

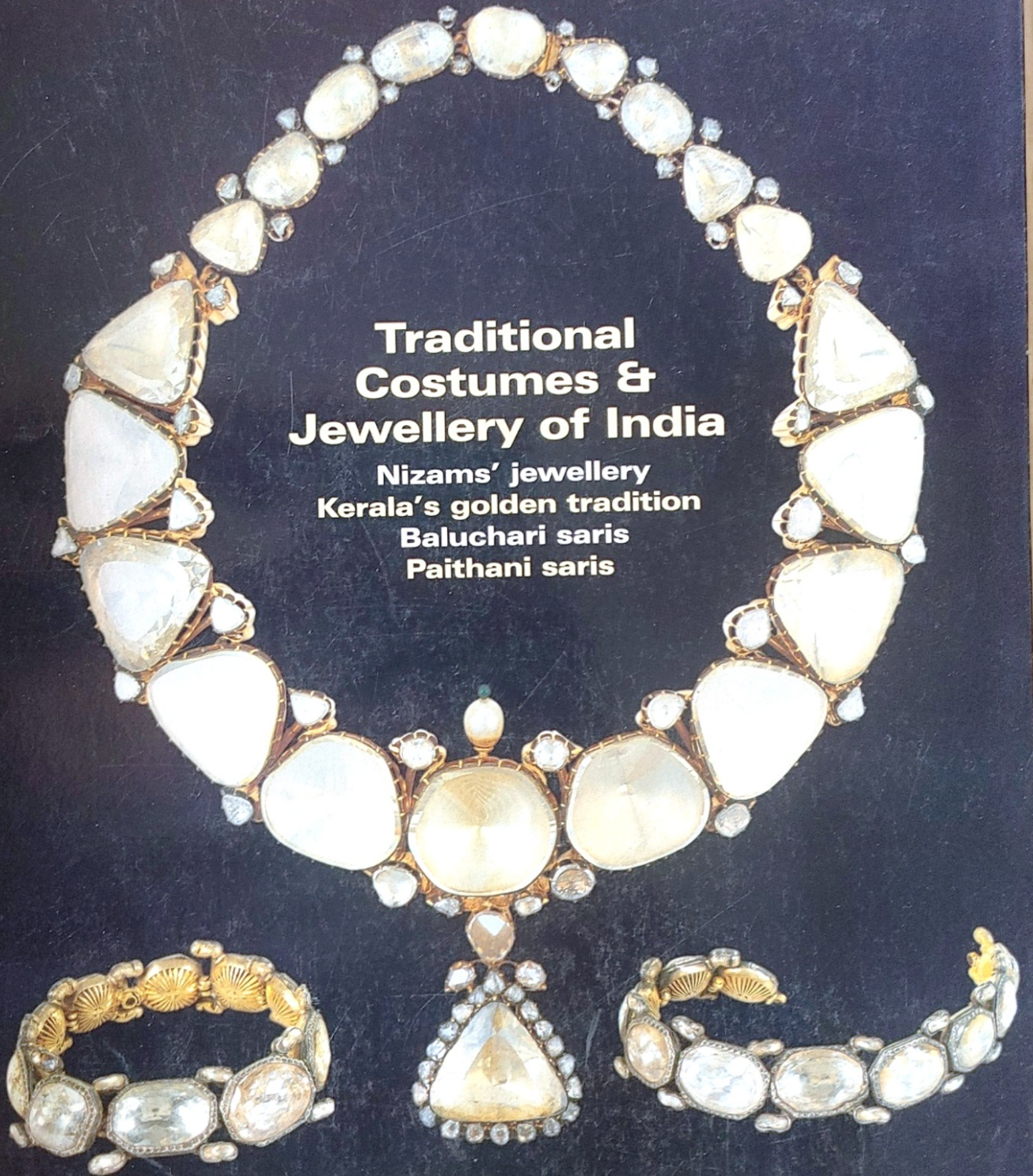
JETWINGS

FOR THE WELL-INFORMED TRAVELLER

OCTOBER 2005 · VOL 5 · ISSUE 10

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avian encounters

Visit Sewri in Mumbai for a sight of one of the finest wildlife spectacles in the world - a flamingo

text & photographs by Krishnar V.



flamingos at the Sewri mud flats. My eyes were drawn to it, but unfortunately there was not much information. I happened to mention this to my colleague Ashwin and he informed me that the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) was organising a flamingo watch at Sewri very soon. I could not hold back my enthusiasm and called BNHS to inquire about the event.

All geared up

Sunday morning saw me getting up way before time, frantically packing my camera gear and double-checking my equipment and batteries. I was soon at the designated spot at Sewri, where I was to meet the guide from BNHS, Mr Naik. Shortly I was joined by a bunch of 20-30 very excited birders, who had collected on the roadside, all armed

with binoculars and cameras and braving the Mumbai afternoon heat. Located along the eastern waterfront in Mumbai, Sewri Bay is the winter retreat of a huge number of flamingos and other migratory shorebirds, some of which come from Central Asia and Europe. The flamingos spend nearly eight months of the year here, and during winter, this area stages one of the most stunning avian pageants to be seen within city limits anywhere in the world.

Mr Naik lead our pack through the winding Sewri lanes towards the jetty, which is a great vantage point to see the birds. The local children seemed to know what we were up to and would from time to time run up to us screaming, "Flamingo watch"! We turned the final corner and the jetty, which had mangroves on both sides, came into view. A few boats and a barge were grounded nearby. The heat had picked up considerably by this

LEFT: The winter home of the flamingos - Sewri Bay
BELOW: A lone bird strikes a pose



I have never been a believer in coincidences. But sometimes the not-too-apparent link between certain disparate situations force me to reconsider my stance. Late last year, the photographer's delight - the yet-to-be-released Nikon D2X was on top of my mind. While

browsing through a digital photography website, I came across a stunning picture of flamingos on an African safari, posted by a person who went by the interesting name of DiverX. I was riveted. Curiously enough, a few days later, a Mumbai newspaper carried a small picture of



Time for a hearty meal

time and we were roasting in the temperature. I was beginning to wonder if at all we would find any birds in the heat...let alone flamingos. No sooner than had this thought crossed my mind that we came up to the final turn into the jetty and my jaw dropped...right before me was a sea of dotted pink - a few thousand flamingos!

Lights, camera, action

It took me a whole minute to take in this fluttering assemblage. I had to pinch myself - was this really happening in the heart of fast-paced Mumbai city? It was an absolutely breathtaking sight. My photographer instincts leapt into action. Bag off, camera and lens hooked, tripod extended, I quickly set up a shoot. As I looked through the viewfinder, I realised that since it was low tide, the birds were much further away and I would not be able to accommodate them in my frame, unless I moved to a

During winter, this area stages one of the most stunning avian pageants to be seen anywhere else in the world

more convenient spot nearer. I started scouting for a better position. A little below where I stood and at the end of the jetty, a few metres ahead, I spotted a few large metal plates, probably discards from an old barge repairs, half-sunk in mud. I would have to wade in ankle-deep mud to get there, for sure! I slung my tripod like a rifle and gingerly lowered myself from the jetty into the mud. Little did I know then cautious and nervous steps to reach the spot. Peering through the viewfinder, I saw what has to be one of the most spectacular sights in my life.

Eating right

Sewri Bay is said to hold an impressive 15 per cent of the entire South Asian population of Lesser Flamingos. The birds are probably lured by the food rich bay. Watching them feed is an interesting sight. They push the water into their hook-like beaks with their tongues and then sieve the water for food. The top of their beaks touch the ground, very like a hook when hung with the curved side down. When they feed, the lower part of their beak actually turns upwards. The flamingos seem to turn the conventional feeding mechanism on its head!

The route back to the jetty through the slush and mud was equally uncomfortable, but I managed to get back safe and sound.

Back to the pavilion

I was back at Sewri, a few weeks later, soon after the high tide. This time I had my friends and their children for company. The birds were a floating



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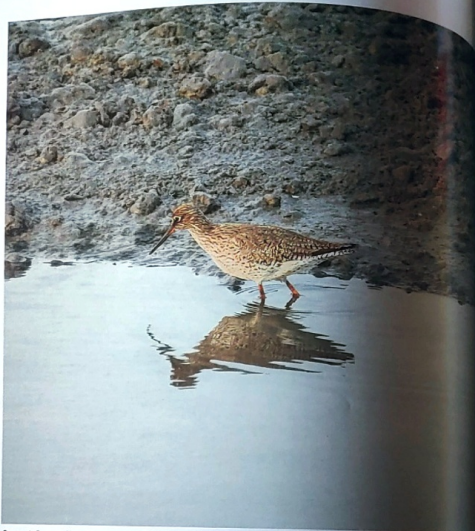
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T I P S

- ◆ Never ever disturb the birds.
- ◆ Take along a hat & lots of fluids.
- ◆ Dress in dull colours.
- ◆ Bring along binoculars.
- ◆ Do not litter or dump on site. Take back with you all that you bring.
- ◆ Get the longest lens you can.
- ◆ Bring along a tripod.
- ◆ Get a bird identification book.
- ◆ Check with BNHS!



Apart from flamingos, one can also spot a number of other birds at Sewri

pink island at a distance. The locals informed me that as soon as the water level dropped, the birds would fly towards the mangroves. Sure enough, a while later, the first pink flight took off from the waters, evoking a collective gasp of amazement from the audience. They settled down in places where the water level had receded and started to feed.

As we waited, the water receded further, and the birds, incredibly, kept coming closer and closer. The children enjoyed themselves immensely, watching them and I believe my friends must have considerably added to their bird knowledge. I spotted a few other birds – ibis and egrets – and some that I could not possibly identify

Anybody who has had the good fortune to witness the sight of a few thousand flamingos congregated at a single spot would not want this wonderful phenomenon to cease

without recourse to a bird book.

I intend going back to Sewri whenever I get the opportunity, for more pictures of those fascinating, exquisite creatures. I am no born birder, but must confess that my visits to Sewri have brought about a change in me. Even as I write this, I am reminded of the fact that the Sewri-New Bombay Link is supposed to run through this bird rich bay. One can only hope that the birds are not affected. Anybody who has had the good fortune to witness the sight of a few thousand flamingos congregated at a single spot would not want this wonderful phenomenon to cease. It is a testament to the fact that Mumbai, despite its concrete core, can also nurture such delicate creations of nature.

D2X, Diver X, Ashwin, BNHS... apparently unconnected, but yet connected seamlessly by that magical bird – the flamingo!

FACT FILE

getting there

Jet Airways flies daily to Mumbai. You can avail of local train services to Sewri Railway Station on the city's Harbour Line.

best time to visit

November-December and June-July.

Flamingo watches are organised by the Bombay Natural History Society (www.bnhs.org). Check the website for monthly event schedules.

There is a Flamingo Festival at BNHS, Hornbill House, Dr Salim Ali Chowk, S.B. Singh Marg, Mumbai, from October 3-8, 2005.

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