

I have a large flowering climber on the south - east corner of my house. By mid January, each year, its leaves start appearing tired and the green gloss begins to fade. However, here and there, all along the stems in the axis of each leaf there appear buds that rapidly swell and spread out into sprays of densely packed, small orange-red flowers. By mid February the leaves fall and the entire climber is ablaze. Drawn to the flowers are a large number of birds - since the flowers are small, the birds are all small: Sunbirds, White - eyes, Common loras and Warblers (both resident and migratory) are the chief habitues. Occasionally, Red-vented Bulbuls sample the proffered food: nectar served up in the multitudes of small flowers but their beaks appear to be too thick to efficiently probe the receptacles. These are essentially bee flowers and both species of our common bee's *Apis dorsata* and *A. florea* literally swarm onto the inflorescence. Their comings and goings invariably draw Green Bee-eaters. So, I can spend time in the warm winter sun enjoying bird watching as exciting as would be possible any place else away from home.

There had been a large *Erythrina* tree just across in the neighbours plot and this tree would also burst into bloom at around the same time as the climber and it provided a spectacular backdrop - the larger flowers drawing an assortment of larger birds: Bulbuls, Babbler, Magpie Robins, Drongos (Black, Grey and the occasional White-bellied), Mynas and Parakeets. Unfortunately, when the property was bought by new owners and they built their house, their first act was to fell the lovely tree. I have planted a sapling from that tree's seed along with an Indian Silk Cotton on my side of the fence. Hopefully, I will have more rewarding bird watching in my very home as with advancing age I will find extended forays less agreeable; in any case, the country side is getting less and less attractive.

At the back of my house stands a tall Umbar (*Ficus glomerata*). That too provides me delightful bird watching particularly when its branches are laden with figs. Coppermiths, Bulbuls, Mynas, Koels all throng. Small birds too are drawn to sample the partially eaten figs and capture the multitudes of small insects that visit them. This tree bears fruit several times a year which makes it extremely important for essentially frugivorous birds like Green Pigeons. I have yet to have a hornbill visit my humble home, but the pigeons drop in year round and are a delight to have around if for nothing else than their musical whistling calls. Unfortunately this fine tree is rather messy since its fecundity rains down huge quantities of fermenting fruit on the ground below. I can appreciate why house proud housewives abhor having one anywhere near their homes. The masses of figs dropping can be advantageously swept up and used for preparing highly enriched compost for household

plants - the inconvenience should be amply compensated by this valuable end product and by of course, the joy of having so many birds around throughout the day. Being a large tree, its full potentials (and total avoidance of the mess it creates) can be had by planting it outside as a roadside shade tree.

Given the fact of shrinkage in garden spaces, we could do well to go in for using the many large climbers for covering bare walls, screens between properties and pergolas. Apart from the beauty and the attracted birds, the foliage cuts out heat, glare and dust. In India we are indeed fortunate in having a plethora of large, freely flowering forest lianas, some so large that one can even cover an entire house! Further advantage is that once having taken root, these magnificent forest plants need no watering. Unfortunately the majority of our climbers are very seasonal in bearing flowers but we do have the *Thunbergias* that bloom almost throughout the year - the blooms are very attractive and borne characteristically on pendant racemes that are decoratively festooned if the climber is trained across overhead trellises and along beams. Sunbirds are the main beneficiaries since they have learnt to pierce the base of the showy flower trumpets to get at the nectar. Bumble Bees appear to be the main pollinators as they enter the flower and in the process, get their furry backs powdered in yellow pollen.

Apart from the *Ficus glomerata* we have many species of fruit and flower bearing trees that can be used along the road front or between houses and in the center of courtyards. The chief argument against trees is that they often grow too large for the space and of course there is the universal Indian fear of roots of trees destroying buildings! Size can be kept within bounds since all trees can be kept within limits by judicious pruning. In fact such treatment produces denser foliage and heavier flowering. As for the roots, they certainly are not going to grow upwards, they go down to water and given space and located judiciously they pose no threat to buildings.

Closely trimmed hedges and shrubbery not only provide privacy, they offer shelter to nesting birds. If the plant is thorny, it invariably attracts Bulbuls, Babbler, loras, White-eyes and doves. The larger leafed varieties draw to them Tailorbirds and Ashy Wren Warblers who stitch leaves together to form receptacles for their nests. Even potted plants on patios and in balconies are patronised.

With greater number of families compelled to live in cramped areas, often with no garden space, the question of having birds around would seem irrelevant for many who have had to forgo homes with gardens, this is quite traumatic. It has become imperative to evolve garden and landscaping practices so that plants and with them birds, are brought into urban homes. Believe me, there can be nothing more relaxing than a flat

balcony or a tenement patio with luxuriant foliage. Such bits of artificial wildernesses are extremely relaxing and magnets to birds.

Well tended roadside trees convert a most crowded urban neighborhood into a sylvan retreat. I am attempting to evolve an avian sanctuary in my small place at Gandhinagar. Something that my neighbours can see. Restricted spaces,

dwindling water supplies and advancing age all make it compulsive to make a very strong statement that even in the most cramped of surroundings the freshness of plants and the cheer of birds need not be given up.

(We shall regularly be publishing selected writeups of Shri Lavkumar Khachar - Ed.) □



Photo : Bhushan Pandya