

Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Decoding the delightful babble of our gardens

TNN | May 31, 2019, 04:03 AM IST



CHANDIGARH: These birds of Tricity gardens unfailingly catch the human eye and ear. They are the famous 'Seven Sisters', moving around in squeaky, noisy groups and flipping leaves for insects and worms with a deftness reminiscent of a professional gambler flicking cards at a Las Vegas casino! But very few would know that the jungle babbler's repertoire of vocalisations includes at least 10 different calls each having a different 'meaning' associated with it, that they live in complex, joint-family systems and that one pair breeds while the rest of the group assists parents in procuring food and nurturing young ones.

As the name 'babbler' suggests, the bird is capable of producing diverse sounds. In the avian and squirrel community, babblers count among the best policemen and whistle-blowers on the presence of lurking predators like cats, hawks, snakes and mongooses. Babblers are courageous and frequently heckle and mob predators to drive them away. But babblers are among the least studied birds because researchers prefer more glamorous species such as the Royal Bengal tiger and the Great Indian bustard!

A remedial attempt at decoding the lives of these endearing birds has been initiated by the department of biology at the Indian Institute of Science Education & Research (IISER), Mohali. IISER researchers are studying babbler sociobiology, acoustics and group genetic profiles. Researchers captured and tagged 50 babblers from the IISER and around. The babblers were then set free at the points of capture to study via deployment of cameras and field observations.

Led by assistant professor Manjari Jain and comprising PhD students, Soniya Yambem, Sonam Chorol, Esha Haldar, along with project assistant Nakul Raj, the research has secured international recognition. "My PhD student, Yambem, has been awarded a prestigious grant by the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour for a trip to Konstanz, Germany, to present her findings on the babbler to the global scientific community. Over five years, we have been working on babblers with permission from Punjab forest department and funding from IISER and department of science and technology, Science and Engineering Research Board, government of India," Jain told the TOI.

"We have been following free-living groups of babblers on campus and outside and have banded and ringed these birds with a unique BNHS number and colour code. We are in a position to identify them individually. In other words, we have a unique 'name' for each individual. Anyone who finds a banded babbler can contact us and we can tell which group it belongs to and several other details of their behaviour and ecology," Jain added.

Though cooperation and conflict is co-existent and natural, in babblers the former tends to prevail to the benefit of the species. Some of the assessments gleaned from the study include: (i) babblers are cooperative breeders which means when a male and a female in the group reproduce, the entire group helps to raise chicks (ii) if a member of the group is left behind, they use special kinds of vocalisations to locate the lost member and then help it find the group's location (iii) they are territorial and sometimes fierce fights break out between neighbouring groups but because babblers possess excellent communication skills, the chances of fighting between groups are reduced.