



RAO JODHA DESERT ROCK PARK
SMALL FIELD GUIDE SERIES

cheela leela

The Black Kites of Mehrangarh

SARTAJ GHUMAN

RAO JODHA DESERT ROCK PARK FIELD GUIDES



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www.raojodhapark.com

Series Editor's Note

Here we are with # 5 in our series of Small Field Guides, all about another charismatic bird whose life and livelihood is intimately bound up with the history of the great Fort.

I hardly ever see Indians looking at black kites with pointed interest and it's probably not surprising that we've become a little inured to them. But follow the gaze of a visitor from another country and you will see them peering at kites with avid curiosity. Their affinity – the birds, not the visitors! – to eagles and buzzards is, of course, obvious and it must seem unusual that such big birds of prey can be so ubiquitous and confiding. But that is the way it has come to be with these commensal birds of prey who know that their best chance of a snack lies in the crowded, messy places inhabited by humans that go by the name of Indian cities.

Kites can be brilliantly opportunistic. I remember being in an outdoor restaurant watching waiters walking staidly out of the kitchen bearing trays of chicken and cheese sandwiches. My host laid bets to see which of the waiters would be the first to have his sandwiches filched by a kite on the fly, and sure enough, we saw two expert 'strikes' in quick succession as a pair of kites made off with their prizes. It seemed amazing that the waiters didn't know better than to display their sandwiches so obviously. Or maybe this was a subtly disguised feeding ritual.

I want to say a special 'thank you' to Sartaj Ghuman for taking time out to write and research this booklet. In between his sojourns high up in the mountains where he is blissfully beyond the reach of the internet or mobile phones, he has had to endure the badgering of a meddlesome editor.

Pradip Krishen

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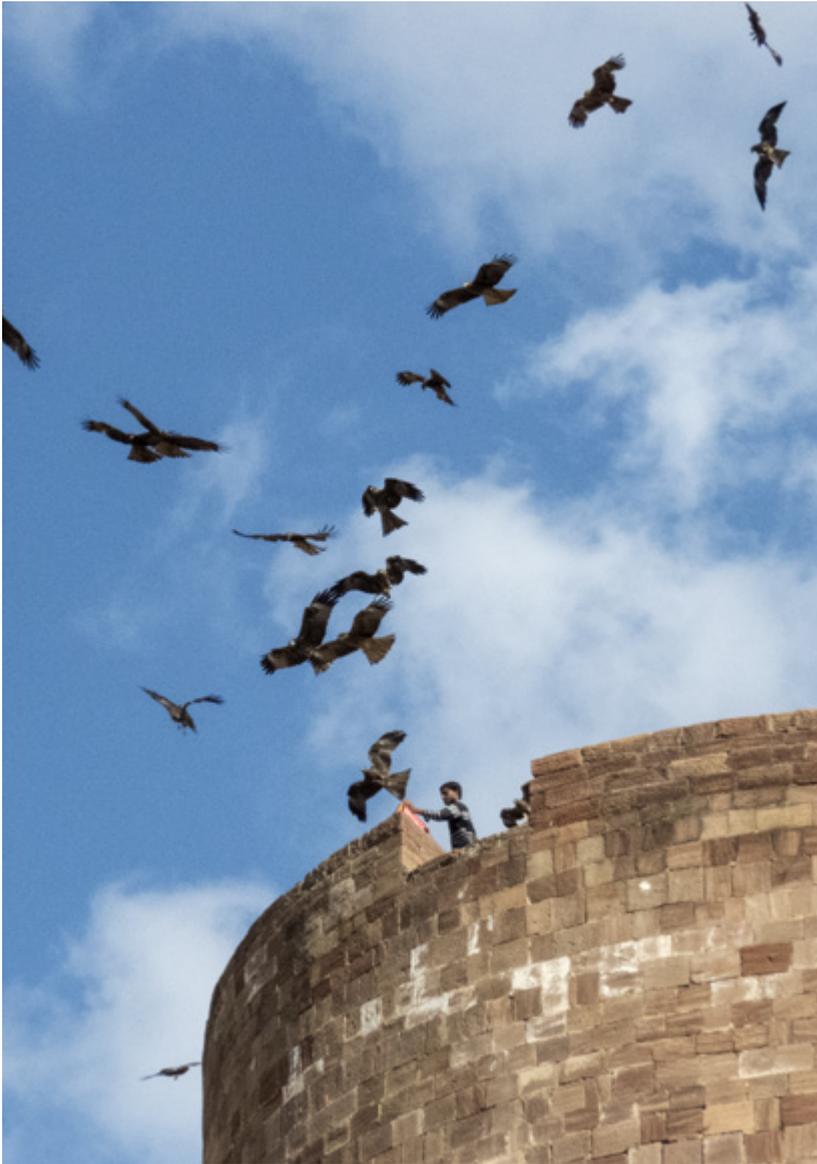
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“He was not bone and feather but a perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all.”

RICHARD BACH IN
JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL

PAINTING BY Sartaj Ghuman



Denzil Britto

Latif Qureshi feeding the kites

The Perfect Idea

High up on the ramparts of Mehrangarh, there's a strange commotion taking place... A swarm of large birds, possibly as many as a hundred, are swirling rapidly around one spot, shrieking shrilly as they direct their attention at – can it be? – one man!

Squinting as he smiles in the late afternoon sun, Latif Qureshi is feeding his beloved kites. Tourists passing by stop in their tracks, barely able to believe what they are seeing.

Latif flings little bits of meat one after another high above his head, away from the wall. The kites circle overhead, hovering just above him as long as they can, vying for the perfect moment, then dive in anticipation of the next flung meatball. Several kites compete to grab it with their feet. One misses, another catches it expertly in its talons and is instantly away, distancing itself from the mêlée. The successful kite flies a

short distance away in a wider circle while the others regroup over Latif's head again. Feeding on the wing, feet meet beak as the successful kite reaches down to gobble up its food and then is back, looking for an opportunity to have another go.

Kites are astonishingly acrobatic and nimble in flight. For a bird so big, they are able to manoeuvre with a deftness that is hard to believe.



Denzil Britto



ALL FOUR PHOTOS: Denzil Britto

You will often see three or four birds competing for the same scrap of meat without ever colliding or getting in each others' way when they make successive attempts, one below the other, faster and faster, as a meatball plunges to the ground. It is breath-taking to watch them dive after the meat with their wings held close. They twist and turn and bank so close to the wall that you fear for their safety. You can feel the tingling of vertigo rising from the soles of your feet as you watch them abort a dive at the very last moment.

Latif smiles through all this, talking to his kites. You can tell just by his tone of voice that he loves them. He calls softly to one scraggly kite that keeps up an insistent whinnying but does not join the m el e. It stands out in the crowd of sleek birds because it has lost half its feathers and the remainder of its plumage looks worried and worn. "Come eat, old one", he calls, as he throws up a meatball directly towards it. The old kite makes a perfect catch at the third attempt and its shrill screams abate but only for a short while.

Latif is a butcher in Jodhpur city who's been feeding the kites every day now for the last 12 years or so. The kites are special, more so than any other bird in this city of the great fortress of Mehrangarh. They are considered to be sentinels of the Fort and avatars of Chamunda Ma, and are revered by the Rathores – the clan of the royal House of Jodhpur – and by the people of Jodhpur city.

When Latif is ill or out of town his brother deputizes for him, otherwise Latif is up there with the kites every single day. No wonder he loves them so much. His family has been feeding them for more than four generations now, since the time of his grandfather's grandfather. Latif says he used to accompany his father to feed

the kites when he was very small and took over when he was eighteen. The feeding-site was closer to the city at first, on a bluff above the road leading to the Fort. But when the feeding ritual began to attract too much of a crowd, the site was shifted to within the ramparts of the Fort. Here too, a few different places were tried out until they finally settled on the present site on the western wall, with a sheer drop of several hundred feet to the rocks below.

Latif walks up to the Fort from the city every day carrying a red plastic net bag, reaching the top of the Fort wall punctually at 3:30 PM no matter what season it is. The meat is in bite-sized pieces, carefully wrapped in a large sheet of bloody



Denzil Britto



Denzil Britto

Sandstone carving of a Kite in Umaid Bhavan palace.

plastic, the entire package swathed in newspaper. The meat consists of about 5 kgs of goat liver, lungs and offal, which is what the Trust (which manages the affairs of the Fort) pays him for. Sometimes Latif adds leftovers from his butcher's shop. On a good day when he has had large orders or if someone donates a little extra money for the cause, he carries up to 8 kgs of meat and then Latif is happy, saying with a smile, "They will have more than they can eat today".

The kites seem to know precisely when to expect Latif. They are eagerly impatient like a bunch of children waiting for some fun to begin. At first all the kites flap about high up in the sky, just below the clouds. As the time draws near for Latif to arrive, they start to descend, flying over the city past the Fort walls. A few kites perch on a wall overlooking the feeding site by 3 PM, half an hour early, sunning themselves with their wings spread out. As they sit there on the wall, it seems so appropriate that black kites were chosen to adorn Mehrangarh's coat-of-arms as symbolic sentinels of this desert city.

Once it begins, the feeding frenzy lasts till the last scrap of meat is gone. Latif's hands never stop, rapidly transferring meatballs from his left to his throwing hand with practised dexterity. Everything happens quickly. The jumble of activity in the sky is so intense it's hard to know where to focus your eyes or mind and almost before you can thrill at the proximity of the kites and their amazing agility and grace, it's suddenly all over. It has taken just 10 minutes or so.

Latif goes off to wash his hands and bag and the kites begin to disperse, flying unhurriedly towards the city to look for a thermal on which they can rise lazily up on stiffly held wings.

Nishant Kumar



Nishant Kumar



ABOVE: Kites congregating at a solid-waste dump site. BELOW: Aerial aerobatics over a food-site.

KITES CONGREGATING

Black kites gather together in large numbers at places where they know they will find food. They have no difficulty remembering places that yield good food on a reliable basis. They can also get used to a regular routine and will visit a place at a particular time of day if that is when they are always fed.

Their eyesight is probably their keenest sense. It is thought that the rapidity with which kites come together in large flocks happens entirely through visual cues. When a kite flying high in the sky sees another kite dropping, it quickly flies in to investigate what the attraction is. This immediately alerts other kites and surprisingly soon you can have hundreds of kites gathering at a 'lucky', one-off food source that would be impossible for individual birds flying far away to smell or spot.



Denzil Britto



Denzil Britto

Feeding time - Latif on the ramparts.

THERMALS



Denzil Britto

A black kite and an eastern imperial eagle (RIGHT) gliding together on a thermal.

You will surely have seen kites along with other large birds high up in the sky, gliding together in spiralling circles on outstretched wings. Unless it is over a large garbage dump, birds of prey don't usually scan for food by circling together. This asynchronous circling is an unmistakable sign that they are riding a 'thermal'.

Thermal columns are formed when uneven heating of the earth's surface creates pockets of warm air. Being lighter, warm air rises to form vertical columns called 'thermals' which are conveniently used by certain kinds of large birds – such as eagles, kites and vultures – to gain height simply by riding the current of rising air on outstretched wings.

Being lifted up without much effort on their part and then being able to glide on motionless wings saves these large birds enormous amounts of energy. Flapping your wings to climb high is an energy-consuming exercise and is especially wasteful for birds that need to spend a lot of energy searching for their next meal. Once a bird gains height on a thermal, it gets a better (birds-eye) view of a much larger area to scan for potential food. From a height, it can also easily glide away to explore a new patch of territory for food.



Pradip Krishen

Vultures soaring on a thermal.

Chidiyanathji



Pradip Krishen

Entrance to a small cave near the spot where Chidiyanathji is said to have lived.

The temple of Chidiyanathji lies directly below the spot where Latif feeds the kites. The story of Chidiyanthji goes back a long way...

Long before Mehrangarh was even thought of, there were the birds. It was the birds that gave the hill its name: 'Chidiyatoonk', or

'Bhakarchidiya' (In Marwari: chidiya = bird; bhakar = rock). What these birds were or why they chose to live on this particular hill is hard to say. One part of the hill provided the massive sandstone blocks from which the great Fort was built and it's possible these sandstone cliffs held cavernous nesting sites for swifts who like to nest together in large communities.



Pradip Krishen

This is said to be the actual pair of tongs used by Chidiyanathji. The tongs are venerated as sacred relics of the Hermit.

Or maybe the rocks were home to insects which, in certain seasons, provided plenty of food for insect-eating birds. We really don't know. This is pure speculation.

Legend tells us, however, that in (what must have been) a somewhat forbidding scrubland broken by tall outcrops of volcanic rocks, there lived a hermit high up on Chidiyatoonk. He is said to have spent his days deep in meditation and lived in perfect harmony with the birds, and his name, appropriately, was 'Chidiyanathji' – Lord of the Birds.

Chidiyanathji lived inside a small cave on the side of the hill where a perennial stream gurgled out from a tiny parting in the rocks. Vestiges of the stream can still be seen today, but only as a tiny trickle emerging from rocks in a little cave tucked away at the foot of the western wall. It feeds into a small tank and from there is diverted through a hollow brass pipe with a cow's head at its mouth onto a stone *shivling* – the sign of the Hindu deity, Shiva.

Outside a low gate to the temple, staked in the ground, stands a

pair of tongs that is said to be Chidiyanathji's own. The tongs bear three *tilaks* like the sandalwood ritual marks made by Brahmins on their foreheads. Someone had lit incense sticks and placed them in the tongs. A dozen steps took me down to a cave temple. The cave was low and I stood hunched over, looking at some idols against the far wall. There was a *baoli* or step-well outside and a neatly swept courtyard with a few trees. Inside stood Lakshmi Dutt, a portly, middle-aged priest or *poojari*, with a stubble. It was Lakshmi Dutt who told me Chidiyanathji's story.

When Rao Jodha wished to build a grand new fort in the fifteenth century, he set out on horseback from his capital, Mandore, to scour the surrounding area for a suitable site. He found this large craggy hill rising high above the plain country below. It seemed perfect: difficult of access, therefore easy to defend, and commanding a magnificent view of the countryside all around. The hill was Chidiyatoonk.

Work on building the fort began right away and it wasn't long before workers came upon Chidiyanathji meditating outside his cave on the hill, next to a smouldering fire. Under orders from the king, they asked him to leave. Chidiyanathji was being unceremoniously evicted! He picked up the embers of his fire with his bare

hands and, wrapping them in a piece of cloth, pronounced a curse on the royal encroacher. He cursed that the new fort that would be built here – and the city that would one day arise at its feet – would suffer terribly from a chronic scarcity of water.

The workers rushed back to tell Rao Jodha what had happened. Nervous at having angered a holy man and wary of his powers, the king followed Chidiyanathji all the way to Palasni, 40 kilometres away. Rao Jodha pleaded with Chidiyanathji, begging him to return to Chidiyatoonk, promising him a home and a temple of his own but the hermit would not be appeased. He relented enough, though, to reduce the severity of his curse: the fort and the city, he said, would be visited by drought every four years, instead of every year.

Rao Jodha built a temple at the site of Chidiyanathji's cave and had a stepwell dug next to it. Morning prayers are still held every day at the temple, after which it reverts to being a quiet refuge, forgotten by goings-on in the busy Fort. Sitting by the stepwell one can hear echoes of the bells of the Chamunda Mata temple far above. This is the temple of the *isht devi* – the Goddess of Faith – of the Rathores. She is called Chamunda Mataji, 'the fierce one', who is depicted mounted on a kite as her *vaahan* or vehicle.

The Kite-Goddess



Pradip Krishen

Chamunda Mata temple inside Mehrangarh

*'With wings outstretched, upon
Jodha's Fort you sit
Our only guardian, Amba...'*

From a poem by Maharaj Prem Singh

Her temple is at the far end of the great Fort. For the people of Jodhpur, no visit to the Fort is complete until they have asked for Chamunda Mataji's blessings. The origins of worshipping this fierce *avatar* of the mother goddess, Devi, or the

warrior goddess, Durga – also known as 'Amba' – are a little obscure. She may be an ancient indigenous tribal goddess who has been assimilated into the Hindu pantheon. At some point, however, she was adopted as the *isht devi* and family goddess of the rulers of Jodhpur. Rao Jodha is said to have brought a statue of Chamunda Ma from his old capital, Mandore, and installed it in Mehrangarh when the Fort was nearly complete.

A black kite features prominently on the Rathore coat-of-arms and there's no reason to doubt that this is intimately connected with the clan's veneration of Chamunda Mataji and her kite. The depiction of kites, and more generally of raptors, has a long history and worldwide spread – from Austro-German motifs, to the German imperial eagle or *Reichsadler*, the Roman Aquilla, stretching all the way back to the two-headed eagle depicted on Byzantine capitals. There are eagle motifs in ancient Hittite relics of ancient Anatolia. With its dominant bearing and charisma, the eagle was understandably popular as a symbol of strength and power. But unlike the more commonly used depiction of soaring eagles, the Rathore coat-of-arms depicts a kite seen in profile, showing only one slightly outstretched wing and a foot raised in the air like a challenge. It forms a unique and distinctive use of a near-universal symbol.

Mehrangarh's connection with the black kite runs deep. Not unlike the ravens in the Tower of London or the Barbary macaques of Gibraltar, there is a superstition linking Jodhpur's kites with the safety of the Fort. The kites are regarded not merely as symbols of the Fort's well-being but as its active protectors. Especially so in difficult times – in times of drought, famine, war or pestilence.



Pradip Krishen



Pradip Krishen

Chamunda Ma temple (TOP) within the Fort walls. (BELOW) Image of the deity.



Denzil Britto

(ABOVE) Carved Coat-of-Arms of the Rathores in the Umaid Bhavan Museum.
(BELOW) The Kite in profile, from the Coat-of-Arms.



Denzil Britto

In the 1965 war, for instance, Pakistan was attempting to take over the strategic hamlet of Munabao, 250 kms from Jodhpur, and the Pakistani Air Force launched an offensive to prevent reinforcements from reaching Munabao. Jodhpur was bombarded and it was feared that bombs had been directed to take down the great Fort. One night, Chamunda Ma appeared to the Maharaja in a dream. He saw her take the form of a kite and, swooping down, grabbing a missile that was headed directly for the Fort. The goddess dropped the bomb into a distant reservoir where it went off harmlessly. She assured the Maharaja that the Fort would remain safe as long as there were kites watching over it.

Milvus migrans

What kind of a bird is the black kite? Well, it is sort of like an eagle, but not exactly. . . Children often mistake kites for eagles and they are not very far off the mark. That's what they've been taught to call all large birds of prey.

The Black Kite is a large, dark brown bird with a long, moderately forked tail. It belongs to an important and much-admired class of birds known as 'raptors', which includes all birds of prey such as eagles, hawks, falcons, harriers, buzzards, owls, and so on. (More about raptors and where kites belong, soon.)

If you look closely, both the tail and wings of black kites show sets of narrow dark 'bars', thin lines of dark brown set off against a paler background. Males and females bear no distinguishing marks or colours to tell them apart. In flight, seen from below, it's easy to spot a pale, crescent-shaped panel running across their wings, but this is very



Vinod Puri



Naman Goyal

Neither their forked tail nor fine bars or markings are sufficient to distinguish black kites from some other raptors.



Naman Goyal



Sartaj Ghuman

Juvenile kite (LEFT) with streaked plumage and distinct highlights. Note how it differs from the plumage of the adult bird on the right.

variable for kites of different ages and races and is sometimes not present at all or is modified into a square-ish patch. Young kites – ‘juveniles’ – are best told apart by noticeably pale edges to the feathers on their upper parts, especially around their neck and breast, and by pale streaks underneath.

Kites have handsome, almost angular faces, with deep-set eyes. Their downward hooked bills are shiny black with a prominent yellow leathery or waxy patch of flesh at the base of the upper beak known as a ‘cere’ (from the Latin ‘cera’, meaning ‘wax’). This patch, present only in a few bird families, contains the nares or nostrils. Being bare and brightly coloured in raptors, it is thought to reflect the health of the birds, thus acting as a sexual signal.

HOW DO KITES DIFFER FROM EAGLES?

A key difference lies in their tails. All eagles – and there are many different kinds – have tails that open up like a Chinese fan, with the end forming a shallow arc or, in a few cases, becoming square-ended when the tail is held closed. A kite, on the other hand – there are several kinds of kites too, but not as many as there are eagles – has a tail that is always forked, or if it is square-ended this is only so when it is held wide open or if the bird is moulting. Another useful distinction is that you hardly ever see eagles soaring together in large numbers, except during their annual migrations. Kites, on the other hand, are positively gregarious and revel in each others’ company! Kites usually roost together at night in convenient places – never very far from where they look for food – in huge numbers.

It’s not difficult to tell them apart physically, but why d’you think scientists place eagles and kites in different ‘boxes’? It’s because there are differences that go way beyond their appearance. Eagles are primarily hunters and tend to live singly or in pairs that inhabit widely spaced-apart territories so that they have enough prey to feed on. Black kites, on the other hand, are the most opportunistic ‘generalists’ you can find. They are mainly scavengers and were called ‘pariah kites’ until quite recently (when their common name was changed). Kites do hunt, but only rarely, and find it much easier to scavenge for scraps of food around human habitation. Compared with

eagles, kites have weak beaks and their legs, feet and talons are not as strong as those of eagles. Kites are known to hunt small prey especially when they have nestlings to feed, at which time they can be a menace to chicks and ducklings at poultry farms. They sometimes pick up insects and earthworms while sauntering about on the ground and have been known to hawk winged termites in the air. They have also been seen capturing tiny bats, if bats are foolish enough to be flying about during the day.

The most impressive attribute of black kites, however, is their superbly acrobatic flight. Salim Ali in his *Handbook of the Indian Birds* says



Denzil Britto

A black kite (RIGHT) chasing away a Bonelli's eagle flying too close to its nest.



Fabrizio Sergio

A juvenile black kite in flight

that they “will swoop and carry off a dead rat or other titbit lying in the middle of a congested thoroughfare, turning and twisting with masterly adroitness to avoid the tangle of overhead electric wires and the bustling traffic below, or one will bide his time and suddenly swoop down from nowhere before the picnicker’s sandwich has reached his mouth, whisk it neatly out of his hand and decamp as suddenly as it came!”

Wherever you are in India, the black kite is amongst the most common raptors you will see. They soar in the smoggy haze between the high-rises of Bengaluru, living high up in the top storeys where pigeons are probably the only other birds for company. They

sit on the sides of bridges in Kolkata, scanning the filthy water sludging below for food. They can be seen on Goa’s sandy beaches, around the harbours or following fishing boats out at sea: a flock of black kites with an occasional brahminy kite. They scour the monotonous flat land of chequered fields in the Punjab and nest in the stately chinars that skirt that jewel in the crown of Kashmir, the Dal lake. Practically anywhere in this country, whenever you see a large brown raptor especially in or around human habitation, the chances are very high that it will be a black kite.

You rarely see black kites in dense natural forests and only a pair or two at forest edges and over fields. But

you will see them in multitudes over garbage dumps on the outskirts of large cities. A recent study in Delhi found black kite densities as high as 15 pairs per square kilometre. They have learnt to live alongside humans and thrive on the mountains of waste that we generate. The black kite that we see at Mehrangarh is one of the most successful and widespread raptors in the world.

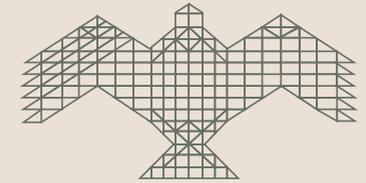
What of other kinds of kites? The black kite belongs to a cluster of closely-related sub-species found all over Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, except in the deserts of north Africa, the Middle-East and central Asia, and in parts of south-eastern Asia. Small differences in home-range, behaviour and physical features allow us to sort the black kite into several distinct sub-species or races. This differentiation allows us to better understand local variations. We know, for instance, that while populations of black kites that live in cool, temperate regions are nearly always migratory, black kites from tropical and sub-tropical areas – such as the Indian sub-continent – are mostly resident and make only small local movements, if any.

The sub-species most commonly seen in India is resident almost throughout the Indian mainland: across the peninsula, in Bangladesh, and much of the sub-Himalayan region from

the Assam valley to Pakistan, and also in Kandahar in Afghanistan. It is a summer visitor to most of the rest of Afghanistan and Baluchistan. Found mainly in the lowlands, it ascends the cooler hills locally.

Scientists assign a unique Latin name to each species and sub-species of the Animal (and Plant) Kingdom. This allows people from all over

KITE-SHAPED ALTAR IN VEDIC RITUALS



The *Atiratra Agnicyana*, one of the oldest surviving Vedic rituals, is considered by some to be the greatest of them all. The entire elaborate ritual takes twelve days to perform and involves the shifting of the sacred fire from one altar to another, moving to the east. During the course of the ritual, a great bird-shaped altar – the *Uttaravedi* or northern altar or *syena-cita* – is built from precisely 1005 bricks.

The *syena-cita agni* altar is said to be in the shape of a falcon, roughly translated from the Sanskrit word *syena* or *alaja*, but people who know their birds say the shape of this altar is unmistakably that of a soaring kite as it drifts in large rables or ‘armadas’, gliding with the wind on motionless, angled wings.



Vinod Puri

Adults and a juvenile share a perch in Rao Jodha Park in Jodhpur.

the world to know precisely which species they're talking about, even if local names and common names differ, as they frequently do. The scientific name of the black kite is *Milvus migrans*. Scientific names are a combination of the genus name and the species name, which correspond more or less to our last and first names. *Milvus* in Latin means 'kite' and is used as the scientific name for the entire genus of kites, and *migrans* alludes to the migratory nature of the species. The red kite of Europe, for example – a closely related species – is also *Milvus* but its specific name is *milvus* as well – so its

full scientific name is *Milvus milvus*.

To distinguish small differences within a species, scientists sometimes go one step further and divide a species into sub-species or races (much like our *Homo sapiens* is divided into separate races, all of which belong to the same species). The sub-species of the black kite that is resident throughout most of India, including Rajasthan, is *Milvus migrans govinda* or the 'small Indian kite', formerly called the 'pariah kite'. 'Govinda' is one of the many names of Krishna, denoting – along with its allusion to the Hindu god – the

geographical distribution of kites within the Indian sub-continent. Unlike other sub-species of the black kite, *Milvus migrans govinda* is largely a resident species and so the species name 'migrans' is actually a bit of a misnomer, gained mainly by association, because all the other sub-species of the black kite tend to be migratory.

In a large part of its range *Milvus migrans govinda* is joined in winter by the black-eared kite *Milvus migrans lineatus*, a cousin of the small Indian kite that migrates to India from central Asia (and possibly some parts of Europe, too). The word 'lineatus' in Latin means 'lined', and refers to the striations or long, thin patterns on its chest and the starker contrast in the pattern on the undersides of its wings. The adult bird also has a dark patch around its cheeks or 'ears' which gives it its common name. The two sub-species, however, can be quite hard to tell apart and there are seasonal moults in their feathers which only adds to the confusion. As if that is not enough, juveniles of subspecies *govinda* too are sometimes prominently streaked.

The black kite is very vocal. While it is capable of making a variety of harsh, guttural or squeaky screeches, the call of the black kite is a shrill, almost musical ululating whistle, heard most often during the breeding season.

India's foremost birdman Salim Ali (who loved to express bird calls in words) rendered their call as 'ewe-wir-wir-wir'! Another writer calls it 'a shrill whinnying'. Anyone who has lived or travelled in India will be familiar with this call, even if they are completely unaware of what is making it!

The average lifespan of a kite is a around 25 years or perhaps a little more. The oldest surviving individual – which was tagged with a band around its leg as part of a study in Spain – was 28 years, though this may have been somewhat exceptional.



Alpsdake (Wikicommons)

The black-eared kite *Milvus migrans lineatus* seen here in flight. Note the pale patches on the underside of its wings



Luke Massey



Nishant Kumar

Kites can be quite creative when it comes to choosing nesting sites

Nesting happens mainly in winter and almost never in the hot, humid rainy months. In some cases, kites may even migrate from places of heavy rainfall to drier areas before the commencement of the rainy season.

While the breeding season is variable in peninsular India, in northern parts of the sub-continent where the seasons are more clearly defined kites begin their courtship at the onset of winter. In Delhi, they begin to nest as early as December, while most smaller birds are still struggling to cope with the cold.

Their courtship display is spectacular. Kites mock-dive at each other, the passive bird turning onto its back in mid-air with feet outstretched to parry the 'attack'. They fly closely in synch and turn and tumble and swirl impressively, all the while making a high-pitched trilling shriek. In the act of mating, a male alights onto the female's back in response to her squealing invitation, flapping his wings to steady himself. A series of six to ten urgent, excited squeals rising in crescendo and ending abruptly on completion of the act, make a pair of mating black kites hard to miss anywhere in the vicinity.

Black kites usually nest in tall trees and only rarely in man-made structures. The nest is an untidy assembly of sticks, incorporating rubbish of every description, placed



Nishant Kumar

(TOP) Kite nests can be quite eclectic! Newly hatched chicks (MIDDLE) are nearly white and only gradually begin to moult and change colour (BELOW).



Luke Massey

Kites being fed from a rooftop.

high up in a forking branch or in the crotch of a large tree. Pairs of kites often nest in the same place year after year. Experienced pairs can finish building a nest in less than 10 days, or if the previous year's nest is in reasonable shape, in just a few days. Females generally lay two eggs, sometimes three and only rarely four, towards the second half of January and both parents co-operate in rearing their young. The eggs are broadly oval, almost equal at both ends, variable in colour and markings, mostly off-white with dark blotches, smears or freckles.

Chicks are fed a diet of scavenged refuse, small rodents, frogs and other

small prey. They have few natural predators and fewer still that the parents can't frighten away.

It is a sight to see young kites that are nearly adult-sized still being fed. One parent brings back a rat to a flapping ovation of shrill shrieks, and the boldest chick greedily gobbles it down.

When their parents are away, the young ones open their fully-feathered wings and flap them, testing them, as they hop in one place. Then one fine day they will just know somehow that it is time to take off from the nest and join their parents, soaring high above.

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Photographs

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Symbols of the Royal House of Jodhpur If you were to visit Mehrangarh Fort on any day of the year at 3.30 in the afternoon, you'd see hundreds of Black Kites swooping and diving for scraps of meat that are thrown up into the air. It is a ritual that has gone on for several decades. Read all about it in this fascinating little booklet that tells you about Black Kites and why they are revered in Jodhpur.

Author SARTAJ GHUMAN was born in the Punjab and travels all over India though he has a distinct preference for high mountains. He is a trained wildlife biologist but prefers poetry to dry academic ways of looking at the world. He likes to say that he spends his time gallivanting in the mountains when he's actually mostly assisting his girlfriend who is a scientist studying Himalayan glaciers. He is modest about his artistic aptitude but spends a lot of his time drawing and painting with consummate skill and passion. He loves teaching and interacting with children, wherever he is.

Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park (in Jodhpur, Rajasthan) was created by the Mehrangarh Museum Trust in 2006 as a project to restore the natural ecology of a large rocky tract that abuts Mehrangarh Fort. The Park officially opened in February 2011. Visitors are welcomed and oriented at the Visitors Centre from where they can choose from several walking trails that wind through different aspects of the landscape.



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