

## Nal sarovar Diary...

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We started around 6.30 am from Ahmedabad towards Nal sarovar in partly cloudy weather to find out the bird activity in and around Nal sarovar at this time of the year. Normally one would expect Nal sarovar to be dry, parched and impatiently awaiting the first rains, so we were curious to see what the Nal has to offer in terms of birding...

Every time we go to Nal sarovar, we see more and more plotted residential schemes coming up on both sides of the road right up to within 4 kms of the entry to the sanctuary. It is a matter of speculation if this development around the lake will have any adverse effect on the rainy run-off waters which normally feed the lake. A customary sighting of a pair of Sarus Cranes enroute happened as the birds crossed the road flying above. We did look for shrike species viz. Southern Grey Shrike, Bay-backed Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike, as I had gone looking for them in the last week of November '14 also but had only seen the long-tailed species. This time too we saw only a couple of Long-tailed Shrike individuals on the Nal approach road. Could it be that rapid spread of irrigation along the Nal bordering areas is contributing to the decline in the local shrike populations? We did come across a carcass of a Jungle cat killed by a speeding vehicle and took some pictures.

The journey being uneventful in terms of bird sightings on the way, we reached Nal around 7.45 am and soon found ourselves in the middle of a large noisy nesting colony of Little Cormorants, at the entrance to the Ramsar site. Almost exclusively, the cormorants were nesting on Pipal (*Ficus virens*). A closer look revealed that Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets too were nesting at the same spot but preferring Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) instead of Ficus spp. There were 150 to 200 nests of which almost 50% belonged to Little Cormorants and Indian Cormorants, while the rest were

of the two egret species. Just opposite to the nesting of cormorants we found a Chestnut-shouldered Petronia calling melodiously and soon discovered that it too was nesting inside a lamp-post. Going further down the road towards the main office block and interpretation centre, we spotted Black-tailed Godwits (more than 25), Woolly-necked Storks (4), and three Greater Flamingos foraging in a shallow patch of water to the right of the road.



Photo : Bakul Trivedi

Quite clearly, the Nal was playing host to a large number of breeding bird species both waterfowl and terrestrial at this time of the year, also indicating a reasonable availability of food for both and presence of sufficient water in the wetland!! Our guess was confirmed very shortly as we turned the corner and were greeted with an almost full to the brim Sarovar- an unexpected sight in this season!! Our good friend and local birding expert Kasam Sama, whom we picked up near the entrance spelled out a few interesting facts, "Nal was being fed by Narmada waters from broken/leaking check dams from upstream Bhaskarpura reservoir which is linked to Narmada branch canal." Run-off from irrigation through this system too contributes to unwanted addition of water round the year in the lake. This partly explained the unusual volume of water in this month. It also raised questions about how the mixing of freshwater from Narmada and the extant brackish water were affecting the depth and growth of aquatic vegetation of this recently declared Ramsar site and whether this will have any adverse effect on the habitat in the long run. Whether the custodians i.e the Forest Department functionaries are aware and have allowed this or they have little control over it, is to be seen. Kasam of course was quick to point out as we got into the boat for an interior view, that the composition of vegetation was changing; for instance 'gha-bajaryu' (*Typha*) was reducing

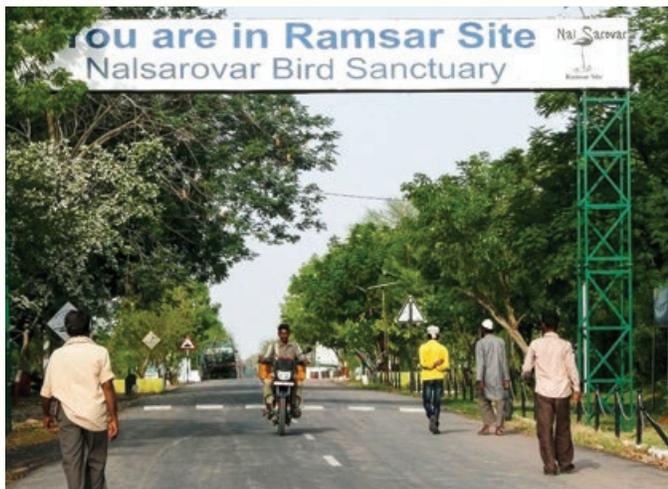


Photo : Bakul Trivedi

in density and 'gondro' (*Scirpus*) too was decreasing while bamboo like sedges and grasses were increasing. This in turn is also affecting the aquatic fauna, like fishes, and subsequently the bird population dependent on them. Clearly we were being informed about a change in the local food pyramid and its constituents. We also witnessed heavy eutrophication in the lake caused by the decaying of submerged vegetation. Water was stinking and its transparency was reduced. We wondered whether the Forest Department was involved in regulation of this organic matter decay to maintain the character of the wetland or not? This needs to be confirmed with them...

However as we travelled further into the Nal by boat the wetland began displaying its true hidden beauty and charm that has brought it the Ramsar status! First we spotted the Yellow Bittern in beautiful breeding plumage but ever so well camouflaged by the reeds and sedges of the Nal!!! Over a time we counted and took pictures of at least 20 of this resident species. Scores of purple moorhens, Little cormorants and a few Little Terns, Whiskered Terns, Pied Kingfishers were the other species recorded. Another major highlight of this visit was the presence of Whit-winged Black Tern, that too a couple of birds in breeding plumage. Interestingly we did not spot a single duck species though we saw a couple of whistling teals in flight. This was a bit intriguing.

'Vadla' was specially recommended by Bakulbhai as he has always found some interesting sightings in this small satellite wetland located some 10 km west to Nal sarovar. This time



Photo : Bakul Trivedi

we made a rapid visit and were amply rewarded by the presence of almost a thousand Lesser Flamingos, a Black-necked Stork as well as large number of purple moorhens (interestingly, we counted more than twenty purple moorhens foraging in a field but could not make out what were they foraging on?). A solitary Black-necked Stork was our first sighting of this bird in the area. And what better way to end the trip than watching the marching display of the Lesser Flamingos...!

Nal has always something more to offer you, whenever you go, whichever season you may choose. One finds himself grown richer in his birding experience after every visit. This is what makes Nal so special and justifies its Ramsar status. □



Photo : Bakul Trivedi