

It's incredible to imagine how birds like the Brahminy Duck from Northern Tibet, and some others from Norway, Siberia, Northern China, and Denmark travel to Nalsarovar every winter without fail, writes **Murli Menon**

Birds of Nalsarovar

Driving from Ahmedabad to Nalsarovar Lake takes just 90 minutes. The Forest Department Guest House at Nalsarovar is my home for the next two days. I am writing this after a close encounter with one of nature's miracles. I had just returned from spending a day among hundreds of migratory birds from Siberia. A paddle boat ride to the river islands of Nalsarovar takes you to local villagers who offer millet rotis with potatoes and brinjals cooked in a mild gravy. Fresh, organic vegetables are available at the local market, along with seasonal fruits. Numerous small restaurants serving Gujarati, Kutchi, and Kathiyawadi vegetarian cuisine dot the area. At most roadside dhabas, you can enjoy freshly steamed vegetables with Gujarati spices, baby brinjals cooked in ginger-garlic gravy, and alu-methi served with millet (bajra) rotis cooked in an earthen oven.

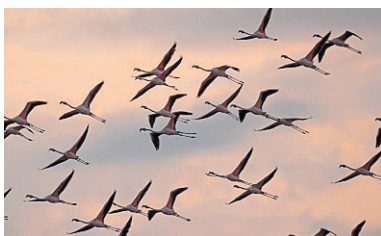
As my paddle boat made its way deeper into the lake, I saw several species of birds resting on the treetops or taking off into the sky in formation. As one flock ascended, another glided down to land. I chose an open boat and set off towards the innermost corners of the lake, as the first rays of light brightened the sky.

Nature always rewards patience. After an hour of waiting on the shore, I was treated to a delightful sight — a formation of migratory birds on the far horizon. Every winter, hundreds of migratory birds fly to Nalsarovar. Birds like the White Stork, Brahminy Duck, Saras Crane, and Gulls can be easily spotted here. Groups of avocets, herons, curlews, pelicans, swallows, eagles, pigeons, spoonbills, flamingos, and jacanas surround the lake.

There are no diesel-powered boats at Nalsarovar, and paddling slowly over the placid waters of this translucent lake is an extremely relaxing experience. The most beautiful sight at Nalsarovar is watching a large flock of pink-necked flamingos huddling together, creating a picture-postcard view. You can see several birds taking a dip in the water as if energising themselves before taking flight. Most of these migratory birds have flown thousands of miles to reach Nalsarovar, arriving from early December



Black-billed Gulls are endemic to New Zealand. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



Lesser Flamingos from Africa; (below) a Black-winged Stilt bird from Eurasia.

until late February. While some, like the Brahminy Duck, travel from Northern Tibet, others come from Norway, Siberia, Northern China, and Denmark. It's incredible to imagine how these birds land at Nalsarovar every winter without fail. Watching them in full flight is a transformative experience. The synchronicity of their movements and their even distance from one another creates the illusion that each bird is tethered to the others by invisible strings.

As the morning turns into noon, more and more birds emerge from their nests and hover around your boat. A few adventurous ones even land on the edge of the boat.

Identifying the species is a challenge, as the number and variety of birds are vast, and many resemble each other. Only an expert ornithologist could accurately name them.

The sounds of the birds are extremely musical to the ears, and you can close your eyes to identify a bird based on its call. You must spend time in the lake's interior to spot the smaller, more elusive species. Watching

hundreds of flamingos fly overhead is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. One group follows another in a never-ending cascade. It's time to be present and absorb this soulful experience. It can take almost five hours of slow paddling to cover the lake's interior and get a close look at these foreign visitors.

These birds are extremely sensitive to sound, so you must paddle in complete silence. Even a whisper is enough to scatter a flock resting on the water.

The Forest Department officials and local boatmen at Nalsarovar are extremely friendly and helpful. They ensure that every visitor to the lake has a close encounter with the migratory birds. The sheer number of birds at Nalsarovar is a satisfying sight.

The most touching part of the boat ride is witnessing the harmony between the local birds — sparrows, kites, pigeons, and crows — and the foreign visitors. There are no territorial disputes or struggles for air dominance between the local and migratory birds.

The locals allow the visitors to have complete autonomy during their stay in India.

These migratory birds always leave after a brief stay during the coldest part of winter. The villagers around Nalsarovar provide birdwatchers with neera (a sweet

drink made from the palm tree). As noon fades into dusk, the birds' calls rise to a crescendo, and many return to their nesting places around the lake. Watching the sunset over the waters is picturesque.

Boating in the dark under a moonlit sky while gazing at the stars is yet another magical experience at Nalsarovar.

