

Alluring AVADAVATS



How conservationists are working to help the striking Green Avadavat, a popular cagebird endemic to India that faces a host of challenges

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SAHIL ZUTSHI



The Green Avadavat is a small songbird measuring less than 4 inches long that is endemic to India. The bird is easy to trap, and its attractive plumage has made it a target of the caged bird trade for more than a century.

Springtime is a riot of color at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in the Rajasthan state of India. Rusty, garnet leaves on wild mango trees, pink orchid tree flowers, golden-yellow silver-oak, and scarlet-crimson coral tree blooms set the forests ablaze. During the summer, the blooming jacaranda, laburnum, and royal poinciana add to this colorful canvas of the forest, while the sweet fragrance of karonda flowers permeates the thorny-scrub.

Guru Shikhar, the highest peak of India's oldest mountain range, the Aravalis, overlooks the valleys. With this backdrop, the hillsides of Oriya and Achalgarh villages truly come alive with the fluttering and high-pitched calls of Green Avadavats, also called Green Munias. Through the frosty winter, the sweltering heat of summer, or even the misty monsoon, flocks are found here, making it the most reliable place to spot them within their restricted, spotty range.

Among the approximately 185 species of birds found at the higher altitude of the sanctuary, the exquisitely colored avadavats are the prize of the reserve. Known

by their local name, *Harias* (which translates to *the green ones*) are the main draw for birders and photographers choosing to travel the less-trodden path to Mount Abu. The term *avadavat* is thought to be a corruption of Ahmedabad, a city about 220 kilometers (136 miles) south of Mount Abu historically known to be a thriving bird bazaar and a hub for the caged bird trade.

Green Avadavat has been a popular cagebird since the late 19th century, and it continues to be traded illegally to this day. Since the birds are found in large flocks, trapping them is easy and lucrative. The species, which has a declining population, is classified as "vulnerable" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Green Avadavat is endemic to western India, and it is sighted rarely in a few areas in central India, where small populations exist. Recently, small flocks were spotted in the Maredumilli and Gudisa area in southern India.

Pretty Plumage

Green Avadavats are in the same genus (*Amandava*) as the Orange-breasted Waxbill (Zebra Waxbill) found in central and

southern Africa and the more common Red Avadavat (Strawberry Finch), which is found from Pakistan to Vietnam. The three species belong to the Estrildid family (waxbills, munias, and allies), a group of small birds found throughout tropical regions of the Eastern Hemisphere.

Green Avadavat's two sexes are similar. However, males are slightly broader, and their olive green and yellow colors are brighter compared to females. The birds sport a striking cherry-red bill, red eyes, a black tail, green head and back, and distinctive zebra-barred flanks. They're generally found in flocks, which sing a high-pitched call in a chorus. Their undulating flight is also marked by loud in-flight calling. Fully grown, the birds do not measure more than 10 centimeters (3.9 inches).

Since 2017, work has been ongoing to create a protected area to restore the natural habitat of these magnificent birds. A conservation initiative has taken shape involving the planting of native tree species and plants, as well as management of invasive species and prohibiting overgrazing at a selected site. Suitable vegetation has been planted on degraded and illegally encroached land while considering the unique, local, and climatic limitations.

An onsite nursery has been established that will continue to provide saplings for expansion of the plantation work. It is hoped that students and volunteers from local villages will be involved in plantation drives and fieldwork. The creation of suitable habitat, not simply for the avadavats but also other wildlife, has already exerted a visible impact on the biodiversity of the area. A reduction in anthropological activities at the protected area has seen a notable increase in flock sizes. Over 70 or more birds have been spotted at one location.

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, birders from various countries would visit Mount Abu to spot avadavats as well as other elusive birds found at the sanctuary. The area is open again to travelers. We have not seen many visitors arrive yet, but we hope that will change.

The plantation area has stopped suffering from overgrazing, resulting in the appearance of grasses, native wildflowers, and flora. And we are carefully managing the nesting habitat of avadavats — under thick scrub. The sight of Green Avadavats feeding communally alongside White-throated Munias (silverbills),

Yellow-throated Sparrows, and Scaly-breasted Munias has become common all through the spring, summer, and monsoon months. Over the past year, observational work has provided insight into the ecology and behavior of the species from a phenological perspective at Mount Abu. Hopefully, a comprehensive study will help protect the resident population and habitat. The overall aim is to secure the long-term future of the species.

Ongoing Challenges

An attractive plumage and gullible nature have been the cause of the avadavats' demise, making them much-sought-after birds in the illegal bird trade. During the 1970s and '80s, it was common to see the species under captivity as cagebirds in India as well as abroad. Green Avadavat populations in the wild were nearly wiped

out in the following decade. Also, populations in some parts of the country were poisoned by farmers who viewed them as pests causing damage to their crops.

At Mount Abu, it is rumored that indigenous communities hunted them for medicine. While the risk from bird trappers remains ever-present, increasing habitat alteration and fragmentation are also major threats. Despite being declared an eco-sensitive zone, the sprawl of the town of Mount Abu and the surrounding villages continues and poses an acute problem. The hillsides surrounding the wildlife sanctuary are experiencing "severe environmental degradation," a 2017 study reported.

Over the past few years, we have seen changing, unpredictable weather patterns — unseasonal rain, colder winters, and hotter summers. Also, the frequency

A small flock of avadavats line up on a branch at the Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, the stronghold for the species.



In addition to trapping, avadavats are threatened by habitat loss, wildfires, and a general lack of awareness of threats to wildlife by local people.



of forest fires is rising, which has been exacerbated this year during the recent heatwave. In fact, a large forest fire this spring burned an area near a prime Green Avadavat habitat.

The consequences of unmanaged tourism, which include unchecked development, disturbance, noise pollution, and increased plastic and glass waste, have resulted in serious environmental harm. Relatively untouched habitats are being altered by unlawful commercial construction, increasing traffic, encroachment, and deforestation. Intentionally lit, unmanaged wildfires have become a serious concern during the dry season. Laws designed to protect the forests are overlooked and being diluted, and an utter lack of concern from the local authorities is troubling. Added to this is the threat from indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers on local farms.

Much awareness still needs to be raised in the villages falling within the eco-sensitive zone. Oriya and Achalgarh, which lie to the west of the sanctuary and have become prime viewing locations, require a shift toward introducing eco-tourism initiatives to safeguard the species. It would be wonderful, for example, to offer nature walks for very small groups along some trails with trained nature guides. This would help raise awareness and appreciation of our local wildlife.

While Green Avadavat populations continue to decline elsewhere across India, the species must be protected with greater urgency at Mount Abu and by drawing inspiration from initial signs of population increase, as part of the conservation initiative. More awareness, vigilance, and consistent enforcement of laws and measures to protect the habitat are required. The good news is that long-term monitoring is underway, which will better assist conservation efforts and action.

Only time will tell what effect this has on the Green Avadavats, as well as the general wildlife of Mount Abu. 🐦

Sahil Zutshi directs conservation work and research at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, India. To support Green Avadavat conservation, visit Sahil's website, www.sahilzutshi.com. The project is supported by the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (ZGAP Germany).

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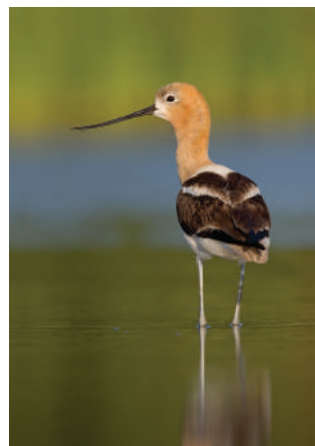
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SCIENCE

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CAGEBIRD
IN INDIA**

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