

THE URBAN SONGBIRD: ON THE RED-WHISKERED BULBUL

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The Red whiskered Bulbul | Photo Credit: [Kiran Dhukuchhu/Wikimedia Commons](#)

Have you ever wondered what a bird with whiskers would look like? The Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) is a sprightly and commonly found garden songbird that likes urban gardens, scrubland found on the outskirts of the city, and even humans. This bird was often traded in Asia, so a number are escapees.

A slender medium-sized bird (20 cm), it is dark brown above, white below, with a conspicuous white patch on the cheeks and an elegant black crest. It has crimson tufts below the eye, a crimson red vent (undertail coverts), black beak and legs.

The bird's diet consists of mostly fruits and the unfortunate odd invertebrate. You'll find them in pairs or small groups in gardens with fruiting trees. Their flight is strong, but slow and jerky. Their lively nature always livens up gloomy days. Their calls include loud and musical notes that sound like 'pettigroo' or 'kick-pettigroo'.

For someone who finds urban ecology fascinating, full of surprises and of prime importance, I went to the length of mapping their seasons for a year. When they start singing more than usual, we may assume that the bird is trying to pair up and the breeding season is about to commence. This is usually from February to May.

However, I noticed a bird singing away in my backyard in January last year, and observed that it was trying to woo a female nearby. As the days went by, I saw them both spending more time with each other and indulging in theatrics together, which seemed to give life to the garden. Soon I heard less of them and later, in April, saw two immature birds being guarded by the parents. To know that the birds had successfully bred in my own backyard, brought me immense happiness.

The next two months went in observing what the parents taught the two novices. The life lesson of hunting or being hunted has always been transformative in a bird's life.

They move away slowly to areas with greater tree density in the city post the monsoon season and then you see much less of them until the next breeding season. The nest is cup-shaped, loosely but strongly built of grass, roots, fibres, thin stalks and is lined with finer grass stems and roots. They are mostly placed in bushes.

Seeing them grow every day were the happiest days spent last spring. I hope you have your own Red-whiskered Bulbul moments this year.

The writer is the founder of NINOX - Owl About Nature, a nature-awareness initiative. He is the Delhi-NCR reviewer for Ebird, a Cornell University initiative, monitoring rare sightings of birds. He formerly led a programme of WWF India.

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