



Counting Birds Together

 drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/27-02-2020/print

This article is based on **“Counting birds together”** which was published in The Hindu on 25/02/2020. It talks about the status of birds in India as highlighted by the State of India’s Birds report.

Recently, the State of India’s Birds 2020 (SolB) report was released at the global conference (held at Gandhinagar, Gujarat) of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. The report held that more bird species have declined in population than the species that have shown population stability. During the last two decades, over half the species assessed have declined.

SolB has **distinctive features** that define a new approach. The report **taps into citizen science for good data building its repository on the local knowledge understanding of citizens**. This serves as a foundation for further collaborative work.

Besides collaboration, another key value that the report seeks to acknowledge is the importance of making, not just its outputs, but also the entire process open. The report’s data and analysis are in the public domain, inviting critique and further refinement. Better public and scientific understanding of biodiversity can grow only from wider and open access not only to data but also from opening the entire process of scientific inquiry to wider peer and public scrutiny and challenge.

Highlights of the Report

- **More than 50% of birds are in clear decline since 2000**, and over the last five years, 79% of birds have registered declining numbers.
- **More bird species deserve immediate conservation attention** than previously thought.
 - To the list of 67 globally threatened Indian bird species previously identified by the IUCN (as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable), the report adds 34 more species.
 - **The number of species of high conservation concern in India is now 101.**

- Most declining groups include coastal birds, birds of prey (like eagles, kites, vultures and others) and habitat specialists.
 - In the Western Ghats the abundance index of 12 endemic species there has dropped by 75% since 2000. The fortunes of the Nilgiri Pipit, Nilgiri Thrush and several Sholakilis are tied to the survival of the high shola forest-grasslands.
 - The population of migratory birds coming to India like Hodgson's bush chat (Mongolia), Bar-headed geese (Tibet), Greater Flamingos (Central Asia), has also declined.

Significance of Birds

- **Birds occupy many levels of trophic webs**, from mid-level consumers to top predators.
 - As with other native organisms, birds **help maintain sustainable population levels of their prey and predator species** and, after death, provide food for scavengers and decomposers.
- Many birds are **important in plant reproduction** through their services as pollinators or seed dispersers.
- Birds also provide **critical resources for their many host-specific parasites**, including lice that eat only feathers, flies adapted for living on birds, and mites that hitchhike on birds from plant to plant and even between countries.
- Some birds are considered **keystone species** as their presence in (or disappearance from) an ecosystem affects other species indirectly.
 - For example, woodpeckers create cavities that are then used by many other species.
 - After the extinction of the dodo, it was discovered that a tree whose fruits had been a primary food item of the dodo was unable to reproduce without its seeds passing through the dodos' digestive tracts, which process scarified the seed coat and enabled germination.
- Culturally, birds have been integral to humans since prehistory. Birds have been used by humans in matters of **faith, food and fashion**.

Reasons for the Decline in the Bird Population

Birds are under increasing pressure from human activity, struggling to survive as habitat loss, pesticides, hunting and trapping for the pet trade push them closer to the edge. For example:

- **House Sparrow:** Rapidly changing cities, modern infrastructure does not account for space for the **sparrow** to nest. Also a sharp rise in pollution levels, microwave towers has resulted in the rapid decline of the population of the house sparrow.

- **Vultures:** The major **cause** of mortality of **vultures** was found to be the veterinary non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug '**Diclofenac**', given to cattle in pain and inflammation.
- **Hornbill:** Illegal trade, poaching has led to a sharp fall in numbers of hornbill.
- Similar is the case for Great Indian Bustard, Coursers and floricans.

Way Forward

- Finding birds poses a challenge to ornithologists, as birds exist in a wide variety of habitats like forests, wetlands, farmlands, cities, mountains and even open oceans. Also, hundreds of species migrate into and out at different times of the year.
- Thus, policy and conservation must now look at innovative ways to conserve these varied habitats. **India is a party to the Convention for Biological Diversity**, the United Nations-led convention for conserving wildlife.
 - The convention calls for Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECM). These are tools that don't always find themselves in land records like national parks but comprise informally conserved places.
 - For a country as diverse and complex as India, OECMs should form a bulwark for conservation. Sacred groves, private land, community areas and institutional campuses can all form OECMs.
 - There is a need for a renewed appreciation for native habitats like open scrub and thorn forest.

India is the largest landmass before the Indian Ocean and holds 90% of stopover sites for birds that migrate in this region. Once-thriving endemic or migrant bird populations have been decimated over the past quarter-century in India. Since bird diversity is necessary for cultural and ecological reasons. Therefore, proactive measures should be taken to address the dwindling population of birds.

Drishti Mains Question

Bird diversity is necessary for cultural and ecological reasons. Analyse the statement in light of the recently released State of India's Birds 2020 (SoIB) report.