



# A Lofty Abode

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There was utter silence. Then we heard an exceptional whistling noise like wind passing through the woods. And came the crackle of dry leaves, perhaps due to the movements of animals. The song of the cuckoo echoed from a distance. And the musical chirpings of tiny birds added rhythm to the ambience. There were no other sounds except these. None of us spoke. Gesture was the only permitted

mode of communication under those circumstances. Every one of us eagerly listened to every single sound that was being produced around that place. We tuned our ears to even the most minute sounds. No movement, no talk, and no walk – we stood still, almost; our eyes fixed on the sky in every possible direction. The whole team was focused and was desperately waiting for one happening. And that was either the

sighting of the vulture or hearing its call.

Here, ‘we’ stands for a group of nature lovers, including myself, who were in search of the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. And the place we had just entered in was the Exclusion Zone (1.6 km radius protected area) of Narora Atomic Power Station, which is on the banks of the sacred River Ganga. Narora, a small town situated 140 km northeast of India’s capital New Delhi,



is an Important Bird Area (IBA) as well as a Ramsar Site.

There were two solid reasons why we went to this exclusion zone to spot the vulture. First, Egyptian Vultures have been sighted in this region in the past. Second, the area was ideal – existence of tall trees, forest cover and open patches, presence of waterbodies and food.

The team became curious when one of us exclaimed that he saw the silhouette of a vulture that had flown above us moments ago. The flight of Egyptian Vulture is characteristic, and its broad fingered wings with wedge-shaped tail can be clearly seen in silhouette. Spotting of a vulture is a rare experience these days, as only a few thousands of them exist. There has been a sharp decline in the vulture population lately. An estimated 20,000 to 60,000 individuals of Egyptian Vulture exist in the world, and only a few thousand in India. BirdLife International and IUCN has rated this species as Endangered. That means it is one of the important species of birds in need of protection. The keenness to spot the vulture spontaneously was on everyone's mind. We stood amidst tall trees, short plants, and bushes. We could hardly see the sky, only a small portion was visible, as the thick vegetation hid most of it. Although we were looking at the sky with the expectation of catching a glimpse of the bird, we unanimously believed that we could hear its call. And this was the reason why an utter silence was maintained.

*Chree... chuh-chuh-chuh*, a high-pitched rhythmic sound came from a place not far. And it was the call of Egyptian Vulture, undoubtedly. We were right, our confidence and silence yielded an encouraging outcome. Instantly, excitement spread within us. What next? We hurried in the direction from where we heard the call, or rather a rhythmic whistle. After a while, we came out into an open area from the dense vegetation, where we witnessed the spectacular flight of an Egyptian



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The 1.6 km radius area around the Narora nuclear reactors, called exclusion zone, is a protected site in which numerous bird species including the Egyptian Vulture are thriving

Vulture with its mate. A breathtaking scene! With occasional whistles, the pair was hovering in a circular path around a tall metal tower about 110 m in height. We were told that the structure was an upgrading tower (that upgrades the quality of heavy water used in a nuclear power plant).

The tower could be, we thought, a favourite place, since they were circling continuously in the same path with an occasional perch on the tower. So, we decided to climb the tower and it took us some time to get the clearance from the authorities of the nuclear power plant, as the nuclear industry follows stringent safety and security procedures.

That was a pretty tall metal tower with narrow staircases. One by one, we climbed up unhurriedly. It took 25 minutes to get to the top. And there was indeed a surprise waiting for us on the terrace. When we reached up there, we were left speechless. In utter astonishment, we saw this beautiful shiny egg on the floor, surrounded by waste cotton, pieces of cables, and a small amount of debris. We quickly understood that this was the home of a pair of Egyptian Vultures. A nest with a new life, valuable life. In India, about 90% population of Egyptian Vulture has declined due to several threats. This drastic decline is mainly due to the use

of diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug for livestock, which has killed nearly 99% of Gyps vultures. Now the usage of this drug in cattle is banned in India. While several conservation measures are on, every single vulture species, we thought, should be protected by us, as they are a vital part of the ecosystem. And the birth of every single Egyptian Vulture is crucial.

The rays of the sun fell on the shiny surface of the egg and it glittered. Gratified, we started descending the tower slowly. We had just seen a whole family of Egyptian Vultures, when we would have been glad to see just an individual. No one spoke. Once again, utter silence, but this time it was unintentional.

This was an unusual example of a bird nesting on such a tall structure. Sans mountains and hills, there could not be any other tall nest elsewhere like this. A lofty abode!



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