Chasing hornbills: a three-year campus bird count review

Note to the Reader
To the ones reading: you don't need to be a "birder" to enjoy this. I'm writing for those who, like me once, haven't yet been introduced to the world flying right above their heads. P.S. If you see a bird name you don't recognize, look it up—it will bring this story to life! This is a review of the GITAM Visakhapatnam Campus, nestled in the "City of Destiny."

It began with a conversation with a campus security staff member. We were sharing what we knew-he showed me photos of herons and Openbill Storks from his village, while I described the residents of our campus. Just as our preparatory session for beginners (which had turned from a 40-minute talk into a two-hour "crusade") ended, a fascinating sound echoed: the cackling call of the Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros birostris*.

Despite the best efforts of my tired troop to pin it down, the bird remained a "fancy tale" I used to keep them motivated. But I am not shy about having fancy wants when I'm with nature, nor am I disappointed when reality doesn't deliver. Everything is already magical. This search for the elusive call perfectly captures my three-year journey with the campus bird count (CBC), an annual citizen science initiative that has transformed how we monitor our campus biodiversity.

Year 1 – The whimsical beginning (CBC'24)

Before our first count, many of us didn't even know two different species of crows lived here. Our very own "Indiana Jones," professor Harish Prakash, introduced us to birding through a WWF collaboration. We learned to use binoculars, eBird, and the Merlin app to identify calls, and use checklists. We discovered the Shikra's taste for Rock Pigeons and the stunning red shoulder patches of Alexandrine Parakeets blending into African Tulip trees.

My own passion peaked on a bizarre whim: firing a random camera flash into the dark patches of the campus at night, hoping for a miracle. Drumroll, please-zooming in on the image later, I discovered a shy Spotted Owlet hidden on a tiny branch, its eyes glowing yellow! We went from novices to identifying 20 species by call in just four days, documenting 38 species total and earning WWF recognition as "top birders" among 178 Indian campuses.

The magic of science: comparing diversity

In the quiet months between year 1 and year 2, we used our new skills to measure the "evenness" of our campus patches.

Campus Bird Diversity Across Patches

Site	Shannon index (H)	Evenness (E)	Interpretation
Gandhi Park	0.623	0.685	More stable: balanced distribution of species.
Ganesh Park	0.662	0.478	Top-heavy: more species, but dominated by a few (like crows).

This taught us that biodiversity equals stable, resilient life. Just like the ocean relies on microscopic plankton to prevent a collapse, every tiny campus ecosystem is part of a massive, fragile chain. If you look at a tree and only see timber, you're missing the ocean for the drop.

Year 2 – The battalion (CBC'25)

By year 2, my buddy Aditya and I had formed our own club. With a 30-sized "troop" at our peak, we conquered every nook of the campus. We added dramatic species like the Common Hawk-Cuckoo and the colorful Chestnut-headed Bee-eater.

We even found a Coppersmith Barbet—a chubby craftsman who carves nests into dead wood. Dead does not mean done!

We recorded 46 species during the event, with the magnificent Eastern Barn Owl as our popular star. Our yearly count climbed to 55 species.

Year 3 – The missing "red flag" (CBC'26)

This year, a brave troop of 15 "green poets" showed up despite mid-semester exams. We were greeted by a mixed species flock: cheeky Rufous Treepies, vibrant Black-rumped Flameback, and a Golden Oriole. We even spotted the Blyth's Reed Warbler, a tiny brown bird that migrates all the way from the Finland-Siberia region!

However, the atmosphere felt slightly bleak. In previous years, we easily spotted 4–8 Red-vented and White-browed Bulbuls. This year, we struggled to find even one and none of the Red-Whiskered Bulbul. This stark difference highlights why the CBC is so important-it tracks the "quiet disappearances" of common birds as much as the loud arrivals of rare ones.

The finale: The hornbill returns

On the last day of the event, I went out with one final whim. I wished to record a hornbill

Shikra (*Tachyspiza badia*)

Jungle Babbler (*Argya striata*)

Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*)

Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*)

Blue-tailed Bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*)

Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*)

Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*)

Indian Golden Oriole (*Oriolus kundoo*)

White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*)

Shikra (*Tachyspiza badia*)

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and a tiny bush bird (specifically the Small Minivet).

Ten minutes into our final checklist, as I peered into a dusky patch under thick canopy cover, I saw a struggling, uncomfortable movement on a creeper. A head untangled itself, revealing an unproportionately gigantic casque and a raw, archaic face— a mean grey metallic horn and a red eye. I absolutely lost my mind for over a minute**.** It wasn't my first time seeing an Indian Grey Hornbill, but it was the first time seeing it exactly when I wanted to.

Before I could even regain my senses, it was gone, leaving only that unmistakable cackling call echoing behind it, as if asking everyone to settle. To top it off, we recorded an Orange-headed Thrush (tiny and orange!) moments later. Both wishes, granted.

Unfolding now

The CBC '26 ended with 43 species recorded, bringing our total campus life-list to 69 species. From the declining numbers of bulbuls to the changing roosting sites of Egrets, every aspect of this urban setting is worth exploring.

We are now moving forward to study how we can better support ancient frugivores (fruit-eaters) and protect the "precious dead wood" that houses our campus residents. This is but one chapter in the ongoing chronicle of the Green Poets Society. Reach out if you're curious; we are long past the beginning, yet far from the end, with so many more stories left to write.

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