults for space and between the young birds for food to sustain the physical growth needed to reach a height of near six feet within a matter of three months. This concentration would not have mattered had the pairs been nesting successfully and uniformly throughout Sarus country, as they were wont in the mid-1900s. This was unfortunately not happening and the large concentration in the protected wetland was due to the high degree of disturbance outside. Road-side ditches, which until the 1950s invariably had pairs nesting, were being encroached by cultivation, and pairs that traditionally enjoyed total protection in agriculture were denied that secure niche. A farmer-crane interaction with negative overtones had started and the cranes were retreating. I suspect more and more pairs were raising either one chick or

none at all. That they continued to be visible and confiding through the second half of the last century was entirely because Sarus are long lived and no one molested the adult birds—so most birdwatchers were lulled into a false sense of security. However, nesting pairs were interfered with and each year fewer and fewer young birds were being added to the crane population. Few can honestly say they were prepared for the sudden crash. I am not sure there is sufficient concern even today. We have here a repeat of what happened to the vultures.

In Gujarat, there are several areas where, during rains, the highest numbers of nesting pairs have been identified. We are lucky to have keen scientists and amateurs pursuing the fate of the magnificent birds. Unhappily and to the best of my knowledge, apart from much-publicized censuses, the managers of our wildlife do not have any blueprint for future action. What is very urgently needed is to have a very concerted drive to ensure that as many of the nesting pairs as possible are fully protected. Native farmers, on whose lands the pairs nest, should be associated with the entire exercise and, if need be, some form of compensation should be paid for potential and real damage to crops and in appreciation for extending hospitality to the nesting pairs. The large band of enthusiastic amateur birdwatchers in the state too should be

marshaled to assist the authorities in locating nesting pairs not only in the two key districts of Ahmedabad and Kheda, but in isolated locations across the state. Here is a wild creature that would lend itself to full publicity. In addition to this highly publicized program, we must now take a leaf from the International Crane Foundation (ICF) USA, and start a captive rearing program. It has been shown that by removing one egg from a nest, the parents are not disturbed and continue to incubate the remaining egg. If the egg is removed at the onset, a third egg may be laid! By removing one egg, the chances of both hatchlings successfully reaching adulthood is increased. Crane siblings are extremely competitive and as often as not, the younger chick does not survive unless the wetland is large enough and each parent can lead one offspring to forage at a distance from the other.

The immediate official response to any suggestion of starting a captive rearing program would be negative! The Sarus is a Schedule-I species and so it cannot be interfered with in the wild. Taking eggs from wild nesting pairs would be flouting conservation laws regardless that such birds are unsuccessful in hatching their eggs, or if they do, are unable to raise even one chick. I can understand the objection, lest any free for all take place. As I visualize it, government gives statutory recognition to a group undertaking the responsibility to start rearing cranes in captivity. The wildlife department would be represented on the board and there would be continual monitoring of the work in progress. The model provided by the ICF should be followed and, one of their representatives should be co-opted on the board of management. Their experience and expertise would be essential to any programme initiated in India. The entire programme must be in full public view and as many concerned birdwatchers as possible should be integrated into it.

Unlike the Whooping Crane *Grus americana*, which the ICF helped save from the very brink of extinction, the Sarus is a resident species with local movements dictated by the

availability of water. The American bird is a long distance migrant, which must have resulted in considerable problems, particularly in getting the captive reared birds to integrate with the wild population. For us, this would not be a problem at all. Each year in summer when the water bodies are at their lowest, Sarus collect in the perennial wetlands where young birds start pairing. Captive reared youngsters would be introduced to these natural gatherings. Conceivably, individuals from the captive reared group would partner wild youngsters and the newly formed pair may find a wetland of their choice, even taking up residence in water bodies forming part of landscaping in many of the new housing societies coming up. What ever they do, our main concern should be to see that as many young birds are added to the population as possible.

Even as the highly scientific programme is initiated to raise as many young as possible, a parallel effort has to be initiated where the pairs nesting in traditional locations are given public protection, and imaginative awareness programmes need to be developed involving the communities concerned, the neighborhood schools, etc., and provide intensive media coverage. Sarus have survived into the present century because they enjoyed high sentiment and it is this sentiment, which needs to be kept alive, avoiding dependence only on wildlife legislation. It may also be seriously considered to artificially feed each pair so that the juveniles grow strong. If the feeding is done by the children of the community, all the better. Wetlands, where summer congregations occur, should be highlighted and grain and other nitrogenous feeds should be provided. Many of the farm houses coming up are landscaped with water as a central feature. Such properties should be registered and pairs of Sarus given them. Soon we would have a semi-feral population strengthening the beleaguered wild one.

If we cannot stem the decline of Sarus Cranes in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, I fail to see how we can ever succeed in saving so many other species on the brink of extinction.

First sighting of Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* and Ashy Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus* from Meghalaya, north-east India

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The Nokrek National Park (25°20'–25°29'N 90°13'–90°35'E) is located in Garo Hills (Meghalaya, India), spread over parts of three districts, namely, West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills and South Garo Hills. Nokrek was declared as a national park in 1997, covering an area of 47.48 km². The park area acts as the core area of Nokrek Biosphere Reserve (total area: 820 km²). The national park area has been

acquired by outright purchase of land from local communities by the Government of Meghalaya.

A bird survey of this little known protected area was carried out from October 2001 to May 2002 as a part of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) (Lahkar et al. 2002). This is a note reporting the sightings of two rare species in north-east India that were seen during this survey.