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Winged guests driven away monitor lizard crushed, fish buried in wetland fill-up

By *Subhro Niyogi*, TNN | Feb 2, 2013, 12:57 AM IST

KOLKATA: A sprawling marshy wetland in Dankuni that has been a birding delight for years is on the verge of extinction with a private developer filling it up to make way for a realty project.

Located barely 35 km from Kolkata, the 1,500 hectare wetland attracts many species of birds, including some that are rarely sighted like the purple heron and yellow-breasted bunting. Also sighted in this wetland are birds like western marsh harrier and crested serpent eagle, reptile like yellow monitor lizard and mammal like fishing cat, all protected under Schedule I, Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.

But with 100-150 trucks of earth being dumped on the site daily, more than two-thirds of the wetland has already disappeared. As dumpers and bulldozers ravage the land, they leave behind a trail of destruction.

When TOI visited the site on the eve of International Wetlands Day, it found a dead yellow monitor lizard, crushed by a bulldozer.

The wetland, next to Mullarbaer in Panchghara mouja (PO Janai) in Hooghly, draws significant number of bird watchers from Kolkata, particularly during weekends and holidays. One of them, software engineer Arka Sarkar, said the marshland, reed beds and grain-bearing wild grass made it a perfect habitat for both birds, like kingfishers, crakes, rails, pipits, larks and raptors.

"It is a fascinating area, rich in biodiversity.

Till November, we could spot rare birds like yellow-breasted bunting that breeds in Eastern Siberia, Mongolia and North Korea in large flocks (30-40). But with the landscape totally ravaged by the indiscriminate filling of the marshland, the numbers have dwindled," said Sarkar.

Himalayan species like the chestnut-eared bunting and little bunting that are rarely found in South Bengal were also spotted here as is purple heron. Birders get to click blue throat, brown-headed shrike, long-tailed shrike, common and wood shrike, black-breasted baya, streaked baya, red avadavat, common stone chat, ziting cisticola, clamorous reed warbler, ashy prinia, ashy woodswallow, Bengal bush lark, black winged kite, marsh harrier, serpent eagle and sandpiper.

"Hydrologically, such a vast wetland would be of significant value in holding and recharging ground water for the region. The birds and the waterbodies, too, are rapidly disappearing in Dankuni," said Bonani Kakkar of Public.

Debala Mali of Mullarbaer echoes the pain and angst of her fellow villagers as the earth gets dumped into the marshy wetland, stretches of which were over 10 ft deep, not just driving away birds but also burying the fish catch. "Jal to gelo, aar jibon ki thakbe? (Water lost, can life survive?)" she remarked.

There's still some expanse of water left where villagers row in boats and lay traps to catch fishes. But given the pace at which earth is being dumped at the site, it will soon be history. "So much fly ash has been dumped in the area that it's hard to believe a waterbody existed here. But anyone with rudimentary knowledge of biodiversity will instantly recognize the signs of wetland in the tall reed beds that are found everywhere," said Zoological Survey of India's former deputy director A K Ghosh.

The firm that is filling up the area claimed it is private land, and hence, outside the purview of laws related to nature and conservation. That is something that former

Ghosh contests, arguing that with the presence of at least one mammal, two birds and a reptile belonging to the Schedule I of IWPA, 1972, legal protection at the highest level should be guaranteed.

There is also the West Bengal Inland Fisheries (Amendment) Act, 1993, and National Environmental Policy, 2006 that has enabling causes to protect wetlands. But conserving this wetland has proved tough. Tapan Dutta of Jalabhumi Bachao Committee was murdered after he filed an PIL against the government in 2009 against the filling up. In a PIL filed by NGO Disha in 2011, Calcutta high court on February 3, 2012, ordered the formation of a high-power panel to see the complaints and formulate a policy to prevent wetland destruction. The panel was set up in two months but the status of the report is unknown.

When Kakkar sent a letter to the committee, highlighting the blatant fill-up, she received a vague reply "The High Power Committee has received your complaint and has discussed it in the 15th meeting on January 1, 2013 and that the Committee has already taken cognizance in this matter."

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