



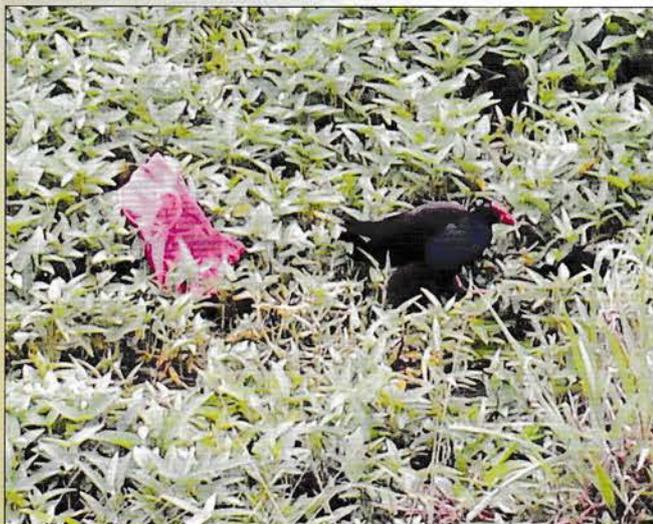
A pair of Comb-crested Jacanas have recently arrived back at Regatta Lake in time for World Migratory Bird Day which started on May 11. It's fitting to note that the theme for this year's World Migratory Bird Day is "Protect birds—be the solution to plastic pollution".

The world produces more than 300 million tons of plastic and it is now one of the most widely used materials in the world. What often escapes one's attention is that the plastic is primarily used for single use items. These lightweight items pieces are easily transported to ecosystems through the forces of nature causing serious threats to migratory species around the world. An estimated eight million tons of plastic waste enter the world's oceans each year. To make matters worse, plastic does not simply dissolve; it just breaks down into small particles by water, sunlight, and wind.

The community is acutely aware of the impact plastic has on marine animals but sadly, having wings does not help birds escape the threat of plastic either. Another imminent danger to birds is when they become entangled or smothered by plastic rings and nets. The foraging behaviour of seabirds makes them prone to ingesting plastics. Dangerous items that float inconspicuously on the surface of the water, covered in algae, single-use plastics such as bags, drinking straws, and bottles can easily be mistaken for prey, both by shape and by smell. Unwittingly, birds feed plastic to their chicks that are even more vulnerable due to their underdeveloped organs.

I recently watched a film called *Albatross* in which the adult parents regurgitated food collected from the ocean to feed their young chicks. The only problem was the hungry chicks were also ingesting a diet of plastic instead of marine animals. The chicks were unable to fly off the island as they were too weak from malnourishment. Others were too heavy to fly because they couldn't regurgitate the amount of undigested plastic, which lay inside them. Eventually, these birds would starve to death because they were unable to catch their food.

In cases of ingestion, the damage caused by plastic depends on its shape. Sharp plastic particles cause immediate death by piercing internal organs. But mostly, plastic consumption leads to a chronic feeling of hunger and starvation as it gives the sensation of having a full stomach without any nutritional value. The toxicity of chemicals coating plastics is an additional threat. The number of seabirds dying from the effects of plastic every year is currently one million and growing. In fact, 90 percent of seabirds are estimated to have plastic in their guts but at this rate, the proportion of seabirds ingesting plastic will reach 99 percent by 2050.



Even birds that live in the wetlands aren't immune. Layers of plastic covering wetlands lead to many cases of entanglement and trapping. Abandoned fishing gear is one of the most common causes leading to a phenomenon called 'ghost fishing'. Caught birds are either injured and pick up infections or end up drowning. Often, trapped birds are limited in their movements and easily become prey to other animals.

Studies show that local projects on the management of plastic waste produce results in a short period of time. Thus, common sense and awareness can help to curb the giant tide of plastic. The international community needs to take urgent action to mitigate unnecessary injuries and mortality of migratory birds due to plastic pollution.

What can you do to be part of the solution to plastic pollution?

Reduce, reuse and recycle - limit your use of plastic materials and replace them with eco-friendly alternatives, use and dispose of plastics sustainably.

Clean up - Join clean-up activities in your area, or do an eco-friendly walk around a lake or along a beach or river and pick up any plastic items such as bags, straws, plastic bottles or lids, and fishing line. If you enjoy recreational kayaking or fishing bring a bag with you to dispose of any collected rubbish that you find. Spread the word - support local and global action against excessive, unnecessary use and detrimental disposal of plastic.

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Photo courtesy of Mick Roderick