

# TIME TO PAY UNDIVIDED ATTENTION TO THE RAPTORS

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

A greater spotted eagle taking the same low perch at Perumbakkam wetland. | Photo Credit: Prince Frederick

Once at the Perumbakkam wetland, this writer was an unintentional eavesdropper, soaking up morsels falling off a good-humoured banter between two seasoned birders.

Standing at the extreme end of Classic Farms Main Road, the two friends were chin-wagging over how winter-visiting raptors cutting across species-lines displayed an orderliness, one that kept them from getting into each other's bristling feathers.

Looking at distant land-marking concrete stakes, one of the two birders noted which raptor would take which stake. This chitchat and the eavesdropping took place before the pandemic. And on hindsight, these stakes were an equivalent of designated, painted social-distancing spots that greeted shoppers at the height of the global health crisis. The raptors were naturally practising social distancing much before it became a necessity for survival for homo sapiens.

So, there is a touch of irony to a report of how two raptors from two different species almost clawed each other, over a "property" dispute, as recently as this Diwali day. On October 24, Umesh Mani, a seasoned birder and a member of Madras Naturalists Society, watched an airborne Osprey heckling a Greater Spotted Eagle off a perch within the boundaries of the wetland.

By no stretch of the imagination can skirmishes between raptors of different species be called an oddity. They do happen but far more rarely than the irritated peckings that routinely take place among birds found in massive mixed flocks, usually waders.

Only that whatever the raptors do now at the Perumbakkam wetland catches the eye unfailingly as the waders are still thin on the waters. As a result, there is fewer distractions eating into the spotlight enjoyed by these birds of prey.

Sightings by birders at the Perumbakkam wetland this season include the marsh harrier, the greater spotted eagle, the osprey, and the peregrine falcon. There is also a record on eBird of a pied harrier (juvenile) sighting.

KVRK Thirunaranan of The Nature Trust, which works closely with the Forest Department and documents the bird life in the Pallikaranai marsh (which the Perumbakkam wetland is a part of) adds to the list: Red-necked falcon and booted eagle.

"Around the time we first sighted the marsh harrier this season, we also sighted garganey. Based on observations over the last five years, there is a pattern, one that suggests a synchronicity between the arrivals of the garganey and the marsh harrier. They check in around the same time, underlining an impressive prey-predator diversity at the Pallikarani marsh," says Thirunaranan.

At the Perumbakkam wetland, the pintail, the northern shoveler and the garganey are now sighted, but their numbers need to pick up.

Thirunaranan notes the common teal has also arrived, being found in the core area of the Pallikaranai marsh. “An impressive number of Eurasian wigeons is also seen in the core area, and this species’ arrival at this hour indicates a great birding season is ahead of us,” he elaborates.

A flock of black-winged godwits was sighted on October 28 at the Perumbakkam wetland. But generally, waders are coming across as laggards this season.

Until the time the waterbirds mass up at the Perumbakkam wetland, nature enthusiasts can pay their undivided attention to the raptors.

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