

Water Birds of Kerala

Water birds or aquatic birds are a large and varied group of birds that live associated with fresh water sources such as rivers, lakes, dams and wetlands. However many sea and shore birds can also be regularly found in fresh water, eg. cormorants and migratory waders. Water birds include: ducks, geese and swans (Order Anseriformes); grebes (Order Podicipediformes); pelicans, darters and cormorants (Order Pelecaniformes); herons, ibises, spoonbills and storks (Order Ciconiiformes); cranes, rails, moorhens and coots (Order Gruiformes); and waders (Order Charadriiformes). Webbed feet, bills, legs adapted to feed in water and the ability to dive from the surface or the air to catch prey in water are the main adaptations found in water birds.

Ornithologically, Kerala is one of the well studied states in India with a rich diversity of avifauna hosting more than 150 species of water birds including migratory ones. Vembanad – kole wetland system, one of the three Ramsar sites in Kerala is the largest estuarine system in Kerala spread over four districts. The area accounts for about 85 per cent of the state's water bird population. Bird life International has declared this as an Important Bird Area (IBA). Wetlands of Kerala seemed to be supporting a stable population of water birds amid concerns over the declining wetland stretches of the state.

Heronries, places where herons or colonially nesting large water birds gather together over many generations for nesting and raising young ones are indicators of healthy wetland systems. In Kerala maximum numbers of heronries are

reported from Palakkad district, followed by Thrissur, Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha and Kozhikode. 16 of the 26 species of colonially nesting large water birds that are known to breed in heronries across Kerala namely, Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Indian Shag *P. fuscicollis*, Little Cormorant *Microcarbo niger*, Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia*, Great Egret *Ardea alba*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Grey Heron *A. cinerea*, Asian Openbill Stork *Anastomus oscitans*, Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*, Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* and Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* were found to nest in Kerala.

Hunted for game and meat, poisoned by pesticides, and deprived of their natural habitat, herons, once a common sight decline in numbers over the years. Aimed at restoring their numbers, Kerala State Biodiversity Board (KSBB) had launched a State-wide heronry conservation programme (Kottilla Samrakshana Programme) with the involvement of local people, in 21 heronries in the Kuttanad region spanning Kottayam and Alappuzha districts. The programme is implemented with the support of Kottayam Nature Society.

Some of the most common water birds found in Kerala

Little Cormorant – *Microcarbo niger*

Small, black, duck-sized water bird with round short head, long tail, short, thick neck and short bill. When breeding, mainly glossy black, with white head plumes whitish throat and stubby bill. Sexes similar. Non-breeding adults and juveniles are browner and lack the head plumes. Inhabits water bodies of all



Little Cormorant

size, including village ponds and drains. Usually quite gregarious and confiding. Often mixing with Indian Cormorant to fish. Feeds on fish, crustaceans and aquatic insects. Flies rapidly often close to water. Holds wings open to dry. It has special nictitating membranes that cover and protect the eyes underwater. Nests in tree colonies with other water birds.

Indian Darter or Snake- Bird – *Anhinga melanogaster*

Large, dark water bird with very slender long, snake-like neck (giving this species its alternative name of 'snakebird'), pointed bill and long tail. Adults black above and below with silvery feathers on wings. Dark brown head and neck. Sexually dimorphic. Males black and dark brown plumage, erectile crest on nape and larger bill than female. Females much paler plumage on neck and underparts. Nestlings very white looking and immature are brown with white from throat to belly. Inhabits either fresh or brackish water and found in lakes, rivers, marshes, swamps, estuaries,



Indian Darter

bays, lagoons and mangrove swamps. Feed mainly on fish. Expert diver for fish which it spears. Perches on posts or branch with wings open to dry. Nest in mixed species heronries. IUCN categorized and evaluated darter birds and listed as "Near Threatened".



Indian Pond Heron - *Ardeola grayii*

Stocky, small, earthy brown heron with contrasting white wings and tail. Usually earth brown with heavily dark-streaked buff head, neck and breast. In summer, adults have long neck feathers. Most of the birds have attractive breeding plumes during reproductive stage. Maroon hair like plumes on back and long occipital crest. Legs turn bright yellow, sometimes salmon-pink, occasional pink or red legs. Wings and tail always white, strikingly contrasting in flight. Short, thick legs and dark-tipped, yellow bill. Sexes alike. Occurs wherever there is water, including temporary puddles. Solitary but several birds may feed close together. Roosts communally. Feed on insects, fish and amphibians. Remains motionless slowly stalk prey. Nests in tree colonies.



Cattle Egret-*Bubulcus ibis*

Medium-sized, stocky, usually snow white, heron with a short neck and stout yellow bill. Very stocky compared to other egrets. In breeding season the species has a heavy jowl, orange-buff crown, neck, breast and mantle. Sexes similar. Habit of foraging in pasture lands in association with livestock animals whose movements and grazing activities flush out insects and other potential prey items. Commonest heron. Inhabits wetland, grassland, cultivation (follows plough), garbage dumps, open woodland, and urban parks. Very active feeder, mainly on large insects, such as those disturbed by ungulates. Sociable and confiding. Share their breeding or nesting sites with other birds.



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