

## Restored, this 100-acre forest is now a sanctuary for birds

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It's unusual to spot the grey-headed canary-flycatcher in Delhi-NCR during this time of the year. However, a recent sighting of the species, in a sprawling and serene forest in Bhondsi, off Sohna Road, has sent a frisson of excitement through the birding community. And it's not just the flycatcher but several other species, too, that have lately been spotted, among them the Eastern imperial eagle and the Sarus Crane (both listed as vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature). Meanwhile, the Pied cuckoo, White-breasted waterhen, the Indian robin, the Rufous treepie, the Shikra, kingfishers and members of the Drongo family, can all be found in the woods here. Located about 7km from Gurgaon, these 100 acres of forest land in Bhondsi were always lush green but birds only started flocking here around two years ago. Avid birder Pankaj Gupta, for one, was pleasantly surprised to see the grey-headed canary-flycatcher. "Spotting the species in Delhi-NCR during winters is not very common as the bird generally moves towards the south when the temperature decreases. Its sighting, and that of many other resident and migratory birds, is evidence that Bhondsi has good potential to come up as a birding destination in NCR," said Gupta, who is associated with Delhi Bird Foundation, an NGO. The endeavours of the forest department to remove garbage dumps, plant trees, breathe life into lakes, and fence the road (coming from Sohna Road, going to Bhondsi), have gone a long way towards protecting this canopy. For, it had, according to locals, become a landfill. "As people had free access to the forest area through this road, waste-dumping was quite rampant. Many trees were also axed to make way for garbage dumps," revealed Guddu, a villager. And the restoration of the water bodies, among which is a lake spread over 10 acres, has played a key role in the rise of the number of avian species. Anil Gandas, a wildlife enthusiast, has been visiting this spot for two decades now. "There is a huge difference between what the area was some two-three years ago and the existing forest. While it was always protected as forest by villagers, it was not very clean," he recalls. "Efforts to revive water bodies and afforestation have ensured abundance of water and food for birds, thereby attracting various bird species." The Haryana Forest Development Corporation (HFDC) deserves credit for the ecological renewal of this verdant stretch in Bhondsi. "We first removed the garbage and then the department carried out plantation drives in the gap areas. It was ensured that water remains in the lakes throughout the year," explained Subhash Yadav of the HFDC. "We are glad to tell you that a birding group recently gave us a count of 130 resident bird species in Bhondsi — it shows that small efforts to revive forests lead to flourishing of the indigenous flora and fauna of the Aravalis," he added, proudly. And recognition came in July 2017, on 'World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought', when Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar inaugurated the nature camp here. Bhondsi is popular for the ashram of former prime minister Chandra Shekhar. Its origins can be traced back to 1983, when the Bhondsi panchayat gifted 33 acres to Chandra Shekhar to promote the environment. In 2009, the area was handed over to the Haryana government, following a Supreme Court order. For the last three-four years, the HFDC has been developing it as an ecotourism site.