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Rejuvenated lakes leave Bangalore an empty nest

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When was the last time you saw a northern shoveler, or a northern pin tail? In case you're wondering, those are the names of birds that make a stopover at city lakes each year, on their migratory routes.

In some cases, the birds begin their journey in East Europe. Recent rejuvenation work on city lakes has brought some respite to Bangaloreans; the water table has risen. However, the number of migratory birds visiting has fallen sharply.

Besides the northern shoveler, northern pin tail, and the brown shrike, there are other varieties of birds like the harrier, Montague's harrier, pallid harrier, common swallows, greenish leaf warbler, booted warblers, blyth's reed warblers, Kentish plougher, the common sandpiper, the marsh sand piper, green shank, Rufus shrike, bay backed shrike, raptors, common kestrel, and gray wag tails that made regular visits to city lakes.

There are also migratory birds that fly short distances, like pelicans and painted storks, which arrive in the city to breed.

Even the bar headed geese, which make regular visits to the city, are still to arrive this year. However, indications are that the birds will just skip the visit this year, as the condition of the lakes makes them less than hospitable.

"Last week, I visited Rachenahalli and Jakkur lakes, which were recently rejuvenated. I was surprised that there were no birds at all," said Manjunath P, an avid bird watcher.

With the rejuvenation of the lakes, there have been less-than-subtle changes in the environment of the lakes. Birds that once visited the same lake year after year, may now take years to come back.

The presence of migratory birds is considered an important indicator of the environmental health of the region. They arrive as food is abundant and the area is salubrious. Even three years ago, many city lakes would see thousands of birds descend.

Manjunath said that the birds would start arriving by the end of September, when winter began to cover parts of Central Asia and Europe with a sheet of snow. Bangalore's lakes offered these winged visitors food and a favourable climate. After rejuvenation, however, city lakes appear to have lost their appeal.

The lakes also had some peculiar features that have been lost with the rejuvenation. Some of the lakes were shallow, and this allowed waders to wade. With the recent cleaning up, many of the lakes are deeper, and waders no longer find them hospitable.

Hebbal Lake, for instance, has only ducks at present; no waders. In shallow lakes on the outskirts of the city, like Hessarghatta, Yelahanka, Madhure, and Hoskotte, though the water level is low, the presence of migratory birds is higher.

Harish R Bhat, biodiversity expert, said that lakes should not be mistaken for tanks; they support entire life cycles, besides holding water. Prof TV Ramachandra of the Centre for Ecological Sciences of the IISc said that the birds appear to have adapted to the change in the environment, and have found homes elsewhere.

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