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Winged seducer that heralds monsoon

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CHANDIGARH: As skeins of honking migratory geese take off from Indian wetlands in spring to fly high over the Himalyas to summer breeding grounds, for most birdwatchers it heralds the end of migration. There is, however, a fascinating bird that wings its way 1,500 to 2,000 kms from Africa to India with the monsoons. This is the handsome pied-crested cuckoo, commonly known as the 'monsoon bird', one of the very few summer migrants.

References of the bird date back to the Rig Veda and Sant Tuslidas. Studies have been conducted of the cuckoo by birdwatchers of British Imperial pedigree like Hugh Whistler. However, for the first time, a citizen science programme, Migrant Watch (MW), has undertaken a nationwide survey to study the cuckoo's arrival in India with the advent of the monsoons. Ornithologists all across India are reporting first sightings to MW, which is based at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru. The cuckoo breeds in Africa, south of the Sahara desert, and is known to use the monsoon winds to fly to India.

"The pied cuckoo campaign aims to improve our understanding of the migration of this intriguing species by collecting data on its arrival across India and comparing this with the corresponding arrival of the monsoon in these areas," said Uttara Mendiratta, MW coordinator.

A great survivor in the evolutionary game, the cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. "I have seen a pair of yellow-eyed babblers climbing up the shoulder of a juvenile cuckoo for feeding it. The babblers took turns in feeding the cuckoo by climbing its back and shoulders," said Haryana birdman Suresh Sharma. The male is a slick seducer. Dr Tarique Sani of the Nagpur Bird Club observed the male catching a juicy caterpillar and dangling it from behind a female. The male cuckoo mounted the female with the caterpillar firmly in its beak. The hapless female was not allowed to get the caterpillar till the male had completed the mating!

While the first sighting of this bird in India was from Kolkata on May 17, 2009, by KS Ray, the cuckoo was spotted first in North India by this author on May 23, 2009, at the Shivalik Golf Course, Chandimandir, on a kikar tree near the 16th hole green. It has a characteristic pipew pipew pipew call.

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