

Home > Lifestyle > Nature & Wildlife > Articles > Cooing and Cawing: Mumbai duo create a local online repository for bird calls

Cooing and Cawing: Mumbai duo create a local online repository for bird calls

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The digital audio repository currently features 20 birds from the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education campus in Mumbai. The website is an educational interactive resource accessible to all for free



A red-whiskered bulbul at the HBCSE campus. Image credit: Adithi Muralidhar

As the pandemic confined us all to our rooms, distancing us from the outside world, many turned to social media to reflect on the little things about nature they barely observed in the life before Covid-19. From reposted pictures of mountains and the wide blue sky, to the **plants** in the balcony and glimpses of chirpy birds on grilled windows, the internet was replete with visuals of nature and wildlife.

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library for bird calls that would enable people to listen to and identify bird calls from their home.

Inspired by existing birds’ audio websites such as Discover the River initiative and the Early Bird initiative by Nature Conservation Foundation, the duo wanted to build a local version featuring the HBCSE campus that would encourage others to adapt the same model for their own regions. The idea was to create an educational, interactive resource that would prime bird lovers and nature enthusiasts for bird watching and other related activities in the long run.

Given that they began the process of documentation long before they embarked on website design, the duo already had a collection of photographs and a few bird calls. The rest of the calls were sourced from Xeno-canto, an online repository of bird calls, audio clips available under Creative Common licenses. Finally, the duo launched a beta version of the website on June 5 on the occasion of World Environment Day 2021.

Muralidhar, who has been documenting common, seasonal and rare birds of the HBCSE for over six years now, feels lucky to be located near such a green pocket. They also have posters on birds of over 50 species which are seen from the small campus of about five acres, she says.

Among the 20 birds that feature on the website are the house crow, feral pigeon, Asian koel, common myna, barn owl, black kite and white-throated kingfisher. Muralidhar states these birds are the ones commonly spotted in and around the city, except the Indian white-eyes, which are found only in a few places.

In the next phase of the project, they plan to include some more common **species** like the rose ringed parakeet, oriental magpie robins, and other less common species like Indian grey hornbills, alexandrine parakeets, spotted owlets, Indian paradise flycatcher, pale billed flowerpecker, purple sunbird and vigours sunbirds.



Ravi Sinha and Adithi Muralidhar believe, though there is no dearth of information on the internet related to birds, designing something that lowers the threshold for participation was challenging. Photo credit: Megha Chougule

When asked about the tools used and the challenges involved in recording sounds at a busy campus, Muralidhar explains that one can simply record the calls from a cell phone voice recorder. "However, getting a clean clip without any background noise is definitely a challenge and is often impossible," she confesses. “Many times, you hear multiple bird calls. So one of the tasks at hand was to curate and record calls that were distinguishable



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According to Sinha, an educator and a researcher in the areas of recreational sciences, re-organising data, pictures and recordings to create an interactive medium with a customised open-source domain made the initial stages challenging.

As reports of birds returning to the [city](#) surfaced during the lockdown, one wonders if it is easier to spot lesser-known birds amid the chaos now and whether the pandemic has had any impact on their population.

Says Muralidhar: “One does see on social media more people reporting birds from their backyards. In fact, that inspired me to write about how teachers and parents can make some structured activity around backyard bird watching.” Personally, she feels the HBCSE campus has had a few more sightings over the lockdown and that the birds may have "reclaimed" more spaces in the absence of crowds.

Documenting bird calls help us understand them better and gain insights into the behaviour of different species, say Muralidhar and Sinha, who also caution photographers and birdwatchers about using bird calls as excessive playbacks to lure them, which is an (unethical) practice that has gained much attention in recent times amongst researchers. One of these practices includes using artificial or downloaded audio playbacks to lure birds, which harasses them and affects their behavioural patterns.

In the future, they plan to update the website to make it more interactive in terms of features and information gathering. Adding a separate page with interesting facts about species in byte-size stories is one idea already on the to-do-list. Additionally, they also plan to curate a list of available open educational resources for bird enthusiasts.

The website has seen more than 7,700 page hits with viewers across age groups, from kids to senior citizens. Many of the visitors have written to the founders appreciating the site and expressing interest in creating similar collections for their neighbourhoods.

Hoping that more people would start observing the flora and fauna around them and take up local projects, Muralidhar and Sinha say: “Such a decentralised endeavour will go a long way in inspiring young people and adults alike to be more aware of the biodiversity in their region. In the long run, these skills of observation and noticing may expand to other areas and become part of daily life of especially young people.”

Link to the audio collection: [Birds at HBCSE](#)

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