

Birds of West Bengal

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The bird life of West Bengal is rich. More than 750 species have been identified within the state, including some extremely rare ones like Masked Finfoot (*Heliopais personata*) seen rarely in Sundarban. In West Bengal, 23 out of 57 vulnerable species listed for India by the Birdlife International are found. Fourteen near-threatened species are also found in West Bengal. The state has a well-protected network of sanctuaries and wildlife reserves apart from numerous waterbodies, which support good bird life. For example, the Buxa Tiger Reserve, located in northern West Bengal at the meeting ground of three major biogeographic provinces, has more than 227 species of birds. A part of Buxa Tiger Reserve lies in the Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Areas (EBA) where 21 restricted range species have been listed. Some important species like Red-breasted Hill Partridge (*Arborophila mandelli*), Yellow-vented Warbler *Phylloscopus cantator*, Hoary-throated Barwing (*Actinodura nipalensis*) and White-naped Yuhina (*Yuhina bakeri*) are found in the higher reaches of Buxa. Earlier, even the Manipur Bush Quail was found at the foothills bordering the neighbouring Bhutan. The type specimens of this species kept in the British Museum of Natural History in London were probably procured in Goalpara. There was also a reported sighting of this species not far from the river Torsa near Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary. The reserve also has two other critically endangered species of *Gyps* vultures such as Oriental White-backed Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) and Slender-billed Vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*).

Another important sanctuary in northern West Bengal is Jaldapara. It is one of the best areas in the region where tall wet grasslands of the Indo-Gangetic plains are still seen, thanks to the protection of this habitat for the sake of the One-horned Rhinoceros. According to Salim Ali, Jaldapara was the last known locality for the Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*) in West Bengal. Goutam Narayan of the Bombay Natural History Society and his team had estimated a population of up to 10 individuals in Jaldapara in the late 1980s. Greater Adjunct

(*Leptoptilos dubius*), once fairly common in Jaldapara and all over West Bengal, has decreased drastically, and none has been sighted here for many years. However, a few individuals of Lesser Adjunct (*Leptoptilos javanicus*) can be seen breeding within the sanctuary.

Another important protected area in northern West Bengal is Neora Valley National Park in Darjeeling district. It is probably the most undisturbed patch of forest in West Bengal. A total of 258 bird species have been sighted. Seven globally threatened species and two near-threatened species—Satyr Tragopan (*Tragopan satyra*) and Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*), also endemic to Eastern Himalayas—are found at this site. It is one of the best sites in India to see rarities such as the Rusty-bellied Shortwing (*Brachypteryx hyperythra*).

Singhalila National Park, situated at the north-west border of Darjeeling district, qualifies as an Important Bird Area (IBA) because it harbours many endemic and threatened bird species. More than 500 species have been recorded so far from this region. These include Satyr Tragopan (*Tragopan satyra*), Black-backed Kaleej Pheasant (*Lophura leucomelanos*), Blood Pheasant (*Ithaginia eruentus*), Hill Partridge *Arborophila (torqueola)* and Red-breasted Hill Partridge (*A. mandelli*).

Another notable area for waterbirds is the Farakka Barrage that supports between 50,000 and 1,00,000 waterfowls including about 8000 Large Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*). Nearly 70 species have been reported from this designated Important Bird Area (IBA). The organisation called Wetlands International has estimated that 1% of the bio-geographical population is only 200, and the total population is 20,000. Therefore, Faraka Barrage holds two-thirds of the total estimated population of this species in the Indian subcontinent. Another notable species includes Indian Skimmer (*Rynehops albiepllis*).

Kulik Bird Sanctuary (Raiganj), although an artificially planted forest, holds perhaps the largest nesting colony of Asian Openbill (*Anastomus oscitans*) in India. More than 11,000 nests were recorded in 1999. According to Wetlands International, the total breeding



population of this species is >1,25,000 and the 1% threshold is 1,250. Thus, about 10% of the world's breeding population is found in this sanctuary. Apart from this, around 130 other species of birds have been recorded from this sanctuary.

The Naya Bandh group of wetlands in the Indo-Bangladesh border includes mainly Chalka, Bakla, Vikon, Morkatta, Mona and Sirishdang. About 150 species of birds have been identified, of which six are globally threatened [important species includes Baer's Pochard (*Aythya baeri*) and Greater Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*)], five near-threatened and 11 biome species.

The Sundarban Biosphere Reserve in the Gangetic delta on the border between West Bengal and the neighbouring Bangladesh is well known for its famous Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris*). Pranabesh Sanyal, a former state forest department official, has identified 163 species of birds from Sundarban. But recently, Sujan Chatterjee has listed 219 species. In India, Sundarban is the most important site for the vulnerable bird species called Masked Finfoot (*Heliopais personata*). Sundarban is one of two sites where the Mangrove Whistler (*Paehyephala grisola*)

is definitely found. 62 waterbird species were recorded in the Indian part of Sundarban, half of which were waders. Of the 32 wader species recorded, only four are known to breed locally. The rest are short/medium-distance migrants from other parts of central and east Asia (9 species) or long-distance migrants from arctic Siberia (18 species, or 56% of the total).

Sundarban is also one of the places in India where one can see five species of kingfishers. Some of the wintering populations of the medium distance migrants, such as Common Sandpiper (*Aetitis hypoleucos*) and Common Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) might also originate partly from arctic birds. Sundarban is also particularly important for Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) and Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*). Lastly, Sundarban is also famous for the highly endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper (*Calidris pygmaeus*). However, sighting of this species is extremely difficult as because they mostly travel with big flocks of sympatric Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*). ■

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