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# Winged guests back at wetland after land-grab attempt fails

Subhro Niyogi | TNN

Kolkata: Migratory birds are flocking back to a sprawling marshy wetland in Dankuni that was snatched back from the jaws of land sharks in the nick of time late last year. More than 40 species of birds, some of them rarely sighted in south Bengal, have been spotted in Mullarbaer, the 500-acre wetland rescued following a court order that not only stopped construction activity on the land but ordered its restoration by removing the fly ash.

"Birds have made a triumphant return to the wetland. I have spotted a large flock of Rosy Pipit as well as Yellow Breasted Bunting, Chestnut Eared Bunting, Little Bunting, Western Marsh Harrier and Crested Serpent Eagle. This is a miracle given that around this time last year, hundreds of trucks were invading the area and dumping fly ash to turn the wetlands into commercial plots. The activity had ravaged the flora and fauna," said birder Sandip Das.

With the migration season setting in, birders have spotted several species that usually inhabit the eastern Himalayas and travel south during winter. In

## LANDSHARKS STILL IN HUNT

the past, migratory birds have used the Santragachi Jheel and wetlands in the Dankuni region as their temporary habitat.

The encroachment that began on the sly in 2011 and gained momentum in 2012 disturbed the habitat, triggering fear among birders that the winged guests may never return to save the marshes that was home to animals such as the jungle cat and the fishing cat.

That gloom turned to a ray of hope when TOI reported the land grab following a site visit with non-government action group PUBLIC. Subsequently, PUBLIC and other NGOs — WWF India, Disha and FHLEP — filed a PIL after a series of letters to state government officials failed to elicit a response. Unlike the apathy of the bureaucracy, the Calcutta high court was quick to act on the matter.

The Chief Justice first ruled that status quo be maintained and then amended it to order that the wetland be restored. Following this, the government deployed earth-moving vehicles to scoop out tonnes of fly ash that had been indiscriminately dumped.



Though the contractors entrusted with the restoration job are carelessly lifting the top soil with the fly ash, birders are happy that the reversal has led to a resurgence in arrival of birds at Mullarbaer.

"It was a landmark judgment from the high court that led to the protection and restoration of the wetland and heralded the return of birds in such large numbers. Personally, it is an incredible experience for me and goes to show that nothing is impossible," said Bonani Kakkar of PUBLIC.

An abundance of rains this year also helped expedite the restoration. "The marsh land, reed beds and grain-bearing wild grass makes Mullarbaer a perfect habitat for birds like kingfishers, crakes, rails, pipits, larks and raptors. It is a fascinating area, rich in biodiversity. We are so glad the

judiciary prevented its destruction and the district administration is now helping its restoration," said birder Arka Sarkar.

While NGOs and birders are delighted, the landsharks who had to forgo the land that would have fetched hundreds of crores aren't furious. They have now deployed bike gangs to do the rounds during weekends to scare the birders. Kanad Baidya, who was surrounded by one such gang, said the youths blamed the birding community for their misfortune and threatened him of dire consequence if he was sighted in the area again.

"The court's judgment and government action thereafter has ruffled a few feathers. But we birders have to continue monitoring the area or the land grabbers will be up to some other mischief," said Baidya.