

Protecting the River Lapwing: Challenges and Conservation Needs in Melghat's Riverine Habitats

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Introduction

A Bird at Risk

The River lapwing (*Vanellus duvaucelii*) classified as Near Threatened by the IUCN (BirdLife International, 2016), inhabits riverbanks across the northern Indian subcontinent and parts of Southeast Asia (BirdLife International, 2024). This medium-sized, insectivorous bird prefers the sandy and gravelly shores of rivers relying on these habitats for feeding and nesting. In Maharashtra, it is commonly spotted along rivers like Godavari, Wainganga, and Tapi, where it thrives in relatively undisturbed environments Rahmani *et al.*



The lapwing's lifestyle

Physical traits and behaviour

The River lapwing is easily recognized by its striking black-and-white plumage and its sharp, high-pitched call, often described as "tip-tip" or "did-did-did." Measuring about 29–32 cm in length, males and females look alike, though males tend to be slightly larger. Their activity peaks in the morning when they forage for insects, larvae, and other small invertebrates along riverbanks.

Ecological preference

These birds rely on shallow waters and sandy shores abundant in algae, which support the invertebrates that form their diet. Their role as both predator and prey makes them an integral part of the riverine ecosystem, with their survival intricately tied to the health of these habitats.



Melghat's riverine habitats: A sanctuary under threat

An overview of Melghat

Located in the Satpuda mountain range of Maharashtra, the Melghat Tiger Reserve spans 2,768 square kilometres and is renowned for its rich biodiversity. The Tapi River, a crucial water source in the area, offers an ideal habitat for River lapwings. Its sandy banks and shallow waters provide the perfect conditions for nesting and foraging, supporting the bird's dietary and breeding requirements.

Supporting biodiversity

Melghat's tropical dry deciduous forests and vast riverine zones are home to a rich diversity of flora and fauna. The riverbanks not only support River lapwings but also provide a vital habitat

for other bird species such as the River tern and Common sandpiper, fostering a balanced ecosystem.



Understanding the lapwing's behaviour: Field research insights

Study detail

From December 2022 to March 2023, Darshan Dudhane, Prof Ujjwala Deshmukh, and Amey Thakare from the Government Vidarbha institute of science and humanities, Amravati, conducted extensive field study along the Tapi River in Melghat. Covering a 5.8 km stretch from the Kutanga to Rangubeli sites, the research focused on analysing the population density, behaviour, and the impact of human activities on the River lapwing.



Key observations

- Population distribution: A total of 12 River lapwings were recorded at Kutanga and 6 at Rangubeli.



- Daily activities: Foraging activity peaked during the morning hours, with the birds spending afternoons resting in shaded crevices.
- Interactions: The River lapwings coexisted peacefully with other bird species, facing minimal interspecies competition for resources.

Human interference and conservation challenges

Disruptions to habitat

Human activities like fishing, washing, and cattle grazing significantly disturb the River lapwings. These activities degrade the habitat, disrupting both nesting and foraging patterns. The presence of stray dogs and cattle further exacerbate the situation, as they encroach on nesting areas and scaring the birds away.

Impact on survival

With limited undisturbed habitats, the lapwings struggle to maintain their natural behaviours, making them increasingly vulnerable to predation and habitat loss, further threatening their survival.

Strategic conservation measures

Immediate actions

1. Buffer zones: Establish no-activity zones around critical nesting and feeding sites along the Tapi River.
2. Control of stray animals: Implement measures to limit the movement of stray dogs and cattle near sensitive habitats, protecting the lapwings' nesting areas.

Community involvement

- Awareness programs: Raise awareness among local communities about the importance of preserving riverine ecosystems and the role of the River lapwing in maintaining ecological balance.
- Collaborative efforts: Engage residents in community-driven conservation initiatives, fostering a balance between human activities and ecological preservation.

Conclusion:

A call to action

The River lapwing, a vital species in riverine ecosystems, faces growing threats in Melghat due to human interference. Protecting this Near Threatened species, requires urgent conservation efforts focusing on habitat preservation and community participation. By safeguarding the natural environments along the Tapi River, we not only ensure the survival of the River lapwing but also promote broader biodiversity and ecological balance in the region.

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