

Bird's Paradise....

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Does falconry persist in India? Evidence from photographs of an Indian Shaheen *Falco peregrinus peregrinator* on eBird India

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While going through photographs posted on 'eBird India' to study the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), I came across some photographs that immediately caught my attention. It showed an Indian Shaheen (*F. p. peregrinator*), a powerful and fast-flying bird with leather straps tied to both legs (called *jesses* and usually used in falconry). These photos were taken at Girnar Hills in Junagadh, Gujarat (Vachhani, 2018; Bagda, 2019), and this points to a serious issue: the illegal practice of falconry may still be happening in India [Figs 1]. Jesses are thin leather straps used in falconry to control and secure the bird to a perch.



Figure 1: Indian Shaheen in flight with jesses visible on both legs. (Photo Credit: Anand Vachhani).

The Indian Shaheen, a subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon, is known for its strength, speed, and exceptional hunting skills (White, 2013). In Gujarat, it is considered an uncommon to rare resident, typically found in some of the state's hilly regions.

A resident pair have been regularly observed at Girnar Hill for years (Mori & Joshi, 2017; Ganpule, 2022). Historically, during the Mughal and Rajput periods, falconry, training raptors to hunt, was common among royalty. Falconry is the art of using raptors like falcons or hawks for hunting (Gadhvi, 2023). These birds symbolised power and prestige (Dixon, 1937). However, today, keeping or training wild birds like the Indian Shaheen is illegal under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.

This subspecies is listed under Schedule I of the Act, which accords the highest level of legal protection. According to Section 9 of the Act, hunting, which includes capturing, trapping, or keeping such birds in captivity, is strictly prohibited unless specifically authorised for scientific or other legitimate purposes. Consequently, falconry involving wild raptors like the Indian Shaheen is not permitted. Violations of these provisions attract penalties under Section 51, including imprisonment and fines.

The jesses seen on the photographed bird suggest that it had been kept in captivity, possibly trained or held in a private collection [Figs 2]. Even though falconry has cultural importance, practising it harms wild raptor populations (Horgan, 2021).

Raptors like the Indian Shaheen are protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, which gives them the highest level of protection in India (MoEFCC, 2019). Still, such illegal activities continue, mainly because of a lack of awareness and poor monitoring. Capturing and keeping wild raptors can damage their populations, reduce genetic variety, and make

it harder for the birds to survive if they are released back into the wild (McClure et al., 2018; Nijman, 2010). These birds often lose their natural hunting skills and may not breed successfully after release.



Figure 2: Red arrows indicate jesses visible on both legs.
(Photo Credit: Anand Vachhani).

This documentation also raises an important issue for birdwatchers and people using citizen science platforms like 'eBird'. These platforms help collect valuable conservation data but can also reveal illegal activities. So, how should we deal with such findings? Should citizen scientists report these incidents, and if so, how can we find a mechanism to report such incidents to the proper authorities?

The conservation of raptors, or birds of prey, in India will need teamwork from researchers, forest officials, conservation groups, and even the general public. Information from platforms like 'eBird' becomes powerful when used in fieldwork and conservation action (Watson, 2018).

Interestingly, a similar case happened in Chhatrapati Shambhajnagar, Maharashtra, where another Indian Shaheen was rescued from captivity and released in Gautala Autramghat Sanctuary (WWA, 2019). This shows that illegal trade and the keeping of raptors may be more frequent than we think.

These photographs highlight an underlying message of greater importance. The complex relationship between people and wildlife in India, and the fact that the illegal practice of falconry probably continues in India. They also remind us that the unlawful practice of falconry might still be happening in secret. This shows the need for constant monitoring and solid vigilance. However, the Gujarat Forest Department has done excellent work protecting wildlife and has launched some of the country's most successful and innovative conservation efforts. Working closely with intelligence teams and agencies like the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau can help stop illegal

activities. Continued support and practical action are essential to ensure a secure future for raptors in Gujarat.

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