

# THE COMMON HAWK-CUCKOO CALLS THE TUNE

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A common hawk-cuckoo at Theosophical Society. Photo: Rama Neelamegam

Birder Rama Neelamegam lets on about a mid-click blooper from 2017. Executed at the woods of the Theosophical Society, the photographic click was a half measure — a half bird, actually. It left a common hawk-cuckoo's barred tail to the imagination.

The bird was at close quarters, and a neophyte with the camera then, Rama could not make the most of the moment. The image was clicked at the speed of greased lightning, but the other hand failed to rotate the focus-ring just that wee bit, to get the complete bird.

“At that time, I did not know how to shift the focus. After I learnt how to, I did not see the bird at close quarters,” Rama makes a laugh out of the botched operation.

The half-image and Rama's lighthearted behind-the-scenes remark about it reveal something about the common hawk-cuckoo. This representative of the cuculidae family is a sure-find in its habitats. Only that its presence is more often registered by the notes of its calls.

It belongs to that species-spanning category of skulking birds best described as “more heard than seen”. Thankfully, the call has a distinct quality that makes identification easy. One can hear the phrase “brain fever” being clearly enunciated in its call, three notes getting the three syllables (one for “brain” and two for “fever”) out as if the bird joined Eliza Doolittle (*My Fair Lady*) to be tutored in pronunciation and conversation by Henry Higgins.

Those living next-door to the common hawk-cuckoo vouch for this: It would be calling throughout the day, even occasionally “clear” its throat at the dead of night (particularly during the breeding season) — rather at the nebulous point where two days, one spent-out and the other barely sprouted, meet. The bird would however pipe down a bit in the non-breeding season. In the Indian sub-continent, the common hawk-cuckoo's breeding season stretches from March to July.

IIT-Madras campus is one of the spaces in Chennai where the common hawk-cuckoo is often heard.

Being an IIT-M resident and possessing a trained ear for avian calls, Mahathi Narayanaswamy has the right location and the requisite skill to appreciate this species.

Mahathi has this to say about her feathered neighbour: “On the IIT-M campus, common hawk-cuckoo vocalisation happens throughout the day. If you step out of the house, even if the bird is not right outside of the house, you just have to wait for 30 to 45 minutes utmost, and you would hear the vocalisation at least once. A couple of days ago, I woke up to its call around one a.m. as it was heard extremely close to the window. I have heard neighbours and other residents of IIT-M note from time to time that they heard the common hawk-cuckoo very close to the window at 11 p.m or extremely early in the morning. The best time to hear the common hawk-cuckoo is just before sunrise. At that time, if you are in any patch, you will hear at least three individuals calling. Common hawk-cuckoo calls also resonate quite a bit.”

“The common hawk-cuckoo is very common, very vocal, but you have to take the pains to look where it is found, tracking the call and heading there. This bird is a skulker. It does not usually sit out in the open, and tends to hide away in the canopy. As usual, with most skulky birds, the

juveniles of the species are bold and curious and would sit out in the open,” remarks Rama.

However, being around its habitat, one is bound to have a sighting sooner than later — because these birds seem to have numbers on their side.

The greatest pre-requisite for a common hawk-cuckoo showing up in a place is sufficient vegetation, and of the right kind, point out eBird reviewer Vikas Madhav Nagarajan and Rama.

Vikas elaborates, “You would not get to see it inside the city, for example. However, in IIT-M, GNP Children’s Park and Theosophical Society — there is bound to be common hawk-cuckoo sightings. This species basically needs some moderate forest tracts. There have been lots of sightings at SSN. That is also because of where it is located — in the outskirts and has the right vegetation.”

Rama reports impressive sightings of this bird at Adyar Poonga, because it prefers this bird the right “food bowl”. Here is her observation: “Like the other cuckoos — which include the Indian cuckoo and the Eurasian cuckoo — the common hawk-cuckoo has a taste for hairy caterpillars. It will prefer those trees that are larval hosts of the hairy caterpillar. Adyar Poonga offers a rich feeding habitat for this species.”

*(Resident Watch discusses the resident birds of Chennai and its surrounding districts)*

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