



Photo: Akbar Ayub

A spot-billed pelican perches on a human friend's hand

# A curious kinship

TO THE SIMPLE FOLKS OF KOKKREBELLUR IT IS NOT JUST A SIMPLE CO-EXISTENCE

WITH THE BIRDS BUT MORE OF AFFECTION THAT BORDERS ON REVERENCE

by Akbar Ayub

Three-year-old Manja bawled shrilly in the heat of early summer. “Shshsh... you’ll disturb the birds,” admonished his mother Gouramma. “They are resting, sitting on their eggs,” she said. “If you make a lot of noise, the eggs won’t hatch!” Little Manja soon quietened down.

That exchange between Manja and his mother exemplifies the fondness the villagers of Kokkrebellur feel for their annual winged visitors – pelicans and painted storks.

Kokkrebellur, in native Kannada, means the village of storks. During October and November every year, this village – a ragtag assortment of tiled and thatched houses, teems with feathered activity, as it turns home to migratory birds. Flocks of painted storks (*Ibis leucocephalus*) and spot-billed pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*) descend on this hamlet to build their nests and rear their young.

About 80 km out of Bangalore, en route to Mysore, it is easy to miss the

signpost to your left – ‘Kokkrebellur’, put up by the forest department. Once you turn into the village road, for the next 14 odd km, you will find yourself surrounded by paddy fields on either side, ranging from lush carpets of vibrant green to the burnished gold of mature paddy ready for harvest. Suddenly, you are at a village square with a cluster of large trees. You realise you are in Kokkrebellur only when you hear the cackle of birds and smell the slightly acrid stench of their droppings.

These two species are colonial nesters and nest in close proximity. Large, shady trees of tamarind, peepal and portia bristle with breeding colonies of birds, the air filled with the quiver of flapping wings and the rattle of their large, pointed bills. Standing in the shade, you get a ringside view of the drama. For avid bird watchers, this place is paradise. They come in droves, especially during February, when the population peaks. "February witnesses an egg laying frenzy," says a village elder. "And then there is a lull as they settle down to roost."

That lull is broken by late March, when the eggs hatch. Then, there is a renewed hum of activity. Each tree is home to about 15 to 20 pairs, in large nests wedged between branches and lined with hay from the surrounding fields. As summer progresses, these gentle, graceful creatures glide tirelessly back and forth, busy feeding their fledglings. The nearby Shimsha River and number of large ponds surrounding the village are happy hunting grounds, providing an endless supply of fish.

A photographer's delight, these birds look magnificent in their striking plumage. The painted stork, almost a

metre tall, has a yellow, tapering bill and snow-white plumage with shades of pink at the shoulders and wing-tips. During nesting, each nest contains from two to five dotted, dull-white eggs. Once the eggs hatch, you can see the storks shading their chicks with outstretched wings. Sometimes, they also fetch water in their beaks and sprinkle it on the nests and the frail-looking but gregarious fledglings, in an effort to keep them cool.

The spot-billed pelican or grey pelican, on the other hand, is only half as tall, chiefly grey and greyish white, with short stout legs and large webbed feet. The bill is flat and enormous, with an elastic bag of purple skin hanging below it. Given their size, these birds are considerably agile, and are often seen soaring in circles in the company of storks, with whom they share their nesting colonies. Each bird lays a clutch of up to three chalky white eggs.

For the villagers, these winged visitors are welcome guests. So much so, that if they fail to turn up in a year, they believe it bodes ill for the village. Around five years back, the birds failed to keep up their annual tryst with the village. That year drought and an out-

*A painted stork perches precariously*




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*A painted stork tests its wings*

break of flu took a heavy toll on the villagers. More scientifically though, the birds probably sense disturbances in weather patterns and keep off. But when they do come, they also bring with them an added gift. The dropping of these fish-eating birds, rich in phosphates, is valuable manure for the paddy fields. It is easy therefore to understand the sentiments of the villagers towards their winged visitors.

Admittedly, the roots of these sentiments go deeper than mere bird droppings. According to them, these birds have been coming here since very remote times and, this antiquity alone, if nothing else, seems to have forged a unique kinship between the birds and the village folk. “No one knows what really brings them here,” is the common refrain, which leaves you wondering why these flocks travel hundreds or perhaps thousands of miles – from as far as Siberia, according to some findings – to home in here, a nondescript little village, and nest. You are also amazed at the ease and assurance that the birds display at such close proximity to humans. Says Rudrappa, from behind the counter of his clapboard teashop under a peepal tree, “No one from this village will ever hurt a bird, and so they

feel safe here. Sometimes when a fledgling falls off a nest, or a weak and injured bird finds itself grounded and flightless, we take them to the nursery over there and take care of them.” He points to a fenced-in enclosure under the shade of a large tree in the distance.

Awake to these sentiments, and also realising its potential as a reserve, the local administration was quick to rope in the forest department to establish an outpost near the village and appoint a ‘watcher’ with the responsibility to watch over the birds and look out for poachers. The department also announced compensation to the villagers for leaving their trees alone where the birds nest, declaring them protected under the Tree Protection Act. Ongoing conservation efforts include planting new saplings, protecting the surrounding water bodies and involving villagers in their efforts.

“We disburse nearly Rs. 50,000 annually to the tree owners,” says Anande Gowda at the forest outpost. “We also keep a count on the nests, that helps us determine the bird-count each year. This year has been lean – only about 1,000 birds. Earlier, following a good monsoon, we have had counts of up to 3,000.”

The tourism department on its part has

been quick to discover the tourist potential of Kokkrebellur and preparations are now afoot to build a tourist lodge on the outskirts. That should be a boon to serious bird watchers and ornithologists, since the village at present has practically no facilities for overnight stay.

By May, as the summer heat begins to peak, the birds finally bid adieu and take to the skies – to return yet again next year. That prospect however is turning grim with each passing year as the pelican is now on the endangered list and Kokkrebellur is only one of the ten known breeding sites left in India. The storks though, are relatively better off.

In the stillness of a mid-May dawn as the flocks finally depart soaring into the lightening sky, a grizzled old woman holds forth from the stoop of her modest dwelling, “For us, these birds are like a daughter coming home for delivery...”

To an outsider, these sentiments may sound maudlin, but to these simple folks, it is not just a matter of co-existence with the birds, but something more – an affection that borders on reverence. ☺

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