

# Shalini Elassery - Indian Pitta

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

bird, birders, birder, indian, women, people, joy, india, burning, pitta, work, nice, enjoyed, matter, england, community, met, pretty, cocktail, colors

## SPEAKERS

Hannah, Shalini



Hannah 00:02

Hey y'all Thank you for tuning in to Women Birders (Happy Hour). My name is Hannah, I'm a birder a woman and someone that enjoys a good drink after a long day birding. Women have been integral to birding since it started, but we haven't always been recognized for the contributions and impact we have. Men have dominated the guiding scene festival circuit leadership positions and publications. And according to a US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011 report and the US there were over 47 million birders the majority of these birders are college educated, they're white, they're women, and mostly are over the age of 55. And if you put all these factors together, we create the typical birder, a white college educated woman over the age of 55. And that's a demographic that I often see out burning, but I don't as frequently see as a speaker, a guide or sole publisher. Additionally, the voices of all women Cand LGBTQ+ birders are not well represented in the burning voices we hear from. So I created the show to bring in more voices, not to say that some of the regular festival keynotes aren't great, but there is room for others. And on the show, I'm asking everyday women from all walks of life, to join me to discuss their experiences, their resources, and advice that they have for others. And I want you to remember that just because you may not have experienced some of these things, like sexism or gatekeeping doesn't mean that they aren't real issues that others face. And because some of these conversations are best had over a cocktail or mocktail, I also create a unique cocktail for each guest in case you want to mix yourself a drink and join us for this chat. If I haven't said it enough, you can bird in whichever way makes you happy and brings you joy. This featured guest said something truly insightful about not doing it if it doesn't bring

you joy, and be honest with yourself. Have you ever had moments of birding that just don't bring you joy? I have. I've had many moments in birding where it just isn't enjoyable and doesn't make me happy. And in those moments, I wanted to quit. I mean, what's the point? Why am I doing this? I'm never gonna be the best at it. Why should I even bother? But after separating myself away from those online chat rooms or other birders that are the root of the lack of joy, I remember why I do it again. Because birds are amazing. They're everywhere. And they are what make it enjoyable. The featured guest for this episode was a little hesitant to join me for the show and was wondering why I would ask her out of the many women burgers out there. And I believe that everyone has a story to share, and I want everyone to have the chance to share it. I'm so glad that Shalini did decide to be on my show because she has so many great thoughts about birding that shouldn't be shared. There's so many incredible birds around the world and she has been fortunate to see so many including the Indian pitta. Now, when she mentioned this bird, I had no idea what it was. But I initially thought of ant pittas that I'd seen in Ecuador, which are pretty plain looking birds. But after looking it up, it's anything about plane. However, I did find it interesting that the ampa does do resemble true pittas because of their strong long legs very short tail and stout bill. Anyways, back to the Indian Pitta it's a gorgeous bird with mustard yellow Buffy breasts and cap, a large black bill and a black stripe across its face. It has a green back with almost an iridescent teal shoulder patch and kind of a hot pink but they are shy birds that stick to the undergrowth were forges for insects on the forest floor. And they have a distinctive to note whistling call that is typically heard at dawn and at dusk. They breed in the forests of the Himalayas, hills of western and central India and migrate out of those areas in the winter. They have local names in different places in India, some of which translate to the six o'clock bird because they call it dawn and dusk and nine colors because of their beautiful coloration. And their call has the mnemonic of common wind come in when I'll be complaining when the next Buddha comes, I'll still be complaining. And that refers to a story about their dress being stolen by a peacock. So just an absolutely stunning bird. So here is your cocktail the Indian Pitta it's an ounce and a half of Hypnotiq an ounce and a half of light rum, three ounces of pineapple juice and ice. Very easy filled glass with the ice pour in the liquids in stir. So one of the local names for an Indian Pitta is nine colors. And so I thought hypnotic would be a great record to use for this because it's a compilation of a bunch of different fruit juices and flavors and alcohols. And also it has a beautiful teal color. It's like the same color as that shoulder patch on the Indian Pitta so I can't go wrong with that. So please grab a glass of this drink or another and join me for this chat with Shalini Well thank you so much for joining me for this episode of Women Birders (Happy Hour). Would you please tell us who you are?



Shalini 05:12

I'm Shalini Elassery, I'm Berta from India, I've been bearing for give or take about 35 years

now. I've been burning, like I said pretty much my entire adult life. It's been a hobby. It's I was quite serious about it as a hobby. But it doesn't take up my whole life. I'm professionally I started my work in it in computer science. I've had the privilege of living and working across the globe. You know, I'm much older than the average bird as you'd be meeting. I've lived in India, in Israel, in England, in New Zealand, in the US for a bit. I'm married to an Israeli, I have a young son, he's just turned a teenager. And they both actually are in Israel right now. And deal I mean, like I said, I'm not very good at talking about myself. So if you want any specific things answered, I'd be happy to answer.

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Hannah 06:18

Okay, so how did you get started birding in the first place.

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Shalini 06:22

So that's an interesting story. I was probably 15 or 16. And the school I used to go to had some sort of a contest about conservation about something to do with nature, I was always very passionate about it. And the first prize I won the award that time was actually a three day stay in a forest. And the trip was led by some of the best, naturally started Delhi at that time. And the award also included a bird book by Salim Ali by Dr. Salim Ali, who was who is the father of Ornithology in India. And they kind of introduced me to the birds showed me how to ID them. And pretty much the passions started from there. And India, you know, it's it's amazingly blessed with a brilliant wide variety of birds. You have them all across the country, different areas, different kinds of birds. And then yeah, it was, it's something I've done all along. So.

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Hannah 07:26

So did your were your parents ever interested in nature?

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Shalini 07:31

Yeah, I get it from my mum mostly. So my parents originally from a place called Kerala, which is in the south of the country. And, again, an amazingly blessed place. My mum's Oh, my mum was always interested in birds. But again, this is not so much as you know, consciously iding them to just observation, noticing the differences, so on so forth, and she passed that on to me. Interestingly, after I became serious about birding so touchy, so it's like, she started burning in earnest after I became a birder. And she would wire when my father retired from service, they returned back to Kerala. That time, I used to live in England, and my mum would call me up and tell me what birth she seen. And you know,

talk about definite IDs and stuff. It was, it was a nice place and a nice face of life.

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Hannah 08:26

Well, it's really cool that that's something that you and your mom can do together.

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Shalini 08:30

Yeah, he passed away a few years ago. So it's, yeah, both my parents passed away a few years ago.

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Hannah 08:38

So what is the day of birding look like for you.

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Shalini 08:43

Um, so I try and get in as much birding as I can, which means I bird almost every day, I happen to also live in a part of the country, which is away from the city. I stay on a farm. And the area around us doesn't have too much too many people too many houses. So most days, in the mornings, I go out for an hour or so before I start work. And then the days that I can I put it up. I mean, you know, during the summer months, the sun sets fairly late. So I normally get in about a narrow so in the evening as well. And I don't have to go very far. At most, I drive around 10 minutes out, or I don't drive I can just walk and we have birds around us. So if I do a full day, which is most weekends and I have friends over who are also birders like me, and you just need to be out in the open and we have amazing birds where I live. So yeah,

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Hannah 09:42

we'll stop bragging about it.

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Shalini 09:44

I'm sorry. I must have been very, very, very good in my life. Because when I bought the place where I live in now, I mean, I don't think births were a criteria. So it was really happenstance and it's it's just worked out. So Very well for me. So pretty happy about it.

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Hannah 10:04

So in your long birding career that you've had, what sort of influences have you had?

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Shalini 10:11

So I think the starting point was probably the one that set the tone. You know, these are people who were, who were actually qualified or ecologists, but they were very gentle. So they kind of introduced me to birds without getting me too hung up about, you know, getting the ID absolutely right. or making sure that I've seen all aspects of it, I've ended up seeing only the male of a species sometimes where I know I can look at a bird. And even then I could place it roughly in the right family. And it didn't matter. It was about looking at a bird going back and looking at a bird book and trying to figure out what it was. And you know, when you're relying on sight, you often get it wrong. And it didn't matter. Actually, it's only in the recent years that I have started meeting up with more, more pedantic Buddhists who are very particular about, you know, getting the name right, getting the scientific name, right and stuff. And I do it for the joy. I love birds. I watched them. I've watched them as often as I can. And I think the influence really has been from people like that. years ago, when I was working in England, I actually volunteered at the London Zoo. for about three months, that was pretty cool. I used to go every weekend. And of course, I volunteered at the bird house. And I actually learned a lot from them as well. I was really did stellar work and was very nice part of my birding career, in that sense, because I learned about, you know, the rigor and how much goes into it. I learned about migrations, and then I've had the opportunity to actually, to actually also travel a lot. I've seen a lot of the world to haven't been to the north, the south of the Americas, or Africa, which are very big for me. And they're on my list. One of these days, I'll get there. But I've, I've seen birds around the world. So you know, that's fun, too.

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Hannah 12:19

So since you've traveled so widely, have you noticed anything about birding culture, as you've gone from place to place?

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Shalini 12:29

So apart from my Indian friends with my bird, I also have people in Israel I bird with and, of course, the guys in England that I associated with briefly a little bit in New Zealand. You know, I've I've only met two kinds of birders, really, my kind, which is the people who are not so specific about getting everything right. And then the real professionals. And I think both these groups are very nice. I think there's an entire breed in between the guys who are not? Well, not, I'm a casual birder. I've been doing it all my life, but I really like to call

myself a casual birder, which means Wherever I am, I will see birds and I will enjoy them, or the really serious ones who made a career out of it, right, a scientific career, or academic career out of it. And they're very nice to because they're doing it because that's their passion. I think the last three or four years, I've met another group, which I think comes in the middle of these two. And I think those are the collectors, the ones who have lists and who, you know, like to get pictures or do counts, or know how many species and I don't belong to that group. I mean, you know, they different. I'm not saying they're not the right kind, but they're not me, and I'm not them. And I don't say I started photography, I think bird photographers are also a lot of them at least come in this list. I mean, they have counts, and they are very particular what they've got. So yeah, I'm a reluctant photographer, even now. I do take photographs. But not, not so that I can, you know, have a collection of photographs, but because it's an extension of what I did, and that's it.

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Hannah 14:34

So when you first started birding, were you able to find the resources that you needed to you know, figure out where to go or bird identification?

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Shalini 14:47

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I had friends like me who had come into birding accidentally, and did it because they liked birds. So it was quite easy all along. I mean, I I was a high school student, I was in college. I was working and I used to find people with whom I could go on bad trips. And, yeah, it used to be a very warm, very informal. You know, there was no sense of competition. We were not racking up lists. I didn't know I didn't know a lot of the terms that exist. I didn't know what a lifer meant, and I didn't know what who or Twitter was until very, very recently. So yeah, I must have I must have missed that entire group, I think.

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Hannah 15:35

Yeah, it seems to only have popped up only recently, like you're saying yeah, it's like this group of people who are very excited and push that sort of mindset. Yeah. So what advice would you have for other women birders?

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Shalini 15:51

So, yeah, I mean, I've I come from a position of privilege. I think there is no doubt in my mind that I've been very, very lucky. I've been very lucky with the people I paired it with in the beginning, I've been very lucky with the people I've had as mentors. People who whom

with whom I could hang out with no concern for myself for my safety. And I think I think it's, it's a real it's really a matter of shame that, that that is not there for other women birders. The first time I heard about it was really when I came on to Twitter. And I heard a lot of the Indian women birders also talk about it, saying that, you know, they have to figure out how it's safe, or how to make sure they're safe when they go out birding. And since I never faced it, I didn't give it much importance. And then recently, I met actually a wildlife researcher who tells me how difficult it actually is. It's my advice to any any young child in any field, which is, if you're not comfortable come out of it. If it doesn't bring you joy, stop it. Okay. You have to find people with whom you can go out where there is no element of competition. And I don't think it's got to be only women birding together. I mean, some of my best birding buddies are a guys. Okay. But, again, I think it is a function of my privilege, that that they know that I'm there equal, that it doesn't matter if I get an ID wrong. Or if they get an ID wrong. And the joy never quite leaves, you know, that I think has to be the underlying thing. So I think some of it is from this organized nature of birding, I think, I think the best advice for women is to move back and do it in groups where it doesn't feel like something you have to do. It's something that you'd want to do, right? I mean, you don't, it's like going out for a movie or a dance or a party, you have to want to do it, there has to be the joy, the need to get up and go and go and do this. The minute that is in question, don't do it. The birds are not going anywhere. They're really not going anywhere. So you know, you can find another another time. So okay, you will not see that one migrating bird is a pity Of course it is. How does it matter? Somebody else will see it and post a photograph, see that and enjoy it. But whatever you do, you have to make sure that you want to be there and you want to do it and not because if you don't you're not part of the elite club. I was part of no clubs none. I have not registered or have not participated in any organized birding ever. Okay, and I've done birding all my life.

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Hannah 19:05

So how can we as more experienced birders create and be supportive of new birders and, you know, create a community where it's inclusive.

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Shalini 19:17

So it's something that I am doing now. I mean, I, ever since I've realized how lucky I've been. The first thing is just encouraging people, and it does. It's not a function of age, or gender, for that matter. Anybody who's interested. Okay. I think the best thing is kindness. When I see senior birders putting down people who get bird IDs wrong or something else wrong or photo battles, how does it matter? You know, the last thing you want to do is kill the spirit. Go out and do stuff and, and I know we can communicate that. So I think It is about communication. One, we must be in a place where we are listening. If somebody is

complaining about something, we should be there to listen. We should hear them. We should be in a position, we may not have answers, we probably will not have answers, but the least we can do is listen. And that is very important. Okay, and, and I think then the younger voters will find their voice, especially the women.

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Hannah 20:29

Yeah. And we're in a time where we're more and more women are finding their voice, which is great. And like you said, we need to be listening so they can feel heard. Yeah. So do you feel that you've found your place in the birding community?

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Shalini 20:44

Um, so we've created a community in India, it's called the indie aves community. And this is, again, not something that was planned. When I came on to Twitter. It's an online community. When I came onto Twitter, got together with a bunch of other birders, and it's somehow happened with just two women in the group, the rest are all men. But all, you know, all have been burning for a long time. I have only met one other person from the group thus far, because we stay all across the country. I think I have found my place. But I think the point notice, it doesn't really matter to me. Yeah, because I think my place is with the birds, that people are kind of, you know, incidental. It's nice to have them around. But yeah, I could do that.

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Hannah 21:43

So what has been your most memorable bird or birding experience?

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Shalini 21:52

You know, 35 years is a long time. Okay, so the, the one that's very close to me, close to my heart is this bird that I saw recently, again, actually got a pic of it, called the Indian Pitta. And this is a bird that my mom had called me, from Kerala to England, to tell me that she'd seen it. And I didn't quite believe her because it's a wintering bird. And it's, it's an amazingly beautiful bird. But for me to get a picture of that, and to get a really good picture of that was special. But again, you know, bird encounters, I saw a bird yesterday, which I hadn't seen for two years, that brings me the same amount of joy. So I don't really have a favorite bird or a favorite experience. I'd really have to think very, very long and hard. And that I'd have to think about the year and where I was in my life. And you know, it's it's got, I like birds. Yeah, and I've had fun. I don't have a single bad experience. How's that?

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Hannah 23:03

That's good. Yeah, yeah, I think that's great. Well, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me. And is there any last thing that you'd like to say about you know, birding that you thought about these last 35 years? Um,

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Shalini 23:21

so for me, it's a way to really connect back with nature. Yeah, I think I think hanging out with birds is the best thing you can do. If you just if you really want to just de stress go and watch a bird. So I've done it, and it doesn't matter where you are, because birds are they're everywhere. Okay, I mean, it could be a sparrow in the street or, or I love watching crows or, or Raptors or it they don't have to be exotic. They could be your everyday ordinary garden birds, wherever you are. And, and I think I think it's worthwhile watching them. So yeah, my advice is, if you're not already doing it, do it.

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Hannah 24:05

Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time. I know it's very late for you. But it's been so much fun to watch your Twitter feed, and I'm, if you're okay with it, I'm going to post your Twitter feed in the show notes so other folks can follow you as well, because you've had some incredible pictures on there. Thank you.

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Shalini 24:23

Thank you. But I'm still I still think of myself as a burden, not a bird photographer. So that's again, on the site. Yeah. Okay.

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Hannah 24:34

Well, thank you so much.

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Shalini 24:35

Thank you. Thank you for doing what you're doing.

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Hannah 24:39

And thank you, Shalini for joining me for this episode. I really enjoyed talking with you. And I've so enjoyed following you on Twitter, and seeing all the interesting things that are

happening in the Indian bird community. Of course, I'd love to get over there and participate in it at some point in time, but it's fun to watch. And it was just such a joy to hear you talk about The experiences you've had and your thoughts about birding and the bird of community. And thank you all for listening to my podcast. I hope you enjoyed it and maybe learn something. Please rate review and subscribe on Apple podcast Stitcher, Google music and anywhere else you listen to me. If you'd like to connect with me on socials, please follow me and HannahgoesBirding on Instagram. My Twitter is @womenbirdershh or you can email me at womenbirders@gmail.com. I also have resources and information on go burning podcast calm. I hope you enjoyed this episode. I look forward to seeing you at the next happy hour.