

Govt should handle avitourism with care, sensitivity: Birders

Photographs: Rajtilak Naik & Aiden Fonseca

'Concretizing Spots, Littering Will Drive Birds Away'

Paul Fernandes
@timesgroup.com

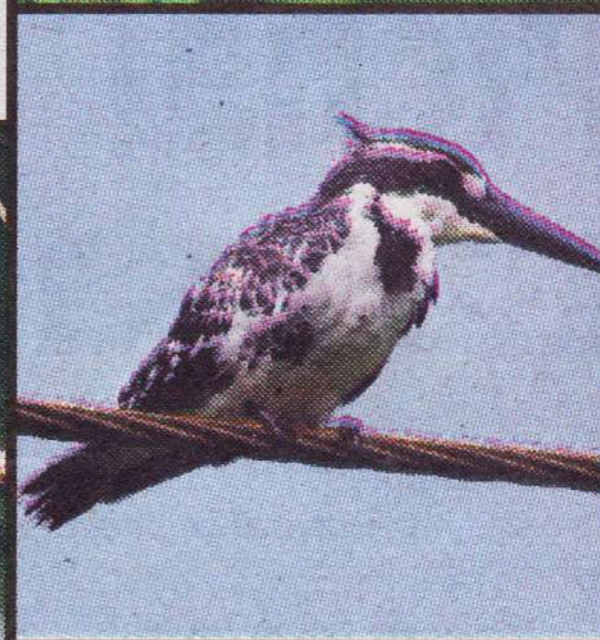
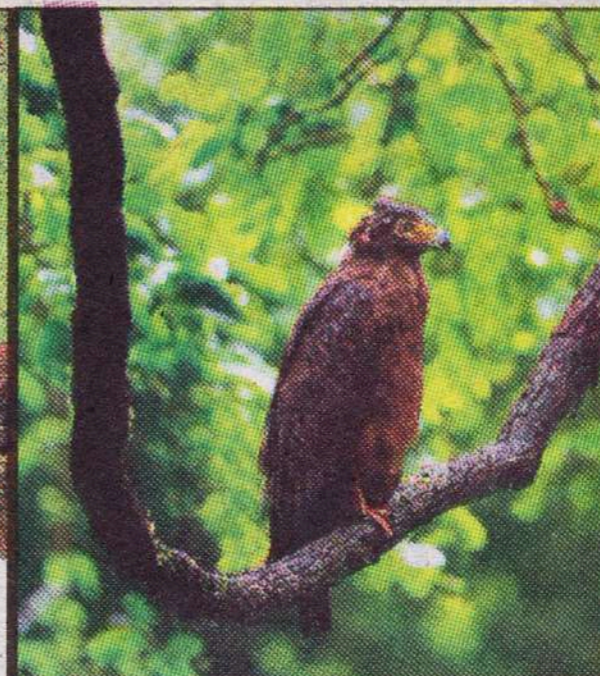
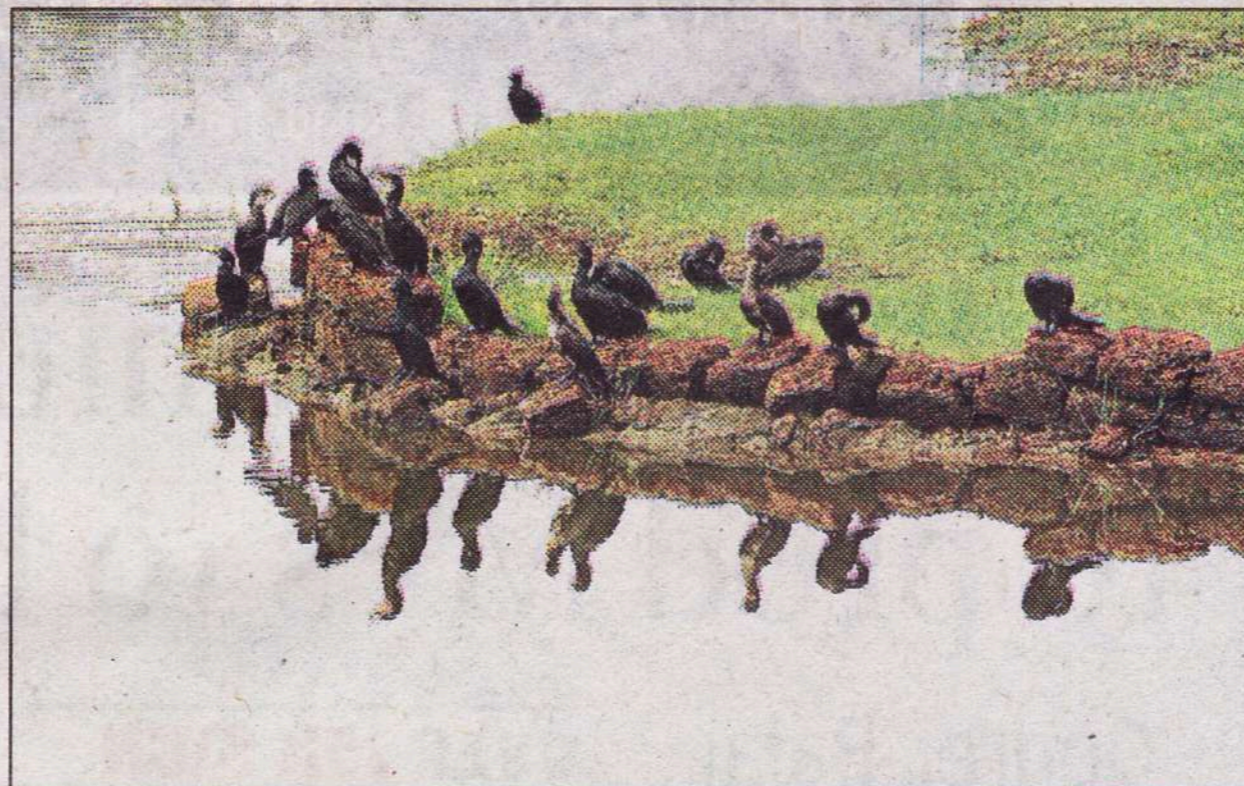
Panaji: With over 400 bird species in easily accessible habitats and adequate tourism infrastructure, Goa needs minimal requirements to promote avitourism, but a few suggest scientific planning to prevent damage of increased footfalls to bird habitats.

Goa tourism recently announced a tie-up with Panaji-based Bird Institute of Goa (BIG) to promote avitourism in the state.

After participating in two editions of big bird day, an annual bird count event, Goan birders have woken up to the joys and potential of flash-counting of birds in the state. Goa stood second after Assam twice in terms of number of species reported during the day-long bird count, though some disagree over the parameters. The ease of bird watching and infrastructure available, prompt a few to tap ornithology for tourism.

"We are lucky to have diverse bird habitats, be it coastal, mangroves, forest, wetlands and Western Ghats within a radius of just over an hour's travel time. A wide spectrum of hotel infrastructure ranges from home stays to luxury resorts while transport is efficient and road network extensive," says Savio Fonseca, a trustee of BIG.

The infrastructure required around bird watching spots involves basic needs and minimal investment. "Nothing fancy and nothing intrusive, but just some watch towers, benches for people to sit down, signage and nature



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Birds at the Maina-Curtorim lake; crested serpent eagle; greater racket-tailed drongo; a butterfly; pied kingfisher and an Asian fairy bird

trails," Philip Fernandes, a honorary wildlife warden, said.

In Carambolim, the well-frequented birding spot, there is not even a nature trail around the lake and the tower is small.

Birders are sensitive to adverse developmental impacts on habitats and cautious about promotion of avitourism by government agencies. "The specifics of this proposal are not known, whether avitourism will be promoted through road shows abroad and how it is sought to be carried forward on the ground," says Rajiv D'Silva, secretary of Goa bird conservation network.

The network has adopted a wait-and-watch policy, as they hope that a detailed plan with experts in the field is drawn up. "The primary focus of any activity should be to preserve the bird habitat," adds D'Silva.

Agreeing with him, another

birder says, "A few Indian birders, may be not all, are actually photographers and may go to any extent to capture bird life."

Goa has always been known as an avi-tourism destination, but the number of visitors is on the decline. "This is because of the type of tourists we get, garbage and other social problems," the birder adds.

Ralph D'Souza, a spokesman of travel and tourism association of Goa (TTAG) dismissed apprehensions about Goa's degrading environment. "The rich avi-fauna is an evaluation of our environment, which is still good. Many spots and even roadside areas have become a paradise for birds, but birders should be allowed only on foot or cycles," he said.

But, Fonseca points out that birders are not the type of people who sit in shacks or party late at night. "They are nature lovers and rise early as bird watching is an early

morning activity," he says.

Ameya Abhyankar, IAS, director of tourism, pointed out that entire safaris are sold on birding experiences in some African countries. "This has also become a family activity, as parents come with their children to do bird watching, and it goes well with the theme of promoting Goa as a family destination," he said.

Most birders want scientific planning and protection of the habitats. "Avitourism is good, but more emphasis is needed on garbage control, as people abuse the place," Fernandes said.

A few consider the potential to link avitourism to conservation. Declaring more protected areas is not feasible and it is best to save unprotected areas through people's involvement. "If conservation is to be successful, it has to be mutually beneficial to locals and conservation interest," Fonseca said.

Appointing tourist war-

dens to monitor activities in bird sports can play an important role. They can act as guides and watchdogs of the habitats. "They can brief authorities about the undesirable development, too," the BSG member said.

But, a birder suggested involvement of the forest department and more experts to promote ornithological interest. "The proposal can be good if the tourism department is sensitive about protecting bird habitats, but not if it is a matter of concretizing the spots, raising only watch-towers, restaurants and concrete structures," a birder said.

Abhyankar conceded that some consequences of footfalls are inevitable. "We are open to associating with all, birders and persons with interest in promoting avitourism, and that includes persons from the environment side. We want the activity to be sustained, and at the same time, engage discerning genre of tourists in it," he said.

Avi fauna attracts enthusiasts to Goa

Avi fauna attracts enthusiasts to Goa

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Panaji: Goa, with its rich diversity of birds, boasts of myriad spots for watching them and two major complexes at Carambolim and Maina-Curtolim. Shiroda are a few places that birders throng to with their spotting scopes.

Carambolim, an artificial lake located near Old Goa, has a few regulars - northern pintail, bronze-winged and pheasant-tailed jacanas and others. Just a stone's throw away, in the Dhado marshland draining into Cumbharjua canal, one can find lesser adjutant storks and many raptors, especially Os-

prey. It is also a habitat of the mugger crocodile.

Driving to the north, the scenic Monte hill is a diverse habitat of forest birds. Back on the road, one can trek the Neura wetland in the south, barely 7km ahead. "This is a microsm of Goa's avian treasures as in Monte hill you get Malabar pied and Indian grey hornbill, India pitta and other forest birds all the year around. Dhado is a habitat of saline wetland birds, Carambolim is known for fresh water wetland birds and Neura, another saline brackish water spot, is an ideal place for flamingoes if they chose to come to Goa," said Savio Fonseca of

Birds Institute of Goa.

The lakes of Maina, Macazana, Curtorim, especially Uddo, Maimtollem and Raitollem and the wetlands of Shiroda, are well frequented by birders, especially during the November-March period, as these places boast of a rich bird life.

The Pilerne and Socorro plateaus are considered ideal places for grass land birds and raptors, while Batim lake receives fresh water birds, pin tails and shovellers, besides forest birds on the hill above it.

St Cruz, Siolim, Chorao bird sanctuary, Bondla and Molem also offer much diversity of avi fauna to birders and amateurs.

Old Goa residency to be bird watchers' base

Panaji: Goa tourism development corporation (GTDC) is planning to promote its property in Old Goa as a base for bird watchers headed to Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, Chorao, and Carambolim lake.

The Old Goa residency has 45 rooms and plans are afoot to impart a different touch and feel to the place. "We will put a different bird picture in each of these rooms with details and guests can talk about birds over a cup of tea or meal," Nilesh Desai, GTDC chairman, said.

GTDC is planning to merge this heritage tourism base into a cultural one with facilities for bird watching, providing them equipment for bird watching, binoculars, cycles and guides to facilitate their ornithological interest.

Officials are aware that avitourism is a niche activity. "This segment is eco-sensitive and responsible," he said. TNN