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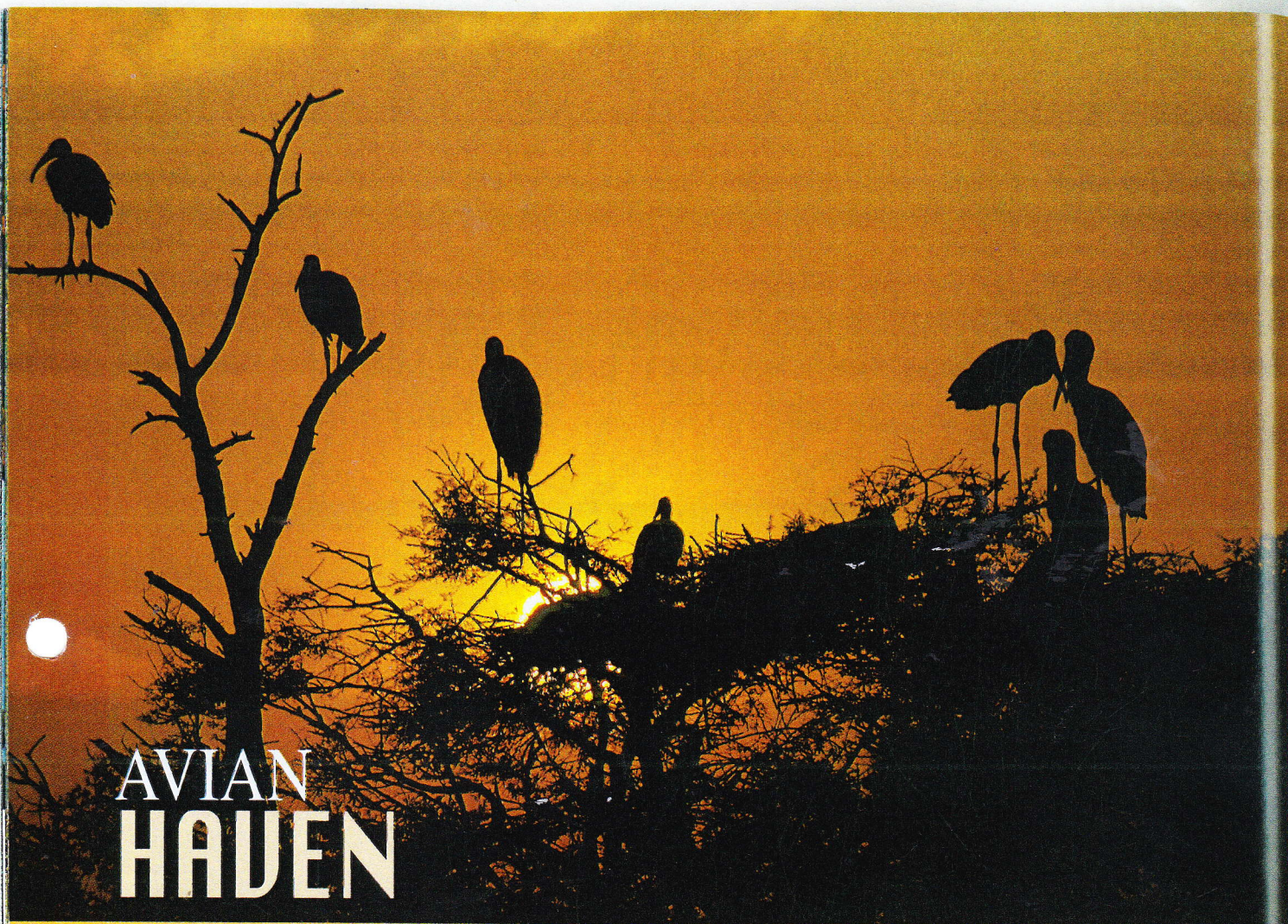
SWAGAT

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WILDLIFE SPECIAL

INSIDE INDIA'S FIVE BEST NATIONAL PARKS



AVIAN HAVEN

At this bird sanctuary, which is also a World Heritage Site, you will see owls, storks,

Bharatpur

Being an amateur ornithologist and an avid photographer, I set out to discover the wetlands of Ghana Keoladev Bird Sanctuary, in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, barely a three-hour drive on the Delhi-Agra highway.

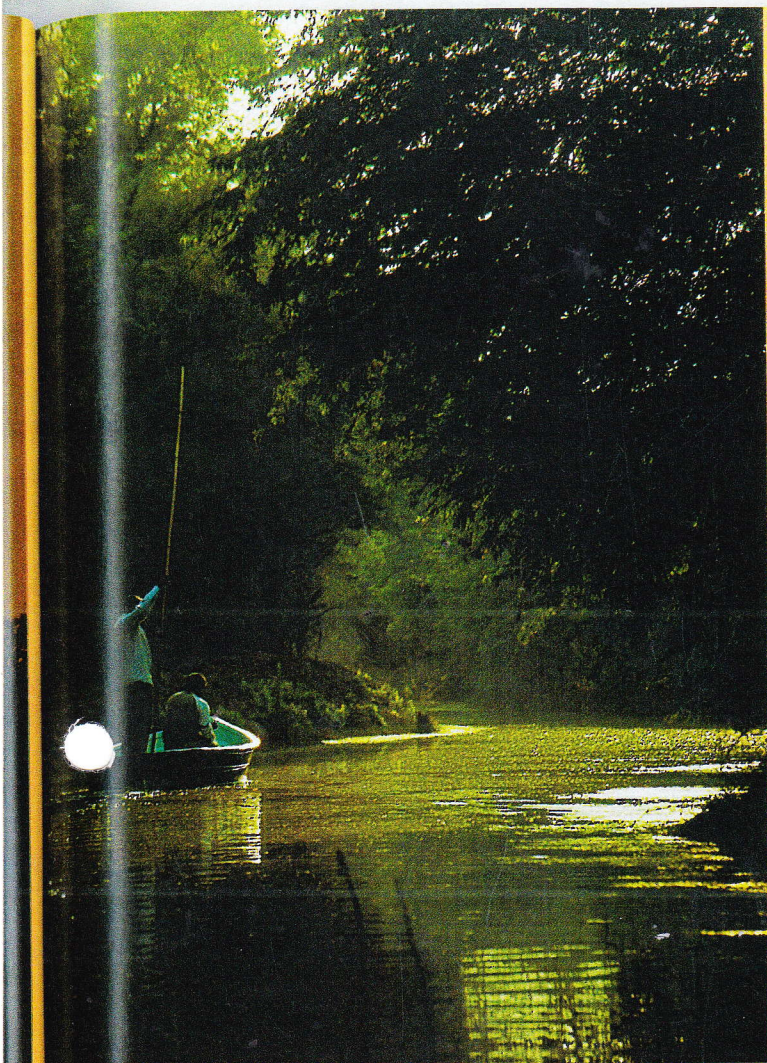
Keoladev is another name for Lord Shiva, at whose ancient temple everyone pays obeisance before entering the sanctuary. *Ghana* is the vernacular synonym for dense forests, which was the case many years ago, when impenetrable forests of *babul*, *kadam*, *ber*, *pilu*, and *keleer* grew here in profusion.

We checked into our heritage hotel, the Laxmi Vilas, and hastened to the park. The usual norm is to park the car, and hire a rickshaw or cycles to enter this visitor-friendly reserve. The slow movement of the vehicle, and the unpolluted air was instantly invigorating, and we relaxed in the tranquil surroundings. We went past Python Point and acacia-lined dykes, pausing to peer through our

binoculars at a variety of birds, nesting in the trees, and swimming or floating in the shimmering waters. I found the rickshaw puller to be very familiar with the habitat, and throughout the ride he kept up a constant commentary on the various types of flora and fauna that came along.

One kilometre away is Ajan Bandh, which regulates the flow of water to this bird paradise. This dam was constructed by the ruler Suraj Mal in the 18th century, and when this natural depression filled up, migratory and domestic birds made it their home. Subsequently, several earthen embankments and sluice gates were constructed to contain and regulate the flow of water, and it became the most popular destination for thousands of tourists, bird-watchers and naturalists from all over the world. This bird haven was declared a World Heritage Site in 1985. It underlined the gradual realisation and awareness of the ecological worth by the naturalists that changed the scenario— from a marshy land, attracting duck-shooters in 1938, to a protected reserve in 1981.

I saw a group of school children, below a tree, animatedly pointing to a collared scops owl crouched on a branch. It



cs, ibises and maybe even the odd Siberian crane, writes **Rita Sawhney**

Photographs: Rita Sawhney

was as inquisitive about the children as they were about it! There are numerous treks on small tracks that cross the main, 4.5-km-long, tarred road and are accessible only on foot. At Sapanmori, we saw ducks and geese... shovellers, teal, pintail, spotbills, red-crested pochard, the graylag and bar-headed geese that flew off on the slightest movement, splashing the water with a furious flurry of their wings. I chanced upon tiny turtles basking in the sun, their soft shells glinting like copper in the strong rays. Purple moorhens played hide-and-seek among emergent plants and tall grass, and in the distance a pair of blue bulls grazed nonchalantly. I missed the presence of the Siberian crane, though, as it had not visited since awhile.

We inspected many rock python holes... hoping to see one sun bathing, but had to be content with only a crumpled rejected skin of one. A peregrine falcon flew overhead, swooping down to catch an unsuspecting prey. The Nil Tal marsh was full of painted storks and black, hooked-beak ibises. They stood in large numbers, on trees, some with unhatched eggs in unruly nests.

It is ideal to carry one's own water and a packed lunch

Facing page: Birds silhouetted against the setting sun
Clockwise from top left: A boat ride allows visitors to see the birds up-close; Painted storks; A turtle sunning itself

to the park and leave only when the park guards are ready to shut the gates. The boat ride in the evening is not to be missed. It is on a first-come-first-served basis, and it is wise to book one for sunset. We were there promptly at 4 pm, and were rowed along shallow wetlands. We passed turquoise, white-breasted kingfishers, perched on thin reeds, dangling their petrified prey from their beaks. The scholarly guide, Dilip, informed us: "Madam, the bird kingdom is like a world outside; each bird has a task to perform. The long-tailed shrike is also known as the "butcher" bird. Starling owls are night watchmen, woodpeckers are carpenters, drongos are fighter birds, tailor birds sew their nests, and vultures are sweepers... so on and so forth!"

As we rowed back, we watched, fascinated, the tall storks and ibises silhouetted against the setting sun, settling in for the night, in their water wonderland.