OUTREACH ACTIVITY IN WII DURING THE CAMPUS BIRD COUNT 2024

- Dr. Ashish Jha

The Campus Bird Count (CBC) is a citizen-science event, conducted annually during the month of February across the world, as a sub-event to the larger Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). In India, CBC is organised and coordinated by Bird Count India in collaboration with ebird.org (Cornell Lab of Ornithology). During the four-day event, birders (amateurs and experts alike) observe birds around them and upload their observations on the ebird database. This global coordinated effort helps document abundances and trends in bird populations across temporal and spatial scales.

Besides the science aspect of CBC, it is also a fun event and a great opportunity to get new people interested in bird watching. Given that WII is among India's most bird-rich academic campuses with over 360 species recorded so far, and a pool of dedicated researchers, we conceived an idea to conduct an outreach activity in the Campus during the CBC (16th-19th February 2024). The goal was to raise awareness and get common citizens interested in bird watching.

Mr. Vabesh Tripura helped us prepare bilingual posters for the event while the EIACP Cell helped us with the Google Form and advertised the program over Whatsapp groups and relevant social media platforms. Our target audience were amateur birders and the general public in Dehradun who may or may not have had any previous birding experience but were interested in learning about birds.

We invited people to WII in six slots during the four-day program. This event ran parallel to the CBC activities conducted throughout the day by trained birders in the campus, aimed at recording maximum bird species from the campus.

We received 99 registrations for the event, majority of them from students and bird enthusiasts outside WII and a few from WII researchers. On the specified day and time, participants gathered at the main gate and were escorted by WII volunteers during various slots. Dr. Ashish Jha, Ms. Amarjeet Kaur, Mr. Sipu Kumar, Mr. Anuranjan Roy, Ms. Malyasri Bhattacharya, and Mr. Manav S. volunteered to interact with the participants and take them on a guided birding tour along WII's nature trail. The participants were provided with pairs of binoculars and a 'Birds of Uttarakhand' pocket guide. The volunteers introduced the participants to the Campus biodiversity in general, and discussed the conservation/research works done by WII. The participants, in turn, shared their stories and interesting avian observations. Participants were given a bird Identification pocket guide as a souvenir. We hope that the participants continue to observe birds in their surroundings and contribute to the growth of citizen-science in the country.

Such an event is of special significance to a country like ours. So far, 1373 species have been recorded from India, making us the 8th most bird rich country in the world and 2nd in Asia, only behind Indonesia.

With over 2.8 million checklists uploaded by Indians on ebird.org, we are behind only the USA and Canada in terms of numbers of checklists uploaded. Birds are excellent sentinels of environmental health, and birdwatchers can help generate vital data across space and time to monitor avian populations in the country. The recently released State of India's Birds Report 2023 is one such scientific exercise which utilised data on the ebird.org portal to reveal interesting insights about the avian populations in the country. With a large bio-diverse geography to explore, rapidly increasing internet penetration, increasing environmental awareness and a large young population, the future of citizen-science looks promising in India.

About the Author:

Ashish Jha joined Wildlife Institute of India as Scientist C in August 2023. He is interested in avian conservation using a multi-pronged approach including genetics, long-term monitoring, field-based natural history studies and community outreach. His research interests include Population genetics, Biogeography, Natural History, Citizen-science, In-situ and Ex-situ conservation, Community ecology, and Avian behavior.