

## SHORT FEATURE

# A Voyager Over the Coast of Kudankulam

J. Devaprakash



**W**ALKING offers plenty of opportunities to connect with nature, especially when you reside in a splendid environment with diverse habitats. Anuvijay Township – the official colony for the employees and families of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP) – is located on the east coast of Tamilnadu and is just 15 km northeast of Kanyakumari – the southernmost edge of mainland India.

It was the last Sunday of January last year. A cold morning. I was on my feet, looking up for birds. The sun was rising from the Bay of Bengal, unhurriedly. There was a pair of bulbuls on a thorny bush, a male peacock was trying to impress its mate with its extravagant wingspread, swallows were busy in their erratic flights, and munias were shifting their perch from one tree branch to the other.

A lone bird high up in the sky caught my attention. It was hovering in a circular path. At first glance, it looked like a kestrel. However, after a quick observation of its flight behaviour and features, I was sure that the bird was a stranger to the place. I hadn't seen it earlier here.

I took my handy binocular and closely observed the characteristics of the bird. To my surprise, it was an Amur Falcon, a bird known for its long voyage.

Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*) is a little bird of prey that measures about 25 cm long. The male has sooty grey back while the female is paler and has scaly marks. Its eye-rings and legs are orange, thighs and vent are reddish brown.

Like all other birds of prey that hunt their prey while flying, the Amur Falcon too does aerial hunting of insects and flies. Though small, this raptor can also feed smaller birds and frogs. With its sharp eyesight, the Amur Falcon spots the prey from a great distance and dives towards it in no time. Upon reaching the prey, the bird grips the prey tight in its powerful talons and flies to a perch to feast on it.

An inhabitant of woodlands and grasslands, the Amur Falcon breeds in Siberia and Mongolia. Several thousands of Amur Falcon undertake a long migration journey from their breeding grounds in East Asia and north China to South Africa to spend the winter. They travel through India and Sri Lanka flyways, mainly.

In autumn, the Amur Falcons set off on their onward migration from Mongolia in two phases. First they arrive in northeast India and Bangladesh, travelling 2500 km, where they congregate in the thousands.

After a while, they take off for their

wintering destinations in South Africa, flying over Central and Western India, and the Arabian Sea. They cover this 5000 km journey in about five days in a non-stop flight. While migrating, these raptors can fly at an altitude of about 1000 m. With over 20,000 km flight, including both onwards and return migration, the voyage of Amur Falcon is considered as one of the longest migrations by a bird.

Though the birds cross India during migration, the Amur Falcons have not been sighted in the Kudankulam coastline in the past. No record of its spotting here is found either. The recent sighting has brought fresh enthusiasm to the naturalists in the region. "The record sighting of Amur Falcon in the Kudankulam township is great news for the region," exclaims Dr. S. Balachandaran, Deputy Director of Bombay Natural History Society and a renowned ornithologist.

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Mr J. Devaprakash is Senior Manager in HR and is involved in Public Awareness and Press Relations at Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project. Address: Senior Manager (HR, Public Awareness & Press Relations), Nuclear Training Centre, Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project, Kudankulam-627106. Email: devaprakash.jinadoss@gmail.com