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Flying on a wing and a prayer Research Team Maps Changes In Migratory Pattern Of Nine Species

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Bangalore: For a few months every year, Bangalore is home to many colourful migratory birds that arrive from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Every August, flocks of these winged beauties fly to Hebbal Lake, Lalbagh, IISc campus, Nandi Hills and the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary in Srirangapatna.

To find out whether climate change has taken a toll on the number of these migratory birds, a research team from the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bangalore launched MigrantWatch in August 2007. The initiative aims to observe patterns of migration, document changes over the years and understand the consequences, in August 2007.

Suhel Qader, an evolutionary ecologist who heads the team, says there is need to monitor changes in order to know problems faced by species and probability of their extinction due to climate change. It is observed that over 100 years, the spring season, marked by flowering of trees, has advanced by almost a month in North Europe and America. The arrival time of the birds is 3-4 days earlier per decade.

MigrantWatch has more than 400 volunteers who collect information on the arrival dates of migratory birds across the country. Information collected in the first year has enabled construction of a country-wide map of first arrival dates, regular presence dates, and dates of return migration for nine winter migrants.

These include the marsh harrier, black redstart, wood sandpiper, spoonbilled northern shoveler, common swallow, grey wagtail, brown shrike, rosy starling and greenish warbler. All nine are seen in Karnataka. Their breeding ground is Central Asia and Europe. They arrive in the country by July and reach South India by August/September and return in March/April.

During the summer, there is a lot of vegetation and food at their breeding grounds. But come winter, these birds migrate to India to ward off the cold and search for food.

In the second year of the project, the team plans to expand from nine to 20-30 species. The research will take a few more years to conclude. Collection of data on flowering and fruiting of trees is also in the pipeline. The project is currently being evaluated and re-designed for the next season. Those interested can register online at www.ncbs.res.in/citsci.



KEEPING A WATCH: The rosy starling (left) and the northern shoveler are two of the migratory birds under study