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Avifaunal Diversity and Distribution Patterns in Nandurbar District, Maharashtra, India: A Review of Habitat Associations, Documented Records and Conservation Priorities

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Abstract

Nandurbar District in north-western Maharashtra occupies an ecologically important part of the Satpuda landscape, where dry deciduous and teak-bearing forests occur alongside scrub, agricultural land, settlements, streams and seasonal wetlands. This habitat mosaic provides conditions for forest-dependent, open-country, wetland-associated and human-adapted birds. This review synthesizes published local studies and publicly available bird records to assess the current evidence base for avifaunal diversity, habitat association and conservation priorities in the district. The regional eBird checklist lists 228 native and naturalized species for Nandurbar; this is a cumulative occurrence record rather than a standardized estimate of abundance or completeness (eBird, n.d.). A survey in Shahada Tahsil documented 63 species from four sites and highlighted the contribution of ponds, shrub vegetation and dry deciduous forest (Chaudhari & Ishi, 2019). The district also has exceptional conservation significance for the Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti*. Surveys in ten forest ranges found that the species is associated with semi-open, teak-bearing dry deciduous forest, patchy woodland and hilly terrain, and that forest degradation and illegal tree cutting pose serious threats (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020). A biodiversity assessment around Prakasha also reported bird species of conservation concern, including the White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, although its broader multi-taxon scope limits its value as a district-wide bird inventory (Rathoure, 2025). Taken together, the literature indicates that Nandurbar's avifaunal importance is linked to habitat heterogeneity and the persistence of structurally suitable forest and wetland patches. The principal evidence gaps are uneven spatial coverage, inconsistent sampling effort, limited repeated seasonal counts and the absence of a standardized district-wide checklist based on verified observations. Priorities include habitat-specific monitoring, protection of Forest Owlet habitat, maintenance of seasonal wetlands, conservation-friendly agricultural margins and transparent integration of field observations with citizen-science records.

Keywords: Avifauna; bird diversity; Nandurbar; Satpuda landscape; Forest Owlet; habitat association; wetlands; dry deciduous forest; conservation; Maharashtra

1. Introduction

Birds occupy a broad range of ecological niches and contribute to ecosystem processes through seed dispersal, pollination, predation, scavenging and nutrient transfer. Because bird occurrence and abundance respond to changes in vegetation structure, food supply, water availability and disturbance, bird communities are widely used in ecological monitoring and biodiversity assessment (Bibby et al., 2000; Gregory et al., 2003). However, bird records need to be interpreted in relation to survey effort, detectability, season and habitat coverage. A long-term checklist assembled by many observers cannot be directly compared with a short, standardized survey unless these differences are acknowledged.

Maharashtra contains diverse physiographic and ecological settings, including the Satpuda ranges, Deccan Plateau, river valleys, agricultural landscapes and wetlands. Nandurbar District lies in the north-western part of the state and forms part of the broader Satpuda landscape. Its habitat mosaic includes dry deciduous forest, teak-bearing woodland, scrub, cropland, villages, streams and seasonal or perennial water bodies. Such environmental variation can support resident species as well as seasonal visitors, but it also means that no single locality can represent the district's entire avifauna.

Local evidence confirms that Nandurbar is important for bird diversity. The eBird regional checklist records 228 native and naturalized species, while the study by Chaudhari and Ishi (2019) recorded 63 species from four sites in Shahada Tahsil. These datasets differ in spatial extent, duration and observation effort and should therefore be treated as complementary sources rather than as directly comparable estimates. The district is especially notable for the Forest Owlet, a globally threatened species rediscovered in the Toranmal area in 1997 after a prolonged period without confirmed records (Rasmussen & Collar, 1998). Subsequent work has clarified its distribution and habitat preferences in Nandurbar (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020).

Despite these records, the published evidence is dispersed across local surveys, species-focused studies, biodiversity assessments and online occurrence platforms. A review can help distinguish well-supported findings from provisional assumptions, identify ecological patterns that recur across sources and specify the information needed for a stronger district-wide assessment. The present article therefore reviews documented avifaunal records for Nandurbar, examines habitat associations and conservation issues, and outlines priorities for future research. It is a literature-based review, not a report of a new field survey.

2. Review scope and approach

The review was developed from the literature and documentary sources cited in the supplied manuscript, supplemented by targeted checks of the published Shahada Tahsil study, the Forest Owlet habitat-selection paper, the Prakasha biodiversity assessment and the Nandurbar regional eBird checklist. Sources were considered for their relevance to bird occurrence, habitat association, conservation significance and survey design. The synthesis is narrative rather than systematic: it does not claim an exhaustive search of all databases or a formal meta-analysis.

Evidence was interpreted according to source type. Peer-reviewed or scholarly studies were used to describe site-specific survey findings and species-habitat relationships. The eBird checklist was treated as a dynamic, effort-dependent record of reported occurrence, not as a standardized abundance estimate. The Prakasha assessment was considered as a local multi-taxon environmental baseline, not as a district-wide avifaunal census. Provisional species totals and habitat-diversity indices in the source manuscript were excluded from

the review's findings because they were explicitly illustrative and were not derived from a verified primary dataset.

Scientific names and conservation categories should be checked against current taxonomic and conservation authorities before publication. Common names are used alongside scientific names where relevant, and conservation labels are reported only when supported by the cited source. This is particularly important for species whose taxonomy or threat category may be updated.

3. Ecological setting of Nandurbar District

The district's position within the Satpuda landscape produces variation in elevation, slope, valley structure, vegetation and water availability. Published Forest Owllet research describes an elevation range of approximately 130–1,032 m for the broader study landscape and reports the species mainly between 250 and 550 m within suitable surveyed habitats (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020). Such topographic variation creates multiple microhabitats, including hill slopes, plateaus, valleys, forest edges and open areas adjoining woodland.

Dry deciduous and teak-bearing forests provide canopy, tree cavities, perches and foraging substrates for forest-associated birds. Scrub and open ground support species adapted to sparse vegetation and exposed foraging areas. Agricultural fields and field margins can provide seeds, invertebrates and feeding opportunities, especially where scattered trees, fallow patches, irrigation channels and hedgerows remain. Ponds, reservoirs and streams support water-associated birds, including herons, egrets, ducks, kingfishers and waders. The value of each habitat depends not only on its area but also on its quality, seasonal persistence and connectivity with neighbouring habitats.

The habitat mosaic should not be interpreted as a uniform landscape. Forest patches differ in tree composition, disturbance and connectivity; wetlands differ in hydroperiod, depth and shoreline vegetation; and agricultural areas differ in crop type, pesticide use and retention of semi-natural margins. These differences are likely to affect the composition of bird communities and the occurrence of species with specialized habitat requirements.

Habitat type	Likely avifaunal component	Ecological features relevant to birds
Dry deciduous and teak-bearing forest	Forest owls, woodpeckers, barbets, drongos, flycatchers and raptors	Tree structure, cavities, canopy heterogeneity, prey availability and low disturbance
Scrub and open woodland margins	Prinias, larks, robins, bushchats and shrikes	Low vegetation, bare ground, shrubs and open foraging areas
Ponds, reservoirs and streams	Ducks, herons, egrets, cormorants, kingfishers and waders	Water depth, shoreline condition, prey availability and seasonal persistence
Agricultural land and field margins	Egrets, mynas, wagtails, drongos, doves and other open-country birds	Crop cycle, invertebrate availability, field margins, fallow land and scattered trees
Villages and built environments	Pigeons, sparrows, crows, mynas and other adaptable species	Buildings, food subsidies, nesting sites and human disturbance

4. Documented avifaunal diversity

4.1 Regional occurrence records

The Nandurbar regional eBird checklist currently presents 228 native and naturalized species (eBird, n.d.). This figure is valuable as a cumulative record of reported occurrence and provides a useful starting point for compiling a district checklist. Nevertheless, citizen-science data are shaped by observer distribution, access to sites, seasonal effort, identification skills and the willingness to submit complete checklists. A high cumulative species count therefore does not, on its own, indicate high local abundance or demonstrate that all species are regularly present.

For conservation and monitoring, online records are most useful when they retain date, location, evidence and effort information. Records of uncommon or range-restricted species should be reviewed carefully, particularly where identification is difficult or where the record would materially alter a known distribution. Repeated, well-documented observations can complement formal surveys and help identify sites that merit targeted fieldwork.

4.2 Evidence from Shahada Tahsil

Chaudhari and Ishi (2019) documented 63 bird species belonging to 17 orders and 32 families from four sites around Shahada Tahsil. Their study emphasized annual and seasonal ponds, open shrub vegetation and dry deciduous forest as important components of the local bird landscape. The authors also identified habitat loss and modern agricultural practices as concerns for the persistence of local avifauna. Because the study was site-specific and conducted with a defined survey scope, its 63-species result should not be interpreted as a complete checklist for the entire district.

The Shahada study is nevertheless important because it demonstrates that smaller water bodies and adjoining terrestrial habitats can contribute to local bird richness. Seasonal ponds may provide feeding and resting habitat when water availability changes across the year. Their contribution is likely to depend on hydroperiod, water quality, shoreline vegetation and the disturbance associated with fishing, livestock, agriculture and settlement.

4.3 Evidence from Prakasha

Rathoure (2025) assessed biodiversity within a 10-km radius of a proposed cement-grinding unit at Prakasha. The study was broader than an avifaunal survey and reported 60 faunal species across several taxonomic groups. Its bird records included the White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, species of substantial conservation interest. This assessment provides a local environmental context, but its findings should not be merged with the Shahada bird list as if both studies used identical sampling designs or taxonomic coverage.

The Prakasha study also illustrates the value of biodiversity documentation in areas facing potential industrial development. For birds, impact assessment is strongest when it distinguishes baseline occurrence from predictions, identifies sensitive habitats and evaluates plausible exposure pathways such as dust, disturbance, water extraction, traffic and habitat modification. These potential effects require site-specific evidence and should not be assumed to have occurred merely because a project has been proposed.

Evidence source	Spatial scope	Main contribution	Important limitation
eBird regional checklist	Nandurbar District	228 native and naturalized species recorded in the regional checklist	Cumulative records; observer effort and spatial coverage are uneven
Chaudhari and Ishi (2019)	Four sites in Shahada Tahsil	63 species; highlights ponds, shrub vegetation and dry deciduous forest	Local study; not a complete district-wide inventory
Kulkarni and Mehta (2020)	Ten forest ranges in Nandurbar	Distribution and habitat selection of Forest Owlet	Species-focused study rather than a general avifaunal census
Rathoure (2025)	10-km assessment area around Prakasha	Multi-taxon biodiversity assessment; includes notable bird records	Birds are one component of a broader environmental assessment

5. Habitat associations and distribution patterns

5.1 Forest and forest-edge birds

Forest habitats are central to Nandurbar's conservation value because they provide resources for species that depend on trees, cavities, woodland structure and relatively undisturbed cover. However, the ecological quality of a forest patch cannot be evaluated from its area alone. Tree species composition, mature-tree retention, understorey structure, bamboo density, edge exposure, disturbance and connectivity may all influence the birds that use it. Forest edges can support generalists and some open-woodland species, but they do not necessarily replace the resources available within forest habitat.

The Forest Owlet is the clearest example of a species whose local distribution is linked to forest structure. Kulkarni and Mehta (2020) surveyed ten forest ranges and reported a preference for semi-open, teak-bearing dry deciduous forest interspersed with agricultural land. The species was associated with patchy forest, valleys, slopes and plateaus, and was recorded mainly at elevations of approximately 250–550 m. The authors also reported avoidance of areas with high levels of illegal tree cutting and identified forest degradation as a serious threat. These findings indicate that the relevant conservation unit is not simply a mapped forest boundary, but a network of suitable habitat patches with adequate tree structure and manageable disturbance.

5.2 Wetlands and water-associated birds

Wetlands and small water bodies contribute a distinct component to the district's avifauna. Ducks and other waterfowl depend on open water and suitable feeding conditions, while herons, egrets and waders respond to shallow margins, mudflats, aquatic prey and fluctuating water levels. Kingfishers and cormorants use aquatic habitats in different ways, making the structural diversity of a wetland important. The Shahada Tahsil study's emphasis on seasonal and annual ponds supports the view that small water bodies deserve attention in district-level monitoring (Chaudhari & Ishi, 2019).

Wetland value is likely to change across the annual cycle. A pond that provides extensive shallow margins during one period may become unsuitable when water levels rise sharply, vegetation is removed or the water body dries prematurely. Monitoring should therefore record not only bird species but also water level, exposed

shoreline, vegetation, disturbance and evidence of pollution. Waterbird counts should distinguish birds feeding or resting at the site from individuals merely flying over it.

5.3 Agricultural and scrub landscapes

Agricultural land is neither uniformly beneficial nor uniformly detrimental to birds. Crops, fallow fields, irrigation channels, scattered trees and field margins can provide food and shelter for a variety of open-country species. At the same time, intensive pesticide use, removal of hedgerows, burning of field margins and conversion of fallow land can reduce prey availability and nesting opportunities. The Shahada study identified modern agricultural practices as a concern, supporting the need to document the specific practices that influence local habitats rather than treating all farmland as a single category (Chaudhari & Ishi, 2019).

Scrub and open grass-dominated patches are also important because some birds require low vegetation, exposed ground or a mosaic of shrubs and open areas. Afforestation or plantation development that replaces naturally open habitat can therefore be inappropriate for some open-country species. Management should preserve habitat diversity and avoid assuming that a single vegetation type is optimal for all birds.

6. The Forest Owlet as a flagship conservation species

The Forest Owlet *Athene (Heteroglaux) blewitti* is an endemic Indian owl with an important history in Nandurbar. Its rediscovery in 1997 renewed attention to a species that had not been confirmed for more than a century (Rasmussen & Collar, 1998). Toranmal and Taloda are historically important localities, and later surveys have expanded knowledge of the species' distribution within the district. The species has high conservation value because its restricted distribution and dependence on suitable forest habitat make it vulnerable to local habitat deterioration.

Kulkarni and Mehta (2020) provide the most directly relevant habitat-selection evidence for Nandurbar. Their findings associate the Forest Owlet with semi-open teak-bearing dry deciduous forest, patchy woodland and particular topographic settings, while also documenting avoidance of areas affected by substantial illegal tree cutting. The findings should not be simplified into a claim that agricultural land itself is the species' habitat: the study describes an obligate forest species that may occur in forest patches embedded within a broader agricultural matrix.

Threats discussed in the Forest Owlet literature include forest degradation, illicit woodcutting, encroachment, grazing, collection of forest products, road-related disturbance and other pressures associated with local dependence on forest resources (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020). These pressures are not independent. Removing mature trees may reduce nesting or roosting structures, while fragmentation and disturbance may alter access to suitable foraging areas. Conservation responses should therefore combine protection of known habitat, enforcement against destructive activities, restoration of degraded patches and engagement with communities whose livelihoods depend on the forest.

The Forest Owlet can serve as a focal species for forest monitoring, but it should not be used as the sole indicator of forest biodiversity. Management that benefits a single forest specialist may not automatically benefit wetland birds, open-country species or other taxa with different habitat requirements. A district conservation programme should therefore pair targeted Forest Owlet monitoring with broader surveys across forest, scrub, farmland and wetland habitats.

7. Threats and conservation pressures

7.1 Habitat degradation and fragmentation

The most clearly documented local concern is degradation of Forest Owlet habitat. Tree cutting and the loss or fragmentation of suitable dry deciduous forest can reduce habitat quality even where some forest cover remains (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020). For other birds, habitat conversion can remove nesting sites, alter food availability and increase the distance between feeding and breeding areas. Mapping forest cover alone is insufficient; monitoring should also record mature-tree availability, patch connectivity, edge disturbance and the condition of known sensitive sites.

7.2 Wetland alteration and disturbance

Filling, drainage, pollution, shoreline modification and disturbance can reduce the value of ponds and wetlands for water-associated birds. Because the Shahada study identified ponds as important local habitats, their protection should form part of district planning rather than being restricted to large, formally designated wetlands (Chaudhari & Ishi, 2019). Seasonal wetlands should be evaluated according to their hydrological cycle, and conservation measures should avoid unintentionally eliminating natural fluctuations that sustain shallow-water feeding habitat.

7.3 Agricultural intensification and chemical exposure

Agricultural intensification may affect birds through changes in field structure, loss of field margins and changes in the abundance of insects or other prey. Exposure to pesticides is a potential concern for insectivorous birds and predators, but local impacts should be demonstrated with evidence rather than assumed from the presence of agriculture alone. Future studies could compare bird occurrence and feeding activity across fields with different management practices while recording crop type, pesticide-use history and the availability of semi-natural margins.

7.4 Infrastructure and industrial development

Roads, built infrastructure and industrial activity can affect birds through habitat loss, noise, traffic, dust, lighting and changes to water availability. The Prakasha biodiversity assessment provides an example of a local environmental baseline assembled in the context of proposed industrial development (Rathoure, 2025). A sound assessment should distinguish existing pressures from predicted impacts and should include pre-development records, repeat monitoring and clear mitigation indicators. Potential impacts should be described as hypotheses until supported by measured changes.

7.5 Hunting, trapping and direct disturbance

Direct persecution, trapping and disturbance may be important at particular sites, especially where rare species are involved. However, the spatial distribution and current intensity of these pressures need documentation. Community engagement, awareness activities and collaboration with forest authorities can improve reporting, reduce disturbance at sensitive sites and support long-term monitoring. Sensitive location data for rare species should be shared responsibly to avoid increasing disturbance.

8. Methodological priorities for future avifaunal research

A district-wide assessment should use a stratified sampling design that represents major habitat types and geographic sectors. Fixed-radius point counts and line transects are established approaches for bird surveys, but the choice should reflect habitat structure, visibility, target species and field conditions (Bibby et al., 2000). Surveys should be repeated across winter, summer, monsoon and post-monsoon periods because detectability and occurrence change seasonally. Forest Owlet surveys may require species-specific protocols and should be conducted by trained observers using methods that minimize disturbance.

Each observation should include scientific name, date, time, geographic coordinates, habitat, number of individuals, detection method and evidence type. The survey record should distinguish visual detections, vocal detections, photographs, acoustic recordings and indirect evidence. For uncommon or difficult-to-identify species, the basis for identification should be retained. Taxonomy should be standardized before analysis so that synonyms do not create duplicate records.

Species richness, encounter rates and diversity indices can be useful, but their interpretation depends on standardized effort and an appropriate sampling unit. The Shannon index, Simpson diversity and evenness should be calculated from verified data and should be accompanied by clear formula definitions. Where sample sizes and replication permit, occupancy models or other detection-aware methods can help separate absence from non-detection. Habitat comparisons should account for differences in survey effort and detectability rather than relying solely on raw species totals.

Citizen-science records can expand geographic coverage and help identify under-surveyed areas, but they should be integrated with structured field surveys using transparent rules. For example, records may be classified by evidence level and confidence, and unusual records can be independently reviewed. The eBird total of 228 species is useful as a dynamic occurrence baseline, but should be reported with an access date and not presented as a definitive estimate of the district's complete avifauna (eBird, n.d.).

9. Research gaps and future directions

The available literature points to several priorities. First, a verified district-level checklist is needed that harmonizes the Shahada study, published Forest Owlet records, local biodiversity assessments and public occurrence records without double-counting taxa or treating all records as equally reliable. Second, sampling is uneven among habitats and localities; a stratified survey should deliberately include remote forest ranges, small seasonal wetlands, scrub patches and agricultural landscapes. Third, the current evidence base provides more detailed habitat information for the Forest Owlet than for most other bird groups. Additional research should examine waterbird seasonality, open-country birds, breeding records and changes in bird occurrence across land-use gradients.

Fourth, long-term monitoring is needed to distinguish persistent trends from short-term fluctuations associated with rainfall, water levels, crop cycles or observer effort. Fifth, conservation studies should evaluate specific mechanisms of habitat change, including the effects of tree cutting, road development, wetland alteration and agricultural practices. Finally, local conservation planning should incorporate the knowledge of residents, farmers, birdwatchers and forest staff while maintaining rigorous data standards and protecting sensitive species locations.

These gaps do not imply that the district lacks avifaunal value. Rather, they show that the existing evidence is

strongest for documenting the importance of particular habitats and species, while a robust quantitative understanding of district-wide distribution and population trends remains to be developed.

10. Conservation recommendations

Conservation planning in Nandurbar should retain a habitat-mosaic approach. For forests, priorities include protecting known Forest Owlet sites, retaining mature and cavity-bearing trees, reducing destructive tree cutting, maintaining connectivity among suitable patches and monitoring disturbance along roads and forest edges. Restoration should use locally appropriate native vegetation and should not replace naturally open scrub or grassland with plantations where this would remove habitat for open-country species.

For wetlands and ponds, management should prevent avoidable filling and pollution, retain shallow margins and native shoreline vegetation where ecologically appropriate, and monitor seasonal changes in water level and disturbance. Small wetlands should be included in local biodiversity planning because their importance may be seasonal and easily overlooked. Agricultural measures can include retaining field margins, scattered trees and fallow patches, reducing unnecessary pesticide exposure and maintaining vegetated channels where feasible.

Monitoring should combine repeated field surveys with carefully validated citizen-science records. A district-level database should record the date, location, effort and evidence for each observation and should be updated periodically. Species conservation status and legal protection should be checked against current authoritative sources before any management decision or publication. Community participation is essential: awareness and reporting programmes should be designed with local stakeholders and should complement, rather than replace, habitat protection and enforcement.

11. Conclusions

The available literature and public occurrence records identify Nandurbar District as an important avifaunal landscape shaped by dry deciduous and teak-bearing forests, wetlands, scrub, agriculture and settlements. The eBird regional checklist records 228 native and naturalized species, while the Shahada Tahsil survey documented 63 species from four sites; these figures represent different evidence types and should not be treated as directly comparable estimates (Chaudhari & Ishi, 2019; eBird, n.d.). The Forest Owlet provides especially strong evidence of the district's conservation importance, and published research shows that forest structure and disturbance are central to its local habitat suitability (Kulkarni & Mehta, 2020).

The evidence also demonstrates the need to distinguish documented records from tentative values. The provisional total of 120 species and illustrative diversity indices in the source manuscript have therefore not been included as findings in this review. Future progress depends on standardized seasonal surveys, verified taxonomy, explicit measures of sampling effort and long-term monitoring across all major habitat types. Protection of forest habitat, maintenance of small wetlands, conservation-friendly agricultural practices and community-supported observation programmes together provide a practical basis for sustaining Nandurbar's bird diversity.

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