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Eye on birds

- The waterbodies of the twin townships provide cosy perches to winged visitors. Brinda Sarkar lists the hot spots where enthusiasts are spending winter mornings armed with binocular and camera



Birders in action behind Mother's Wax Museum on Saturday

How about going birding before the winter trails away? And you needn't trek to Joka or Howrah for it either. There are a few good bird-watching sites pretty close to home. "The city doesn't have any natural jungles but New Town still has some grasslands where birds come," says Uttam Mahatha, an IT professional working in New Town and an avid birder associated with Nature Mates-Nature Club. "It has resident birds as well as migratory birds who come in winter. A few years ago the Desert Wheateye bird created a sensation when it was spotted in New Town. The White-Rumped Vulture, that was once a regular around Victoria Memorial, is rare now but even this can be spotted here."

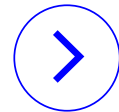
Migratory birds usually come to Calcutta from the Himalayan foothills, China, Siberia etc as their food supply reduces there in winter. "They come to warmer climes to eat and prepare to mate once they return to their breeding grounds in spring," says Mahatha.

While most of New Town's grasslands would eventually get urbanised, the authorities are keen to protect at least part of it for birders. So they have built Eco Urban Village near the Owl Junction.

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Asian Openbill Storks . (Shubham Paul)

"Eco Tourism Park already attracts hundreds of birds to its rain forest and fruit tree zones but for visitors, that is just a sneak peek into bird watching," says Debashis Sen, chairman cum managing director of Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation (Hidco), that is in charge of Eco Park and Eco Urban Village.

The latter is for serious bird and nature-lovers. "Except the washrooms, all other structures there are built of bamboo, hay etc. We have tried to keep it as close to birds' natural habitat as possible," says Sen.

Another coveted site is Kharibari, in the interiors of Rajarhat. "From mid-February to March, Kharibari is used as a transit site by migratory birds headed home from the rest of India. They halt there for a day or two to eat and rest and take flight again," Mahatha says.

Subhas Sarabor, opposite Swabhumi, used to be a good birding site but hobbyists avoid it now as the area is polluted and dingy. "Despite that, the rare Painted Stork is still believed to be breeding there," says Mahatha. "But then birds are mysterious creatures. Look at Santragachi Jheel — surrounded by slums, railway lines, noise, pollution. Yet it has recorded 6-7,000 birds this year!"



A pond amidst the greenery behind Mother's Wax Museum

Behind Mothers' Wax Museum

How to get there: Drive into the Owl Junction lane opposite Eco Park. Take the first right again and you'll come across miles of grasslands on both sides.

You can also try the nearby Eco Urban Village. For this, drive into the Owl Junction lane and take the last left. The village will appear on the left, opposite Malancha complex.

Ambience: Grasslands with blades of grass so tall one could get lost. In other places, there are small water bodies and marshes. Cows come from the nearby villages to graze and the only city folk you see there are bird-watchers.

Eco Urban Village is built around a 15-acre natural lake, that is the largest in New Town after the one at Eco Park. The environment is rural and usually peaceful.

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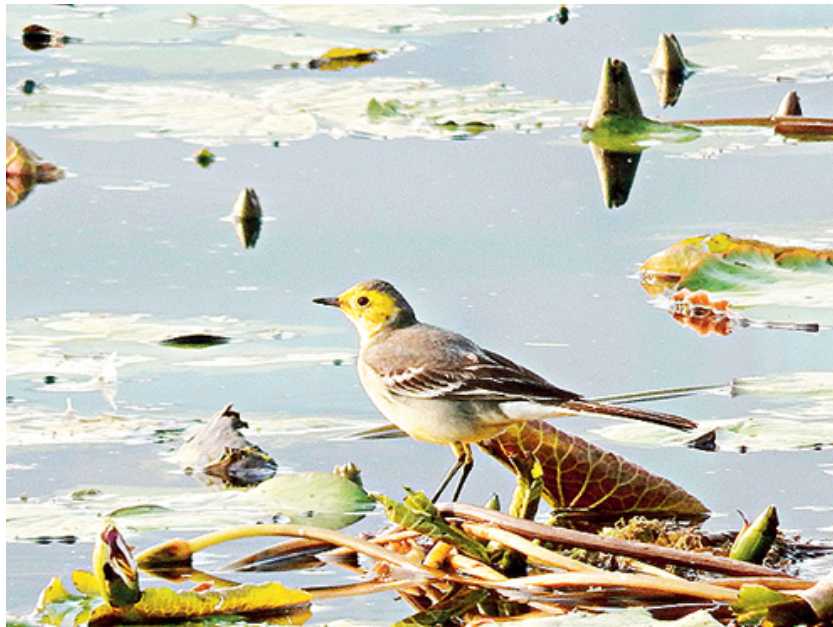
Asian Openbill Storks

Birds spotted: Amur Falcon, Bluethroat, Stonechat, Strawberry Finch, Wrynecks, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Open-billed Stork, Cattle Egret, Paddyfield Pipet.

Downside: Thermocol plates and chips packets are scattered in the open grasslands. The snipped thread from kites lie entangled on the ground and birders (and possibly birds too) get caught in them while walking. Radhanath Mondal, a villager who brings his cows to graze on this land, also knows of locals who have cast nets to catch and eat these birds.

There are signboards across the expanse saying that it is a site for some future project, making you wonder how much longer this open space will remain.

Eco Urban Village is a picnic spot, hosts cultural festivals and the revellery is bound to scare birds away. "The events are held there to attract the attention of visitors. They need to come and discover the place before they can return to watch birds," says Sen.



Citrine Wagtail

Birder quote: Amit Jyoti Majumdar and Utpal Saha, friends from Salt Lake's CF and BD Blocks respectively, say they come to the grasslands twice a month. "We've seen Bluethroats and Amur Falcons here. It's a great site," said Amit on Saturday, looking through a binocular as Utpal focussed his telephoto lens on a faraway bird.

Himadri Mondal had come from Beliaghata. "Shyamkhola More, near Narendrapur, is my favourite birding site but this is a good spot close to home," he said. "I've spotted birds like Munia and jal mayuris (Pheasant-tailed Jacana) here."

Central Park

How to get there: Enter from the Netaji statue side to reach the lake faster. One can also enter from the gate opposite Bikash Bhavan and watch the birds in the trees before reaching the lake.



Indian Pond Heron and White-breasted Waterhen (below) at Central Park

Ambience: While boating and angling are allowed in the lake, the portion near the Netaji statue is cordoned off and left undisturbed for birds. The rest of the park has tall trees, flowers and bushes. Ducks swim and bathe in the water, cattle egrets walk on the banks, kingfishers bask in the sun and parrots chase one another between branches.

Birds spotted: Scaly Thrush, Black-breasted Thrush, Lesser Whistling Duck. "Central Park also plays host to the Tufted Duck, a bird that only visits clean and unpolluted areas," says Mahatha.

Downside: It is a popular destination for fitness freaks in the morning and couples during the day. The stream of people round the clock may pose a disturbance to the birds.



Birder speak: "This is a lovely place for bird-watching although birds do get disturbed by the Metro construction work next door. This year I am seeing far less birds than last year," says Abir Chatterjee of FD Block, who watches and clicks birds.

Bheris behind Sector V

How to get there: Drive into Sector V till you reach the water bodies. Park your car and walk further into the narrow unmetalled roads between the bheris.

Ambience: Peaceful, especially on winter mornings. The only thing you hear is the call of different birds and the occasional aeroplane flying overhead. Some portions of the bheris are getting emptied now for the ground to be smoothened and this has created wetland-like surfaces that is attracting birds.



Lesser Whistling Ducks in the Central Park waters on Saturday. Pictures by Shubham Paul

Birds spotted: Common Kingfisher, Barn Swallow, Pond Heron

Downside: Birds get chased away by fishermen. The water bodies have fish like rohu, katla and silver carp but Gopal Mondal, a security guard there, says it's his job to protect them from thieves and birds.

"We have to row our boats and stop the birds from eating up the fish," he says. "The fish are to be caught and sold. Four to five years ago there used to be many more birds here and lots would come with binoculars and cameras to watch them."

Birder quote: "The bheris are an important site for birds and in the past we've spotted hundreds of ducks in places like Captain Bheri, next to Chingrihata. Northern Shovelers have also been sighted," says Mahatha.



The bheris around Nalban

TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

Kit: Even before a camera, get a pair of binoculars. Get the hang of watching birds before clicking them. Also get an illustrated field guide book such as *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Inskipp and Grimmett or *The Book of Indian Birds* by Salim Ali. This will help you identify the birds you spot. You will know if they are residents or winter visitors, if they are male or female etc.

Attire: Birders must blend into the surroundings so birds cannot spot them. Dress in dull colours like olive green.

Season: Winter, when migratory birds come, and June-August when resident birds are busy making nests and feeding chicks.

Time: Birds are most active in the early hours, between 6 and 9.30am. During these hours they are so busy feeding that they become oblivious to their surroundings and to anyone watching them.

Approach: This hobby requires patience. If you expect birds to go perch on a particular tree, wait 30-ft away from it. Put your phone on silent mode and don't speak or make a noise. Once the bird(s) arrive(s), move closer slowly in a zig-zag fashion. If you walk straight up to them they will feel threatened and flee.

Ethics: Maintain silence even after you've got your best shot. You entered the bird's territory without disturbing it; now leave without it finding out too.

Share your bird-watching experience.
Write to The Telegraph Salt Lake, 6, Prafulla Sarkar Street, Calcutta 700001.
Email: saltlake@abpmail.com



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