

SHOWSTOPPING MUNIAS

The rare, endemic and globally threatened green avadavats are facing increasing pressure from anthropogenic causes on the hillsides of Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary in India. An ongoing conservation effort aims to safeguard the resident POPULATION.

Text and Images by Sahil Zutshi



Green avadavats are striking songbirds that continue to be trapped for the unlawful bird trade and also smuggled out of India. The species suffers from stress and high rates of mortality under captivity.

A short distance from Mount Abu, a hill-station in southern Rajasthan state, stands Guru Shikhar, the highest peak of the Aravalli ranges. Rising some 5,650 ft, the summit overlooks the villages of Oriya and Achalgarh. This area, situated in India's oldest mountain range and among the oldest in the world, is home to rare, spectacularly coloured little birds. Among the 180 odd species of birds found in Mount Abu, green avadavats, also called green munias, are the prize of the wildlife sanctuary and found in relative abundance. A cousin of the orange-breasted waxbill (zebra waxbill), found south of the Sahara and also in north-eastern South Africa; these songbirds with an attractive plumage and prominent zebra barred flanks are much sought-after for the unlawful bird trade. Consequently, the birds have a declining population trend within their extremely restricted distribution range. The 'State of India's Birds Report 2020' categorises green avadavats as a species of high concern, 'severely threatened', 'neglected' and 'dangerously low abundant' which must be urgently protected. 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. While the risk from bird trappers remains ever-present, the major threats are also in the form of increasing habitat alteration and fragmentation. 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. Added to this is the threat from indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers on local farms. 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 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 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. 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

Right: A globally threatened species, green avadavats, have a restricted distribution range and are a 'neglected' and 'lesser-known' species.

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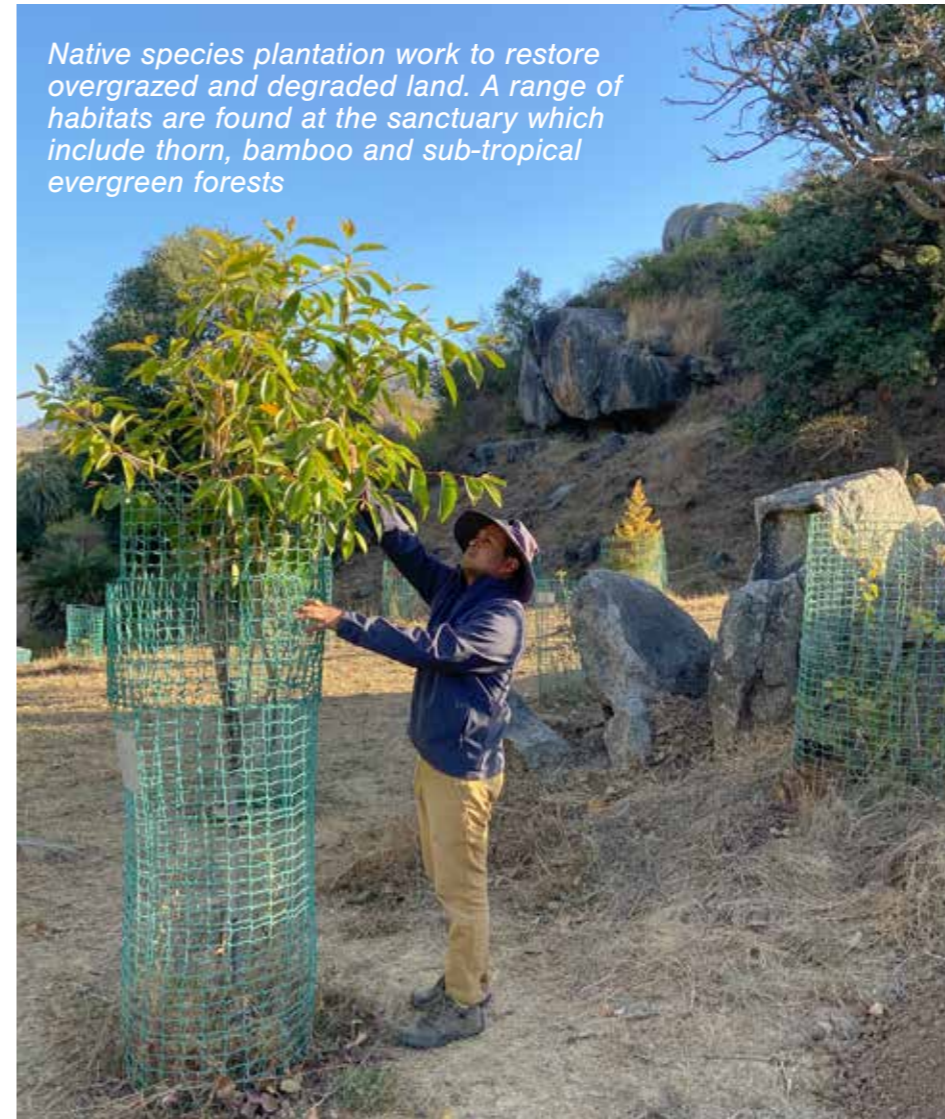


“RELATIVELY UNTOUCHED HABITATS ARE BEING ALTERED BY INCREASING TRAFFIC, ENCROACHMENT, DEFORESTATION AND INTENTIONALLY LIT, UNMANAGED WILDFIRES”

Left: The resident population of green avadavats is spread across a range of habitats found at the sanctuary. The birds prefer to nest in thick scrub near a water source.



Green avadavats spend a considerable time at ground level, foraging for seeds and husk which constitute their main diet.

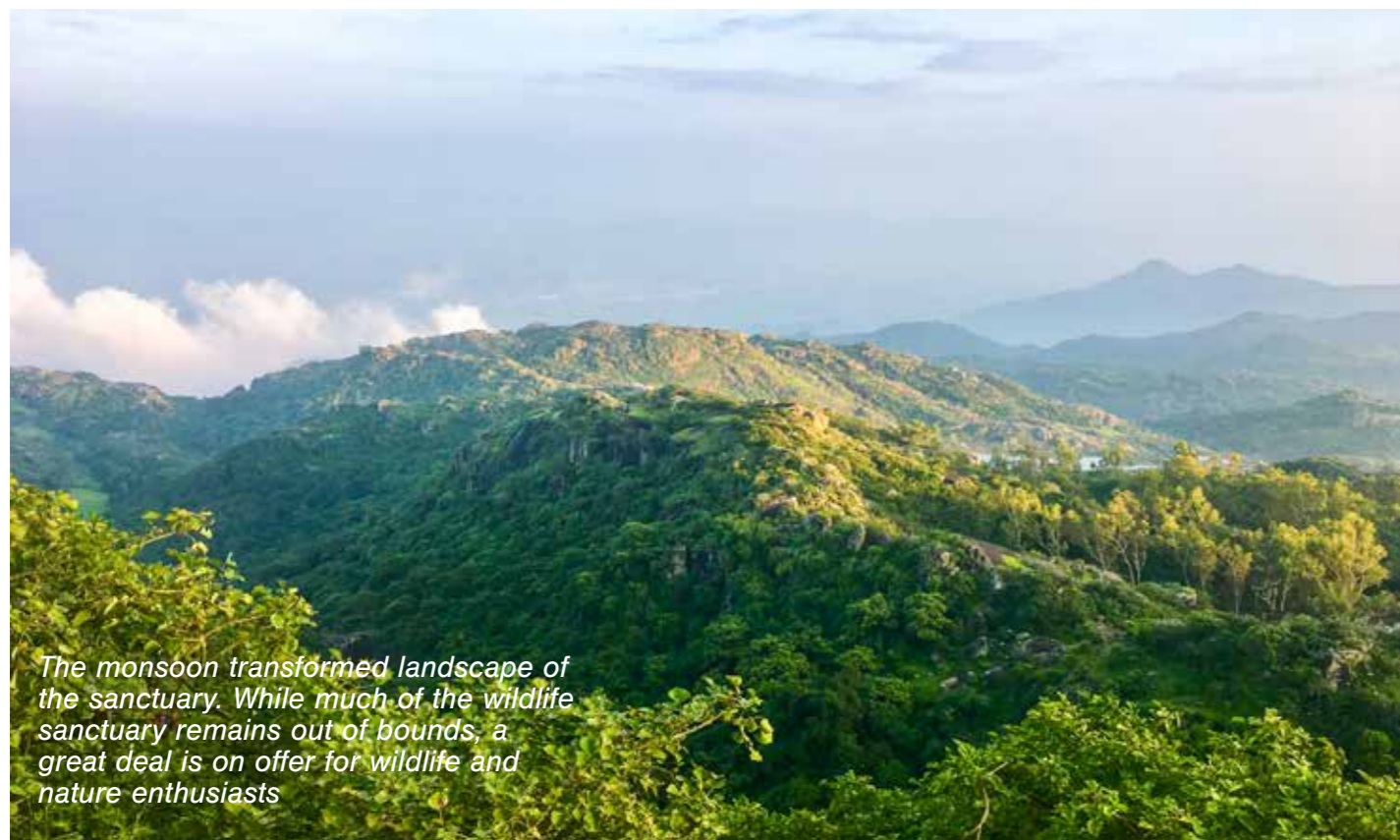


Native species plantation work to restore overgrazed and degraded land. A range of habitats are found at the sanctuary which include thorn, bamboo and sub-tropical evergreen forests

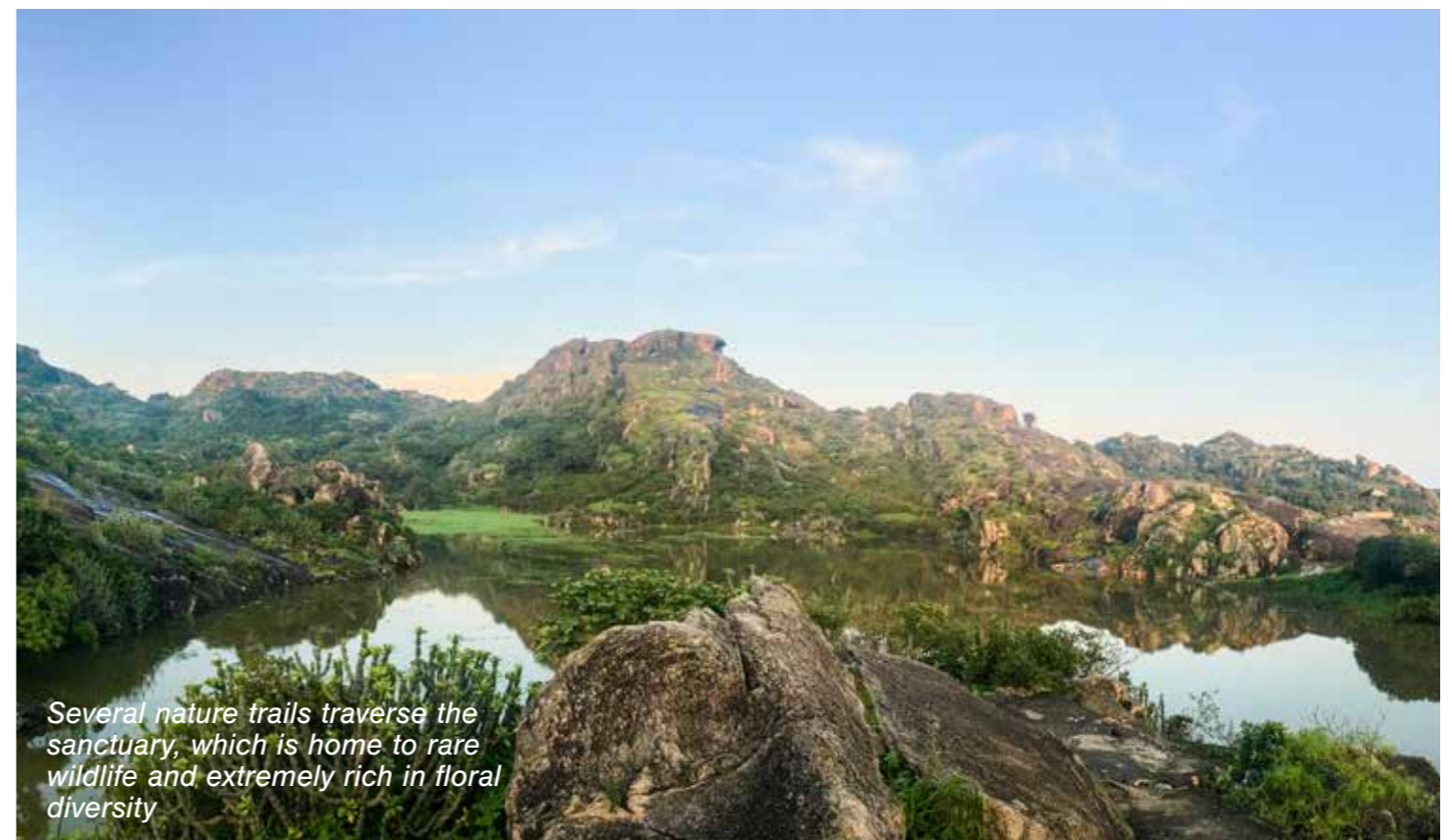
notable increase in flock sizes. Over seventy or more birds have been spotted at one location. Before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, birders from various countries were welcomed to the protected area to spot munias, as well as other endemic species.

While populations of green avadavats continue to decline in the few select areas they are found elsewhere in India, a greater degree of 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. Long-term monitoring is being undertaken since there is a pressing need to identify populations through surveys. In the future, a much-needed shift towards introducing eco-tourism measures is required at the wildlife sanctuary to protect and ensure the existence of this globally threatened species.

Sahil Zutshi is currently undertaking research and conservation work at Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, India.



The monsoon transformed landscape of the sanctuary. While much of the wildlife sanctuary remains out of bounds, a great deal is on offer for wildlife and nature enthusiasts



Several nature trails traverse the sanctuary, which is home to rare wildlife and extremely rich in floral diversity