



Assam Bird Sanctuary Faces 72% Decline in Bird Species Count

ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT



Drastic Decline in Avian Diversity

A study revealed a significant 72% decline in bird species over 27 years at the Bordoibam Bilmukh Bird Sanctuary (BBBS) in Assam. From 167 species recorded in 1997, the number dropped to 47 species by 2024.

Study Details and Methodology

- **Research Team:** Independent researchers Lakhijyoti Saikia, Siddartha Suman Bora, and Khirod Sankar Das.
- **Duration:** 154 days between October 2022 and March 2024.
- **Location:** BBBS, spanning 11.25 sq. km across Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts, at an altitude of 90–95 meters above sea level.

Findings on Bird Diversity

- **1997:** 167 species recorded.
- **2011:** 133 species observed, including 86 resident, 23 migratory, and 24 local migrants.
- **2022-2024:** 47 species identified under 16 orders and 29 families.

Notable species observed included brown shrike, citrine wagtail, white wagtail (winter migratory), and lesser kestrel (summer migratory).

Causes of Decline

The study noted that habitat degradation, including water table reduction and food chain disruption, forced resident and migratory birds to relocate for foraging and breeding.

Impact on Ecosystem

The decline in bird populations adversely affects:

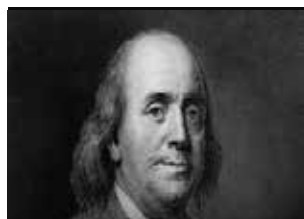
- Wetland nutrient cycles.
- Ecosystem stability.
- Human-environment interactions.

Call for Conservation

The researchers emphasized the need for intense conservation efforts to restore BBBS's wetland habitat and preserve its biodiversity.

Assam's Rich Biodiversity

Assam, one of India's most biodiversity-rich states, harbors about 950 bird species, including 17 endemic ones. The state also has 55 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas that serve as critical hotspots for avian diversity.



"If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it."

–Benjamin Franklin

New Undersea Cables to Strengthen India's Digital Connectivity

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



Expansion of Undersea Cable Network

India is set to launch two new submarine cable systems—India Asia Xpress (IAX) and India Europe Xpress (IEX)—in the next three months. These systems will enhance Internet connectivity to Asia and Europe, reflecting India's increasing focus on undersea cable resilience and security.

Details of the Cable Systems

- **India Asia Xpress (IAX):** Links Chennai and Mumbai with Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia.
- **India Europe Xpress (IEX):** Connects India with France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Djibouti.
- **Combined Length:** Over 15,000 km.

- **Ownership:** Reliance Jio, with strategic investment from China Mobile. These cables will add to the existing network primarily concentrated in Mumbai and Chennai.

Geopolitical Implications

- The expansion aligns with India's ambitions to strengthen its position in the maritime cable network domain.
- According to Jagannath Panda, head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA), the new systems enhance India's defense strategy by ensuring cable resilience against physical and digital disruptions.
- India is taking a proactive role in regions like the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea, aiming for leadership in undersea cable security and infrastructure.

Addressing Disruptions and Resilience

- In March, disruptions to three submarine cables impacted India's connectivity to West Asia and Europe. However, alternate routes and domestic data centers mitigated the effects.
- India is actively working on strategies to ensure stability and resilience in Internet services during potential disruptions.
- Telecom Secretary Neeraj Mittal is part of the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience under the International Telecommunication Union.

Regional Connectivity Challenges

- Bangladesh recently paused plans to sell bandwidth to Northeast India.
- Despite this, connectivity in Northeast India remains robust, supported by fiber optic networks installed along Power Grid Corporation of India's transmission lines, providing ample bandwidth for current needs.

India's Growing Role in Undersea Cable Networks

India's expanding undersea cable infrastructure reflects its growing digital traffic, strategic ambitions, and commitment to ensuring secure and resilient Internet connectivity both regionally and globally.

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A Chance to Strengthen Bilateral Ties During the Kuwait Visit

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Historic Visit After 43 Years

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kuwait on December 21-22 marks the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 43 years, with the last visit being by Indira Gandhi in 1981. Originally scheduled for January 2022, the visit was postponed due to COVID-19 concerns. This trip seeks to bridge a gap in India's West Asia engagement and rejuvenate the relationship between the two nations.

Kuwait's Strategic Significance

- **Geopolitical Importance:**

Located at the northeastern end of the Persian Gulf, Kuwait shares borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It hosts key American military bases and is the only Gulf monarchy with a functioning democracy.

- **Neutral Diplomatic Role:**

Kuwait has often acted as a mediator in regional disputes, maintaining a neutral stance on contentious issues.

- **Economic Strength:**

With the sixth-largest global oil reserves, Kuwait is a founding member of OPEC. Its sovereign wealth fund, managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), is the fourth largest in the world, valued at \$924 billion as of March 2024.

Existing Ties and Shared History

- **Trade Relations:**

India and Kuwait share a robust trade partnership, with bilateral trade in FY 2023-24 amounting to \$10.47 billion. Kuwait ranks as India's sixth-largest crude oil supplier, meeting 3% of the country's energy needs.

- **Cultural and Historical Links:**

India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with Kuwait post-independence in 1961. The Indian rupee was legal tender in Kuwait until 1961.

- **Humanitarian Collaboration:**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kuwait provided India with critical medical supplies, while India supplied vaccines to Kuwait.

People-to-People Connections

- **Indian Diaspora:**

Over 1 million Indians in Kuwait constitute the largest expatriate group, contributing to the country's development and fostering goodwill.

- **Educational and Cultural Exchange:**

Kuwait hosts 26 Indian schools with over 60,000 students. Initiatives such as the 'Festival of India' in March 2023 and the weekly Hindi radio program 'Namaste Kuwait' launched in April 2024 strengthen cultural ties.

Opportunities for Enhanced Cooperation

- **Strategic Agreements:**

A comprehensive strategic partnership agreement and a defense cooperation pact could elevate bilateral ties. Kuwait's participation in the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure could further strengthen collaboration.

- **Economic Growth:**

An agreement between KIA and India's National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) could promote mutual growth. Kuwait could also contribute to India's strategic oil reserves.

- **Infrastructure and Education:**

India could support Kuwait's Vision 2035 initiative by contributing to infrastructure projects, establishing IITs and IIMs, and building modern hospitals.

- **Aviation and Space Cooperation:**

Additional airline seats for Kuwait and collaboration on satellite launches could open new avenues of partnership.

A Platform for a Golden Era

Prime Minister Modi's visit presents a vital opportunity to revitalize and deepen India-Kuwait relations. With vast potential for cooperation across various sectors, this trip could mark the beginning of a new, dynamic chapter in the bilateral partnership.

Evolution of Jatra: From Mythological Narratives to Modern Spectacles

ART AND CULTURE



Jatra, a folk theatre tradition rooted in the Bhakti movement, has undergone significant transformation over the years to cater to contemporary audiences. Once celebrated for its devotional songs and mythological themes, it now includes acrobatics, stunts, and even sensual performances to stay relevant in an era dominated by digital entertainment. The competitive nature of Jatra, especially in Odisha's Ganjam district, has led to dramatic changes in storytelling. Traditional Ramayana narratives, which once captivated audiences for hours or days, now incorporate modern twists and spectacular stunts. While these innovations draw larger crowds, they often overshadow the art form's cultural essence, sparking

criticism from purists who lament the loss of authenticity.

Controversies and Commercialization

The increasing emphasis on shock value has sparked controversies, as seen in the infamous incident where an actor used a live pig in a performance. This act, condemned by animal rights activists and lawmakers, highlights the growing disregard for ethical boundaries in pursuit of audience engagement. Simultaneously, Jatra has evolved into a lucrative industry, with some performers earning lakhs annually and Bollywood stars occasionally gracing the stage. However, this commercialization has alienated traditional audiences and raised concerns about the erosion of Jatra's core values. While some argue that reinvention is necessary for survival, others emphasize the need to balance modernization with respect for cultural traditions.



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