

KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK



Rajasthan, India

Area: 694 sq km core area. 105 sq km restricted tourist area
Best Time to Visit: November to March

Altitude: 410 to 810 meters above sea level
Closed: Monsoon season



Keoladeo is actually a name of Lord Shiva and is the form in which he is worshipped at the small temple in the heart of the park, near a canteen that serves a welcome cup of hot tea. Ghana refers to the thick tree cover the area once had. This sanctuary is known by the name of the adjoining town of Bharatpur, which is also the name of the king who created the park in the late 19th century.

Keoladeo Ghana National Park is a gem in India's ecological crown despite being one of the smallest parks in the country. Declared a World Heritage Site in 1985, it has had to withstand devastating drought in recent years, which has caused lasting damage to its unique wetlands. It was like witnessing a miracle, therefore, to visit Keoladeo in the monsoon of 2005, when the area was seeing the wettest July in the past 20 years. Farmers had lost their crops and bridges had been washed away. But there was a glimmer of hope — perhaps Bharatpur could now regain its former glory.

Washed out or not, the monsoon is one of the times when maximum avian activity occurs in the park, a fact that often gets lost in all the attention that winter and the accompanying migratory birds receive. During the rains, some of India's most spectacular birds deck themselves out in their finest plumage, get together to court their mates and nest in huge colonies in the trees lining the paths of the sanctuary.

July marks the beginning of this season. I stood with water stretching as far as the eye could see on a muddy bank with one of the trained naturalists in the park and one of its cycle rickshaw-puller-cum-guides beside me. Above, long red legs extended to negotiate a tricky landing. An open-billed stork descended into a babul tree, only to be pecked by his neighbour; it fell out and flapped off to a nearby perch. As with humans, location is the primary thing when birds build houses — no self-respecting open-bill allows another to trespass on its prime few square feet of treetop.

There was a cracking sound across the road behind me and I turned to see another open-bill stork wrestling with a small branch it fancied as building material. Almost in slow motion, it grasped the branch in its heavy bill and wrenched it away before jumping into the air and solemnly flying to its nest. A pair of open-bills were arranging twigs together around the bowl of their new home, another pair were mating — a brief affair, and some, having got all the preliminaries over, were sitting on their eggs, eyes half-shut, looking profoundly content. I was sure that they would not look so happy once the chicks were born. They grow at a fast pace and demand food in loud voices. The colony of storks then dons a busy look, with parents flying in



Eurasian Spoonbills



Jungle Babbler



Painted Stork

and out so fast that an Air Traffic Controller would have a heart attack.

The colony I saw was a multi-cultural avian metropolis. Amidst the black and white storks were snow-white large and intermediate egrets sporting delicate breeding plumes. Grey herons held their black head plumes erect as they interacted with their neighbours. Black-headed ibis on the uppermost branches raised their wings to reveal crimson armpits, and darters or snakebirds, each dark glossy feather outlined in pale shimmering colour, gulped fish down their long, elastic throats. Small cormorants, neat and dapper with streaks of white behind the ears, filled the empty branches.

The cacophony of painted storks with their yellow bills and pink and white behinds has to be heard to be believed. They are a hungry lot too. Studies estimate that the 2,000 painted storks in the colonies require 4 to 6 tonnes of food daily and, in the 30 to 40 days they breed, they consume 1,200 tonnes! And we are talking only about one species here.

Hopping along the road in front of us as we strolled towards the Keoladeo Temple in the centre of the park were some of the permanent residents, easy to dismiss as little brown jobs, or LBJs as they are called by birdwatchers. These were, in fact, the creatures responsible for Salim Ali, India's greatest ever ornithologist, first taking an interest in birds. As a child he had been given an air gun and had amused himself shooting some of the plentiful birds around him. One day he shot what he assumed was a house sparrow. Then he noticed it had a yellow throat, was fascinated, and began to investigate what it could be. His observation of birds started here. However, these creatures are no longer called yellow-throated sparrows. They are now chestnut-shouldered petronias.

While rains bring their own glory, winter remains a splendid time to visit the park. When Keoladeo Ghana was made a World Heritage Site, its guests in the cold season included the Siberian cranes, with bills and faces as red as if dipped in blood, white



The Sarus dance



Indian Roller



Sarus Crane

plumage that was simply peerless and outstretched wingtips pitch black like a dark night. Sadly, the world proved too unfriendly a place for the flock that came to Bharatpur, which were driven away by consecutive years of drought. Siberian cranes are now on the verge of extinction because of habitat loss and hunting. The last documented sighting of Siberian cranes in India was during the winter of 2002. It would require a real miracle to bring these cranes back now, and one can only hope for one. The comforting factor is that although the vegetarian Siberian cranes are gone, there is still the chance of seeing delicate demoiselle cranes, common cranes, or our very own resident crane, the sarus, which now needs our protection so that in future years it will not meet the fate of its Siberian relative.

Despite the fact that the Keoladeo Ghana NP is surrounded by human habitation, it has maintained an atmosphere of the wild. On my most recent trip, I sat in the back of the rickshaw as the sun set. We stopped at regular intervals to see, not just the birds but the mammals. Mature nilgai, cheetal and sambar were grazing close to the road and from far off came the eerie wailing of countless jackals. A watersnake held its head aloft above the water, a turtle basked on a branch, a monitor lizard — some excited young boys identified it as a crocodile — ambled across the road. A cormorant held out its wings to dry, silhouetted against the sky, and I felt the satisfaction and happiness that even a short visit to this park could bring.

courtesy

Gillian Wright

author and book reviewer



Boating in the park



Friends in the jungle



Hover landing