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GREEN AVADAVAT CONSERVATION

NFSS GENERAL ELECTION BALLOT

VIRTUAL BIRD SHOW RESULTS

Making Every Chirp Count

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The author undertakes conservation and research work at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, India. This edited article first appeared in Resurgence & Ecologist Magazine and Deccan Herald.

Green avadavats are facing increasing pressure from anthropogenic causes at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary. An ongoing conservation effort aims to safeguard the globally threatened, resident population.



Five miles from Mount Abu, a hill-station in southern Rajasthan state, India, a pockmarked road perilously hugs and winds its way across hillsides covered with Kachnar and Mandar trees to the villages of Oriya and Achalgarh. Not far from these villages stands Gurushikhar, the highest peak in the Aravalli ranges, which rises some 5,650 ft and is home to an ancient temple and a cave. While this ancient area, situated in the oldest mountain range of India, features in various sacred Indian scriptures and is renowned for its pilgrimage and tourist sights, not much is known about it being home to a rare, spectacularly colored little bird.



Among the 185-odd species of birds found in Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, green avadavats or green munias are prized and can be frequently spotted on the hillsides. Known by their local name in the hills of Mount Abu, the Harias (translating to the green ones), are exquisitely colored and have a loud high-pitched call making them much

sought-after songbirds. 'Avadavat' is thought to be a corruption of 'Ahmedabad', a city historically known to be a thriving bird bazaar and a hub for the caged bird trade. Paradoxically, while they are classed as 'rare', the illegal trade of these birds continues. Since these birds can be found in large flocks, capturing them is easier and unlawful trading is more lucrative. Green munias are categorized 'vulnerable' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and

are listed in Appendix II of CITES. Schedule IV of India's Wildlife Protection Act makes hunting, trapping or trade illegal involving the birds, a punishable offence.

The recent 'State of India's Birds Report 2020' categorizes green avadavats as a species of high concern, 'severely threatened', 'neglected' and 'dangerously low abundant' which must be urgently protected. The birds have a declining population trend within their extremely restricted distribution range.

Conservation

Since 2017, we have been working on creating a protected area to restore and protect the natural habitat of these rare and magnificent birds. A conservation initiative, involving habitat restoration work, has taken shape owing to the effort and determination of a handful of residents which has involved plantation of native tree species, as well as the controlled management of invasive species and prohibiting overgrazing at a selected site. Suitable tree species have been planted on degraded land and the work has borrowed elements of the Miyawaki method of afforestation while considering the unique, local, climatic limitations and challenges. The project was initiated with active support from the former Deputy Conservator of Forests, Balaji Kari.



An onsite nursery has been established which will continue to provide trees for plantation expansion work. It is hoped that students and volunteers from local villages will be involved in plantation drives and fieldwork in the future. The creation of suitable habitat on previously degraded land, not only for munias but other fauna too, has already exerted a visible impact on the biodiversity of the area. The reduction in anthropological activities at the protected area has seen a notable increase in flock sizes. Over eighty or more birds have been spotted at one location. Before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, birders from various countries were welcomed to the protected area to spot munias, as well as other endemic species. "It is truly wonderful to see so many green munias at one place. The plantation work has been commendable. The effort could be used as a model to reinvigorate the forests of Mount Abu and provide a safe habitat for these birds", Gajendra Singh Khimsar, former Forest Minister of Rajasthan remarked on a recent visit to the protected area.

While populations of green avadavats continue to decline in the few select areas



they are found elsewhere in India, a greater degree of awareness, vigilance to curb environmental violations and consistent enforcement of laws and measures to protect the habitat is required to safeguard the resident population of green avadavats at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary.

The 'plantation zone' has stopped suffering from overgrazing – results of which are already visible in the appearance of grasslands, comprising native wildflowers and flora. While lantana and Mauritius thorn present challenges, the advocacy to indiscriminately remove thick bush cover either mechanically or biologically has been carefully managed at the protected site to safeguard the nesting habitat of munias – under thick scrub. The sight of green munias feeding communally alongside white-throated munias (silverbills) and scaly-breasted munias, has become a common sight all through the summer and monsoon months.

Road Blocks

While the risk from bird trappers remains ever-present, the major threats are also in the form of increasing habitat alteration and fragmentation. Despite being declared an eco-sensitive zone, encroachment and the sprawl of Mount Abu town and the surrounding villages continue and pose an acute threat. The hillsides of Mount Abu and the surrounding wildlife sanctuary are experiencing "severe environmental degradation", a 2017 study reported. The consequences of unmanaged tourism, which includes noise pollution, disturbance, increased plastic and glass waste and unchecked development have resulted in serious environmental harm across the declared 'eco-sensitive zone'. Relatively untouched habitats are being altered by increasing traffic, encroachment, deforestation and intentionally lit, unmanaged wildfires. A lack of concern from the local administration and inaction from the incumbent leadership of the local



forest department is troubling. Added to this is the threat from indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers on local farms.

The future for green munias looks bleak unless conservation efforts are stepped up. Much awareness needs to be generated among the populations of Oriya and Achalgarh, which have become 'prime' viewing locations. A shift towards introducing eco-tourism is urgently required to safeguard the existence of this globally threatened species. While green munia populations continue to decline across the country, the species must be protected with greater urgency and by drawing inspiration from initial signs of population increase as part of this conservation initiative. The significance of safeguarding the habitat of a rare, endemic species in a rapidly degrading environment is the need of the hour. Research and monitoring are being undertaken which will better assist conservation efforts.

Bio: Sahil Zutshi is a nature and wildlife conservationist, currently living in India. Previously based in the UK and Spain. Sahil now lives surrounded by the forests of Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary and undertakes research and conservation work. When he is not observing and photographing green munias, he is busy daydreaming and cloud appreciating in his garden.

