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The cranes' castle

It was five in the morning, dark everywhere, trees dancing rhythmically in unison in the background of dark sky and a hum of wind passing through the woods. We – two nature club members and myself – were making our moves cautiously so as not to disturb the wildlife and also for our own safety. We were in search of the Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, a large elegant bird. And the place was the exclusion zone of Narora Atomic Power Station (NAPS) located about 140 km northeast of New Delhi. Surprised? Well, you may be, but yes, I am indeed talking about the exclusion zone of a nuclear power plant! This 1.6 km radius area around the nuclear power plant is indeed home to several birds, mammals, insects and flora-fauna. That is because it is tranquil and safe here, and this human-habitation-free area has an abundance of food and water bodies.

As we were wandering slowly inside the exclusion zone amidst the bushes and trees, we heard a fabulous sound, rather a

pair of voices, from a little far distance. It was loud, high-pitched and trumpeting. Unmistakably, the sound was that of Sarus cranes. Full of joy, we started moving in the direction from where the voices were coming.

The sky started becoming pale and the dawn had broken when we reached near a freshwater lake. On the banks, there stood a pair of Sarus cranes, trumpeting in a rhythmic manner. The sight was simply amazing! They were strolling gracefully and making calls in between. A few metres away, in front of the pair, reposing on a bund was a juvenile crane, probably one year old. It was a family – a child with its parents – and the place was their home (Figure 1).

The sun was still below the horizon at twilight. The movement of the Sarus cranes in the background of mild orange-tinted sunrays and the cooling towers of the nuclear power plant, and their sublime song with the ambience sound of bird chirpings made the place very special.

With its courtly appearance, the Sarus Crane is a tall bird of about 150 cm, nearly the height of a human being. It is indeed the world's tallest flying bird. With its wings spread, it measures about 260 cm. Spotting the crane is pretty easy, as it is large and unique. The Sarus Crane



Figure 1. A family of Sarus cranes seen in the backdrop of the Narora Atomic Power Plant.

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is grey overall, with a striking red head. It has a long pointed bill in pale grey tint. Its eyes are generally brown and, at times, orange. It has long legs that are pinkish-red. Both male and female are similar, but the male is slightly larger than the female.

A 'vulnerable' bird as designated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List data, the Sarus Crane has a total world population of about 20,000 individuals. In India, about 9,000 individuals are believed to exist. Besides India, it is found in Pakistan, Vietnam, Myanmar, Nepal, Cambodia and parts of Australia.

The Sarus Crane inhabits open grasslands, marshes, ponds, canals, sandy riverbanks and agricultural fields. Being omnivorous, it feeds on a variety of vegetable matter like seeds, grains and shoots of grasses and animal matter like molluscs, amphibians, insects and frogs. In India, the peak breeding season of the

Sarus Crane is from July to October; however, if the conditions are suitable, it can breed anytime during the year. It builds its nest preferably on the bund in the middle of swamps, paddy field, etc. using vegetation such as reeds, straw and rushes.

Not just Sarus cranes, but several other birds, aquatic species and mammals inhabit Narora. The Narora region, including the exclusion zone of the nuclear power plant, is home to a large variety of wildlife. A recent study reveals that about 1,300 individuals of Indian Peafowl exist inside the exclusion zone. Besides, crocodiles, turtles, a variety of fishes, blue bulls, rabbits, foxes, butterflies, etc. are also the part of the wildlife present here. About 200 species of birds – both resident and migratory – are seen here during peak winter. A variety of ducks and several shore birds migrate to Narora every year. At least ten threatened species of birds can be spotted

here. Because of the presence of diverse wildlife, Narora has been conferred the status of 'Important Bird Area'. The wetlands of Narora are internationally important and, indeed, the site has been declared a Ramsar site.

As the day set off, the sky became bright and the sun was in its full glory. The parent cranes soon flew away in search of food, leaving the child alone in the exclusion zone, which they felt was the safest place. It is the place where they stroll fearlessly, fly cheerfully and live peacefully. After all, it is the cranes' castle!

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