

FIELD NOTES

Excessive bird call playback, available on mobile apps, is disturbing birdlife and ruining the joy of birding

Unsound birding



Sahil Zutshi

Louder...play louder!" yells a photographer, armed with a lavishly priced camera and a weapon-like telephoto lens. A collared owl call blares repeatedly through a portable speaker.

Within minutes, a pair of verditer flycatchers and a handful of black-throated tits arrive on a rhododendron tree. The Himalayan black-throated tit follows. Soon, a cole tit, black-faced warblers, whiskered yuhinas, blue-winged sivas and a fire-breasted flowerpecker join the search party.

The paranoid flock frantically begins searching for the intruding predator. The tree is a lit firework. A curious blue-throated barbet arrives and watches the drama unfold. The photographer's group is excited, but unsure what it is photographing. "Posting it on Instagram today," declares one photographer, pleased with himself, while scrolling through his images. Presenting the catch on her screen, another asks the bird guide: "By the way, what bird is this?" The vibrantly dressed group, sorely sticking out in these surroundings, decides to move further down the valley to startle other birds.

Disturbing scenes

During a trip to all corners of Uttarakhand earlier this year, I frequently noticed scenes of aggressive and excessive call playback. I observed birdlife being disturbed by bird guides, photographers and birders. In fact, I continue to witness this across the country, including some

national parks and sanctuaries, even where call playback is prohibited. The practice makes me question whether the Gordian knot can be untied as bird call databases are easily accessible on mobile apps. Demanding birders and photographers get upset if guides fail to show them their target species. "If clients are unhappy, it's not good for business and there's constant pressure," remarked one guide.

"The money that birding tourism fetches overrides ethics and bird safety. Once this stops becoming the sole consideration, perhaps, good birding behaviour will take precedence. A large number of people are still deeply interested in birds and their well-being. The more they speak up against poor practices, the better it is for birdlife," says scientist, K.S. Gopi Sundar.

Deeply controversial

Using playback remains controversial, deeply dividing the birding community. Researchers have long used cautious playback to locate certain species, assist with surveys, understand habitat use and distribution, and decipher bird communication: all with the potential to assist conservation action. Worryingly, however, the degree to which call playback is now used, has, it would appear, become an essential tool to some. Gone are the days when a good old pair of binoculars, a field guide, and patience were all that was needed to enjoy birding. Wanting to instantly sight birds appears to have become the norm.

Ornithologist V. Santharam believes that there is far too much emphasis on building personal check-



'Tweet' with caution

■ Playing bird calls can be done in moderation for scientific studies, but never for commercial purposes, says V. Shantaram, ornithologist and director at the Institute of Bird Studies, Rishi Valley. "Bird guides play these calls for tourists who want to quickly tick birds off in their list. As bird calls are available online and can be downloaded, some serious birders also play them, as they want to add more birds to their lists."

■ To promote bird watching and citizen science, features such as the 'eBirder of the Month Challenge' are introduced. "On the flip side, these features promote a competitive spirit, leading some birders to resort to desperate measures like playing bird calls to have a bulky species list. These features are therefore better avoided," says Shantaram.

— Prince Frederick

Vulnerable in the wild Birds such as (clockwise from far left) the black-throated tit and verditer flycatcher are very responsive to call playbacks; the threatened cheer pheasant (below); and a bunch of bird watchers • SAHIL ZUTSHI



back does not have any negative impacts. Currently, the lack of sufficient scientific evidence that playback causes demonstrable harm to birds appears to be a convenient way to justify and continue the harassment of birdlife. What might not constitute harm scientifically, nonetheless, amounts to nuisance.

Raising awareness on the issue and educating photographers and birders, especially the younger generation, on the ethics of birding and wildlife watching, is essential. Conservation organisations and local birding clubs being more vocal on the issue will reinforce good birding and photography practices. Forest departments must enforce bans on call playback more strictly, particularly in situations relating to certain species and during nesting periods.

It's tough being a bird. The struggle to survive takes up all day. Populations are declining, compounded by habitat loss. Now, imagine being stalked by humans. The welfare of our feathered friends ought to be priority rather than furthering careers or personal records. If you fail to see a particular species or a 'lifer', perhaps your perseverance and patience to observe the bird in its habitat naturally will be more meaningful. Enjoying birding is a privilege, not a right. Being sensitive to creatures of the wild is a humbling experience, far more satisfying than Instagram and Facebook likes.

Raising awareness

With questionable practices being widespread, it wouldn't be surprising if studies emerge suggesting play-

books and sharing images on social media. "By using call playbacks, we are missing out on observing bird behaviour in their natural habitats. The original ethos of birdwatching is lost where one views birds after much waiting and effort," he says.

Call playback is justified by researchers and enthusiasts in many ways, but it affects bird behaviour and nesting success of some species, at least in the short-term. Excessive

playback has led to certain species becoming unresponsive, negatively impacting research and conservation efforts. "Famously, birds such as the critically endangered Bugun liocichla, have apparently stopped responding to playback as a coping mechanism. We simply do not know the impact of playback on lesser-known species and in remote areas. This is not a good situation given birding is increasing without a concurrent in-

crease in ethical behaviour," says Sundar. "Playback use is not restricted to enthusiasts and photographers. Ornithologists and birders often practise unsound ethics to 'flush' out rare species to add to their checklists."

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GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY



Rich palette (Clockwise from below) Stained glass windows at a Chettiar mansion in Pudukottai; a colonnade with lace curtains at a mansion in Athangudi village; and the iconic Kanadukathan Palace in Sivaganga district
• B. VELANKANNI RAJ & GETTY IMAGES



POP-A-RAZZI

Giant cakes in the sun

In a time of rising ethno-nationalism, the colourful Chettiar mansions bear testimony to a world that was more open to the other

I thought I knew the traditional emblems of the foreign-returned in India – Camay soaps, Danish butter cookies and KitKat bars. Then I went to Chettinad. There I discovered new symbols of the foreign-returned from 100 years ago, things that did not fit into suitcases as neatly as soaps, biscuits and chocolates.

Burmese teak. Spiral staircases from Birmingham. Delft tiles. Swedish enamel. Venetian glass.

The mansions of Chettinad, many of them over a century old, some art deco, some neo-classical, are bursting with markers of their globetrotting owners. The Chettiar were traders who ventured all around the world but especially to South East Asia. They settled in these villag-

es in Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district, and using their new-found wealth built homes that showed off both their prosperity and their cosmopolitanism.

Just the entrance to a Chettinad mansion can be an exercise in map-spotting – doors of solid Burma teak, Belgian mirrors, English floral tiles, and Italian black marble columns.

Sivashankar Solaimalai who works in guest relations at Visalam-CGH Earth, an art deco mansion-turned-boutique hotel in Kanadukathan, the village where his father was born, takes me on a bullock cart ride pointing out

the 100-odd mansions that still survive in his village.

Missing tiles

It's not just Kanadukathan. There are over 70 villages around here, all with the shuttered mansions of the Chettiar. Most are under lock and key, the owners live in Chennai or Singapore or California. The buildings sit there like brightly coloured cakes melting in the hot Tamil Nadu sun.

Some are mired in litigation between a slew of heirs. The families come together occasionally for

a big wedding. Sometimes the buildings are opened up for film shoots. Solaimalai shows me one white wedding cake of a building. That one's been in many Tamil films, he says, usually as "the bad politician's mansion". Another palatial building has some English tiles missing. A pattern of pink roses has been painted into the wall to cover up the missing squares. A film crew "took" some tiles as souvenirs, laments Solaimalai.

The calmness of the village with its pond, its temple, its chickens and goats, all point to the sort of never-changing timelessness we associate with *Malgudi Days*. Yet right in the midst of that are these glorious *khichdi* mansions – houses that look as if they have been caught in the crosshairs of great currents of change, buildings you'd expect in great trading hubs, not built by local architects in sleepy Tamil villages.

The antique stores lining a lane in the nearby town of Karaikudi are stuffed with the debris of homes that have been demolished – boxes of brightly coloured enamel dishes from Scandinavia and antique tiles from Spain. Huge Burmese teak doors stand propped up against a wall while local hand-carved lion-faced *yalis* snarl in a corner, and Chinese paintings hang on the wall. A dog sleeps peacefully in front.

It makes me wonder what it is that we bring back from our journeys and what we hope it says about us. Of course, it is often just a marker of status. As schoolchildren, we'd envy those with cousins in America who could bring them real Levi's while we made do with the Lavis rip-offs. Hindi films back then lampooned the pomposity of the foreign-returned and there was a grain of

truth in those caricatures of the foreign-returned who needed to show off their newly-minted *phoren* accents and duty-free Johnnie Walkers.

Tamil ethos

Perhaps that was true of the Chettiar too when they came back to the wives and children growing up in these homes. Yet, in a time of rising ethno-nationalism worldwide, when we view the other with such suspicion and insist that all answers lie in our own golden age, the Chettiar mansions bear testimony to a world that was somehow more open to the other and could happily incorporate bits of the other to create something new without losing what it had.

The mansions are not like UFOs which landed in the Chettinad countryside instead of Europe. The ethos remains very Tamil. The kitchens still come with the old style *aatukal* – stone grinders – like all Tamil households. Visalam hotel might have a swimming pool but it has also retained the egg plaster on the walls that the house had when it was built, a technique now long lost. At the entrance, there is a bas relief of the goddess Lakshmi.

In fact, she's there at the entrance to every home. But as Solaimalai points out, sometimes she comes with foreign-returned accessories.

One home has a pair of British-era sepoy guarding her. In another there is Queen Victoria herself. But this Queen Victoria has a *bindi* on her forehead putting the local very firmly in the global.

Sandip Roy, the author of *Don't Let Him Know*, likes to let everyone know about his opinions whether asked or not.

