

Migratory birds keep their date with Kashmir

If winter has arrived in Kashmir, can migratory birds be far behind? Thousands of exotic birds have kept their date with the valley this year too, landing in water bodies from far off lands to avoid the extreme winters there.

From times immemorial, hundreds of thousands of avian visitors land here each year to make Kashmir their winter home as water bodies here contain plenty of food and space too.

There are daily arrivals at the many bird sanctuaries in the state. Thousands of greylag geese, mallards, pochards, gadwalls, shovellers, teals and coots have already landed.

'There are nearly 300,000 birds at the Shallabugh Bird Reserve this time and even larger numbers are expected to arrive before month- end,' said an official at the wildlife protection department here.

Besides Shallabugh, migratory birds also throng other water reserves in the valley like Hokarsar, Mirgund and Hygam.

Wildlife department staff is on round the clock duty at the bird reserves to ensure that no poaching takes place. 'We also use boats to keep an eye on the birds and see that no harm comes to them,' the official said.

Added keen birdwatcher Master Habibullah: 'These birds come from Russian Siberia, China, Eastern [Europe](#) and Philippines. We also get cormorants and cranes, but these are passage migratory birds, which means they don't stay here for long and use the local water bodies only as their temporary habitat.

'But all other species of migratory birds stay here for nearly four months as water bodies in their summer homes are frozen right now and this makes movement and food availability extreme difficult for them.'

The 67-year-old confirmed sighting more than 10,000 geese at the Shallabugh Bird Reserve recently.

'They fly in a line and the eldest goose that has undertaken the flight to Kashmir many times before leads the way. It is a navigational feat yet to be matched by man. Their instincts guide them through good and bad weather and they reach the local water bodies to keep their trust with us,' Habibullah said, detailing the annual miracle.

While the birds are being welcomed with open arms this year, their arrival last year had given rise to widespread fears that they could be potential carriers of the dreaded bird flu disease.

But the fears are dismissed as baseless.

'There is absolutely no evidence that any migratory bird species that have come here carry the dreaded virus. You see, these birds have to be totally fit and healthy to fly thousands of miles to reach here and the sheer distance of the valley from their summer homes is one big insurance against the possibility of a sick and unhealthy bird making it here,' said veterinarian Bashir Ahmad

War.

Interestingly, the numbers of migratory birds has been increasing each year because shooting of these birds is now prohibited under local laws.

Habibullah, for instance, recently saw a photograph of the late maharaja Hari Singh shown with 2,037 birds, including geese, mallards and teals, he had shot in just one day at Hygam.

'That must have been a massacre. Now we are trying to help these visitors to live here safely as they have as much right on the environment as we have,' said the bird enthusiast, who in his youth was a good hunter.

'I must now do a little penance by trying to return to nature what I must have undeservingly taken from it', he said.

F. Ahmed (© IANS / India eNews)