

COUNTING BIRDS TOGETHER

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The State of India's Birds Report 2020 represents the first collective attempt in India to understand and assess how the avifauna are doing. The results of this exercise are broadly sobering. While there are several species, including globally threatened ones, whose populations are doing reasonably, more bird species are showing declines in population than are showing population stability or increases. During the last two decades, over half the species assessed have declined. This trend is even more pronounced in recent times, with nearly 80% of the species assessed showing declines over the last five years. And these declines are particularly acute for certain groups of birds, including birds of prey, migrant shorebirds, birds of forests and grasslands, and endemic birds of the Western Ghats. The report further suggests that more bird species deserve immediate conservation attention than previously thought. To the list of 67 globally threatened Indian bird species previously identified by the IUCN (as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable), the report adds 34 more species. The number of species of high conservation concern in India is now 101.

But the news is not all bad. The report also provides strong reasons for hope that we can further strengthen the understanding and conservation of our avian heritage. In particular, the report has two distinctive features that define a new approach: first, that the information it builds on comes from citizens like us all, and second, that the report's data and analysis are in the public domain, inviting critique and further refinement.

Assessing the status of our birds poses a variety of challenges. For a start, there are over 1,300 species of birds in India. While some are loud, colourful or diurnal, and hence relatively easier to detect, others are quiet, shy, or nocturnal. Further, finding them also means having to look in a wide variety of habitats: in forests, wetlands, farmlands, cities, mountains and even open oceans. And to complicate matters further, hundreds of species migrate into and out of our country at different times of the year. Addressing these challenges and achieving a coverage both of species and of habitats has been possible only because of an alignment in the formidable energies and efforts of a large and inspired community of birdwatchers across the country. Only through the efforts of over 15,500 birdwatchers, it became possible to assemble a dataset of over 10 million records, with data points going as far back as the 1970s. Upon this foundation, a large multi-institutional consortium of researchers drawn from both non-governmental and government institutions collaborated to analyse and put together the report.

While the report describes key patterns of change in the populations of certain bird species, answering why these changes have taken place, or developing conservation action that address these changes, are logical follow-up actions that are inconceivable without focused and sustained collective efforts. Just as we have collectively collected, curated, compiled and analysed bird data, we must remain engaged with the results, and continue to further not only an understanding of our avifauna but also actions to conserve them.

Besides collaboration, another key value that the report seeks to acknowledge is the importance of making, not just its outputs, but also the entire process open. The data that has gone into this report are not only collected by thousands of citizens, but are open for any researcher to use. The analyses (and the code) that form the basis of this report are in the public domain. Finally, the report and its results too are entirely open. A better public and scientific understanding of our biodiversity can grow only from wider and open access not only to data, but also from opening the entire process of scientific inquiry to wider peer and public scrutiny and challenge. And we are hoping that, as more and more people come in and examine the data, the analyses and the

results, and ask questions, it only adds greater strength to our understanding of our precious birds.

Of all the forms in which humans encounter nature, birds perhaps touch our lives most closely. Birds are nearly everywhere. They are colourful, they sing and they display. They perform vital functions like predation and seed dispersal. They pervade nearly every aspect of our cultural lives. Given our shared bonds in a timeless journey, to paraphrase ornithologist Nigel Collar, we need to continue building and strengthening models by which citizens, scientists, conservationists and managers collaborate not only to understand our birds, but also to enable them to fare better on our fast-changing planet.

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