

HOPE FOR ABU'S MUNIAS

Endemic to India and found within an extremely restricted range, green avadavats are a rare, globally threatened species, found in relative abundance in the forests of Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary. As part of conservation efforts, Sahil Zutshi has been photographing this lesser-known and neglected species.

Text and photos: Sahil Zutshi



† Known locally as “haria,” translating to the “green one” in the regional dialect, the birds continue to be trapped for the illegal bird trade. *Nikon D500, Nikkor 200-500/5.6 at 500mm, f/6.3, 1/1600 sec., 3200 ISO.*

Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in the state of Rajasthan in India, is home to rare birds called green avadavats, also known as green munias. Among the 185-odd species of birds found locally, these little birds are the prize of the sanctuary. Dressed in an attractive plumage and prominent zebra barred flanks, they are much sought-after for the unlawful bird trade.

THREATENED. Although they are classed “rare,” illegal trade of these birds continues to flourish since they are found in large flocks, therefore making capture easier, and illegal trading more lucrative. Green avadavats are categorized “vulnerable” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and are listed in Appendix II of CITES. Hunting, trapping or trade involving the birds is a punishable offence. The “State of India’s Birds Report 2020” categorises green avadavats as a species of high concern, “severely threatened,” “neglected” and “dangerously low abundance,” which must be urgently protected.

I have been photographing these poorly studied, attractive birds with the aim to showcase them as part of a conservation photography



† Green avadavats spend a considerable time at ground level, foraging for seeds which constitute their main diet. The birds prefer to nest in thick scrub near water sources. *Nikon D500, Nikkor 200-500/5.6 at 500mm, f/8.0, 1/1000 sec., 3200 ISO.*

project and help raise awareness. The species has a declining population elsewhere within their extremely patchy, restricted range, which is understood to extend over central India.

FRAGMENTATION. The hillsides of Mount Abu, forested areas near the surrounding villages, are experiencing increasing habitat alteration and fragmentation. Unchecked commercial development, rife corruption and negligence within the town and village authorities is resulting in serious environmental harm across the declared eco-sensitive zone.

Laws designed to protect the eco-sensitive zone are enforced inconsistently. Relatively untouched habitats are being altered by unmanaged tourism, increasing traffic, encroachment, deforestation and intentionally lit, unmanaged wildfires. Added to this is the threat from indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers on local farms. More recently, village children have been observed herding birders to deeper, untouched areas, causing disturbance. Increasingly, unethical and questionable practices by birders and photographers is also a concern.

A restricted area to restore and protect the habitat of these magnificent birds has been created as part of a conservation initiative. This has involved the plantation of native tree species on reclaimed forest land, as well as the controlled management of invasive species and prohibiting overgrazing at a selected site, where anthropogenic disturbances have been minimised. A greater degree of awareness, vigilance to curb environmental violations, and consistent enforcement of laws to protect the habitat, is required to safeguard the resident population of green avadavats at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary. Ongoing survey work and long-term monitoring will assist with formulating further conservation actions.


Sahil Zutshi is a researcher and nature conservationist. For more information on his conservation work at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, visit www.sahilzutshi.com

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