

VAS Instagram Takeover recap by Aditya Sridhar

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Hi! My name's Aditya, and I am a nature and wildlife photographer specializing in birds. I am currently based in Bahrain, a small island in the Middle East, and aim to document the local and migratory bird species – raptors and shorebirds, in particular.

My love for bird photography started on a late-winter morning in 2013. A casual walk around my neighborhood introduced me to the world of raptors in the form of a Marsh Harrier. Time froze as I watched the harrier fly directly overhead in hot pursuit of prey. I was hooked! Similarly, a trip to the local beach gave me the first taste of Bahrain's most well-known shorebirds – Flamingos and Cormorants.

To me, bird photography is a getaway from the stress of everyday life. To be able to watch these beautiful creatures in their habitat is a thrill that absolutely nothing can come close to fulfilling. In return, I hope to raise awareness and inspire others to help conserve what we are blessed to have today.

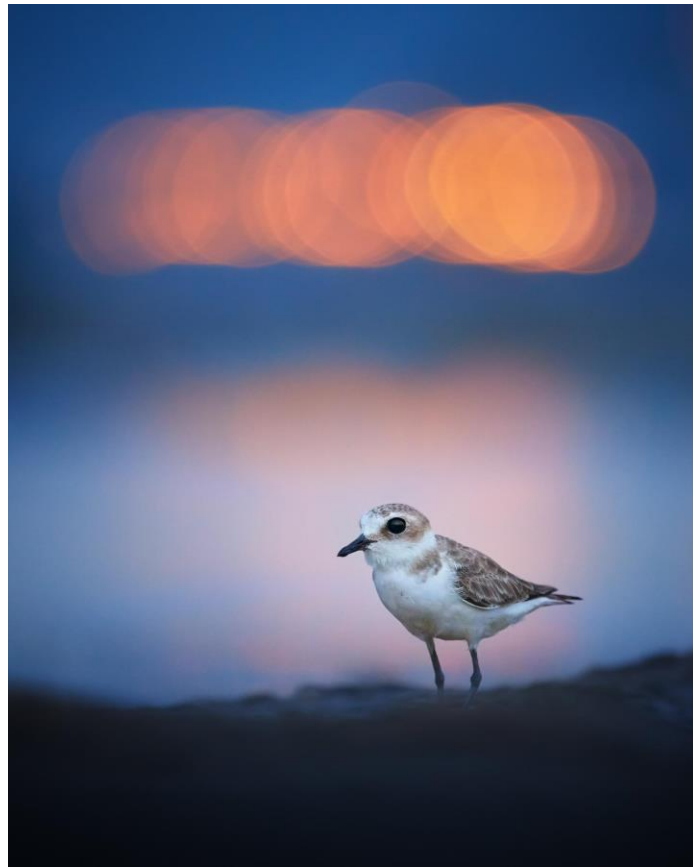


Beaches are synonymous with summer. As the sun beats down and the mercury rises, there's no better place to cool off than the seaside. However, we're not alone in our boundless love for the shore.

Meet the Kentish Plover. This little fluffball is a close relative of the Western Snowy Plover and can be found scampering along the beaches and marshes of Bahrain in search of worms, insects and crustaceans. They are one of my favorite shorebird species to observe and photograph due to their adorable antics and friendly disposition.

In fact, over the entirety of June and July 2020, I dedicated myself to photographing this individual plover at my local marsh. It only took a couple of visits for the bird to warm up to me and now, every time I arrive on location, I'm greeted by the familiar 'dwee-dwee' that I adore so much.

While the Kentish Plover's global conservation status is listed as 'Least Concern' by the IUCN, it is a species that is threatened by large-scale habitat loss in Bahrain. Land reclamation projects and clearance of natural hotspots have contributed to a decrease in the birds' favored habitats. These birds, however, continue to adapt to their changing environment, be it by deviating from their natural diet or through aggressive territorial disputes. The streetlights in the background of this image signify the impact that rapid urbanization has had on these birds and how they continue to live on despite the numerous hurdles.



Black-winged Stilts, to me, have been a subject of great interest and intrigue ever since my first sighting of the species in late 2013. I've tried to photograph them on numerous occasions but

failed in nearly every single attempt. So, naturally, when I discovered that these birds were found in abundance at my local marsh, I decided to try my luck once again.

My arrival on location was announced by the ever-alert Swampphen. As I trudged along the road, wary of on-lookers and feral dogs, a flash of black and white behind a distant reedbed caught my eye. I bolted down the dirt track, throwing dignity and caution to the wind, and watched as my dream scenario unfolded right before my very eyes – a flock of Black-winged Stilts in the pastels of dawn. Army crawling through wet mud, I narrowed the gap between myself and my subjects. I followed the birds into the shallows of the coast, blowing my cover but gaining unobstructed views in exchange. As the cold, algae-infested water entered my clothes, I let out a silent scream, grimacing immediately after; I had flushed the flock. Heartbroken, I watched as the Stilts flew into the deeps, far beyond my reach. I picked myself up; my hopes of capturing the shot I had envisioned all but dashed. Just as I prepared to make the long walk back to the car, though, the situation took yet another turn.

In the midst of the vast expanse of nothingness appeared three birds, seemingly out of thin air and totally unbothered by my existence. As my worst nightmare morphed into the kind of things dreams are made of, I pressed the shutter button with quivering hands, immortalizing what I consider to be one of the most fulfilling photography experiences of my life.



The onset of spring in Bahrain is marked by the congregation of thousands of shorebirds along the coasts as they prepare to embark on their long journey north. Determined to make the most of my

limited time with these birds, I made my way to the beach on a pleasant morning in March, blissfully unaware of what was about to transpire.

When I arrived, the tide was low and the birds were far out on the mudflats. Scanning the beach for any semblance of life close to shore, I found a young Curlew. As I gingerly made my way to the bird, I inadvertently stepped on a patch of soft, wet mud; my boots sunk instantly, and I nearly lost my footing in the knee-deep muck. I managed to clumsily drag myself out, flushing the bird with my crazy antics. Scared out of my skin, I decided to stick to dry land. The real drama, however, was yet to unfold.

I set myself up on the shoreline to photograph a couple of co-operative Lesser Sand-Plovers without knowledge of being watched. Suddenly, a car pulled up and the driver hollered at me to draw my attention. I paid no heed to the call and immediately heard incoherent mumbling. As I strategized my escape, the stranger approached me. I panicked; he didn't seem friendly. Tales of camera theft flashed through my mind with every passing second. Thankfully, my uncle managed to intercept the 'undercover cop', as he introduced himself. A long and unpleasant conversation ensued. Jarred and traumatized, we managed to slip away without physical consequence.

It was later revealed that the individual was no policeman after all. Needless to say, the very thought of being alone in a public space with my photography gear now sends shivers down my spine. Talk about dodging a bullet!



I've lived in Bahrain for over 15 years, and having documented most of the country's core birding hotspots, I'm always on the look-out for new spots to discover and explore.

Back in late 2019, when I first learned about the existence of a marsh in the country, my initial reactions were those of absolute disbelief and joy. Obsessive research and planning ensued, and soon enough, I was en route to exploring a whole new world of birds.

It's difficult to convey through mere words how utterly overwhelming the sounds and scents of a marsh can be. The blaring alarm calls of about a dozen Moorhen, swarms of countless mosquitoes and gnats, and the nigh omnipresent feral dogs – the marsh truly is its own ecosystem. Walking along the dirt path, I was greeted by an inquisitive Red-tailed Shrike perched on its favorite thorn bush – an ominous sight for the sparrows and insects in the vicinity. Further ahead, a pair of playful wagtails danced along the water's edge. I was in heaven.

Traversing a wide ditch, lost in my thoughts, I made my way to the very edge of the coastline. A windless winter's morning made for the most spectacular sight – Bathed in orange, surrounded by a sea of gold with an Intermediate Egret for company. Life couldn't be any better! I owe a lot to birds and photography, and moments like these keep me driven to go out and experience nature in its truest state.



On a sizzling late-May morning, I went to the marsh in pursuit of Little Bitterns, a highly localized species on the mainland. Try as I might, I just couldn't capture a noteworthy image of the birds. As the summer

heat sapped my energy and motivation, I decided to call it quits for the day. Before I made my way to my car, however, I scoped out the marsh for any signs of interest. My eyes landed on a distant Kentish Plover which appeared to have caught a particularly beefy insect. Jaded from my lack of success with the Bitterns, though, I dismissed the incident and chose to retreat to the comfort of my air-conditioned transport. It was only later when I reviewed my images that I realized the mistake I'd made – the Plover was, in fact, trying to swallow a fish. I was shell-shocked.

For several days, I scoured the internet to extract information on this kind of behavior, but I was unable to unravel the mystery of the fish-eating Kentish Plover.

The months that followed were, frankly, monotonous. I'd visit the marsh 3 times a week and fail to witness a repeat of the act. Self-doubt reared its head; perhaps I'd missed the only chance I had of capturing 'The Shot'. Nevertheless, I persisted and, eventually, I was treated to an up-close-and-personal demonstration.

While the reasons for such an odd deviation from their natural diet remain unknown, there are some clues that might aid further research, most notably an absence of the Plovers' preferred food sources of insects, worms, and crustaceans at the marsh. My current aim is to document and photograph these piscivorous Kentish Plovers in hopes of better understanding their complex lives.

Bahrain's beauty lies in its sheer unpredictability. The highly dynamic landscape necessitates adaptation - a trait the birds seem to have mastered and one that I've now learned to incorporate into my photography.



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