Goa can fly high on avi-tourism: Grewal

Bikram Grewal is an eminent ornithologist, best-selling author, and delightful speaker. He is the acclaimed author of several photo-guides to the birds of the Indian Subcontinent.
He speaks to **Gerard De Souza** on his latest venture 'Birds of Goa'.

The Goan: You have successfully published India's best selling book on birds "Birds of India". What special are you bringing to Goa's latest book on birds?

Bikram Grewal: "We have tried to document as many species as possible found in Goa, more than any other book, and paired them with international class photos, including wherever possible, two photos -- one of the female in cases where the female looks different than the male. This also includes descriptions. It is a truly international class of book and can compare with any other in terms of a product.

TG: It is clear that your aim is more than just promoting the book but venturing into avi-tourism to the point of saying that avi-tourism can actually save Goa's ecology? How true is this?

BG: Avi-tourism is completely different from conventional tourism. Goa is currently working on about 5% of its avi-tourism potential. Avi-tourism actually helps local tourism unlike the big hotel tourism. Bird tourism will help the local guides, the local people who offer home stays, and the taxi drivers and in general those who have local knowledge.

Goa is uniquely placed in that it has everything going for it. It has the coast, the forests, the people are by and large eco-friendly and best of all it has a huge diversity of birds. It's a class case. Goa can just use its existing resources and go big in avi-tourism, it has 90% of the things in place it just has to use them better.

Training guides is very important as is opening up of dedicated trails as well as designating hotspots which we have done in the book.

TG: What is the potential in terms of finance?

BG: In States that have invested in bird watching, people are willing to pay 5,000 a day for just the bare essentials including stay. Abroad people are willing to pay $100 per day for a bird guide. Bird watching is the largest pastime in the US overtaking golf with 20% of the population saying it's their favourite pastime. Several States have done this in a big way. There's Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh is now doing it, the North Eastern States have been doing it for years. Only in Nagaland we had a negative experience in the sense that the response was so good that they are getting more visitors they can handle. There are not enough hotels, not enough taxis, not enough home stays to the point that people go back disappointed. Goa won't have any of these problems.

Goa can go big...

TG: What is the government's role in this?

BG: Goa needs to have a Goa bird festival. Gujarat has had it, Uttarakhand has had it. Several other States have had this. This is how you spread the word nationally and internationally. You have to get international watchers, hold photography workshops. Governments are also important for regulation. There is this horrible word called progress. For progress we don't have to destroy forests and the environment. Governments need to be strict.

Once you start, it's a hobby that is difficult to give up.

TG: Bird watching has the impression that it's a very elitist pastime replete with haves and have-nots and exclusive clubs of people...

BG: I would like to categorically state that there is nothing elitist about bird watching. All you need is an interest and a notepad and a pen. You can do it anywhere at anytime even sitting on your roof or your backyard.

Bird photography is a little more difficult field to get into given the cost of equipment. To get into serious bird photography one would need the money, which is why many techies are getting into it.

People have taken to bird watching so fast that there are about three-lakh bird watchers across the country. There are only about 50,000 lenses in the country so you know the ratio of bird watching to bird photography.