Barheaded Geese in Chilika (Orissa)

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Nothing is more enthralling in Chilika lake than a skein of Barheads (Anser indicus) appearing from nowhere, bursting out of the northern horizon. It is usually an early morning when the eastern sky is dappled with vermilion, against the silhouette of a hill range, that these majestic geese come honking from the north, as they fly in a perfect arrowhead formation. They straight splash down on water and continue flapping their wings even though their long flight is over. The few that have landed on the grassy fields of Nalabana also keep flapping their wings for a few minutes after which they spread their large wings and call loudly, outstretching their long necks skywards. This practice among the just-arrived geese and ducks is probably to reassure each other, that each one of them has arrived safely, that "They have made it" and they are successful in their long, hazardous flight. One of them having a slender neck and without a heavy knob at the root of the upper mandible, evidently their matriarch, is seen fluttering and hopping around the rest of the gaggle while the other gander and geese stand in a semi-circle calling "Aaung—Aaung". The cacophony continues for quite a while, till the matriarch lowers her head and starts with the first blade of grass from Chilika's soil.

A gaggle of Barheads in Chilika now may number only 30 to 40 or even less. There was a time when these large geese in Chilika used to be seen in hundreds, in one gaggle. The arrival of the geese heralds the peak winter season. Winter is not very harsh in Chilika, situated as it is on the north-eastern sea coast of the Indian peninsula. Escaping from the awesome winter in the north of the great Himalaya, most of the duck species, geese and plovers which breed around the places like lake Tso Moriri and Mansarover, conduct an exodus to warmer places to spend the winter. The usual time for the arrival of migrants in the Chilika every year is recorded as the first and second week of October. Such birds include ducks as Pintail (Anas acuta), Shoveller (Anas clypeata), Wigeon (Anas penelope), Gadwall (Anas strepera), Common teal (Anas crecca) and Ruddy shelduck (Tadorna ferruginea) to join resident ducks like Lesser Whistling teal (Dendrocygna javanica), Cotton teal (Nettapus coromandelianus), and plovers and waders like Blacktailed godwit (Limosa limosa), Bartailed godwit (Limosa lapponica), Curlew (Numenius arquata), Redshank (Tringa totanus), Greenshank (Tringa nebularia), and many others, followed by raptors like Steppe eagle (Aquila rapax), White-tailed Sea-eagle (Haliaeetus albicilla), Ringtailed or Pallas Fishing eagle (Haliaeetus leucoryphus), Marsh harrier (Circus aeruginosus) and others. But during the first phase of migration Barheads are conspicuous by their absence.

Barheads arrive in Chilika not before the first week of December or the last week of November. The late arrival of these geese must be governed by some ecological factors. These geese seem to tolerate cold much more than any other duck or goose species. Till it is very cold and snow really started to accumulate they do not leave their breeding grounds. Secondly the young ones that have hatched must accompany them on their migratory flight to wintering sites thousands of kilometres away. Growth rate of these goslings is much slower than those of other ducks and waders which are smaller in size. After growth is accomplished, the young ones must fledge and complete a few sorties of trial flights before the long flight to the south is undertaken.

One of the striking features observed among the
Barheaded is that the number of sub-adults is about 30% of the total number arriving in Chilika lake. They are identified by their dirty colour, a brownish-fawn shade through the hind neck and the absence of ‘bars’ across the nape from eye to eye with legs and feet dusky green and not yellow as in adults. The lesser number of sub-adults may indicate the population dynamics of this species. According to records it is known that Barheads lay about 3 to 6 eggs but during the period of growth there seems to be a lot of infant mortality, may be due to predation and disease.

Barheaded geese appear to be more terrestrial than aquatic. They spend most of their time foraging on grassy plains of Nalbana and keep changing places according to availability of food. “Doob grass” and tender shoots are their most favoured food and the geese are properly named in local Oriya language as Dooba Hamsa.

To be a favourable habitat for these geese, it must be a flat ground, preferably an island, unfrequented by humans or grazing buffalo. The top soil should be fine sand mixed with soft loam in places. The sub-soil must be peat and loam. The predominant vegetation here should be Doob grass.

It is also observed that Barheads have some waterfowl species as their camp-followers. The first among them is the Wigeon, Anas penelope which also loves to feed on Doob grass. Though both use the same habitat and the food, Barheads tolerate the presence of Wigeon because they seem to have a symbiotic relation. Generally Barheads are not very shy and fall an easy prey to natural predators and poachers as they cannot detect the approach of danger easily. If the Wigeon are present on the same ground, these smaller ducks are generally very alert, give alarm calls and fly off providing enough time for the Barheads to escape also. Another bird which seem to enjoy the company of Barheads is Redwattled lapwing (Vanellus indicus). It enjoys picking up insects exposed at the roots of grass disturbed by the feeding geese. They therefore, also have a symbiotic relationship with geese. When danger approaches the lapwing also emits the usual alarm call alerting the geese.

The sandy flats which are the most favoured habitat of geese have now become scarce. One such area of the Chilika was Gerasara which is now fully encroached upon by prawn culturists. This place which used to attract more than 100 geese is now surrounded by nylon nets for prawn culture. The flats are submerged having been dug out and there is anything but tranquillity in this area where prawns and dollar-spinning is the main theme. Garesara, the grand habi-tat of Barheads is gone forever. Now geese are usually seen around artificial mounds erected by the Wildlife Wing of the Forest Department. These places have watch-towers built by the government and heavily guarded by the departmental people. Good grass grows there but they are not frequented by buffalos. They offer a favourable habitat to geese.

Decline in the number of geese in Chilika can only be attributed to the loss of their habitat. On the other hand, their number has increased in Bhitarkanika, the tidal mangrove forest sanctuary punctuated with good swamps and grassy patches. They appear to have changed their wintering ground from Chilika to Bhitarkanika.

Human civilization is progressing day by day. Modernization brings many good and bad elements. In the Chilika during recent years, a wildlife division has been created, specially to look after the bird and other fauna of the lake and Nalabana sanctuary in particular. Where there was wanton bird killing in and around Nalabana and on the shores of villages surrounding the Chilika, no gunshots are heard now and we can heave a sigh of relief. But the silence of the poacher’s gun should not be mistaken as the end of poaching. Loud gunshots easily attracted forest guards resulting in arrests and booking of cases, therefore, the poachers now adopt a soundless system of killing by using snares. Formerly they were made of horse’s hair, but the nylon thread has revolutionised the process. By using nylon yarns of various thicknesses, birds as small as the Little stint (Calidris minuta) and as large as the Barhead can be easily snared. But again snares are to be set in particular places, are to be left there for a long time till a bird decided to go there and get entangled. Guards could locate the sites of snaring and methodically remove them foiling the effort of the poacher. Soon snares also became obsolete and poachers have adopted another novel method, which is something like this:

Some cooked rice or sprouting Bengal gram are soaked overnight in water in which the required dose of sedative tablets (powdered, available in local market) is dissolved. During a suitable hour of the day these soaked grains are scattered at places frequented by geese, ducks and waders. Birds are easily attracted to grain, get sedated and are caught. This is a more effective method of trapping birds as even after discovering the sprinkled grain no forest guard can totally remove them!
Barheaded geese are the most coveted trophy as these birds fetch more than Rs.100/- per bird in the market. Unless some solution is worked to stop this trapping Chilika will lose the remaining geese also. Barheads can be termed as one of the bio-indicators of a healthy wetland. Could we expect that one day large gaggles of these handsome geese will grace Chilika again? This is possible through better and more enlightened management; through educating the people and taking them into confidence and not through policing only.

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