

BIRDS HIT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON STATE OF INDIAN BIRDS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Birds are under increasing pressure from human activity, struggling to survive as habitat loss, pesticides, hunting and trapping for the pet trade push them closer to the edge. Once-thriving endemic or migrant bird populations have been decimated over the past quarter century in India, as the scientific report, [State of India's Birds 2020](#), points out. The analysis, produced by 10 globally influential organisations, is a major addition to ornithology. It is a rare synthesis of scientific understanding and citizen-led initiatives, using over 10 million observations made by over 15,500 bird watchers, achieving what would be difficult for small groups of researchers working alone. What emerges is an alarming picture of long-term declines of several species for which enough data is available over a 25-year period, as well as a more recent trend of annual losses. Data inadequacies have led to the exclusion of many species. Some bird species assessed as 'least concern' by the IUCN, were found in peril in India. Remarkably, in spite of having a rich ornithological tradition, only 261 species out of 867 spotted qualified for a full analysis, based on robust long-term data; 52% of them are now classified as being of 'high concern'. The heartening news is that sparrow numbers remain stable overall, although the bird has largely disappeared from some of the big cities. But the Western Ghats offer bleak prospects, and the abundance index of 12 endemic species there has dropped by 75% since 2000. The fortunes of the Nilgiri Pipit, Nilgiri Thrush and several Sholakilis are tied to the survival of the high shola forest-grasslands. Equally critical to some species, such as the Hodgson's bushchat wintering away from Mongolia, is the protection of terai grasslands in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and the northeastern States.

India's conservation community expects the Environment Ministry, which released the status report at the global conference of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals at Gandhinagar, Gujarat, to secure a future for birds. Resolute steps to protect forests and other habitats will confer multiple benefits, protecting other myriad species too. The latest report is refreshing as it taps into citizen science for good data and should serve as a foundation for further collaborative work. It is essential to revive the Great Indian Bustard, now pushed to precariously low numbers. Coursers and floricans need help with their delicate habitat, as do neglected small birds such as the Green Munia that is widely trapped. Bird diversity makes India, Kerala in particular, a birdwatching destination. That variety must be protected not just for cultural reasons, but to improve the health of forests, wetlands, open country habitat and high mountains.

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