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OTHERS

Wildbuzz: The heart of hawking

Amritsar has been a symbolic choice for the ongoing Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process conference as it was historically the east-west gateway. That main artery to Asia's heart now stands blocked by Pakistani obduracy. Before Partition, Amritsar was one of the leading 'mandis' (markets) for falcons and hawks that were trapped from the high mountains, trained and used for hunting.



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Afghan falconers with Northern goshawks in the Laghman province of Afghanistan.(PHOTO: KAMRAN KHAN YOUSUFZAI)

Updated on Dec 04, 2016
07:25 PM IST

Hindustan Times | By Vikram Jit Singh

Amritsar has been a symbolic choice for the ongoing Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process conference as it was historically the east-west gateway. That main artery to Asia's heart now stands blocked by Pakistani obduracy. Before Partition, Amritsar was one of the leading 'mandis' (markets) for falcons and hawks that were trapped from the high mountains, trained and used for hunting. Located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, Afghanistan played a key role in transferring the art of hawking/falconry from one region to another. It was from Kabul that the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Zahiruddin Babur, set out for India. The renowned 17th century poet-falconer, Khushal Khan Khattak, also hailed from the same race. Said Khattak: "The falconry field requires great skill and art/But the Afghans know this art by heart."

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In contemporary Afghanistan, falconry/hawking has survived the ravages of war and the preferred bird captured and trained for hunting is the Northern goshawk. This raptor is also the State Bird of Indian Punjab due to its association with the Sikh Gurus. In fact, growing strategic ties with Afghanistan can be leveraged to procure goshawks for Chhatbir zoo's raptor conservation breeding and awareness programme, which is languishing as sourcing is proving difficult for the Punjab government. Then Afghanistan president Hamid Karzai's spokesperson, Karim Rahimi, was also an avid falconer.

According to the latest report prepared on the status of falconry in Afghanistan by the South Asia Officer for the International Association for Falconry (IAF), Kamran Khan Yousufzai, falconers have been confined to home towns. They do not venture deep into mountains as the Taliban have banned falconry due to the fear that roving falconers will leak their hideouts to armed forces.

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Yousufzai's report, 'Falconry in the War-torn Afghanistan', lists the need for Afghan falconers to adopt modern methods and work towards conservation of raptors and their quarry such as Chukor, See-see partridge, quail, hares, foxes, antelope fawns and Black francolins. The falconers' quarry has shown a steep decline in turmoil-ridden years due to illegal gun, trap and poison hunting and weak law enforcement. "Peregrine and Saker falcons are smuggled out of Afghanistan. We met the Afghan deputy minister of culture and information Zardasht Shams, and urged him to preserve falconry and submit Afghanistan's case for inclusion in Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity," Yousufzai told this writer.



(Extreme left) three Common shelducks sit on a silt bar at Sukhna Lake in January 2002. (PHOTO: SANJAY KAUSHAL)

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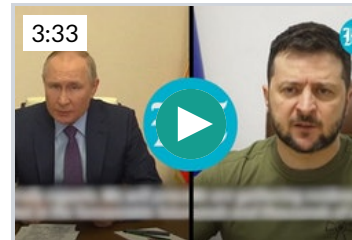
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FLOODS WREAK HAVOC IN ASSAM;
14 DEAD, 8 LAKH AFFECTED

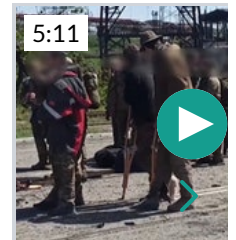
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Pink legs, less seen

Fourteen years after the Sukhna lake was graced by a very uncommon visitor, the species has again registered in the log book of avian migrants. On November 27, 2016, wildlife photographer Sarabjit S Lehal observed six Common shelducks at the Sukhna. These birds are not at all common in these parts as their common name may suggest!

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Kaushal's record of 2002 is from the era when the lake's regulator-end was a mosaic of silt islands, marshes and reed-encircled ponds. This ensured not only a very high number of migratory waterfowl but records of such rarities for the Sukhna as the shelduck and Common merganser. In the current season, due to shallow waters and weeds for food, the migratory waterfowl have descended in good numbers (estimated 1,300) though still not as rich in profile as embedded in the ecological era that preceded the de-siltation drives.

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The shelduck is described thus by the late Dr Salim Ali: "A handsome, strikingly coloured duck, chiefly white, black and chestnut, with a distinctive, bright, red-upturned bill and pink legs." This species has also been recorded at the Harike and the Pong wetlands. It prefers mudflats where it can saunter about with the confidence of geese, is an omnivore and dabbles and up-ends for feeding in shallow waters. The species summer breeds from Iceland to Europe to Central Asia/Mongolia and Baluchistan.