

CHENNAI BIRDERS GO ON A GUIDED WALK AROUND PALLIKARANAI MARSHLAND

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

Birdwatchers at Margazhi Bird Utsav 2021 | Photo Credit: [Special arrangement](#)

Margazhi concerts might have taken the virtual route in 2021, but there is still one *utsav* that saw in-person participation — the Margazhi Bird Utsav.

The event coincides with the bird migratory calendar in Chennai's wetlands. Pallikarnai marsh has an enviable heterogeneous hydrology and ecology, making it one of the most diverse natural habitats in the country. The biological diversity boasts 349 species of flora and fauna including 133 species of birds. The marsh supports over 40,000 birds at a time during the migratory season and over 5,000 birds during the non-migratory season. Come winter, the wetlands transform into a bird-watcher's paradise as over 15,000 birds make special appearances.

The Tamil Nadu Forest Department and the Conservation Authority of Pallikaranai Marshland in association with Care Earth Trust (CET), organised the second edition of an immersive bird watching experience from January 10 to 14. Participants were taken around the Pallikaranai marsh and the Perumbakkam wetland adjacent to it, in small groups, with walks guided by Vinoth Balasubramanian, wildlife biologist at CET, and project associate, CET, J Subramanean.

"We had a good mix of both amateur and seasoned bird watchers aged from four to 65 years. They were treated to a beautiful collage of birds that migrated from Siberia and Europe as well as resident great egrets, spot-billed pelicans, purple and grey herons and black-winged stilts. In all, we recorded 54 species, which is an improvement on the count in 2020, though there were fewer birds overall, compared to last season. This was probably because of the longer spells of rain we had in late 2020," explains Vinoth, who said the lower footfall this year was compensated by the enthusiastic birdwatchers.

Migratory birds spotted over the week included the garganey, northern pintail, northern shoveler, blue-tailed bee-eater, western marsh harrier, grey-headed lapwing, yellow wagtail and fulvous whistling duck.

The watershed-landscape that cradles the marsh is a confluence of freshwater, brackish water, and estuarine conditions. Over the last few decades, there has been a steady increase in the diversity of birds that flock to Pallikaranai, especially an abundance of fish-eating birds, which points to resilient underwater biodiversity as well.

Nirupama Viswanath, a city-based freelance illustrator and architect, was smitten with the avian diversity on display. "I am not an avid birder, but I love learning new things about animals and birds. As we made our way from the ELCOT Toll towards Medavakkam, it was amazing to see grey pelicans, cormorants, and ducks that came all the way from northern Europe and large painted storks that flew gracefully across the sky."

Residential buildings adjacent to the marsh offer unique vantage points and students brought binoculars, as they perched themselves on terraces and balconies to get a bird's eye view of the wetland.

The Margazhi Bird Utsav 2021 coincides with the Pongal and Bihu Bird Count as well, wherein birders are encouraged to spend 15 minutes identifying avian species, recording them on ebird.org.

The Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) runs concurrently through the end of February. The citizen-science event is part of the global International Waterbird Census (IWC) that supports the conservation and management of wetlands and waterbirds worldwide. By using eBird, and filling an additional site form, birders can participate in a multi-country effort to document the state of wetlands and waterbirds.

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