

Avifaunal Diversity of Bhopar Gaon Wetlands, Thane, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract The study area of Bhopar Gaon Wetlands is situated in Kalyan Tehsil of Thane district in Maharashtra. The avifaunal diversity of the area was investigated using the point count method from the first week of February to the last week of April. In total, 56 species from 25 families were spotted during the study, including resident birds, migrant birds as well as birds belonging to vulnerable and near threatened categories of the IUCN Red list. A checklist of observations has been compiled. Construction activities and deforestation pose a threat to the bird diversity. There is increasing awareness about bird diversity and its significance nowadays. A checklist of the said area does not exist and will be very helpful in getting a complete picture of the biodiversity status of the state. Ornithological data is also a useful indicator of effects of environmental changes on an area, and the impact on bird migration, nesting and breeding can all be assessed with this data. Avifaunal cataloging plays a significant role in understanding the complex ecological and evolutionary patterns of the biodiversity of an area. The present study represents a modest step in that direction.

Keywords Avifauna, Biodiversity, Birds, Wetlands

1. Introduction

Birds are rightly defined as 'Feathered bipeds' by Dr Salim Ali [1]. They serve a variety of functions for the

ecosystem, including those of scavengers, pollinators, insect pest predators, and bioindicators of various types of environments, including urban and industrial belts, human disturbance, and illumination [2]. Birds are not only sensitive to their environment, but conspicuous and therefore relatively easy and inexpensive to monitor as indicators of immediate ecosystem health [3]. Since the census techniques are well developed and affordable and there are plenty of experienced volunteers eager to count birds, they are generally simple to detect and identify [4]. At present, there are more than 10,000 species of birds that exist all over the world [5]. There were 1364 species in India as of 2021 [6] which is over 13% of the bird species worldwide [7]. Regrettably, after Brazil and Indonesia, India ranks third among the nations with the highest number of threatened and rare species [8]. Due to its extreme diversity, India offers a wide range of habitats for birds, including forests, grasslands, mountains, shorelines, and wetlands [9].

Wetlands in India cover an area of 58.2 million hectares [10] and are known to support over 310 avian species [11]. Wetlands are defined as "areas of marsh, fen, bog, or water, whether natural or manmade, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or saline, including areas of sea water depth of which at low tides does not exceed six metres". While some wetlands contain water that is always visible above ground, others are seasonal, with water that comes and goes. Wetlands may have water levels that fluctuate from several metres deep to a few centimetres below ground, but as long as they feature

wetland plants, at least occasionally throughout the year's wet and dry seasons, they are still considered wetlands. [12]. They are lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic eco-systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water [13]. Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on earth and are essential for controlling erosion, flooding, recharging aquifers, and absorbing nutrients. In addition, wetlands provide home for a huge diversity of wildlife such as birds, mammals, fish, frogs, insects and plants [14].

Wetlands are crucial bird habitats because they provide them with resources. Birds utilize them for breeding, nesting, and rearing young, as a source of drinking water and for feeding, resting, shelter, and social interactions [15]. Wetlands are one of the most crucial habitats, yet they are also among the most threatened ecosystems in the world. They are prime targets for human activities like drainage, reclamation, pollution, and biological alteration through biotic and abiotic introductions, which can lead to their exploitation, modification, and destruction [12]. Therefore, it is urgent to create conservation action plans and policies to safeguard wetlands and their rich variety of birds. Very little is known about the ecology of wetland-related birds, their diversity, and their relationship to the trophic state of wetlands in India, despite a few studies being conducted by a number of scientists [16].

The proposed study aims to document the bird diversity at Bhopar village, Dombivli situated in Thane district of Maharashtra, India. The population of Dombivli is increasing rapidly and there is a consequent demand for land. Majority of the previously existing grasslands and wetlands have been replaced by buildings either already developed or under development and farms [17]. Around 30% of land is partially reclaimed for large town planning projects, industrial waste and solid waste dumping, cattle

grazing, farming, fishing and poaching [17]. The goal of this study is to gather data on the diversity of various bird species in Bhopar wetlands.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

The village of Bhopar is situated in Kalyan Tehsil of Thane district in Maharashtra, India (figure 2). The total area of the village is 447.30 hectares. The wetland of Bhopar village (figure 1) is located at coordinates 73°04'21.4"E, 19°11'31.7"N and it resembles tropical climatic conditions. The mean annual temperature of the study site is 24.3°C (min) to 32.9°C (max) with the hottest and driest part of the year is April-May when temperature rises to 38°C for a few days. The humidity typically ranges from 58 to 84%. The average annual rainfall in the region ranges from 1286 to 1233 mm.



Figure 1. Urban Landscape [view of selected wetland]

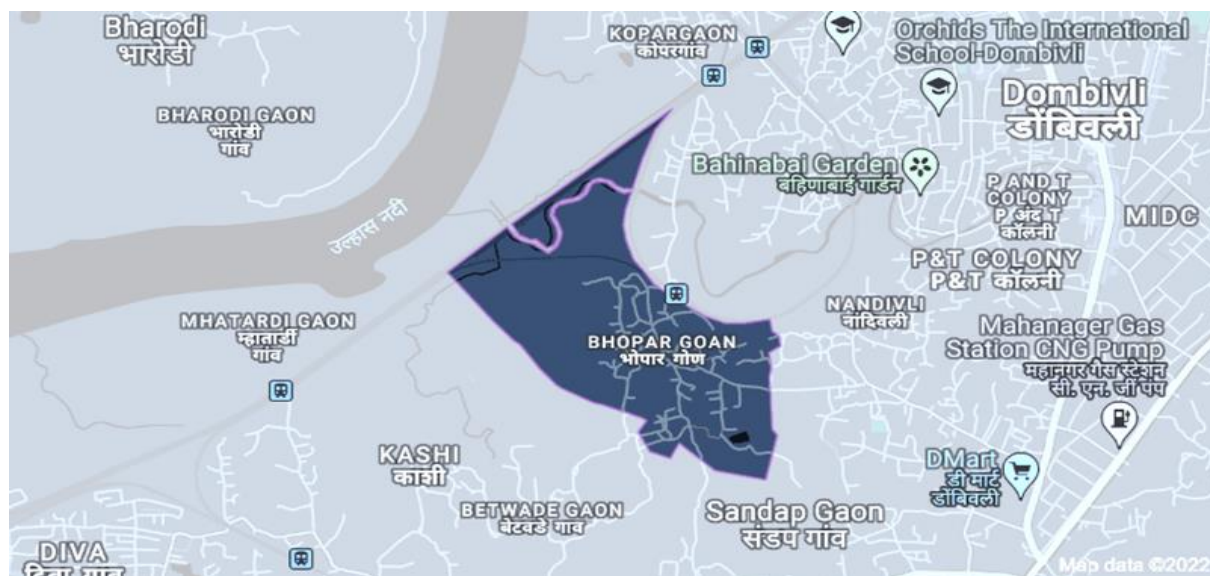


Figure 2. Map of Bhopar Gaon, Thane, Maharashtra, India [Image courtesy: Google Maps]



Figure 3. Locations of Stations [Image courtesy: Google Earth]

Beginning in the southeast near the Kalyan-Dombivli railway station, the estuary portion of the Ulhas River meanders for about 40 kilometres. The wetland of Bhopar is formed because of the backwaters of Betawade Khadi which emerges from the Ulhas River. The surrounding area is a mix of different habitats which includes marshland, grasslands, forest patches and water bodies.

The entire area of Bhopar wetland was divided into 4 stations as shown in figure 3. These stations were chosen to cover maximum area and variety of habitats

Station 1

Station 1 is Ganesh Ghat where immersion of Ganesh Idols is done. The place is also a cremation ground. This station has the highest level of human disturbance. Small scale fishing is also carried out at this point. Though the station is rarely crowded, people and two-wheeler vehicles are often present on this station. This station has wetland habitat on one side and grassland habitat on the other. When disturbance is at a minimum during the day, cormorants and painted storks can be seen foraging freely. Pond herons can be seen foraging and roosting in large numbers.

Station 2

This station has some ponds, marshland and a grassland in its vicinity. The lowest level of human disturbance can be seen on this station. Hence, flocks are usually seen roosting and foraging here.

Station 3

Wetland is present on one side and grassland is present on the other. This station is close to a forest patch and an ongoing construction activity. Railway track is close to this

station thus suffers from noise pollution.

Station 4

Station 4 is a transitional habitat between grassland and the wetland. A forest patch is also present on this station. This station is closest to an ongoing construction activity. Thus, it deals with noise pollution and continuous human disturbance throughout the day. Yet, during the times of the day when disturbance is less, waders as well as grassland and forest birds could be seen.

2.2. Methodology

The study area was surveyed from the first week of February through the last week of April 2022, thrice every week. The method used in this study was point count method wherein bird count is done from a fixed place for a set amount of time [18]. The bird species observed were noted with point count method since the study area is uneven [19]. Observations were made using binoculars (Solognac 8x25/ Nikon 8x42). Digital point and shoot cameras (Nikon P950) and DSLR Camera were used for photo documentation. The birds were identified by their visual cues. The Field Guide of Indian birds by Salim Ali [20] and Birds of the Indian Subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives by Grimmet, Inskipp and Inskipp [21] were used as a reference to identify bird species. Species are categorized according to the latest IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List status, migratory and resident status, waders and other birds and their population trend. Checklists were made on the field by using eBird applications on smartphones as well as field data sheets were used to note observations and remarks.

3. Results and Discussions

A total of **56 species** (Table 1) belonging to 25 families were observed during the study. Dominant family is Ardeidae with 8 species; followed by families *Anatidae*, *Accipitridae*, *Muscicapidae*, *Scolopacidae* with 4 species each; followed by families *Ciconiidae*, *Sturnidae*, *Threskiornithidae*, *Motacillidae* with 3 species each; followed by families *Hirundinidae*, *Alcedinidae*, *Rallidae*, *Phalacrocorcidae*, *Phalacrocorcidae* with 2 species and rest 10 families with single species. The vegetation at Bhopar supports the population of waders, swimming birds, divers, aerial foragers and terrestrial birds.

As shown in figure 4, the highest total number of all species 52 was seen in March. In February 49 species were seen. Whereas, the lowest total number 40 was seen in April. During all the months of study species from the family Ardeidae, Rallidae and Phalacrocorcidae were found to be present.

Total number of migratory species seen were highest in the month of February, followed by March, then followed

by April. This is because migrant species return to their homeland in March-April. Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail were the species observed until early- March. Common Sandpiper and Marsh Sandpiper were the migratory species observed during all the months of the study period

Total number of resident species was highest in March, followed by February, then followed by April. This may be because after the departure of migrants, the residents returned to the wetland.

Highest average number of birds was found in the month of February, which was followed by March and then April. Diversity in February could be attributed to the presence of winter migrants residing in the study area as well as suitable temperature for resident birds.

As shown in figure 6, the average population of waders was highest in February, which was followed by March and then April. Following the trend of monthly total count, the number of waders decreased from the month of February to April. Painted Storks, Grey Heron, Purple Heron and Egrets were consistently present during the study period.

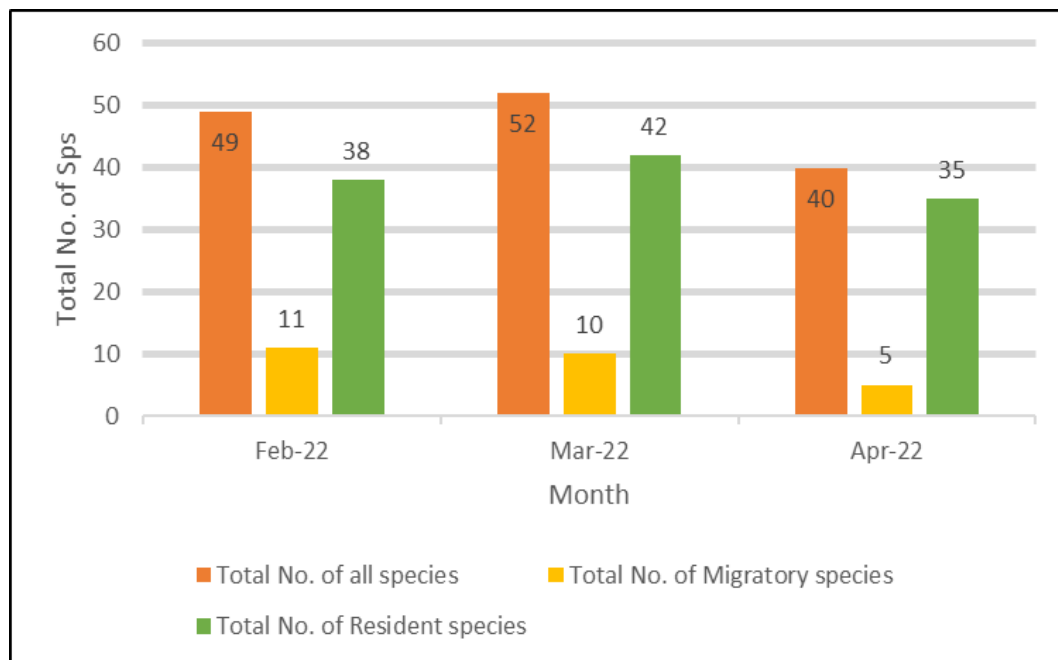


Figure 4. Month Wise Variation in no. of bird species

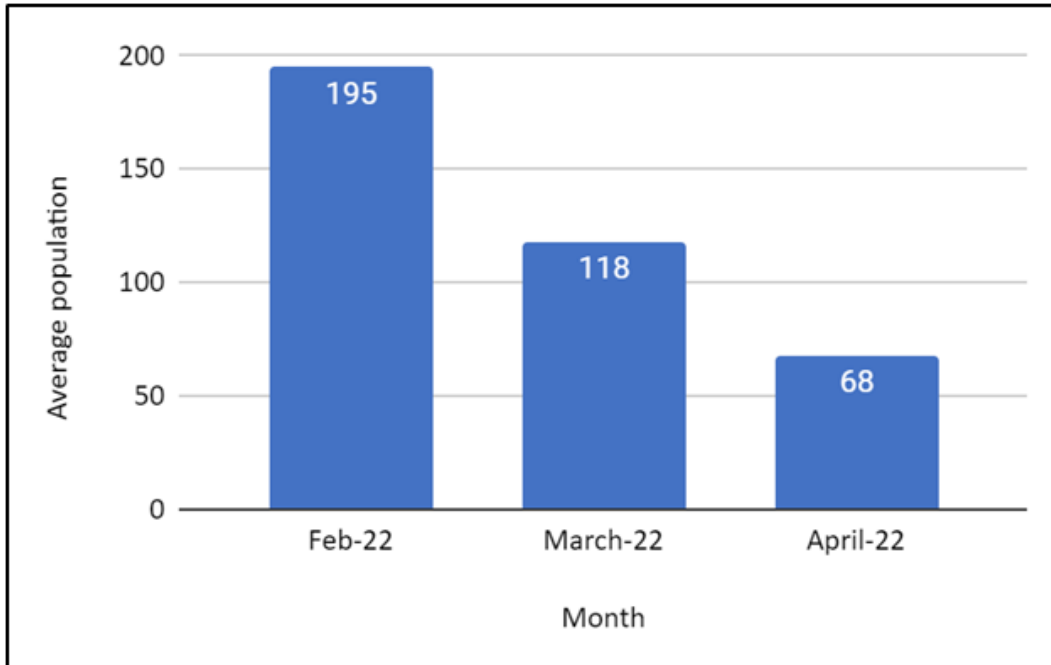


Figure 5. Average Total Count

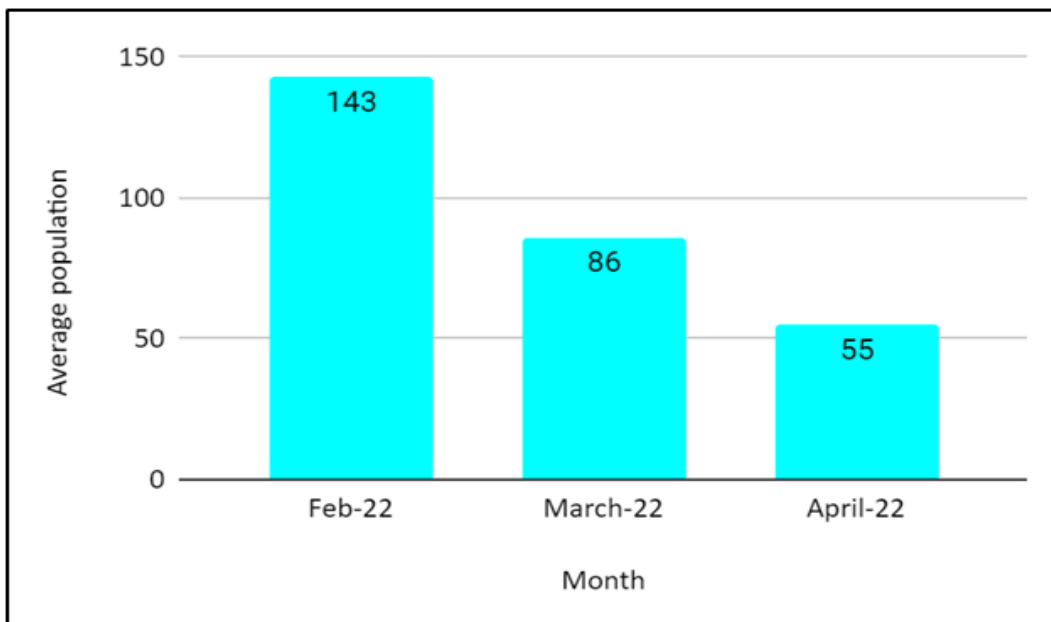


Figure 6. Month Wise Average of Waders

As shown in figure 7, the average population of other birds also was highest in February, which was followed by March and then April. Average population of waders dominated the average population of other birds. This is because the study area habitat has a major portion of wetland and marshland habitat which is more suitable for waders as compared to other birds.

As shown in figure 8, the average population of migratory species was highest in the month of February. The average population decreased drastically in the months of March and April. Migratory birds started departing from

India as the summer months of March- April approach.

Month Wise average of resident birds as shown in figure 9 was highest in February followed by March, then followed by April. This may indicate that resident birds may have moved to shady areas to protect themselves from the heat.

As per the latest IUCN status, two near threatened species Black-headed Ibis and Painted Stork were seen during all three months of the study. One vulnerable species Greater Spotted Eagle was seen in February, while two vulnerable species Greater Spotted Eagle and Woolly-

necked Stork were seen in March. Other species found belonged to the least concerned category. The highest number of Least Concern species were found in the month of March, followed by February, then followed by April (refer figure 10).

The data revealed that the small patch of Bhopar Gaon wetlands provides asylum to a good diversity of birds. The local people are aware of the rich biodiversity of their locality. However, efforts to protect the same are not taken. Since the study area is close to Ganesh Idol immersion and Cremation ground, solid waste items like garlands, plastic

cutlery, decoration articles and other plastic materials often find their way to water causing water pollution. Anthropogenic activities like water pollution, waste dumping and disturbance caused by small-scale fishing negatively affect the birds by impacting their foraging activities and nesting sites. Habitat destructions due to large scale of deforestation and land reclamation for the purpose of construction activities are key factors which pose a threat to the avifaunal population. If conservation efforts are not taken at the earliest then there is a high chance of loss of diversity in the study area.

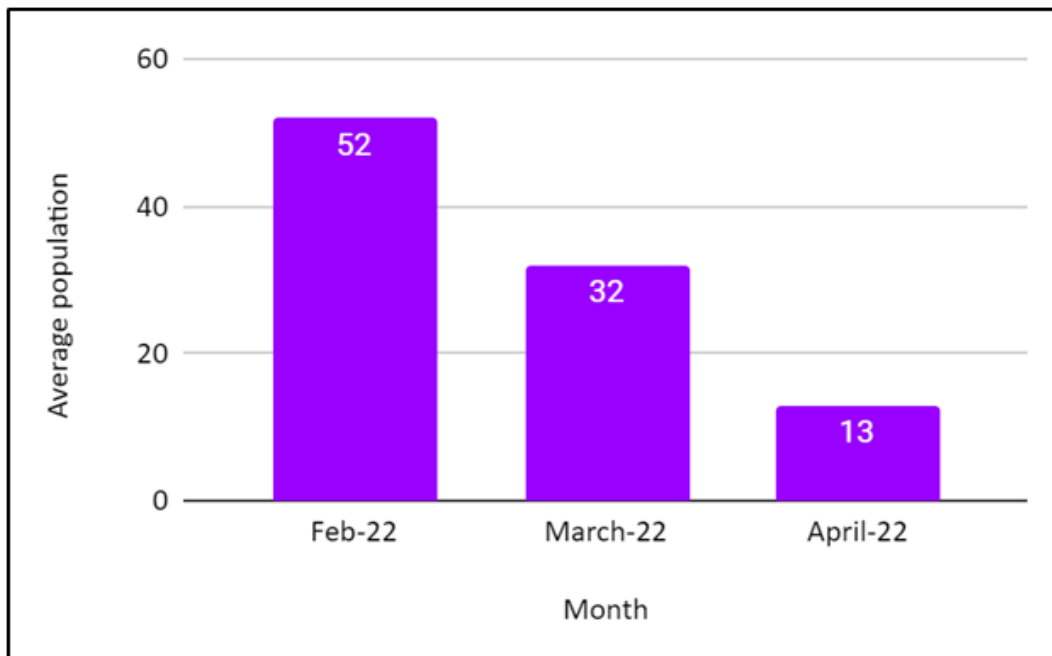


Figure 7. Month Wise Average of Other Birds

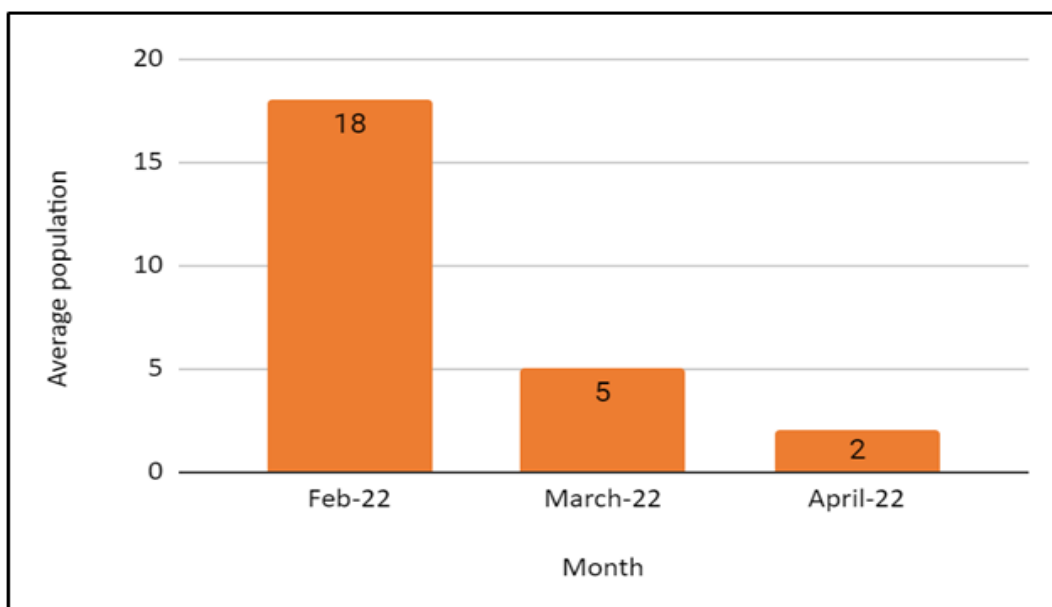


Figure 8. Month Wise Average of Migratory Birds

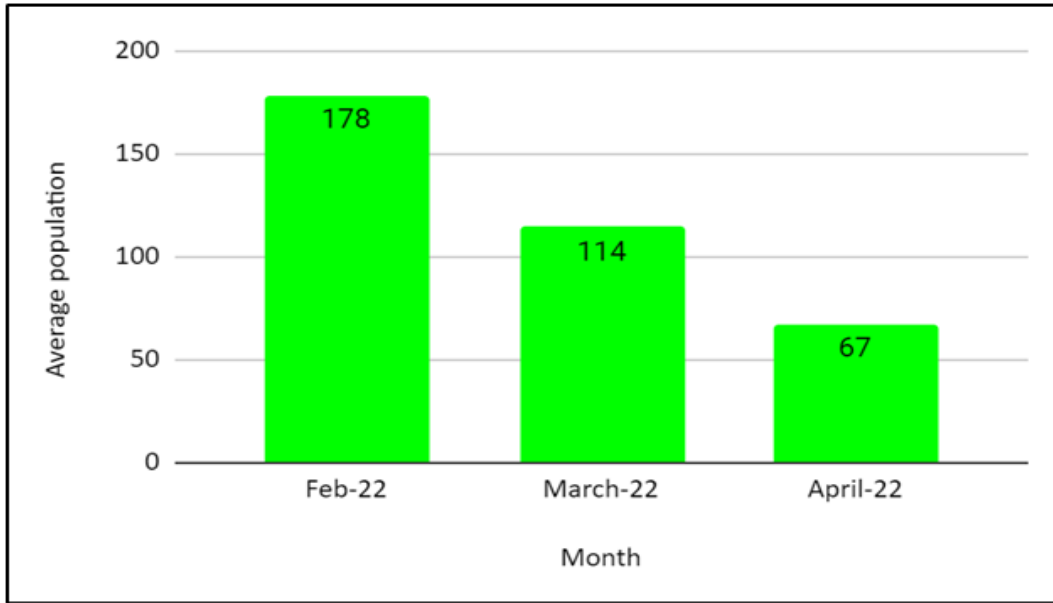


Figure 9. Month Wise Average of Resident Birds

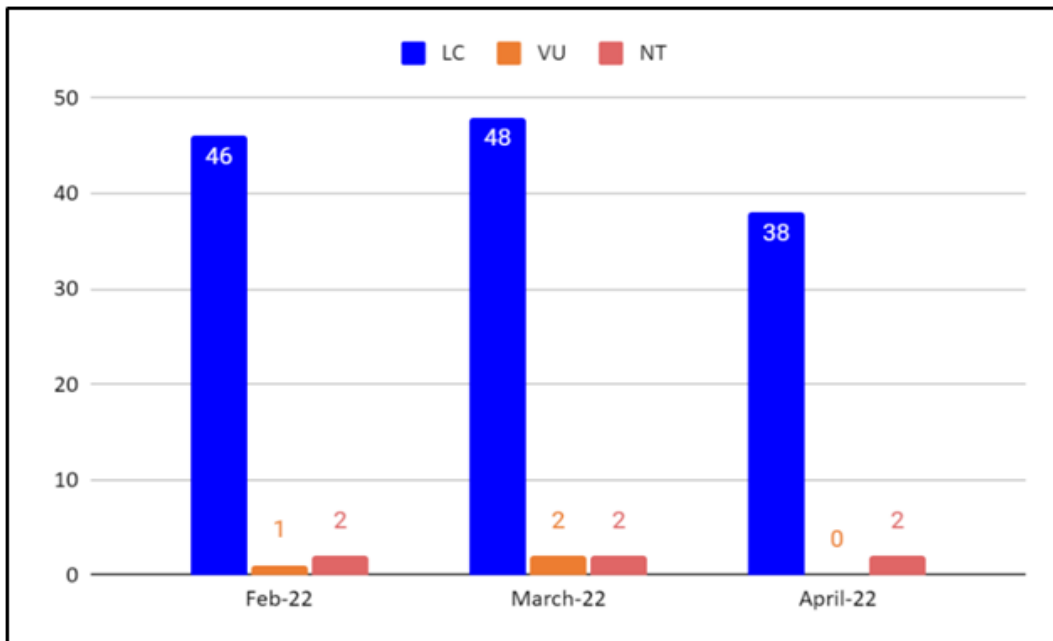


Figure 10. Species seen as per IUCN status (LC- Least Concerned, VU- Vulnerable, NT- Near Threatened)

4. Bird Checklist

Table 1. List of species along with their scientific names, IUCN status, Resident status and Population Trend

Sr No	Common Name	Scientific Name	Family	IUCN Status	Resident Status	Population Trend
1	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	Anatidae	LC	M	↓
2	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Anatidae	LC	M	↓
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	Anatidae	LC	M	↓
4	Indian spot billed Duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	Anatidae	LC	R	↓
5	Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	Ciconiidae	LC	R	Unknown
6	Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	Ciconiidae	NT	R	↓
7	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	Ciconiidae	VU	R	↓
8	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark	<i>Eremopterix griseus</i>	Alaudidae	LC	R	=
9	Asian Pied Starling	<i>Gracupica contra</i>	Sturnidae	LC	R	↑
10	Rosy Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>	Sturnidae	LC	M	Unknown
11	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Sturnidae	LC	R	↑
12	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Hirundinidae	LC	M	↓
13	Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Hirundinidae	LC	R	↑
14	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Dicruridae	LC	R	Unknown
15	Black Kite	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Accipitridae	LC	R	=
16	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Accipitridae	LC	R	=
17	Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga clanga</i>	Accipitridae	VU	M	↓
18	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	Accipitridae	LC	R	=
19	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	↓
20	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	↑
21	Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	Unknown
22	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	Unknown
23	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	Unknown
24	Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	↓
25	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	↑
26	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Ardeidae	LC	R	↓
27	Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>	Threskiornithidae	NT	R	↓
28	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	Threskiornithidae	LC	R	Unknown
29	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Threskiornithidae	LC	R	↓
30	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Recurvirostridae	LC	R	↑
31	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	Muscicapidae	LC	M	=
32	Indian Robin	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>	Muscicapidae	LC	R	=
33	Oriental Magpie Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	Muscicapidae	LC	R	=
34	Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola maurus</i>	Muscicapidae	LC	R	Unknown
35	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	Motacillidae	LC	M	↑
36	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	Motacillidae	LC	M	↓
37	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>	Motacillidae	LC	R	=
38	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Alcedinidae	LC	R	Unknown
39	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	Alcedinidae	LC	R	Unknown
40	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Scolopacidae	LC	M	↓

Table 1 continued

41	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Scolopacidae	LC	M	↓
42	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	Scolopacidae	LC	M	↓
43	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	Scolopacidae	LC	M	=
44	Gray-headed Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	Rallidae	LC	R	Unknown
45	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	Rallidae	LC	R	Unknown
46	Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	Cuculidae	LC	R	=
47	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Meropidae	LC	R	↑
48	Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>	Phalacrocoracidae	LC	R	Unknown
49	Little Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>	Phalacrocoracidae	LC	R	Unknown
50	Indian Golden-Oriole	<i>Oriolus kundoo</i>	Oriolidae	LC	R	Unknown
51	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Charadriidae	LC	R	↓
52	Red wattle lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	Charadriidae	LC	R	Unknown
53	Long tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	Laniidae	LC	R	Unknown
54	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>	Estrildidae	LC	R	=
55	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Pycnonotidae	LC	R	↑
56	Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	Columbidae	LC	R	↑

IUCN Status: LC: Least Concerned, VU: Vulnerable, NT: Near Threatened

Population Trend: ↑: Increasing, ↓: Decreasing, =: Stable

5. Conclusions

Throughout the study site, a total of 56 bird species were found. This is a strong indication that the Bhopar Gaon Wetland is biologically productive and has the capacity to house a variety of bird species. The diversity of birds appears to be supported by the soil, water, climate, number of people walking, and other factors. Loss of habitat is by far the biggest hazard to birds. Major concerns to birds include deforestation, the draining of wetlands, the planting of non-native plants, the loss of land to urban development, and intensive agriculture. The ongoing construction activities and deforestation for the same might play a key role in negatively affecting the diversity of the present avian species. Further research is necessary to comprehend the seasonal variation of avifauna.

Biodiversity studies are generally done in large habitats, and small habitat patches are usually overlooked. Small patches, however, are also crucial for preserving biodiversity and the ecosystem as a whole. There are limited studies on the interior parts of Thane district. Since no documented studies are available on Bhopar, this study can be used as a baseline to understand the condition of the birds in the Bhopar Gaon Wetlands and how development activities affect them. A conservation plan should be undertaken focusing on protection of habitats to keep the avifaunal diversity intact. Educating locals about the importance of biodiversity present in their locality, afforestation, limiting land reclamation for construction are some of the steps that could be taken to maintain the rich diversity present in the study area.

To summarize

- 56 bird species (including resident as well as

migratory) have been identified in the study area.

- Bhopar wetlands has all the potential of being converted into an avian biodiversity park if preserved.
- Very limited studies are available of the said area
- Anthropogenic activities need to be controlled to protect the avian biodiversity here.
- This study may provide baseline data for future research in this area.

Future Perspective

For the present study, further work could involve an annual study that could cover seasonal variation and a more comprehensive data generation of the area. Community surveys could also be initiated to understand the local knowledge and thought process of the locals with respect to the biodiversity of the area. In the long term, the area could be developed as a biodiversity park or a protected bird area.

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