BIRD enthusiasts often see a cluster of birds aggregated in one particular area or spot. These flocks may have members belonging to the same species or different species. Such flocks are common in most habitats including a town or village, or forests of any type - deciduous, littoral, mangrove, scrub vegetation, grassland or wet lands.

However, not all birds show flocking behaviour. For example, the kingfisher birds forage solitary. Some of the predatory birds like eagles rarely form flocks. So, why do most birds form flocks? Does the habit of forming flocks benefit the birds in any way? Are there any disadvantages in such associations?

Let’s examine the different probable reasons why birds form flocks with members either belonging to some species or of varied species.

Increased vigilance and protection
In the moist deciduous forests of Panchawati, a village in Middle Andaman, a flock comprising birds like scarlet minivet (*Pericrocotus flammeus*, both male and female), Asian fairy blue bird (*Irena puella*), brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus lucionensis*), black naped oriole (*Oriolus chinensis*), black headed bulbul (*Pycnonotus atriceps*), oriental white eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*) and greater racket-tailed drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*) is a common sight during day time.

All of them have similar food habits with prey consisting of insects such as beetles, cicadas, grasshoppers, dragonflies, moth or their larvae, caterpillars and so on.

The greater racket-tailed drongo, known for its aggressive behaviour and sometimes mobbing larger birds especially when nesting (*Popular Handbook of Indian Birds, 1949*), mimics the sounds of scarlet minivet perfectly and perches on a branch in their vicinity. While the other birds will be picking up and gleaning the insects off the leaves, the racket-tailed drongo stays still and alert. The chirping, ringing high pitched whistles of each bird species resonates in the otherwise quiet forest. The drongo raises an alarm on seeing a predator like the Andaman serpent eagle or white bellied sea eagle making the birds break up in different directions. For this reason the nests of many of these birds are close to the breeding grounds of drongos.

Increasing Feeding Efficiency
Birds like sparrows or pigeons usually feed and roost in groups. When they are feeding not all birds would pick on the food with their heads down, some of their heads would be raised up. If they confront a predator they quickly take off initiating the same response in other birds (*Study in Ostriches, Bertram 1980*). Thus groups can detect predators sooner than solitary individuals.

Communal roosting also increases foraging efficiency (*Eiserer, Leonard A, Bird Behaviour, Vol 5*). While on flight the predator would find it hard to hook on to one bird from the flock (*Split effect, Cousin et al. 2002*)
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that traverse over grassy fields. They hawk on grasshoppers and locusts that flush from the grass that sways in wind. Although they belong to different species or variety they never intimidate one another. Different varieties of egrets also get along well when foraging on grass.

Warding Off Predators
During the nesting season predators like owls, eagles and hawks are found swirling around nesting grounds to feed the eggs and the young ones.

On 1st July 2014 in Kasargode district of Kerala a tree belonging to acacia species was found fallen horizontal on the ground due to the previous night’s stormy rain. A group of birds belonging to different species were found encircling a motionless object on the tree trunk – a spotted owlet (Athene brama).

It was located by birds such as house crow (Corvus splendens), black headed oriole (Oriolus xanthornus), common myna (Acridotheres tristis), red whiskered bulbul (Pycnonotus jocosus), loten’s sunbird (Nectarinia lotenia) male and female all with their characteristic chattering sounds and they seemed restless. The owlet kept staring at these birds that were chirping consistently. It subsequently fluttered off to a distant tree.

Warding Off Brood Parasites
Brood parasites are organisms that rely on others to raise their young (David Attenborough, The Life of Birds 1998). Cuckoos are considered brood parasites for this reason. The host birds may range from birds as small as sun birds to larger ones as crows or drongos. Cuckoos are thus often chased by a flock of crows.

An interesting case of a black drongo raising alarm calls on spotting a cuckoo was seen in an open forest of Kerala. This act of drongos prompted the crows to ward off the unfavourable visitor.

However, feeding in flocks is not without detrimental effects. In the forest undergrowths of Kerala yellow billed babblers (Turdoides affinis), common mynah (Acridotheres tristis), rufous tree pie (Dendrocitta vagabunda) and black drongo (Dicrurus macrocercus) form a group in the same location at the same time especially before heavy rains. The high pitched cries of babblers and mynahs and their frenzied moves from one branch to another before they lunge down to the ground to forage is gawked over by the black drongo. The drongo dives down swiftly and robs the insects from the babblers. In this situation the feeding efficiency of one species gets reduced due to the presence of other species.

A similar kind of interference in feeding between species was seen in an open forest of Andaman where a greater racket-tailed drongo intimidated a large cuckoo shrike (Coracina macco) with harsh threatening calls making the less dominant cuckoo shrike drop down its prey and fly away.

So, until now we had heard that “birds of a feather flock together”. However, it is now apparent that “birds of different feathers flock together as well”.

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