

An unusual hunt by a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus calidus* in the Little Rann of Kachchh

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The Little Rann of Kachchh (LRK) is known for its avian diversity, especially in birds of prey. Many species of falcons (genus: *Falco*) are seen in the Little Rann of Kachchh. This area is famous for the wintering Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus calidus*), which is seen in good numbers here and bird watchers from all over India come to see and photograph this amazing raptor. The Peregrine Falcon is given as 'fairly common' in Little Rann of Kachchh by Ganpule (2016).

These predators use diverse hunting strategies to maximize hunting success, while its prey adopts anti-predator strategies to maximize escape chances, among which flocking, communal roosting, and the related collective responses are a common pattern in gregarious species. Prey-predator interactions involving a single predator and flocks of prey, a common situation in birds, have received little attention. The most frequent is the 'surprise attack', which is also the most successful. The Peregrine Falcon is well known for its diving speed and hunting abilities, and is the fastest bird in the world. Having a strategy for successful hunting is also a very important facet of this deadly bird.

Observation

On 4 January 2019, while birding in LRK with Nirav Bhatt, Naimuddin Saiyyad and Shailesh Patel, we were fortunate to

witness the hunting strategy used by the Peregrine Falcon. We saw from far that a Peregrine Falcon was trying to hunt a bird and a jeep with photographers was following the bird. We assumed that the falcon was finding it difficult to hunt because of the jeep which was chasing it. So, we went near to the jeep and advised them not to do so. To our utter surprise, the driver of the jeep, Samat, who is an experienced guide, told us that the fact was that a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) was chasing their jeep to save itself from the attack of the peregrine.

Then, we came to know that the egret must have been attacked by the peregrine earlier and was injured. It was able to take small flights but the injury was bad enough to prevent it escaping the peregrine attack by flying away. Thus, it was using their jeep as a hide to save itself from the peregrine. As we approached nearer, the egret stayed just adjacent to our vehicle and it would always stay in close vicinity of one of the two cars. The falcon sat on a nearby stone perch, seeking an opportunity and waiting for us to go. We tried to go away but the egret kept flying on the other side of the jeep. We were in the middle with the predator and prey flying parallel on either side!

We were astonished that both the birds were not disturbed with our presence and concentrated towards their goal. We



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decided to leave the car and the jeep. We came out and walked away from our vehicles. The egret remained around the vehicles and also went and perched inside the jeep to save itself. Even though the peregrine was closely watching our movement as well as the egret, it neither flew away nor did it attempt to chase the egret near the vehicle. This went on for half an hour. Then, we decided to go away so that our presence should not stop the inevitable. We could see in the eyes of the egret that this step of ours would end its life. But, we had to take the decision and so we did. As soon as we drove both the vehicles away, the egret could not catch up with us for long. Without wasting any time, the peregrine took up the chase and once we took a sharp turn, the egret was exposed for a very short while. This was the time that the peregrine took the plunge and in a flicker of a second, ended the chase by killing the egret. It started tearing it apart in no time and started feeding. While eating, it was fully conscious of our presence. It was not perturbed and ate bit by bit. Later, it flew away with dead body of the egret to sit far away.

The cognitive skill of the falcon was extraordinary. It was very much aware about the opportunity and the risk associated with it. Our presence did not stop it from hunting the egret. The cognitive skill of the egret was no less either; it came near to us / our vehicles to save itself as it was aware that our presence was helping it survive. It was amazing to watch the predator-prey interaction at such close quarters.

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References

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