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## One-legged grey wagtail makes a daunting journey

Vikram Jit Singh, TNN 6 July 2009, 02:05am IST

CHANDIGARH: Few in City Beautiful could have been left unstirred by the marvels of bird migration. An estimated 105 of the 315 species recorded in the Greater Chandigarh area are migrants. The Bar-headed goose, a regular winter visitor to the Sukhna Lake, is known to cross the Himalyas at heights of over 8,000m. Across the globe, the Manx shearwater is estimated to have flown 8 million km in its 50-year lifespan. The Arctic tern is recorded to have flown 22,000 km, the longest one-way migration, from the UK coast to Melbourne. Add to these fascinating migration stories is that of a wounded but doughty 15g puff of feathers, the Grey wagtail. The wagtail flew 1,500-2,000 km on one leg from its breeding grounds in Central Asia to the BRT Hills sanctuary in Karnataka for two consecutive years. The Grey wagtail's admirers doubtless expect it to resurface once again, come October.

The wagtail breeds in Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the Himalyas. It winters in the Indian sub-continent and graces the City Beautiful's numerous gardens and wetlands. A dainty bird, it is identified by the strong up-and-down pumping of its tail. Organic coffee planter and bird enthusiast TS Ganesh first took pictures of the handicapped wagtail in October 2007 at BR Hills (200 km south of Bangalore) and noticed it had only a stub for the left leg without claws. The wagtail disappeared in May 2008 along with its partner and to Ganesh's surprise again made a dramatic appearance in his garden in October 2008.

Predators and global climatic changes make migration a hazardous task. "To look at the wagtail going around my garden cheeping, one would never think it was lame. It visited my garden from October 2007 to May 2008 and came as a flock of wagtails that stayed on the hill near my house. Since migration requires a lot of energy, is very difficult with the weak not surviving, so I did not expect to see the one-legged wagtail again but the pair came back again to my garden in 2008 October," Ganesh said.

The one-legged wonder attracted notice of Migrant Watch (MW), a nationwide citizen science initiative, to study changes in bird migration. "Handicapped migrants get reported once in a while - one of our participants reported a one-legged White wagtail from Rajasthan; but in most cases you can't tell if the bird survived to come back the next year. In the case of BRT wagtail we know that the bird survived and made the long journey back. Some previous observations suggest that Grey wagtails come back to the same location each year to winter and that is of great help in studying the BR hills case," said Uttara Mendiratta, coordinator for MW.

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