

World Drug Day

Also called the *International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking*, World Drug Day was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1987. The event was founded as an expression of the determination of the UN to cooperate and strengthen their actions to create a society that is free of drug abuse. The United Nations continues to observe World Drug Day, encouraging individuals, communities, governments, schools and various organizations to not only educate young people about the dangers of drug use, but also promote healthy ways to deal with life's problems without turning to drugs.



#FITNESS

Walking Backwards

Walking backwards might seem like a quirky exercise choice, but the science behind its benefits is compelling.



Jogging is a classic choice for exercise, but what if there was a way to challenge your body and potentially reap even greater benefits? Enter *backwards walking*, a simple yet surprisingly effective way to elevate your fitness routine.



Strengthening Your Core and Glutes

Backward walking significantly engages your core and gluteal muscles. These muscles are crucial for maintaining good posture, enhancing stability, and reducing lower back pain. By walking backwards, you provide them with a targeted workout, leading to better overall support for your body, according to Dr. Singh.

Boosting Neuromuscular Control

This unique movement challenges your nervous system in a way that forward walking doesn't. It improves proprioception, also known as body awareness, which allows you to have greater control over your movements. This translates to better coordination throughout your entire body, leading to more efficient and controlled movements in all your activities.

Backwards Walking vs Jogging

"While jogging is a fantastic exercise option, backwards walking offers distinct advantages," said Dr. Singh.

Reduced Knee Strain

For individuals experiencing knee pain, backward walking presents a gentler alternative. The impact on your knee joints is significantly minimized compared to jogging, making it a more suitable choice for those seeking a low-impact workout.

Enhanced Metabolic Rate

Backward walking can actually improve your resting metabolic rate, which is the number of calories your body burns at rest. This can ultimately enhance your overall exercise capacity as your body becomes more efficient at burning calories.

Who should avoid Walking Backwards?

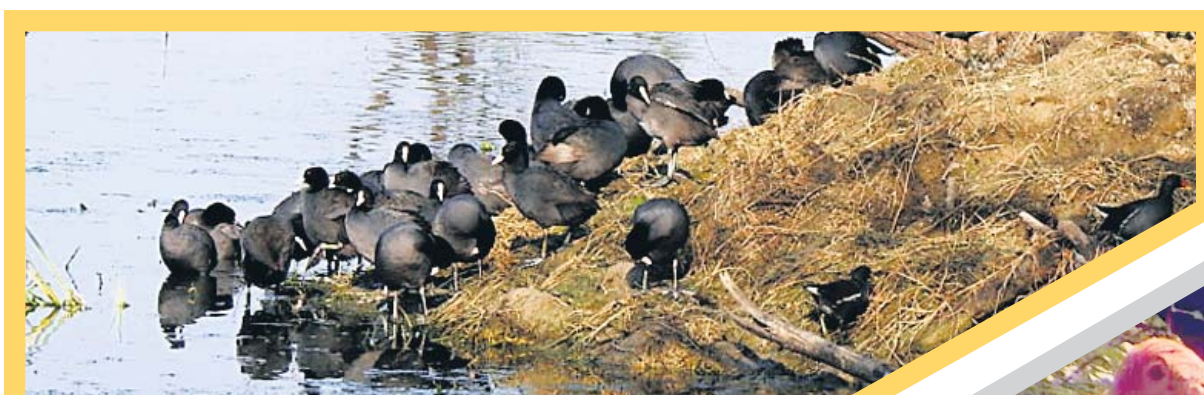
While backward walking boasts numerous benefits, it's not for everyone. Dr. Singh cautions that individuals with neuromuscular disorders, impacting balance and control, such as difficulties with depth perception or sensory integration loss, should not attempt backward walking.



This is because this exercise relies heavily on good coordination and proprioception, which can be compromised in these conditions.

Walking backwards might seem like a quirky exercise choice, but the science behind its benefits is compelling. From strengthening your core and improving balance to potentially enhancing your metabolism, it offers a unique challenge that can elevate your fitness routine. However, it's crucial to listen to your

body and avoid it, if you have any concerns about your balance or coordination. Consult with your doctor or a physiotherapist before incorporating backward walking into your exercise plan, especially if you have any pre-existing health conditions.



Herons In Their Homes



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#KEOLADEO

Furthermore, most of these species make their nests in mixed colonies. They do not have racial disputes like human beings. On the contrary, this kind of formation provides them a kind of additional security against all kinds of predators. Small birds-like cormorants, little egrets feel safe in the company of mighty storks and spoonbills. The large birds also have preference for this kind of combinations because one tree cannot bear the burden of many large birds resulting in fewer nests, meaning fewer fights against predators. This is the best example of symbiosis.

Water bodies are confined to the central portion of Keoladeo National Park. It is a saucer-like depression, having various levels of water depth ranging from 4 inches to 5 feet. This variation helps in supporting more and more species of birds as different birds have preference for different water depths in order to search out their choicest food. The heron breeding colonies and few other species largely feed on fishes and insects, frogs, lizards etc. But ducks and other migratory waterfowl need aquatic vegetation in the form of grasses, sedges, tubers, seeds etc. Some of the waterfowl prefer deep and open water bodies while others are happy with waters having half-submerged, fully-submerged, emergent and floating vegetations like the 'touch-me-not' and water lilies. The free-floating lily gardens of Keoladeo have rightly been named as 'Gardens of God'.

The heronries (heron nests), about ten to fifteen thousand nests are made by fifteen species of water birds like ibis, egrets, herons, storks, cormorants, darter, and spoonbill.

In the entire animal kingdom, utmost priority is shown by every living being towards security of their eggs and newly-born chicks/babies. This phenomenon can be best learned here in the breeding behaviour of these birds. For breeding, they choose only waterlogged trees, preferably the one having spiny creepers wrapped all around. Such trees provide them security against terrestrial predators.

The smaller birds need fish fry (small fish) but the large storks like spoonbill, darter, large cormorants look for large-sized fishes. It is estimated that in good monsoon years,



when breeding birds occupy larger areas to form about 10-15 thousand nests in the park, these birds need about 460 tonnes per year. Amazingly, the Keoladeo *Jheels* are capable of providing almost 80% of this enormous quantity.

Though, I have enjoyed this nature's paradise for many many years, yet every monsoon tickles me. The temptation of saying 'hello' to these peace ambassadors becomes irresistible. Of course, during monsoon, these gather in their brightest feather coats, wings, bills and legs to lure their partners to copulate, to ensure their survival forever.

The *open bill storks* are the first nesters of these colonies. They arrive here in June itself. Their main food include molluscs, water insects, worms etc., which they pick from puddles, surviving with little water even till late summer. For this purpose, nature has gifted these birds with a special beak, having a slit in-between. This slit helps them wash away the mud without losing grip on the prey. They invariably form their colonies in the *Sapan Mori* area of the park. Since they come much earlier than other species, therefore, initially their colonies seem pure open-bill stork colonies but in the month of July, they are joined by other birds as well, transforming these into *inter-species* colonies.

In the beginning of July, all the three species of egrets such as large, intermediate and the small ones also occupy their spaces on trees along with little and intermediate cormorants (shags). Grey-heron, white-ibis, white-necked (wooly



storks also join them. A little later, they are joined by larger birds like spoonbills and painted storks. Large cormorants arrive right the last, and by the time they arrive, the large-breeding colonies are full and therefore, they are seen nesting as a single species on a tree. They do not arrive here in large numbers like other species. The large cormorant can be easily differentiated from other cormorant species for its really large-size and peculiar white patch on the throat and thigh.

Though, these colony nesters do not prepare artistic nests like the baya, the tailor-bird or purple sun-bird, but both male and female, participate in the process. The little egrets are more or less milky white birds and during the breeding period, both male and female get decorated with beautiful feathers called *breeding plumes*. Their courtship behaviour is also

pretty fascinating. The male and female lure each other by bowing now and again. During this act, their beautiful plumes attractively erect out. The intermediate egrets change their nest duties with a lovely display of beautiful snow white plumes. The large egret, with long supple neck and spear-like yellow beak, is truly an attractive bird



especially in this period with long breeding plumes. During breeding days, their eyes emit bluish-green rays. During courtship display, the male and female greet each other by touching bills, bending back and occasionally, coming forward to entwine necks. The sight of the male stretching its neck while rising on tarsal joints and grabbing a tree branch compels you to keep gazing at their activities for hours together.

Both male and female egrets

equally participate in incubating eggs. Though, these birds are primarily fish-eaters, they also feed on insects, worms, lizards, frogs etc. After the chicks are born of these and other species, the jungle resounds with the cacophony of the young ones, crying for food. The parents serve them the regurgitated food so that the chicks may not face indigestion problem. The chicks take about two months to fly with parents and then they are taught how to feed by themselves from the lakes. Like egrets, three species of cormorants, locally known as *pan kavas*, also share the breeding colonies. On the basis of their size, they, too, are named as little, intermediate and large cormorants. These are jet black birds. The large cormorants carefully line up the interiors of their nests with algae and soft grasses, sedges etc. while on incubation, only their heads remain visible from ground as the adults get sunk in the depressed nests. This tree-borne colony looks like a huge vibrating machine as several throats flap together on individual nests. All the cormorants are excellent divers and use the technique of hunting together by herding the fishes into one corner and then catching them en masse. Egrets also join them in this hunting. That is how this community hunting, in the early hours of morning, presents one of the most fascinating scenes to the onlookers. Majority of serious nature photographers may be found capturing this live drama of nature, in Keoladeo, during the monsoon and early days of winter.

Ortland darter is another fasci-

nating member of these breeding colonies. It is a greyish black bird, with huge slender snake-like neck and spear-like strong beak. For this characteristic, it is popularly known as the *snake bird*. Interestingly, its chicks are born snow white, which gradually change their colour. The bird is an excellent swimmer and dives like a submarine. It is a voracious fish eater. It prefers catching fish by piercing through with its beak, and gives excellent opportunity to photographers when it happens to catch a fish horizontally in its beak. For swallowing, it throws the fish overhead and then catches it back into the beak. The large fishes are thrashed on hard surfaces to get them into proper size to swallow. It is most photogenic on its nest, with 3-4 white chicks fighting with each other for food and thrusting beaks deep into the long neck of the parents, to reach for fishes half-done.

No visitor may miss the presence of this bird, which may be seen either providing shade to its chicks on nest against the sun by spreading its huge wings, or drying the wings after diving into water.

Herons are other beautiful birds that add colour to the fascinating swamps of Keoladeo. The grey heron male first occupies the nesting site and then calls for mates in short but sharp note. The interested female, reaching the site, rattles beak with the male. Then, they together flap their huge grey wings and also preen each other. Thus, they settle down to pair up.

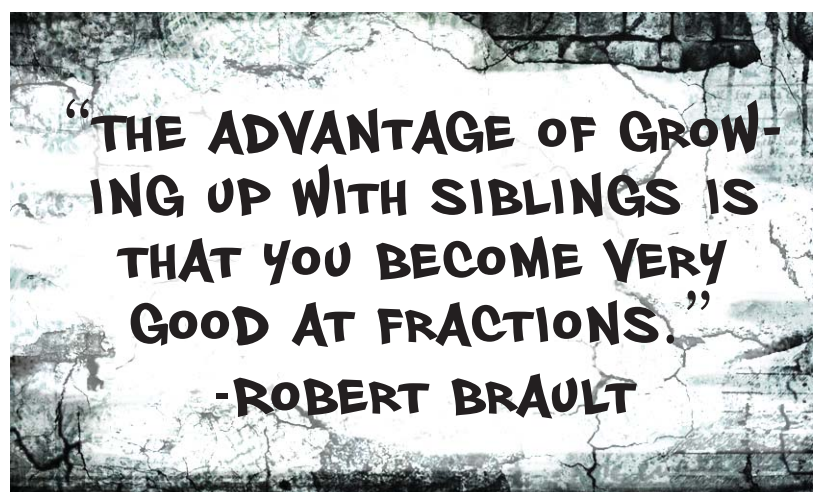
The painted stork is, undoubtedly, the most beautiful nesting bird of Keoladeo. By providing white, black, pink feathers and red legs with yellow-orange coloured beak and head, nature has decorated it to the best possible imagination. Also, it is a profuse breeder and forms around 1000-1500 nests in the park.

All these colourful birds put together and their multifarious breathtaking activities like luring their partners to copulate and then build nests and keep repairing these throughout the breeding time to suitably accommodate themselves and the growing chicks, feeding and training them to fly and catch their feed themselves, make the park so vibrant that a day or two is just not enough to appreciate this 'grandeur' of nature.

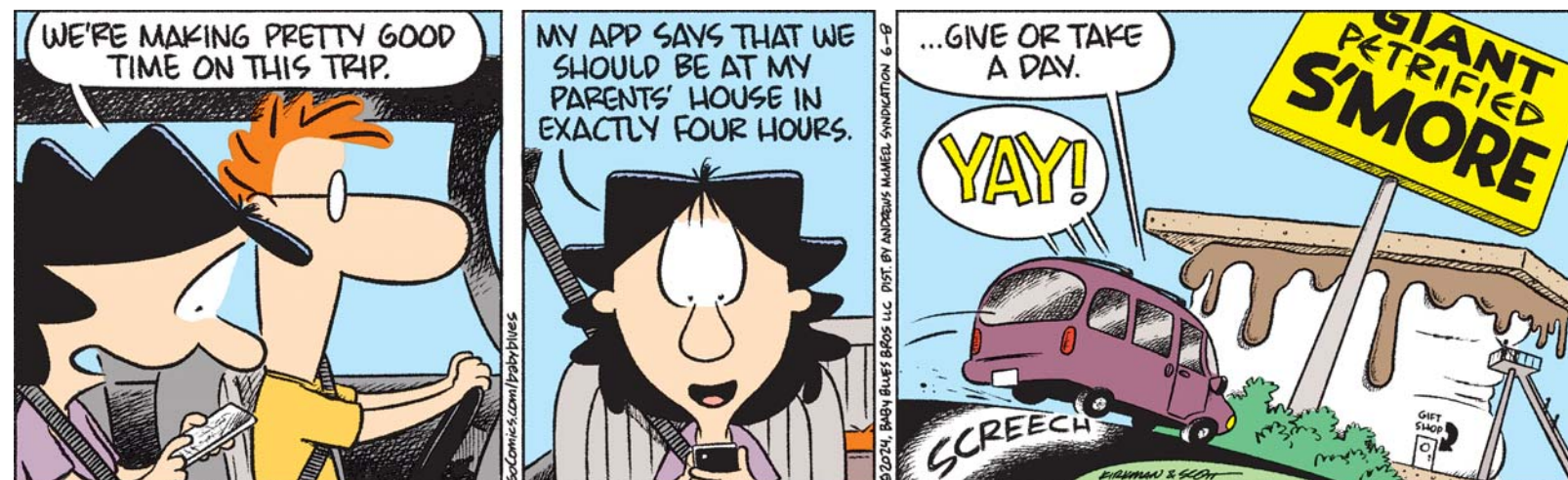
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THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman