

Birding with Children

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A Summer Camp, this summer, offered a platform to begin birdwatching with students and a teacher from village Atand, (Kurud *tehsil*, Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh). I am sharing some of the camp's highlights and insights with you, here.

Day 1

On the first day, we began by listing out the local bird names that the children are familiar with or see around. They started enthusiastically: Crow! Hen! *Padki* (dove)! *Myna!* *Mittu!* (parrot) *Gorayya* (house sparrow)! *Bagula* (egret)! *Koyal* (cuckoo)... Then there was a long pause. We were able to add only a few birds' names to the list.

'Only these many?', I asked.

'Nahi didi, aur bhi hai, magar naam nahi jaante.' (No didi, there are others, but we don't know their names).

'Let's try one thing: here are thirty flashcards of local birds that we can spot around us. We'll carry them with us and go on a search outside to see how many birds we can identify with the help of these cards.'

We communicated some simple, but important, instructions clearly to the students before we set

out on the birding trip – being as quiet as possible, avoiding sudden movements, whispering or conveying with gestures if anyone had anything urgent to tell. I told them that since birds are very sensitive to sounds, they can hear sounds much better than we do. If anyone were to spot an unusual bird, they should refrain from exclaiming loudly so that everyone could get closer to it and the bird too was more likely to remain in the same place for everyone to see.

A giant *peepal* tree, the village's largest, stood outside the Sahu Bhavan (a public hall where the Summer Camp was held) and we spotted two Indian Pond Herons sitting near their nest on this tree. We matched the features of these herons with those on the flashcard and identified them by their local name, *Talaab Bagula*.

Then we moved to a paddy field nearby. It was dry and had been ploughed in preparation for sowing once it rained. A neighbouring pond flanked by trees that were the habitat of many birds. Within the next half hour, we observed one Sunbird, two Great Coucals, four Oriental Magpie Robins, three Cattle Egrets, two Indian Silverbills, two Black drongos and three Black kites.



Figure 1. Birding at Atang village as part of the summer camp.



Figure 2. Students looking at birds and nests in a peepal tree.

Day 2

The following day, our group grew to thirty children from classes II - VII. The class teacher accompanied us. We started from the *peepal* tree. That day, we spotted three different egrets (Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Indian Pond Heron), two types of *Mynas*

- two common *mynas* and one Asian Pied *myna*, three Red-vented bulbuls, and four squirrels. We spotted four nests in this giant *peepal*, which we identified as belonging to the *myna*, Cattle Egret, Little Egret, and Pond Heron.

'Toh agar koi is ped ko katenge toh kitnon ka ghosla chale jaayega!' (So many birds will be homeless if this tree is felled!) remarked a child from class II, gazing at the tree. 'Haan sahi baat hai, ek ped bahuton ke liye unka ghar hai,' (Yes, that is correct, a single tree is home to many creatures) a class V student added. I witnessed how much more impactful it is when children sense the importance of environmental conservation on their own, rather than getting a lecture from a teacher on the topic of environmental education.

After the birding trip, we recorded our detailed observations in a table (Figure 3): the bird's local name, the number of birds spotted, the colour of the chest, the eye, the bill, the wings (the children refer to these as 'arm'), the tail, and the claws. This recording has two objectives, one, to encourage the children to observe keenly and the other, to enhance their data/inference recording skill (useful in developing a scientific temper as well).

नाम	रंग पीला	खड़े ओंठ	पोछ	खींचा	ईमारक
(1.) मुनिया - 5	पीला - भूरा रंग - बाल	पीला	पीला	भूरा	भूरा
(2.) मिठा - 2	पीला - काला रंग - वीला	पीला	पीला	भूरा	भूरा
(3.) पद्ममिठा - 3	पीला - शावा रंग - विकसन कुर्ता	बाल	भूरा	भूरा	भूरा
(4.) बड़ा गाँवा - 5	पीला - अपेक्षा रंग - काला	कुसरा	कुसरा	भूरा	भूरा
(5.) भालूजी, भैना - 3	पीला - राखा रंग - पीला	पीला	भूरा	भूरा	भूरा
(6.) - 5	पीला - भूरा रंग - वीला	भैनीजी - काला	भूरा	भूरा	भूरा
(7.) चीज़ - 2.	पीला - काला रंग - विकसन कुर्ता	पीला	काला	भूरा	भूरा
(8.) पढ़की - 3	पीला - भूरा	काला	अपेक्षा	भूरा	भूरा

Figure 3. Recording observations.

Follow-up activities

In the following days, we discussed the relationship between the shapes of the beaks/bills of different birds and their eating habits. Egrets have spear-like bills for jabbing fish, shellfish, frogs, and other amphibians, whereas the house sparrow, which eats millets, grains, seeds, very small worms, and insects, has cone-shaped, strong bills for cracking seeds and nuts. Downward-curved, long-pointed bills of sunbirds enable them to feed on the nectar of flowers.

Further, we learned about ‘family’, ‘genus’, or ‘species’. To understand this, we took the example of the *Brahmini myna*, the *Common myna*, and the *Pied myna*, since they are commonly seen in the area. All of these belong to the same family but are of different genera and different species. We listed the similarities and differences between these three.

Other activities related to birding

- Listing out several sounds after keeping quiet for a while. We listed out seven different sounds – bird calls, sounds made by squirrels, crickets etc.
- Making ID cards of birds with the basic details of each type of bird that we observed. This was an activity for class V students. The ID card had a picture of the bird (either a hand drawing by a child or a photograph), its local/common name, shape and size compared to other birds (for example, the Great Coucal compared to the cuckoo because they have similar features, the colour and shape of the bill, the colour of breast feathers, crown, eyes, claws and habitat (inference derived from observations). The bird-watching record (Figure 3) is a daily data record, whereas the Bird ID is made by compiling some observations. In making the IDs, children get

the opportunity to understand how to draw inferences from observations. Here there is some scope of developing writing skills as well. Most importantly, these Bird ID cards remain useful for bird identification for new birders.

- Making a collage of birds by using old newspapers (Figure 4). This activity gave scope for the psycho-motor development of the younger students and served as a platform for creative art for the older students.



Figure 4. Students making a collage depicting the Great Coucal.

We are happy that some students in Chhattisgarh are getting an opportunity to explore nature through the study of birds. This is the first step, and we hope to follow it up with more practical lessons. It is my firm belief that activities, such as this birding experience, which help in creating a connection with any species, draw us closer to nature. This helps us in appreciating every other creation of nature, be it the trees or butterflies. This bond formed at a young age will help these children to care for and protect not just one or a few species of living beings but be environmentally conscious citizens for life. They will not hesitate to play their part in saving this planet.

References

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