

Birds of Summer

While winter is mostly associated with birding as many birds migrate to India to escape the cold northern winters, summer offers chances for backyard birding. Indications that summer is arriving are aplenty. The ubiquitous koel bursts forth, hidden among mango trees, whose fresh white blossoms remind us of the heat's delicious edible promises. While his brown speckled mate coquettishly flies from branch to branch, ostensibly looking for suitable homes to lay her eggs in. But it is the Coppersmith Barbets exercising their vocal abilities that signal summer to me. As spring slips into the space left by winter, the skies are filled with the sounds of the loud clanging of hammer against copper. Fig trees especially, are notorious for sounding out the metallic notes. Why, even at noon, when the sun is the most exacting in his punishment of the world, the Coppersmith Barbet can be heard shouting his little lungs out. Interestingly, however, the beak remains closed. The Coppersmith that I am acquainted with has cleverly chosen the Gulmohar tree outside my window for a home. So while I hear him all day long, he remains gleefully hidden, his green and red coat blending with the mayflowers that have cloaked the tree. I once had the opportunity to watch a Coppersmith through binoculars- cheeks puffed, he called earnestly and almost breathlessly, like a little colourful balloon. Another bird that delights with its summer song is the Black-hooded Oriole. Apart from insects, it also frequents fruiting trees and can be seen feeding on small berries and figs. The male wears a sunny bright coat while the female is dressed in pretty olive green feathers. Both sexes manage to remain well hidden among foliage but can be given away by their song- a mellifluous melody that cheery and jovial as their coat.



Black-hooded Oriole (Male). Image courtesy: Nikhil Nagle

During this time, many trees are covered in exuberant foliage. The Indian Laburnum seems weighed down by pendulous golden blooms while equally sunny blossoms shoot out the ends of the Copper Pod. Meanwhile the Rain tree is covered in pink and the Palash wears a flaming coat like the sun, at once attracting birds and insects alike.



Purple Sunbirds can be seen (and heard) in almost any tree or even bush that flowers. The males jauntily flit about in dapper coats of sparkling purple while the more demure female in her pale yellow garb takes on the responsibility of nest-building. When not at the nest, they can be seen perched daintily on flowers, patiently gorging on the nectar within. And when not feeding, they twitter merrily in loud metallic tones that can be heard at quite a distance. They can be distinguished easily from their cousins, Purple-rumped sunbirds. The males wear dapper little maroon waistcoats while the females are a sober green.

Left: Purple Sunbird. Image courtesy: Kavya Chimalgi

Flowers also attract insects like bees and wasps, which in turn are food for a variety of other birds. In fact, summers see heightened activity in the insect world, which can create a feeding frenzy among birds such as mynahs and babblers. Both of these are gregarious birds that move around in large riotous flocks or parties. Summer days are inevitably brought in by screaming parties of mynahs who seem to have taken up the duty of waking the world up. Even at dusk, they can be found discussing events, their garrulousness untempered by the frenzy of a day which hasn't been spent in idyll splendour. The time in between their rants and shouts is spent hawking insects and squawking, with a fight or two thrown in! Many have testified to having seen these birds have a go at each other in a manner that is sure to make even the WWE pale in comparison. One afternoon, many moons back, I was brought running to the verandah by the sounds of loud mewling and raucous yowling. Thinking they were cats, I rushed to the verandah to find one mynah squatting on top of the other, pecking away in rage while two others tried to join the fight. Later I realized that the sore spot was a little piece of real estate under a tile that both pairs were vying for. Problems of property are clearly not a human pre-occupation! A friend adds that babblers can match the mynah's aggression, beak to caterwauling shriek. She had the good fortune of growing up in a house with a large garden with a large stone birdbath. While this gave her ample birding opportunities, it also acquainted her with the party of babblers who regularly visited the bath to splash the heat away. She tells of a time when feathers flew because one babbler objected to this intrusion of space and privacy into his bath time. Now that must be a regular occurrence given that babblers are prone to travelling in large parties-in hindi they are called saat behen or 'seven sisters' because they are always found in groups. This proclivity for company is hardwired into them as a means of protection against predators. One of my earliest sightings of the Brown Wood Owl was hastened by a party of babblers who screamed and screeched and mobbed the owl until the bird flew out of the tree and into my line of vision. However there are other insect eaters that are pleasant to the ear and not half as screechy.



A Babbler surrounded by a party of Bulbuls. Image courtesy: Kavya Chimalgi

Robins, (not the English red breasted one but their darker and equally sweet sounding Indian cousins), warblers and flycatchers frequent gardens. Very often, gardens and trees echo with a sweet too-ieee of the Tailorbird as he traipses merrily in his coat of olive brown. I say merrily because I have seen these birds swing on the branch of a Tulsi shrub with what can only be described as unbridled joy while another time, a jaunty little male played a version of hopscotch on my window grill and remained there while my dog looked on curiously, barely centimetres away. Being excellent practitioners of camouflage, Tailorbirds tend to remain hidden in the trees and shrubs where they build their nests. I have heard accounts of a person who nearly plucked a Tailorbird off a plant while collecting chillis from her kitchen garden as the bird sat oblivious, sewing its nest.



Oriental-Magpie Robin. Image courtesy: Kavya Chimalgi

In fact, during summer, birds of all manner and kind can be seen repairing and building nests. Parasites like the cuckoo wait for others like crows to finish the dirty work after which they lay

their own eggs there and transfer their parenting duties to the other birds. All the birds mentioned in this piece can be seen foraging for nesting material. Those patient enough to watch them as the months progress will also probably be able to see the nestlings grow right up their first flight! However, in doing so, one must be careful to observe from a distance so as to not disturb the nest.

Coming back to the signs of summer, where there are mangoes, there will be parakeets. Most urban Indians are acquainted with these chattering birds through the bars of the fortune teller's cage or as Mithu the ubiquitous house pet. However, those that live in the vicinity of mango and other fruiting trees like the guava can testify to frivolous dinner habits of these birds as these self-appointed samplers of their precious fruit. When not stuffing their beaks with fruit, they use it to scream out every kind of profanity and opinion in the manner of very loud squawks and screeches. If you are unattached to your fruits and can withstand high decibel squawks, you might quite enjoy watching these birds as they perform acrobatics at mealtime or simply whiz past like bright green jewels.



Plum-headed Parakeets Male(L) &Female (R) Image courtesy: Nikhil Nagle

Given that I live in an area with very few trees, I'm amazed and quite grateful that I have at least this much to observe and be entertained by. While this list of summer birds may not be exhaustive, I assure you that it's enough to keep the idlest of minds occupied-of course, patience and a love for the natural world is essential. So what's on your list this summer?

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