

Santragachhi fence in bird flight path

By Subhro Niyogi/TNN

Kolkata: A 'well-intentioned' but 'ill-conceived' project to erect a fence around Santragachhi Jheel – a natural habitat for migratory birds in winter – has sparked off a major controversy with wildlife enthusiasts opposing the forest department initiative tooth and nail. While forest department officials claim the fence will prevent encroachment and protect the migratory birds, wildlife activists say it will cause irreparable damage.

Nearly 80 bird species are found at Santragachi in winter, including several which migrate from Tibet and beyond. "The monstrous fence made of iron angle and galvanised wire will scare away birds and be a visual pollution for bird lovers," said Raja Chatterjee, secretary of Junglee. Already, the numbers are down from 8,000 three years ago to 5,000 last year. The NGO has been spearheading the campaign against fencing of the tank though it has received support from Nature Environment Wildlife Society and WWF India. Apart from being



an eyesore and kill-joy for those who flock to see the birds barely 15 ft away, Chatterjee said the fence would alter the avian demography and puzzle birds. "Birds have photographic memory and settle at a place only if the demography remains unchanged. After

the Santragachhi flyover was built, birds stopped frequenting waterbodies on the other side. The same will happen if the fence is set up. Birds are sure to spot it as sunlight reflects off its surface," said Chatterjee. Rubbishing the need for protection,

he said there had been no instance of poaching at the site in the last seven years. "Why spend Rs 12 lakh on a bad project. Instead, put a notice board with the high court order against encroachment. A security service can even be engaged between December and March when the birds flock the tank,"

he said. Chatterjee also pointed out that the money could be better spent on a sewage line to stop the tank's pollution. Currently, sewage from nearly 200 South Eastern Railway quarters flow into the tank instead of the main sewage channel in Santragachhi. The forest department though, is unwilling to see reason. "At the 12 hectare site, two hectare has already been encroached. The fence is needed to protect the rest," forest officials said. Ornithologist Sumit Sen too was in favour of a fence to prevent encroachment but felt the sides could meet midway and work out a pragmatic solution.