

My First Birding Buddy

by Chandramika Nath

The first friend I ever made had feathers.

My father introduced us.

Every morning of my childhood began with the same sound—*cheep-cheep-cheep*. Before the village stirred awake, before smoke rose from kitchen fires, the house sparrows had already begun their day. Their nests were tucked beneath the roof of our Lakshmi Narayan temple, and their songs spilled into our courtyard like music.

Deuta never needed an alarm clock. The sparrows were enough.

With a cup of tea in one hand and a handful of grains in the other, he would step into the courtyard and scatter food across the ground. Within seconds, our little band of sparrows would arrive, fluttering down to share their morning meal. I would run after him, still rubbing sleep from my eyes, and together we would watch our little guests eat their breakfast.

One winter morning, I remember asking why the sparrows came to our house every day.

Deuta smiled and said, “Because they know they are welcome here.”

At the time, I thought he was talking only about birds.

Years later, I realized he was teaching me something about kindness.

Those mornings were simple, but they became the happiest memories of my life. We shared our home with the sparrows, and in time they became part of the family. Their cheerful presence felt as natural as the morning sunlight in our courtyard.

Not everyone saw it that way. Some visitors would tell my parents that sparrows choosing to nest in our temple was a blessing, a sign of prosperity and good fortune. Others insisted it was inauspicious and warned that the nests should be removed. My parents paid little attention to either opinion. To them, the sparrows were simply living creatures looking for a home, and our home had room for them.

Deuta seemed to know every bird that visited our home. Pointing toward the bay leaf tree, he would tell me stories about them—the bright Black-hooded Oriole, the noisy Blue-throated Barbet, the restless White-throated Fantail. He knew their local names, their favorite branches, and the seasons in which they arrived. Other visitors came too—Common Mynas, Jungle Mynas, Tailorbirds, Rufous Treepies, Spotted Doves, and many more. To me, they were simply birds. To Deuta, they were neighbors.

I never realized he was teaching me.

To me, he was simply my father, and I was simply spending time with him.

For years, the sparrows returned every morning, filling the courtyard with their chatter. Then, quite suddenly, they were gone.

No repairs had been made to the temple. No trees had been cut down. Nothing had changed. Yet one season the nests stood empty, and the sparrows never returned. I was too young to understand why, but I remember searching the temple roof and waiting for the familiar flutter of wings.

Even today, I sometimes wonder what made them leave.

Years passed, and I left home to study wildlife and ecology. During a university session on birdwatching, I heard a word that made me smile: “Birding.”

As the speaker described the practice of observing birds, my mind drifted back to winter mornings in our courtyard.

I realized then that I had been birding long before I knew there was a word for it.

And Deuta had been my first birding buddy.

Later, in a small, rented room in Guwahati, life became busier and lonelier. Then, somehow, the sparrows found me again.

A pair built a nest above my window. Every evening, I watched them carry twigs, feed their chicks, and disappear into the fading light. After years of absence, it felt as though old friends had found their way back to me.

The first person I called was Deuta.

When I returned home during vacations, we spoke for hours about birds. I shared the English and scientific names I had learned; he laughed and replied with the local names he had always known. Sometimes I would describe a bird and ask what people in our village called it. He always seemed to know the answer.

We lived miles apart, yet the birds somehow brought us back to the same courtyard.

Then one day, I lost him.

The phone calls stopped. The conversations stopped. The world I knew quietly rearranged itself.

But the world did not stop. Seasons changed. Birds migrated. Life moved forward as it always does.

The first time I returned home after his death, I found myself standing alone in the courtyard. The temple roof was still there. The bay leaf tree was still there. Everything looked exactly as I remembered, yet nothing felt the same.

I waited for the familiar sound of sparrows.

The silence felt heavier than I expected.

Now, whenever I return home, I still look toward the temple roof expecting to see them. I find myself searching the bay leaf tree for the birds Deuta once pointed out. Sometimes, when a familiar chirp breaks the afternoon silence, I instinctively turn around, half expecting to find him standing beside me with his cup of tea.

Of course, he is never there.

Yet, in another way, he always is.

He lives in every bird I notice, every birdsong I pause to hear, every moment I spend looking up instead of rushing past. The love he gave me was woven so deeply into those mornings that I can no longer separate him from the birds themselves.

And so, every time I return home, I wait.

I wait for the sparrows.

In some quiet corner of my heart, I think I am still waiting for Deuta too.

Perhaps that is why I still glance at the temple roof whenever I walk into the courtyard. Somewhere inside me, I hope the sparrows will choose our home again, just as they once did.

Maybe they will never return.

But if they do, I know it will feel as though a small part of Deuta has found his way home.

People often ask where my love for nature began.

It began in a small Assamese courtyard—with a flock of sparrows and a father who never knew he was teaching me how to look closely at the world.



Chandramika Nath is a wildlife researcher and an aspiring nature writer from Assam, India. She holds a master's degree in environmental biology and wildlife sciences and works on wildlife behavior, conservation genetics, wildlife physiology, and ecological research. Inspired by birds, landscapes, and everyday encounters with nature, her writing explores the connections between memory, family, and the natural world.