The charm of the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur is the amazing variety of birds that come there every winter

I had waited a good 45 minutes on the banks of the marshes. I could hear the distant thrum of the water pump, interspersed with calls of the birds. Human habitation was just across the boundary wall, less than 50 feet away. But the pair of Sarus Cranes I was stalking didn’t think much of the boundary wall. They were on the other side, poking around in the potato field. Officially, they weren’t in Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur anymore. But the villagers were familiar with their errant behaviour. “Thodi der mein vapas aa jayenge, madam,” a farmer yelled across the wall to me. After all, their nest was in the marshes within the park. So they would have to come back after foraging for grains among humans.

I was at Keoladeo for a weekend trip. It had been planned hurriedly since it was the end of the good birding season and even though Kalu Singh, my guide and rikshawallah at Bharatpur, assured me that there would still be plenty to see, I was skeptical. The Sarus Cranes would definitely be making their way north in a week or two. The painted storks, pelicans and hornbills too wouldn’t last much longer.
I had already lost a day to incessant and unseasonal rains the previous day. So, I set out early, around 5 am, to make the most of my day in the park. The marshes were still shrouded in dense fog at that time of the day. But soon, as it lifted, you got a glimpse of the early starters – red-cheeked bulbuls, turtle doves, green pigeons, owlets, snake birds, northern shovellers, black-headed ibis... The day tourists and the “phamilee” gangs would invade the park later in the day, so I wanted to catch the prized species before they were scared away by the noise and crowds.

Keoladeo is one of the few bird sanctuaries that are planned and maintained well. There are four paths marked out as only walking tracks, each ranging between a kilometre to three. The rest of the park has well-maintained, bricked tracks that are accessed by cycle-rickshaws or safari vehicles.

The birds too seem to recognize the layout of the park and each has its favourite spot to hang around. The fact that the park has large amounts of the distinct red algae that’s the gourmet fare for waterfowl helps too. The ones that Bharatpur is most known for – flamingoes, painted storks and pelicans are spotted right at the end of the park.

The roads within form a network of 28 km and most serious birders have their regular rickshawallahs. Having spent years there, the rickshawallahs are almost as knowledgeable as the guides, pointing out a serpent eagle hidden in a mass of dry branches or a green pigeon amidst foliage. They also know what birds are best spotted at what time of the day and plan your trip around the park accordingly.

Keoladeo National Park, like most parks in Rajasthan, comes with its share of history and is one of the oldest in the country. It was identified as a bird sanctuary nearly 250-years-ago. The natural marshes that attracted thousands of birds were enhanced with bund constructions during the reign of Maharaja Suraj Mal in the 1700s. The park also became a favourite hunting ground of the maharajas till independence yielding thousands of birds during each shikar season. Named after the Keoladeo temple within the park, the park is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Ideally located between Delhi and Jaipur, Bharatpur is a favourite with day trippers. The park is small enough and the bird life dense enough to ensure you see at least some of the star attractions – pelicans, painted storks, flamingoes and even a few nilgai and sambar deer. But if you are a serious birder or photographer, you are advised to start early, take a long break at the
lake when the crowds are the most around mid-day and head to the farther corners of the part in the late afternoon.

Also, if you, like me, want to catch a glimpse of some rare birds like the Sarus, keep in mind that a day or even three might not be sufficient. The birds, after all, are wilful creatures. Staying at one of the hotels on the fringes of the park might be a good idea. Within the park itself, you only have the option of the Bharatpur Ashok.

As I dragged myself away from the lake that evening, the pre-adult painted storks were burying their heads under their wings, settling down for the night. The fog was coming down and the last of the birders were dragging their heavy photography equipment as they trudged back to the hotels. There would be many checklists compared and discussed that night as each accounted the birds spotted.

Quick guide to Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur

Best time to visit: October to March

Recommended places to stay: The Birder’s Inn on the highway and Bharatpur Ashok within the park

Must see: Flamingoes, painted storks, pelicans, hornbills and sarus cranes

Getting there: By road or rail from Delhi and Jaipur

Getting around: Cycles and cycle rickshaws