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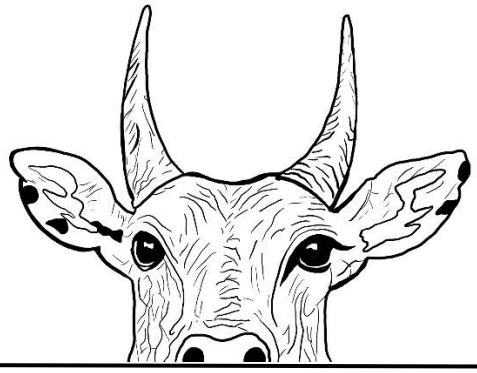

DWARKA FOREST

a respite in the cracks of the city's concrete

February 14, 2026
URBAN NATURE MATTERS

Dwarka Forest: A respite in the cracks of the city's concrete

This work is dedicated to the Dwarka Forest.

To every Babool and Khejri tree, and to the many invasive species,
to the Nilgai, the insects, and birds,
to the humans whose lives are comforted by its existence.

It is dedicated to the omnipresence of natural processes that continue to shape and influence our cities.

Acknowledgements

This work could not have been undertaken without the unwavering support, insight, and commitment of Naveen Solanki. More than a collaborator, he has been central to the movement to protect Dwarka Forest. As a long-time resident and environmental advocate, Naveen has taken on the immense responsibility of representing the forest and articulating its ecological significance in two ongoing legal battles—one before the Supreme Court of India and another before the National Green Tribunal. His persistence has been a crucial source of motivation for this work.

This motivation was also shaped by Ipshita Raj, whose exhibition work ensured that Dwarka Forest remained present within public imagination, even across distances of thousands of kilometres.

I also extend my sincere gratitude to Shruit Ragavan, Merlyn Maria Antony, and Lalitha Ramalingan for their careful reviewing and proofreading of the document.

Finally, while the positions of environmentalists and organisations involved in protecting the forest are not without internal differences or limitations, their collective efforts have been instrumental in raising public awareness, organising protests, and mobilising petitions that foreground the forest's significance for the wider city. At the same time, it is the gaps and silences within these efforts that have provided the impetus for the report that follows.

Author's Note

Ever since my childhood, I have been raised by many cities, growing up while strolling through their cityscapes for as long as I can remember. And we never stopped living in cities, perhaps they are like confines of my own choosing. Delhi however, in particular, holds a very important place in my life. For more than a decade, it has nurtured me in many ways: it has given me education, offered opportunities for friendship and love, and brought together diverse cuisines and leisure within a single place. Delhi has shown me most of the biodiversity I have encountered in my life. It has shown me inspiring stories of adaptability and survivability of human and non-human species in its nooks and corners.

In my relationship with Delhi, I had never pondered how we have shaped each other. Delhi has changed me as a human, and I have changed it as a city. Delhi provided me quality higher education, and I provided it with malls, offices, residential apartments, and landfill sites. Delhi provided me colours through flamingos and teals, and I coloured its sky grey and blackened its rivers.

In this urban century, as I inherit Delhi, I inherit many things. I inherit unsafe drinking water, toxic air and an inequitable capacity to deal with it. I inherit the prevalent and persistent sufferings of all beings.

Alongside this, I inherit extraordinary diversity: hundreds and thousands of non-human species, varied landforms, some of the oldest mountain ranges, and expansive wetlands. I strongly believe that, unlike other centuries, I have also inherited the cause of reciprocity. A quality that is not limited to human transactions itself, but one that morally extends to beings and things.

With an awareness of this self-imposed value, and in light of what I was given, what I have, and what I must do, I write. I write to further the imagination and the cause of a just Delhi.

Table of contents

Introduction

Public conversations about the dire state of forests in India often oscillate between praise for government-led environmental initiatives and sharp criticism from tribal groups, conservationists, and others. These debates are usually anchored in stories of forest rights, and vanishing biodiversity, which evoke a deep collective sadness. In contrast, when it comes to nature within the city, the emotional response is far more muted, seldom generating the same urgency or grief.

In cities such as Delhi, the steady loss of green and blue spaces is straightforward, visible, and consciously felt. Anyone travelling by metro can witness this unfolding across the city and experience the peculiar cough that comes with breathing its air. Although there is still considerable discussion around recognised natural areas such as the Ridge, Sanjay Van, the Yamuna floodplains, Najafgarh Lake, and the Sahibi River. But even more vulnerable are the sites that remain unrecognised: the small, neglected patches of spontaneous vegetation that survive in abandoned or overlooked plots scattered throughout the city.

These spaces are considered as vacant land, waiting to be cleared for development. Yet within them unfold vibrant stories of ecosystems and human–nature interactions. They hold untold stories of soil, water, plants, animals and people. The relationships that sustain ecological resilience in ways rarely acknowledged in urban ecology or urban planning in India.

This document focuses on one such site: Dwarka Forest, a thriving natural patch located immediately behind the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi. Despite its ecological richness, the forest's future remains uncertain. Competing developmental interests and ongoing legal battles before the Supreme Court of India and the National Green Tribunal have left its status unresolved.

Work on the ground has so far been scattered, with different individuals and groups documenting distinct aspects of the forest's biodiversity, history, and threats. This document brings these strands together by consolidating ecological observations, legal developments, and historical accounts into a single, coherent narrative. It also introduces community engagement and social narratives, areas that have received no attention so far. In doing so, the document addresses a crucial gap by foregrounding perspectives on the politics of urban nature.

Dwarka Forest is not merely an isolated green space. It is part of a larger pattern of unmanicured green spaces that are rapidly appearing and disappearing across Delhi. Its story points to a deeper concern, the persistent separation of nature from urban development planning and urban imaginaries. The aim of this document is to place urban nature on par with the sensitivity accorded to protected and recognised natural sites. The city's ecosystems have long been neglected by researchers and storytellers alike, and this work offers one piece of evidence for the importance of nature within the city, and for the reasons why such spaces must be observed, documented, and studied seriously.

The following sections traces its history, ongoing legal contestations, ecological features, community relationships, and the broader policy and research implications. Together, it aims to present a coherent account of an urban woodland whose value extends far beyond its physical boundaries.

History of Dwarka Forest

Land ownership and Possessions

When I first walked through Dwarka Forest, traces of its past were still visible. Old wells lay hidden beneath thick undergrowth, and the uneven contours of the land hinted at fields that once existed here. Long before, this area formed part of the agricultural landscape of Shahabad Mohammadpur village.

The land on which Dwarka Forest stands today was acquired by the Government of Delhi in the mid-1980s for the stated purpose of planned urban development. At the time of acquisition, the area, measuring approximately 275 acres, was described as largely barren, with almost no vegetation. For nearly two decades thereafter, it remained under the possession of the Delhi Development Authority and the influence of natural processes.

A major administrative shift occurred in January 2008, when 272 acres of this land were allotted to the Ministry of Railways on a perpetual lease. The site was earmarked for the redevelopment of Bijwasan Railway Station as part of an integrated metropolitan development project. Redevelopment activities began in late 2022, when approximately 31 acres were transferred to the Rail Land Development Authority and later allotted to a private developer for a large mixed-use project linked to the new station.

In simple terms, the land now known as Dwarka Forest has carried multiple identities over time. It was farmland, then land acquired for urban development, and later land earmarked for railway infrastructure. Yet, in the long period between 1986 and 2022, something else took shape. A dense, spontaneous forest gradually emerged here, along with water bodies and diverse forms of life. Despite this transformation, the area has never been officially recognised as a forest, nor has it been notified or protected as one.

Legal contestations

The legal story of Dwarka Forest evokes a sensation similar to being buried slowly, not only under layers of procedure and paperwork but also under soil and construction and demolition waste. In August 2021, this process became noticeable with the rampant illegal felling and burial of more than 900 trees by contractors hired for the development of a railway station [1]. This marked a turning point in how the land was treated and perceived. Following complaints by local residents, the Forest Department promptly imposed a ₹6-crore fine in July 2022 for tree felling carried out without the requisite permissions.

Soon after, an environmental petition was filed before the National Green Tribunal (NGT) by R. M. Asif. The petition challenged the redevelopment on the grounds that the land ought to be treated as a "deemed forest", but this claim was dismissed in February 2024. A deemed forest is defined as land that is not recorded as forest in the forest department's records. The Tribunal held that the land could not be recognised as a deemed forest, as the amended Forest

(Conservation) Act, 2023 does not contain any provision for such a designation. At the same time, the Tribunal clarified that any future tree felling would still require permissions under applicable laws.

Figure 1: Sheesham (Dalbergia sissoo) trees cut and buried under soil (top two images). (Bottom) A Khejri (Prosopis cineraria) tree, an ecologically important species of the region, stands half-buried, its trunk marking the former ground level.

Subsequently, a separate appeal was filed before the Supreme Court by Ajay Joshi and Naveen Solanki. This appeal expanded the scope of the dispute—from the original 31 acres to approximately 125 acres—arguing that the larger landscape should be treated as a contiguous block of deemed forest. Although the Supreme Court issued an interim order in September 2024

restricting construction and tree cutting, by March 2025 the same Court clarified that these restrictions applied only to the original 31 acres considered by the NGT.

Following site inspections linked to the court proceedings, the Forest Department identified three patches within the area that appeared to meet Delhi's own criteria for forest land: parcels exceeding 2.5 acres with a density of at least 100 trees per acre. Together, these patches cover nearly 50 hectares and contain over 19,000 trees i.e. around 150 trees per acre.

This, then, is the legal history of Dwarka Forest. Its future now lies before the courts, where competing claims of development and ecological value continue to be weighed. While this uncertainty weighs heavily, the present is not defined solely by loss. There are moments of persistence, encounter, and care. The following section presents ecological and social evidence that illustrates these quieter forms of hope.

Ecology of Dwarka Forest

Description of Dwarka Forest

Dwarka Forest lies within the coordinates approximately 28°33′22.42″ N, 77°03′47.88″ E, in the Dwarka and Shahabad Mohammadpur area of southwest Delhi. The eastern edge of the forest lies close to the Indira Gandhi International Airport, while its western boundary abuts gated residential societies. On the southern side, large-scale construction associated with railway redevelopment is currently underway. Given this location, the forest is exposed to multiple urban pressures, including emissions and soil contamination associated with airport activity and construction [2,3].

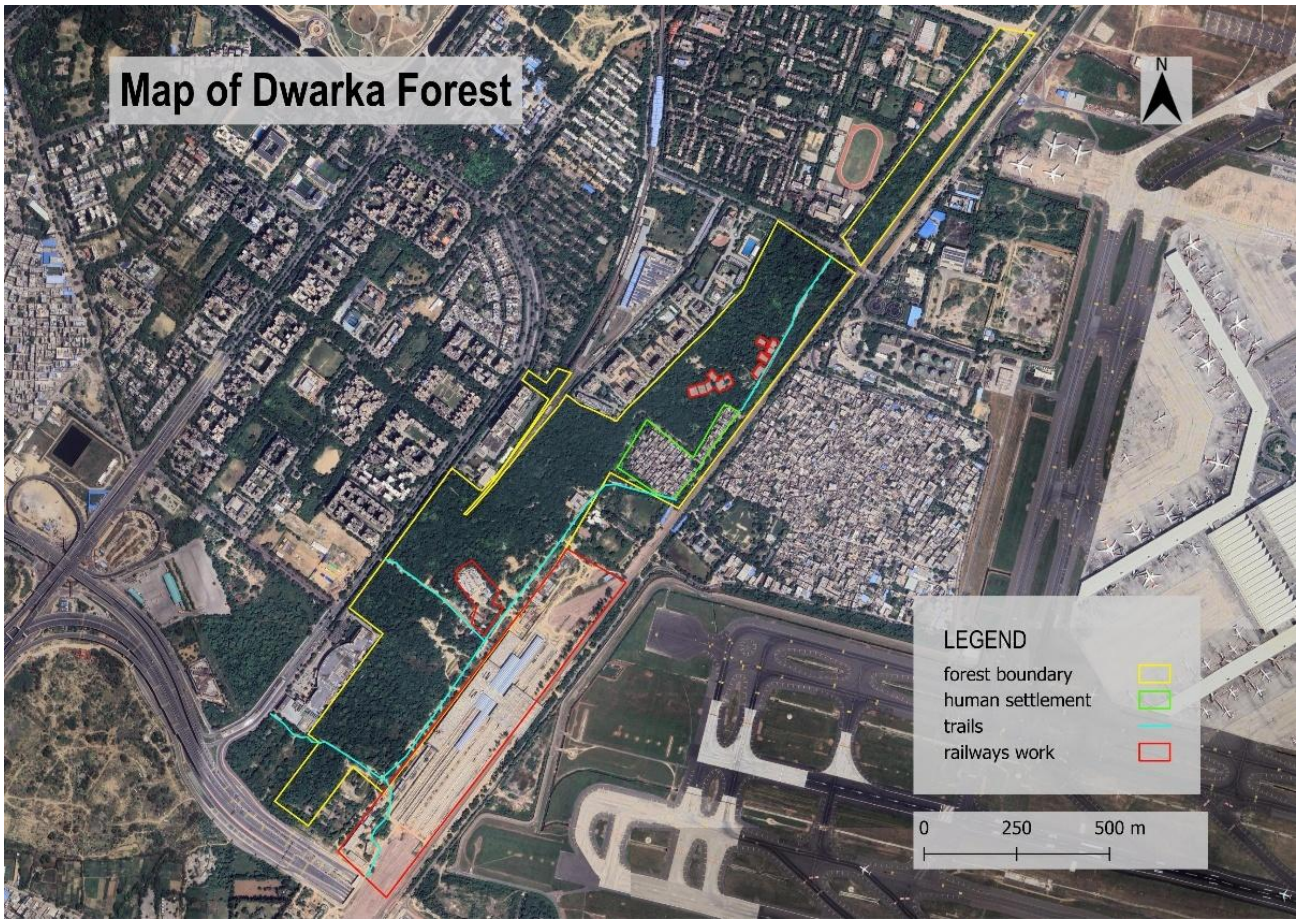

Figure 2: Map of Dwarka Forest: The forest boundary has been delineated in accordance with the official survey conducted by the Forest Department (see Appendix I).

It lies within the Bangar region which is a distinct physiographic division of Delhi. Historically, Bangar areas constituted some of the most arable land in the region and are typically characterised by saline and alkaline soils with silty, sandy, or loamy textures [4]. Ecologically, Bangar areas are well suited to monsoon forests or savannah-like vegetation when left to natural processes [5]. Such forests are generally open and single-storeyed, with trees bearing thin, feathery crowns, characteristics that are clearly visible in Dwarka Forest today.

However, the emergence of Dwarka Forest cannot be explained by climatic and physical factors alone. After 2009, construction debris and other waste dumping became its dominant use, with only minuscule agricultural activity persisting inside the forest.

Figure 3: Claiming what is left: Vegetation taking over construction waste. Rock-like debris on the left is now colonised by herbs and grasses, while the mound in the background, mixed with construction material, shows similar signs of regrowth.

Over time, dust settled over this waste, and natural processes—sun, wind, and rain—began their slow, persistent work. Seeds arrived gradually: some dispersed from nearby "mother trees," what Naveen describes as a tree line of Sheesham *(Dalbergia Sisoo*) and a few Babool (*Acacia nilotica*) trees that existed before the forest took shape. Other seeds were carried by wind, birds, and passing animals. Vegetation began to establish itself in scattered patches.

A mosaic of micro-landscapes emerged. Small waterbodies formed in depressions, grassland patches developed, and woodland areas took shape where vegetation was able to recover and persist. One of the most striking features of Dwarka Forest today is this diversity of forms, a range of habitats that support vibrant ecological interactions, including sustained and evolving relationships with neighbouring human communities.

Figure 3: Emergence of a spontaneous woodland (top), where self-grown vegetation has formed a continuous canopy over previously disturbed ground. (Bottom) A seasonal waterbody embedded within the same landscape.

Flora and fauna in Dwarka Forest

According to a survey conducted by the Forest Department in 2025, a total of 19,387 trees were recorded within a 125 acres area of Dwarka Forest (Appendix I). These figures exclude a substantial number of trees that were felled, both with and without permission, prior to the reporting period. Based on field observations and local accounts, it is reasonable to estimate that the total number of trees in the area exceeds 21,000.

The survey documented a total of 33 tree species. Of these, 15 species belong to native tree species (highlighted entries in the following table) listed under the Green Action Plan's recommended plants for ecological restoration [6]. With the exception of *Leucaena leucocephala*, *Prosopis juliflora*, and *Eucalyptus* species, all recorded trees are native to the Indian subcontinent. This proportion of native species is notable when compared to public parks and landscaped green spaces in Delhi, where exotic and introduced species often dominate.

Table I: Tree species inventory of Dwarka Forest categorised as native and introduced based on Flora of Delhi [4]. Invasive species classification follows the list prepared by the National Biodiversity Authority [7]. Highlighted entries indicate species recommended under the Green Action Plan[6].

S.No	Local name	Scientific name	Status
1	Aam	*Mangifera indica*	Native
2	Alestonia	*Alstonia scholaris*	Native
3	Amaltas	*Cassia fistula*	Native
4	Arjun	*Terminalia arjuna*	Native
5	Bakain	*Melia azedarach*	Native
6	Bamboo	*Bambusa spp.*	Native
7	Bargad	*Ficus benghalensis*	Native
8	Beri	*Ziziphus mauritiana*	Native
9	Chudail Papri	*Holoptelea integrifolia*	Native
10	Desi Kikar	*Vachellia nilotica*	Native
11	Frace	*Grewia asiatica*	Native
12	Hingot	*Balanites aegyptiaca*	Native
13	Imli	*Tamarindus indica*	Native
14	Jamun	*Syzygium cumini*	Native
15	Jatti	*Wrightia tinctoria*	Native
16	Jungle Jalebi	*Pithecellobium dulce*	Introduced
17	Kabuli Kikar	*Prosopis juliflora*	Introduced, Invasive
18	Kachnar	*Bauhinia variegata*	Native
19	Kaner	*Nerium oleander*	Native
32	Khejdi	*Prosopis cineraria*	Native
20	Lehsua	*Cordia dichotoma*	Native
21	Neem	*Azadirachta indica*	Native
22	Pahari Neem	*Melia azedarach*	Native
23	Papri	*Holoptelea integrifolia*	Native

24	Peepal	*Ficus religiosa*	Native
25	Pilkhan	*Ficus virens*	Native
26	Safeda	*Eucalyptus tereticornis*	Introduced
27	Sangwan	*Tectona grandis*	Native
28	Sehtut	*Morus alba*	Native
29	Shisham	*Dalbergia sissoo*	Native
30	Siras	*Albizia lebbeck*	Native
31	Subabol	*Leucaena leucocephala*	Introduced, Invasive
32	Wood Apple	*Limonia acidissima*	Native

Dwarka Forest also supports considerable avian diversity. Personal birdwatching observations conducted across different seasons have recorded more than thirty-seven bird species. In addition, residents, environmental activists, and long-term visitors consistently describe the forest as sustaining a much richer bird community. A documented list compiled over several years records fifty-three bird species, including eleven migratory species (table 2). These records were compiled by a local birdwatcher who prefers to remain anonymous (Appendix II).

Table II: Inventory of avifaunal species recorded in Dwarka Forest, with their migratory status based on Birds of the Indian Subcontinent [8]. Highlighted rows indicate summer and winter migrant species.

S. No.	Common name	Scientific name	Status
1	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*	Resident
2	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	Resident
3	Asian Pied Starling	*Gracupica contra*	Resident
4	Baya Weaver	*Ploceus philippinus*	Resident
5	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	Resident
6	Black Redstart	*Phoenicurus ochruros*	Migratory
7	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*	Resident
8	Bluethroat	*Luscinia svecica*	Migratory
9	Brahminy Myna	*Sturnia pagodarum*	Resident
10	Brown-headed Barbet	*Psilopogon zeylanicus*	Resident
11	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	Resident
12	Common Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*	Resident
13	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*	Resident
14	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	Resident
15	Common Woodshrike	*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*	Resident
16	Coppersmith Barbet	*Psilopogon haemacephalus*	Resident
17	Eastern Orphean Warbler	*Curruca crassirostris*	Migratory
18	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	Resident
19	Eurasian Thick-knee	*Burhinus oedicnemus*	Resident
20	Eurasian Wryneck	*Jynx torquilla*	Migratory
21	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	Resident

22	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	Resident
23	Green Sandpiper	*Tringa ochropus*	Migratory
24	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*	Resident
25	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	Resident
26	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros birostris*	Resident
27	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	Resident
28	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*	Resident
29	Indian Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*	Resident
30	Indian White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosus*	Resident
31	Laughing Dove	*Spilopelia senegalensis*	Resident
32	Long-tailed Shrike	*Lanius schach*	Resident
33	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	Resident
34	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*	Resident
35	Pied Cuckoo	*Clamator jacobinus*	Migratory
36	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*	Resident
37	Red-breasted Flycatcher	*Ficedula parva*	Migratory
38	Red-naped Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	Resident
39	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	Resident
40	Red-whiskered Bulbul	*Pycnonotus jocosus*	Resident
41	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	Resident
42	Ruff	*Calidris pugnax*	Migratory
43	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	Resident
44	Silver-bill	*Euodice malabarica*	Resident
45	Verditer Flycatcher	*Eumyias thalassinus*	Migratory
46	White Wagtail	*Motacilla alba*	Migratory
47	White-breasted Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	Resident
48	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	Resident
49	White-tailed Swallow	*Hirundo megaensis*	Resident
50	Yellow Wagtail	*Motacilla flava*	Migratory
51	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	*Treron phoenicopterus*	Resident

Taken together, these observations indicate the presence of both resident and migratory bird populations and highlight the forest's importance as a seasonal refuge within Delhi's urban landscape.

Beyond birds, the forest also supports larger fauna. During one field visit, I recall standing with Naveen on a slightly raised patch of land that had effectively become a tombstone for many trees that could not be saved. As we spoke, our attention was drawn to a dung beetle rolling a ball of dung across the soil. Soon after, another appeared. This prompted reflection on which animal the dung belonged to, with Nilgai being the most likely source given their presence in the area.

Dwarka Forest supports a significant population of Nilgai *(Boselaphus tragocamelus)*, with local estimates ranging from forty to sixty-two individuals. During fieldwork, at least thirteen

individuals were directly observed. Reports of pregnant Nilgai suggest ongoing reproduction and indicate that the habitat remains suitable for sustaining future generations.

Figure 4: Behind the rubble: An alert nilgai stood behind a mound of rubble, watching Naveen and me as we entered the forest, before disappearing into the woodland behind.

This makes the present situation both remarkable and concerning. Despite their highest protection status as Schedule I animals, Nilgai in Dwarka Forest are increasingly struggling to access water.

Ecological observations from Dwarka Forest reveal a complex and resilient system that has developed despite prolonged disturbance. Together, these accounts underscore the site's significance as a functioning urban ecosystem within an otherwise densely built landscape.

Human habitation around Dwarka Forest

Dwarka Forest is bordered by roads on three sides and a railway line on the fourth, making it function like an island within the city's mobility network. The closest human settlement is Harijan Basti, located partially within what is now recognised as the forest. This housing colony was established in 1983, when approximately 257 families were relocated here under urban development policies aimed at spatial reorganisation in Delhi [9]. The settlement comprises

residents from Scheduled Caste communities, Muslim families, and households originally from Shahabad Mohammadpur village.

The establishment of the Basti closely coincides with the period during which the land began transitioning from abandoned terrain to a regenerating forest. Over the past four decades, residents have lived alongside this changing landscape, witnessing its gradual greening, seasonal rhythms, and ecological shifts.

For the people of the Basti, Dwarka Forest holds multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings. Informal paths through the forest serve as everyday shortcuts for women and men commuting to work in the sectoral societies of Dwarka. Some households depend on the forest for limited fuelwood collection, while others graze goats and buffaloes in certain areas. At the same time, some residents (both economically stable and otherwise) view the possibility of forest clearance and redevelopment as an economic opportunity, hoping it may bring employment and improved infrastructure.

(Left) A business card advertising excavation, demolition, and the removal and dumping of rubble and construction waste. (Right) Demolition waste dumped around a Babool tree.

Human use of the forest has also included practices that have contributed to ecological stress. Powerful contractors and musclemen from nearby village have long used the area for the illegal dumping of construction and demolition waste [10]. While this dumping played a role in shaping

the physical substrate on which vegetation later established, it now poses significant challenges as the forest functions as a living ecosystem.

Beyond utilitarian uses, some residents maintain deep relational ties with the forest. Individuals such as Naveen have been shaped by long-term engagement with this landscape, from childhood encounters with biodiversity under highly disturbed conditions to later involvement in legal and civic efforts to protect the forest. Others relate to the forest through every day acts of care. Some women regularly enter the forest to feed stray dogs and ensure water provisions during lean seasons. One conversation with a butcher who runs a stall near a waterbody close to the Basti remains particularly vivid. His attentiveness to birds reflected a deep entanglement with this place. On one occasion, he insisted me to join him for a birdwatching walk. “Migratory birds have arrived,” he said, his eyes shining with great excitement.

People from beyond the Basti and Shahabad Mohammadpur village also visit the area to walk, cycle, observe birds, and photograph the landscape. These everyday interactions reflect Dwarka Forest’s role as a shared social and ecological space within the city.

Significance of Dwarka Forest

Ecologically, Dwarka Forest qualifies as a *novel ecosystem*. In simple terms, an ecosystem consists of living components—plants, animals, insects, and microbes—and non-living components such as soil, water, air, and sunlight, which interact to form a functioning system. What introduces *novelty* is the way these interactions are shaped and influenced by social processes and human activity. Novel ecosystems emerge through both intentional and unintentional human interventions [11]. In the case of Dwarka Forest, its emergence can be traced to unintentional intervention, wherein nature gradually reclaimed land possessed and managed by the state.

Such ecosystems include tree plantations, pastures, or agricultural fields that are later abandoned and allowed to regenerate without active management. Other examples include abandoned urban lots, archaeological sites, and post-industrial landscapes where spontaneous vegetation colonises contaminated soils, as well as railway corridors, drains, and urban lakes sustained by wastewater.

These ecosystems are increasingly recognised as persistent and resilient when compared to formally restored sites, as they develop in response to local and contemporary climatic conditions. They demonstrate a clear capacity for self-sustenance and are capable of supporting biodiversity, including species of conservation concern [12]. Novel ecosystems can also provide habitat for native animal species and offer many ecosystem services, such as filtering water, controlling soil erosion, sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, and building soil [13]. In many contexts, novel ecosystems therefore constitute legitimate targets for environmental protection and management [14]. Contemporary ecological literature recognises their value for biodiversity conservation, climate moderation, and the sustaining of human–nature relationships in cities [11].

However, the significance of Dwarka Forest extends beyond ecological function alone. In this context, it is essential to foreground the forest's most direct and immediate beneficiaries: the residents of Harijan Basti and Shahabad Mohammadpur village. The forest's significance becomes clearer when one considers the settlement's location between railway tracks, highways, and the airport. Without the forest, residents would experience extreme heat, air pollution, and persistent noise far more intensely.

In this sense, Dwarka Forest provides a form of climatic and environmental protection that cannot be purchased. It compensates, though only partially, for structural inequalities in housing quality, infrastructure, and access to environmental comfort. Its true significance lies not only in what it offers to Delhi as a whole, but in how it sustains those who live within or around the forest, and depend on it the most.

Discussion

The question of access

Until now, the lack of formal recognition of this space as a forest has allowed it to remain accessible to both people and animals. However, if courts in the future decide to retain Dwarka Forest and protect it from railway or other infrastructure development, an immediate question of management arises. Should access to the forest be restricted or fenced, or should it remain open, at the very least to the residents of Harijan Basti whose everyday lives are closely intertwined with it? Should the forest be treated as a protected enclave, governed by models of fortress conservation that prioritise exclusion over coexistence?

These are not merely technical or administrative questions of conservation. They are deeply political. Decisions about access and protection shape everyday practices and affect people unevenly. For many women, the forest functions as a network of informal shortcuts to workplaces in a city marked by extreme temperatures and fragmented mobility. Restricting access may increase travel distances, time, and physical labour, further burdening those already navigating unequal urban infrastructures.

Most critically, the forest functions as a microclimatic buffer for people who cannot afford well-ventilated housing, air-conditioners, coolers, air purifiers, or sound-proofing. It also provides psychological relief to those living alongside it, particularly residents exposed daily to aircraft noise, railway traffic, and air pollution. This form of well-being, though rarely acknowledged or valued in policy frameworks, remains central to everyday life around the forest.

These considerations demand serious deliberation, not only by environmental planners and legal authorities but also by those advocating for the forest's protection. But before all this, a more fundamental issue arises.

What constitutes a forest?

This issue intersects with the Supreme Court's emphasis on evaluating past land use, present ecological conditions, and future use when determining the legal status of forest land. Dwarka Forest sits uneasily at this intersection. It is neither officially protected nor ecologically empty. This uncertainty reflects a broader ambiguity in how "forest" is defined and recognised in India and calls for closer scrutiny of how the categories of past, present, and future are themselves understood.

Urban landscapes are shaped by layered and shifting ecological histories. In the Najafgarh region, a once extensive wetland system was systematically drained and transformed through infrastructure development and real estate expansion. Elsewhere, areas such as Connaught Place were developed over Babool-dominated woodland, yet these ecological pasts remain largely unacknowledged. This raises a critical question of selection. Which past is foregrounded, where

is the temporal cut-off drawn, and by what criteria are certain ecological histories rendered visible while others are erased.

The legal contestations surrounding Dwarka Forest therefore reveal more than a dispute over classification. They point to a deeper difficulty in recognising and protecting ecologically significant spaces in cities when such spaces emerge outside planned frameworks and fall beyond conventional administrative categories. These contestations call for a new, specifically urban way of seeing forests.

One such approach is to understand spaces like Dwarka Forest as urban-industrial woodlands within the field of urban ecology. These woodlands may be completely surrounded by developed areas, functioning as forest islands within the city. They can emerge on sites such as old or poorly maintained cemeteries, the rubble of former buildings, and rail yards that have fallen into neglect. This concept has gained prominence as a way of understanding urban nature shaped by altered microclimates, elevated pollution levels, modified soil composition, and transformed hydrological conditions.

Based solely on their location within dense urban agglomerations, urban forest can provide substantial social functions for nearby residents while simultaneously fulfilling significant ecological roles [14].

The agency of nature

The concept of forests, as grounded in documentation, land records, and administrative classification, often overlooks ecological processes and the agency of nature itself. Plants, animals, and forests have always moved, adapted, and colonised spaces according to their own dynamics, long before formal systems of classification and long before modern human institutions came into being. Forests have never been static entities. They expand, contract, transform, and reassemble over time. Under conditions of climate change, this dynamism is further intensified, as species are already expanding, shifting, or redefining their ranges in ways that diverge sharply from recent ecological histories.

In contemporary urban contexts, this agency manifests through the emergence of new forests such as Dwarka Forest. These formations are ecological responses to disturbance, climate, soil conditions, hydrology, and opportunity, among other interacting factors. Although such forests may appear “accidental” in relation to planning and administrative intent, they are entirely natural in ecological terms. Their emergence represents adaptive responses to a changing world and reflects ecological assemblages that are often better suited to present-day environmental conditions than historically idealised baselines.

When nature is permitted to exercise agency on ignored or abandoned lands, it raises fundamental questions about how ecological value is defined and recognised. Is value determined by the number of species present, by the presence of particular native or charismatic species, or by adherence to predefined ecological categories? Or does value also lie in the very act of ecological persistence, the effort of life to establish, regenerate, and sustain itself under

adverse and disturbed conditions? The case of Dwarka Forest brings these questions into sharp relief and calls for the recognition of ecological agency, thereby accommodating a more flexible and process-oriented understanding of forests within urban landscapes.

Conclusion

An examination of both the ecology of Dwarka Forest and the lived experiences of people who interact with it in different ways reveals that the forest is not simply a significant green space awaiting classification, but a socially embedded landscape shaped by land history and everyday public use. Its status oscillates between visibility and invisibility, legality and informality, and economic evaluation and social utility.

Dwarka Forest emerges as a contested site on two accounts. First, in courts, due to its past land use and future prospects. Second, in the public imagination, through state narratives that frame vacant land primarily in terms of economic value under capitalist urbanisation. Positions within the latter are not neatly opposed, nor are they evenly distributed. Rather, they reflect the complex ways in which people relate to urban nature under conditions of precarity, structural inequality, and aspiration.

The question of whether Dwarka Forest is recognised as a forest or remains legally ambiguous does not resolve these tensions. Recognition may offer legal protection from felling, dumping, and large-scale infrastructure development, but it also raises pressing questions about access, governance, and exclusion. Conversely, remaining unrecognised leaves the forest vulnerable to erasure under development-led planning and human-induced disturbances. In both scenarios, uses, claims, and relations to the forest are likely to shift significantly. Categorisation alone, therefore, cannot stabilise them.

At the same time, such spaces are particularly vulnerable to appropriation, as any large, unmanicured green patch in the capital is quickly reimagined as a “green lung” without due recognition of the forms of habitation and coexistence it entails. This raises a crucial question: whose claims are amplified in decision-making processes, and whose remain marginalised?

Within this context, Dwarka Forest is not merely a matter of conservation or legal classification. Framing Dwarka Forest as an urban-industrial woodland offers a meaningful way forward, as it allows the agency of nature to be recognised. However, this approach requires policy makers and conservationists alike to move beyond purely ecological considerations and ground such recognition in local realities and the everyday practices of those who use and inhabit the forest. At the very least, such an approach may help ensure that Dwarka Forest can continue to exist, persist, and function as both a living ecosystem and a social space.

The implications of this work extend far beyond Dwarka Forest and relate to the swathes of land that sustain novel and complex human–nature interactions across Delhi. It calls for reimagining how cities relate to nature, time, and their own inhabitants. More importantly, it invites us to notice and cherish the forms of respite that emerge through the cracks of the city’s concrete.

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Credits

Photographs and imagery

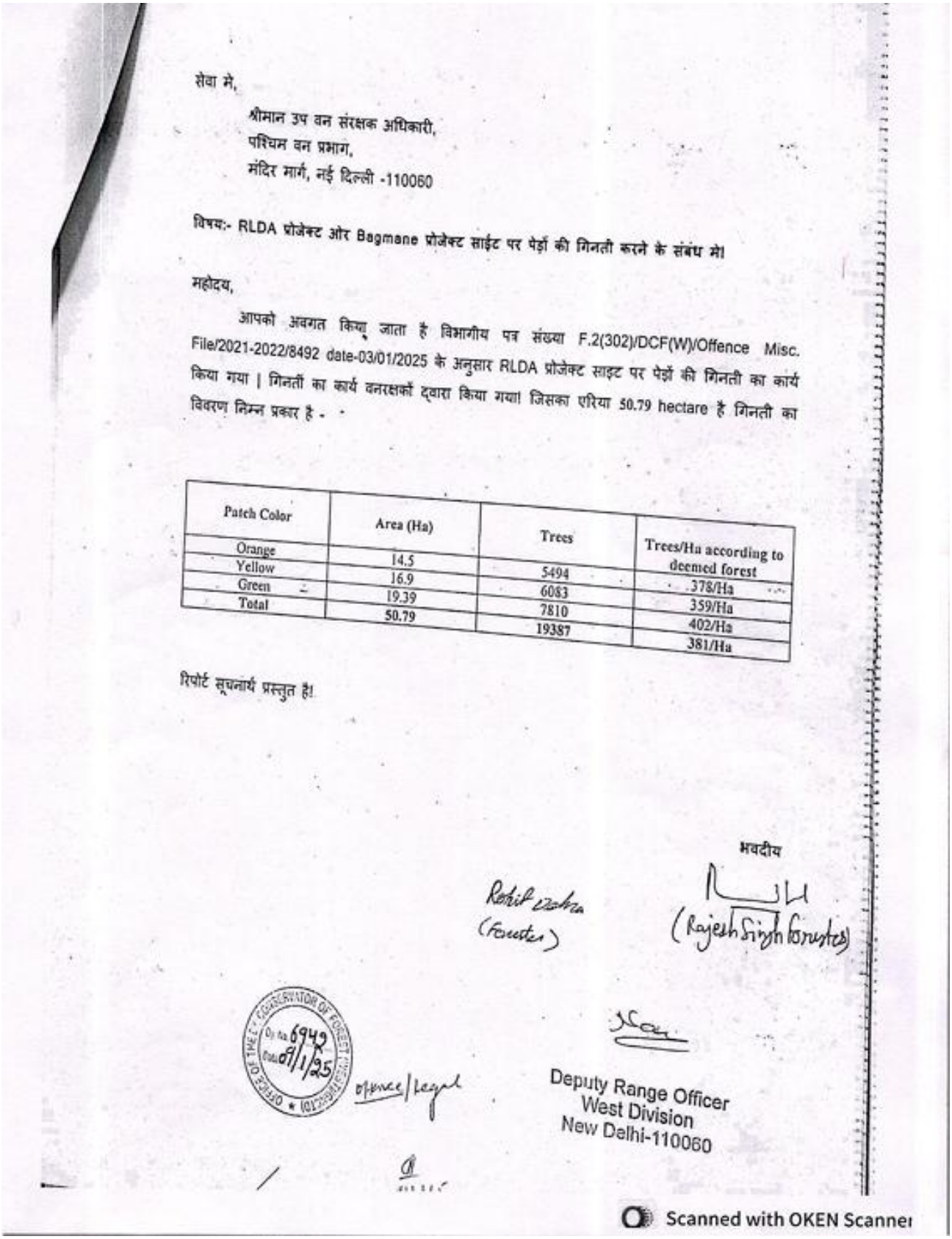
1. Tree burial: Nirjesh
2. Negligence of contractors: Nirjesh
3. Map of Dwarka Forest: QGIS
4. Claiming what is left: Nirjesh
5. Unnamed: Save Dwarka Forest
6. Behind the rubble: Nirjesh
7. Unknown: Save Dwarka Forest (Left), Nirjesh (Right)
8. Front Cover: Nirjesh
9. Back Cover: Ipshita Raj

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools, including assistance from *ChatGPT (OpenAI)*, were used for language editing, paraphrasing, and structural refinement of the text. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the author.

Appendix

I. Tree Count Report by the Forest Department



सेवा मे,

श्रीमान उप वन संरक्षक अधिकारी,
पश्चिम वन प्रभाग,
मंदिर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली -110060

विषय:- RLDA प्रोजेक्ट और Bagmane प्रोजेक्ट साईट पर पेड़ों की गिनती करने के संबंध में।

महोदय,

आपको अवगत किया जाता है विभागीय पत्र संख्या F.2(302)/DCF(W)/Offence Misc. File/2021-2022/8492 date-03/01/2025 के अनुसार RLDA प्रोजेक्ट साइट पर पेड़ों की गिनती का कार्य किया गया | गिनती का कार्य वनरक्षकों द्वारा किया गया। जिसका एरिया 50.79 hectare है गिनती का विवरण निम्न प्रकार है -

Patch Color	Area (Ha)	Trees	Trees/Ha according to deemed forest
Orange	14.5	5494	378/Ha
Yellow	16.9	6083	359/Ha
Green	19.39	7810	402/Ha
Total	50.79	19387	381/Ha

रिपोर्ट सूचनार्थ प्रस्तुत है।

भवदीय

Rohit Sinha
(Forester)

(Rajesh Singh Forester)

OFFICE OF THE CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS (HQ) Dy No. 6942 Date 9/1/25 Office/Legal

Deputy Range Officer
West Division
New Delhi-110060

Scanned with OKEN Scanner

सेवा में,

श्रीमान उप वन संरक्षक अधिकारी,
पश्चिम वन प्रभाग,
मंदिर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली -110060

विषयः- RLDA प्रोजेक्ट और Bagmane प्रोजेक्ट साईट पर पेड़ों की गिनती करने के संबंध में।

महोदय,

आपको अवगत किया जाता है विभागीय पत्र संख्या F.2(302)/DCF(W)/Offence Misc. File/2021-2022/8492 date-03/01/2025 के अनुसार RLDA प्रोजेक्ट साइट पर पेड़ों की गिनती का कार्य किया गया | गिनती का कार्य वनरक्षकों द्वारा किया गया। जिसका एरिया 50.79 hectare है गिनती का विवरण निम्न प्रकार है -

Patch Color	Area (Ha)	Trees	Trees/Ha according to deemed forest
Orange	14.5	5494	378/Ha
Yellow	16.9	6083	359/Ha
Green	19.39	7810	402/Ha
Total	50.79	19387	381/Ha

रिपोर्ट सूचनार्थ प्रस्तुत है।

भवदीय

Rohit Sinha
(Forester)

(Rajesh Singh Forester)

OFFICE OF THE C.F. CONSERVATOR OF FOREST (WEST CIRCLE)
Dy No. 6942
Date 9/1/25

Deputy Range Officer
West Division
New Delhi-110060

सेवा मे,

श्रीमान उपवन संरक्षक अधिकारी,

पश्चिम वन प्रभाग,

मंदिर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली -110060

विषय:- RLDA प्रोजेक्ट ओर Bagmane प्रोजेक्ट साईट पर दिनांक 3/01/2025 को पेड़ों की गिनती करने के संबंध मे।

महोदय,

आपको अवगत किया जाता है आज दिनांक 03/01/2025 को विभागीय पत्र संख्या F.2(302)/DCF(W)/offenceMisc.File/2021-2022/8492 dt-03/01/2025 के अनुसार RLDA प्रोजेक्ट साइट पर पेड़ों की गिनती का कार्य किया गया | Orange Patch की गिनती का कार्य वनरक्षकों द्वारा किया गया जिसका Area(14.5 ha) है।

गिनती का विवरण निम्न प्रकार है -

S.No.	Name of species	Number of Tree
1	Kabuli kikar	3010
2	Desi kikar	1011
3	Shisham	1135
4	Neem	107
5	Sehtut	95
6	Beri	25
7	Subabol	76
8	Peepal	08
9	Siras	02
10	Aam	02
11	Khejdi	09
12	Lehsua	05
13	bakain	02
14	wood apple	07
	Total	5494

रिपोर्ट सूचनार्थ पररस्तुत है।

भवदीय

Rohit Dahiya (Forester)

(Rajesh Kisi Forester)

Pradeep (F.G.)

Singh (F.G.)

Mandeep (F.G.)

Vijender (F.G.)

ROHIT DALAL (F.G.)

सेवा मे,

श्रीमान उपवन संरक्षक अधिकारी,

पश्चिम वन प्रभाग,

मंदिर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली -110060

विषयः- RLDA प्रोजेक्ट और Bagmane प्रोजेक्ट साईट पर दिनांक 04/01/2025 को पेड़ों की गिनती करने के संबंध मे।

महोदय,

आपको अवगत किया जाता है आज दिनांक 04/01/2025 को विभागीय पत्र संख्या F.2(302)/DCF(W)/offenceMisc.File/2021-2022/8492 dt-03/01/2025 के अनुसार RLDA प्रोजेक्ट साइट पर पेड़ों की गिनती का कार्य किया गया, Yellow Patch की गिनतीं का कार्य वनरक्षकों द्वारा किया गया जिसका Area(16.9ha)है।

गिनती का विवरण निम्न प्रकार है -

S.No.	Name of species	Number of Tree
1	Kabuli kikar	4231
2	Desi kikar	644
3	Shisham	242
4	Neem	196
5	Sehtut	15
6	Beri	96
7	Subabol	532
8	Peepal	11
9	Siras	12
10	Amaltas	12
11	papri	07
12	Imli	07
13	jatti	01
14	Frace	02
15	Pahari Neem	34
16	Kaner	37
17	pilkhan	04
	Total	6083

रिपोर्ट सूचनार्थ परस्तुत है।

भवदीय

Rajesh Singh forester · Mandeep (F.G) Onkar Gabbar
Pardeep (F.G) Virender (F.G)
(F.G) Rohit Dalal (F.G)
Amit (F.G) (F.G)

सेवा मे,

श्रीमान उपवन संरक्षक अधिकारी,

पश्चिम वन प्रभाग,

मंदिर मार्ग, नई दिल्ली -110060

विषय:- RLDA प्रोजेक्ट और Bagmane प्रोजेक्ट साईट पर दिनांक 05/01/2025 को पेड़ों की गिनती करने के संबंध मे।

महोदय,

आपको अवगत किया जाता है आज दिनांक 05/01/2025 को विभागीय पत्र संख्या F.2(302)/DCF(W)/offenceMisc.File/2021-2022/8492 dt-03/01/2025 के अनुसार RLDA प्रोजेक्ट साइट पर पेड़ों की गिनती का कार्य किया गया, Green Patch की गिनती का कार्य वनरक्षकों द्वारा किया गया जिसका Area (19.39ha) है।

गिनती का विवरण निम्न प्रकार है -

S.No.	Name of species	Number of Tree
1	Kabuli kikar	5000
2	Desi kikar	331
3	Shisham	432
4	Neem	168
5	Sehtut	162
6	Beri	248
7	Subabol	441
8	Peepal	476
9	Siras	17
10	Amaltas	84
11	papri	160
12	Imli	07
13	jatti	17
14	Pahari Neem	02
15	Kaner	39
16	pilkhan	14
17	Lesua	20
18	Arjun	04
19	Jungle Jalebi	09

20	Bargad	02
21	Kachnar	02
22	hingot	19
23	Sangwan	01
24	chudail Papri	10
25	alestonia	04
26	bamboo	17
27	bakain	56
28	Safeda	66
29	jamun	02
	Total	7810

रिपोर्ट सूचनार्थ परस्तुत है।

भवदीय

Rohitzakhar (Forester)

(Rajesh Singh Forester)

Mandeep (F.G)

Pardeep (F.G)

Vijender (F.G)

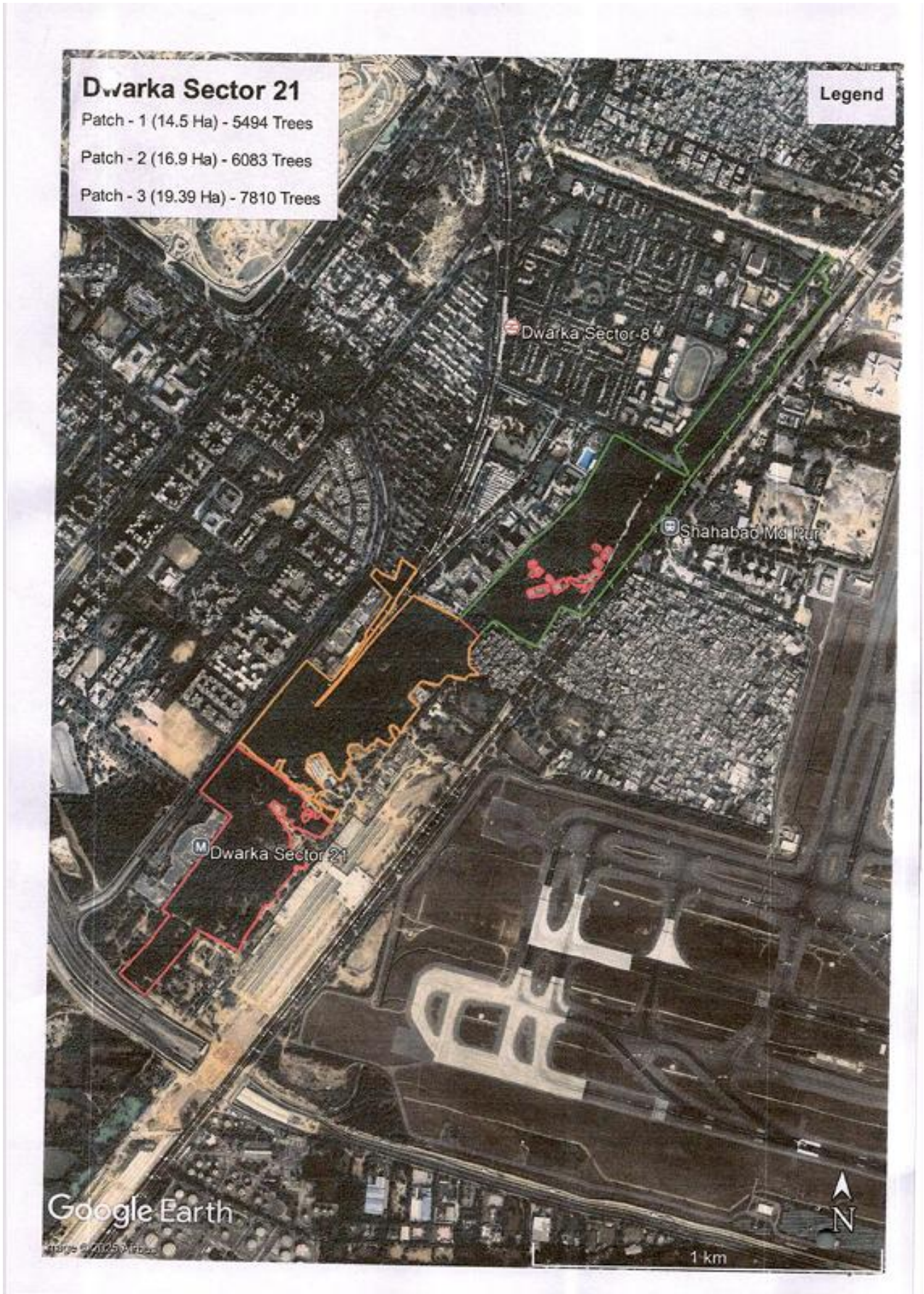
(F.G)

ROHIT DAGAR (F.G)

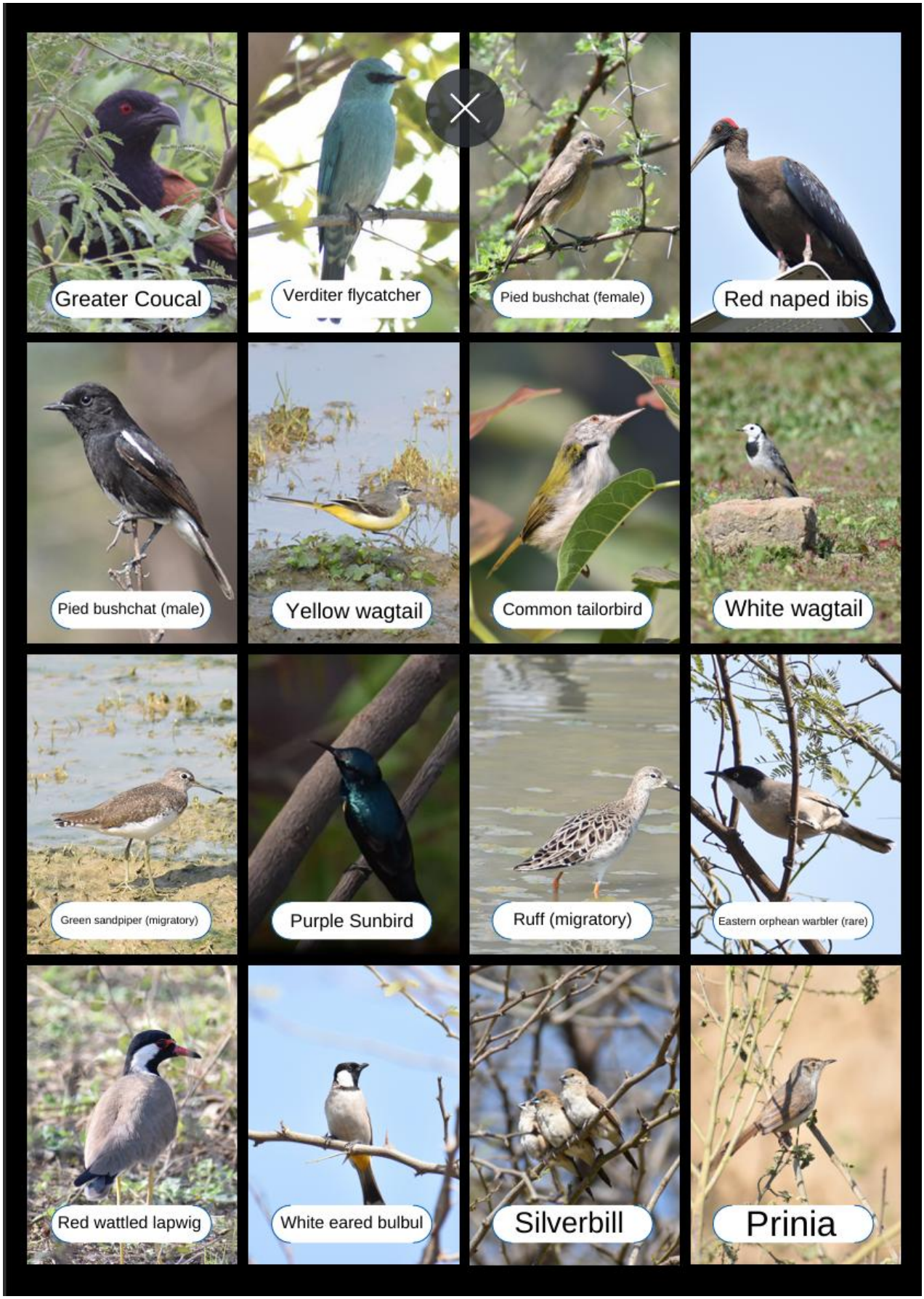
(F.G)

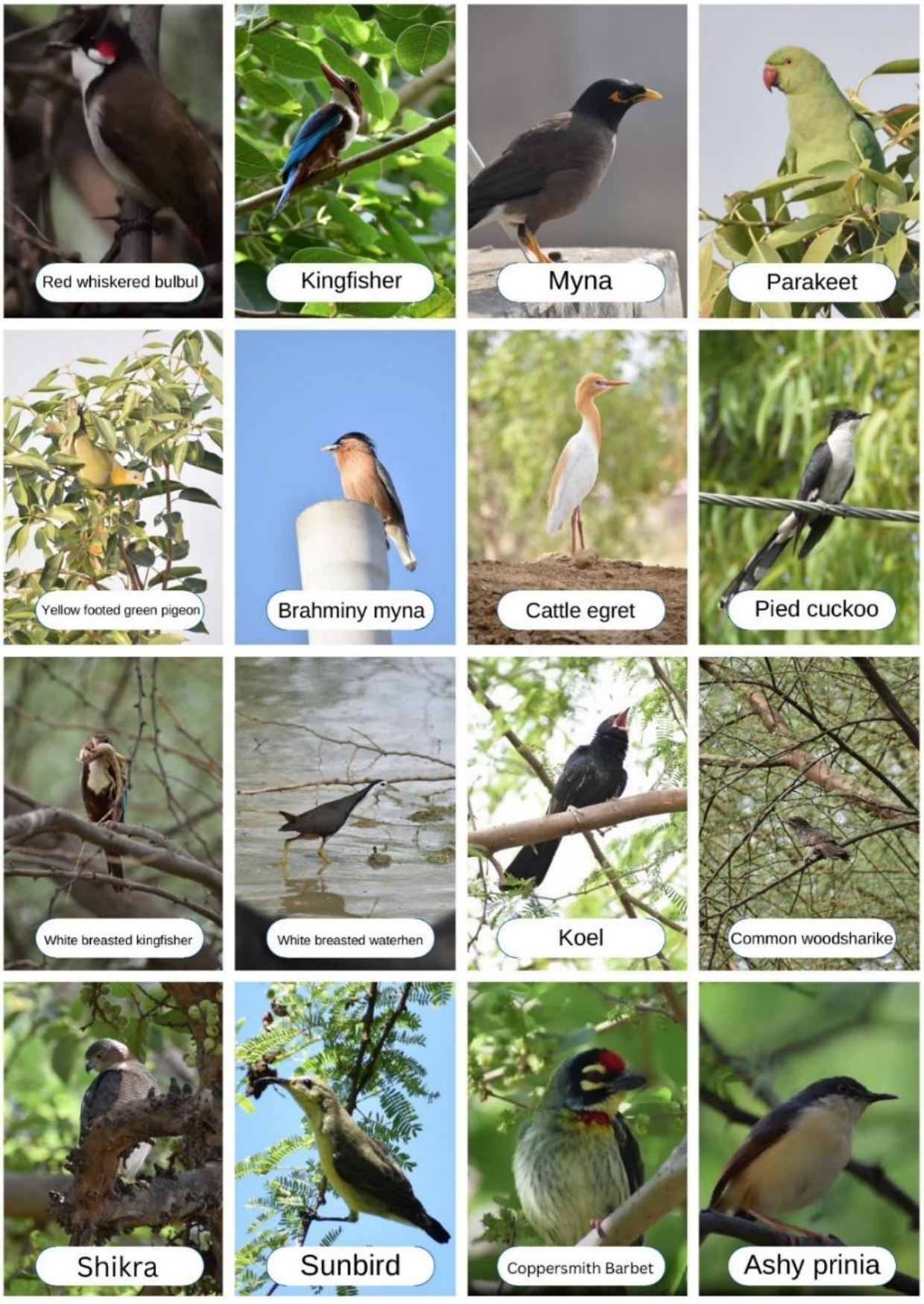
Gahlot

Aman Gahlot (F.G)

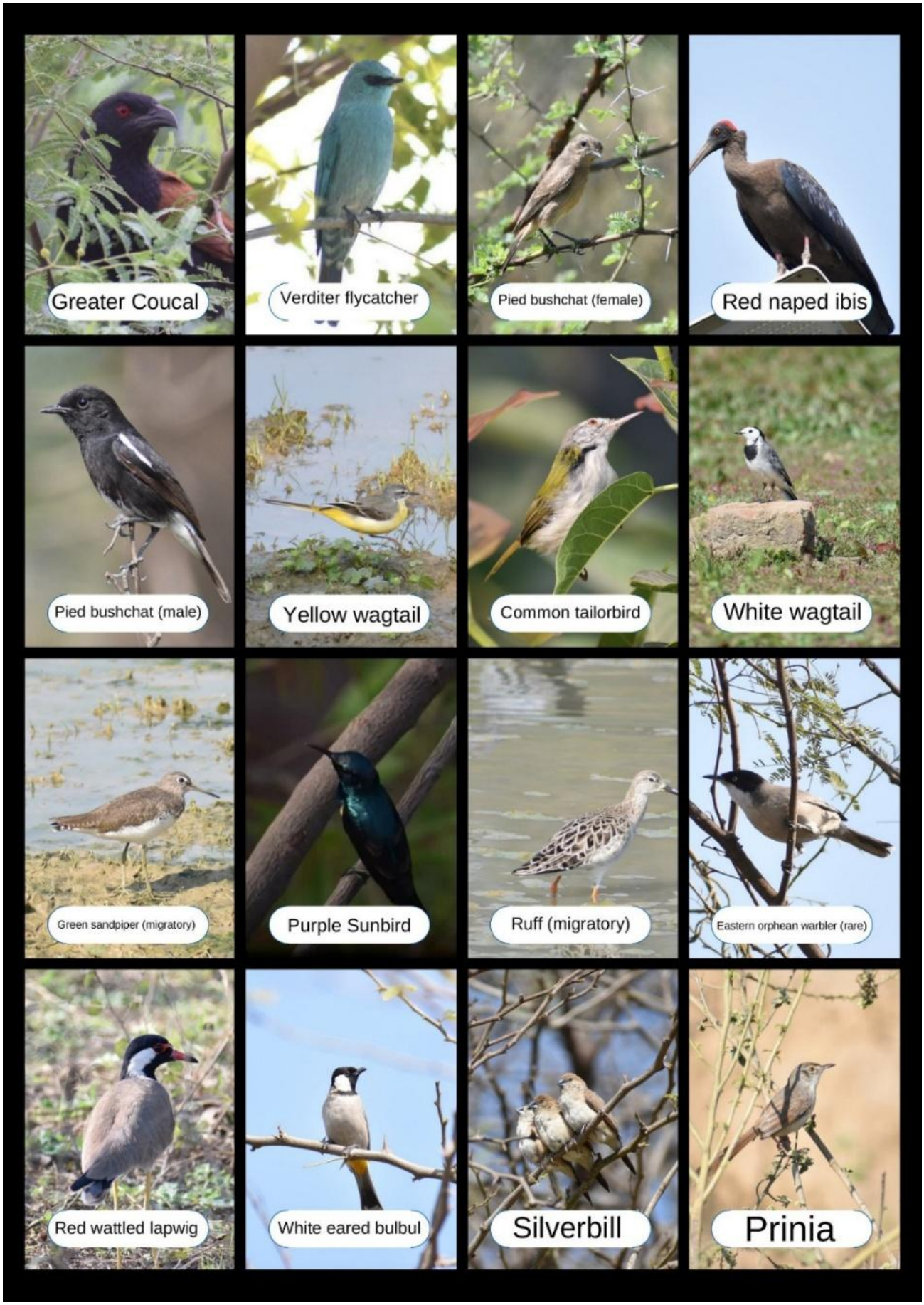

Dwarka Sector 21
Patch - 1 (14.5 Ha) - 5494 Trees
Patch - 2 (16.9 Ha) - 6083 Trees
Patch - 3 (19.39 Ha) - 7810 Trees
Legend
Dwarka Sector 8
Shahabad Mohammadpur
Dwarka Sector 21
Google Earth
1 km
N

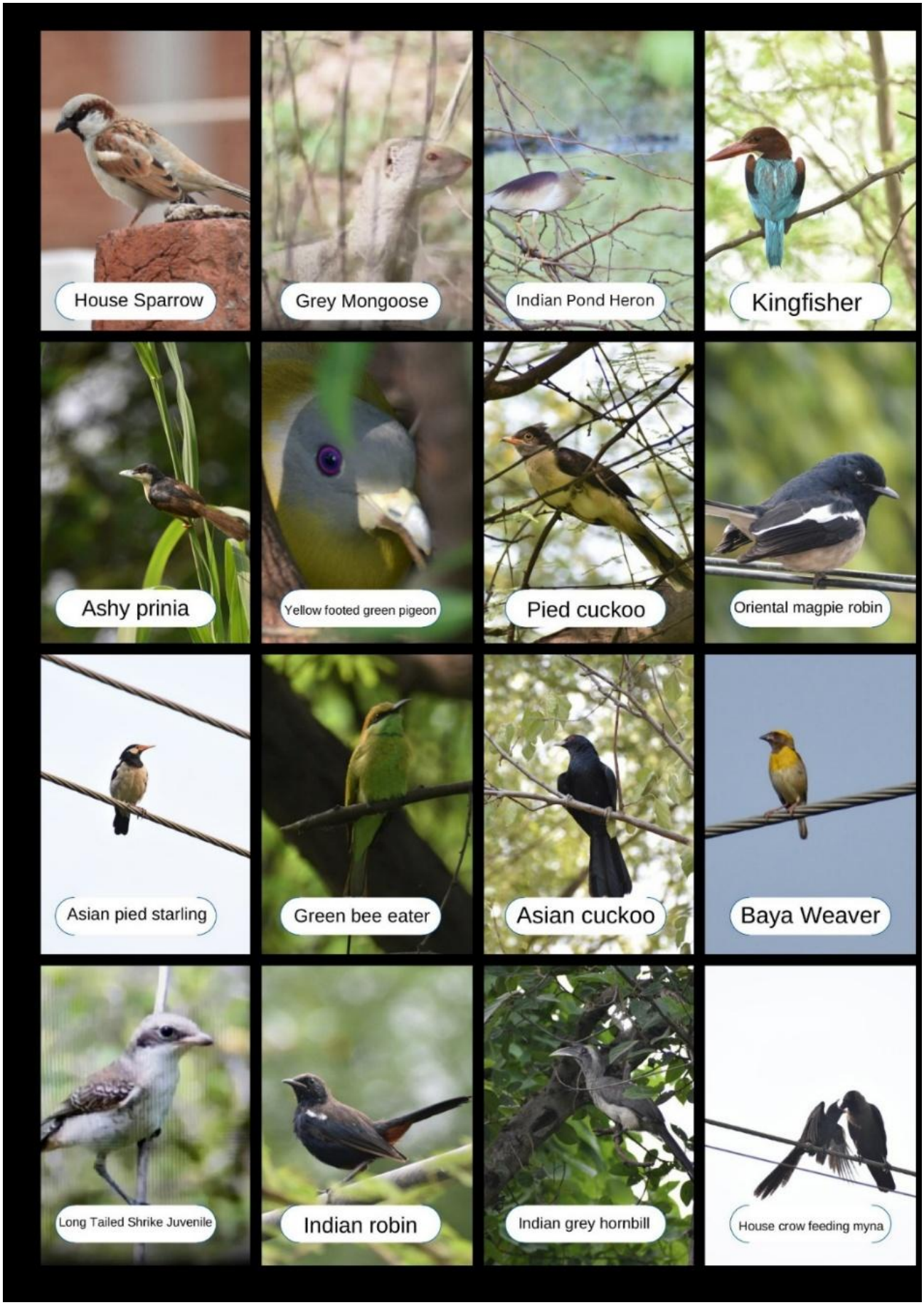
II. Biodiversity of Dwarka Forest




Red whiskered bulbul
Kingfisher
Myna
Parakeet
Yellow footed green pigeon
Brahminy myna
Cattle egret
Pied cuckoo
White breasted kingfisher
White breasted waterhen
Koel
Common woodsharike
Shikra
Sunbird
Coppersmith Barbet
Ashy prinia


Shikra (raptor)
Laughing dove
Indian robin
Eurasian thick-knee
Indian white eye
Long tailed shrike
Black winged kite
Black redstart
Oriental magpie robin
Red breasted flycatcher
White Tailed Swallow
Common hoopoe
Eurasian collared dove
Migratory species of flycatcher
Bluethroat
Silverbill


Greater Coucal
Verditer flycatcher
Pied bushchat (female)
Red naped ibis
Pied bushchat (male)
Yellow wagtail
Common tailorbird
White wagtail
Green sandpiper (migratory)
Purple Sunbird
Ruff (migratory)
Eastern orphean warbler (rare)
Red wattled lapwig
White eared bulbul
Silverbill
Prinia


House Sparrow
Grey Mongoose
Indian Pond Heron
Kingfisher
Ashy prinia
Yellow footed green pigeon
Pied cuckoo
Oriental magpie robin
Asian pied starling
Green bee eater
Asian cuckoo
Baya Weaver
Long Tailed Shrike Juvenile
Indian robin
Indian grey hornbill
House crow feeding myna


Indian treepie
Common hoopoe
Brown headed barbet
Black Kite
Nilgai
Cobra Snake
Feral pig
Indian bull frog
Five stripped palm squirrel
Nilgai
Nilgai Herd
Pond heron
Eurasian wryneck
Eastern orphean warbler
Black Rumped Flameback
Monitor lizard

About Urban Nature Matters

Urban Nature Matters is a shared, living space dedicated to reimagining how cities and nature coexist. The initiative challenges the idea that urban areas are ecologically barren and highlights the rich, often overlooked life that persists within cities. Through inclusive education, storytelling, field engagement, and community-driven conservation, Urban Nature Matters works to reconnect people with the natural world around them and to make biodiversity visible, valued, and embedded in everyday urban life. The organisation also explores who counts as a “city dweller” and how different communities experience and interact with urban nature, aiming to expand access to environmental learning and meaningful conservation engagement.