

VOLUME 8 ISSUE 1 2022

ISSN 2454-3055



**INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
ZOOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATIONS**

***Forum for Biological and
Environmental Sciences***

Published by Saran Publications, India



International Journal of Zoological Investigations

Contents available at Journals Home Page: www.ijzi.net

Editor-in-Chief: Prof. Ajai Kumar Srivastav

Published by: Saran Publications, Gorakhpur, India



ISSN: 2454-3055

Ichthyofaunal Diversity of Bhagda or Bhagta Taal, a Wetland of Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh, India: Threats and Conservation

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Received: 4th March, 2022; Accepted: 30th March, 2022; Published online: 8th April, 2022

<https://doi.org/10.33745/ijzi.2022.v08i01.046>

Abstract: Wetlands serve as potential reservoirs of water which also harbor coveted bioresources, that sustain animal life. Fish is a potential bioresource for nutrition and offers workplaces for people. The present investigation intended to study the fish diversity in Bhagda/Bhagta Taal, a wetland along with threats and their possible conservation measures. The study revealed the occurrence of 41 freshwater fish species which belong to 29 genera under 16 families and 8 orders. The order Cypriniformes, which was found to be the most dominant order, comprises 16 species sharing 39.02 % of the total fish population of the wetland. The highest diversity was recorded in the family Cyprinidae (16 species) followed by Channidae (5 species), Bagriidae (4 species), Siluridae (3 species), Mastacembelidae (2 species) and the remaining 11 families included solitary species. The present investigation showed that Bhagda Taal possesses rich biodiversity but proper conservation measures are required to maintain its sustainability. The IUCN conservation status of fish species in the wetland has been worked out as 4.88% endangered (EN), 2.44 % Vulnerable (VU), 12.20% Near threatened (NT), 75.60% Least concern (LC) and 4.88 % Not evaluated (NE). There is a need for the conservation of fish diversity in this natural wetland. The pressure is increasing day by day due to the increasing population, leading to loss of fish diversity hence, identifying the problem and making a better management plan is the way for conservation of the fish diversity of wetlands of Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Taal, Wetland, Ichthyofauna, Conservation measure, Fish diversity

Citation: Singh Varsha and Prakash Sadguru: Ichthyofaunal diversity of Bhagda or Bhagta Taal, a wetland of Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh, India: Threats and conservation. Intern. J. Zool. Invest. 8(1): 412-420, 2022.

<https://doi.org/10.33745/ijzi.2022.v08i01.046>

Introduction

Fishes are not only playing a significant role as members of different trophic levels in the aquatic ecosystem but are also considered important economic, aesthetic and ecological resources (Pathak and Goswami, 2021). India is one of the mega biodiversity countries in the world and occupies the 9th position in terms of freshwater biodiversity. In India, there are about 1,570

marine and 1027 freshwater fish species. The freshwater fishes are categorized into primary, secondary and alien fishes. Primary freshwater fishes include 858 species belonging to 167 genera, 40 families and 12 orders. Further, 137 species of secondary freshwater fishes that frequently enter and thrive in freshwater rivers are also known from India. Thirty-two species of

alien fishes belonging to 21 genera, 9 families and 7 orders are found in the freshwater bodies of India. Out of 21, 16 species are well known, potential invasive alien fishes in India (Gopi *et al.*, 2017).

Wetlands are among the world's most productive ecosystems and are often described as "Kidneys of land scope". They are cradles of biological diversity providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals including fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, and invertebrate species depend for survival (Prakash, 2020a). They represent only a part of our land bases but they provide shelter to a great number of animal and plant species. Many species only use the wetland for a very small but important part of their life cycle such as for breeding and responding (Yadav *et al.*, 2011). Besides contributing to the environmental sustainability through the nutrient cycle, the wetlands of India are the major sources for inland fish production of the country, offering vast potential for capture as well as culture fisheries.

The fisheries sector in India is third in the world in total fish production and contributes around 1.07 % of the country's GDP and 5.34% of the agricultural GDP. With the third position in fisheries, the country has high potential in this sector for rural development, nutritional security and employment generation (Prakash, 2021). Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest states in India, has vast potential of aquatic freshwater resources and offers a considerable scope of culture as well as capture fisheries development. Therefore, there lies the scope for utilization of these vast resources for fishery development. In spite of vast freshwater resources, the fishery has been assigned the least priority among the long chain of stakeholders of Uttar Pradesh, India.

A huge number of recent studies have been made by different researchers on fish diversity of various freshwater bodies in Uttar Pradesh such as Shukla and Singh (2013), Verma *et al.* (2015), Verma and Prakash (2016), Prakash (2016),

Prakash (2020 a,b), Prakash and Singh (2020), Prakash and Yadav (2020), Sanjay and Prakash (2020) and Prakash (2021) but, there is a paucity of detailed information regarding fish diversity and their conservation status in wetlands of Uttar Pradesh. So, a comprehensive and trustworthy study of fish diversity in the light of emerging threats to its population and to suggest future conservation measures for proper management of fish stock in the wetland is of utmost importance for the development of inland fisheries.

The presence of many natural wetlands in the form of Taals and ponds in the Tarai region of eastern Uttar Pradesh offers immense scope and potential for inland fishery development. Before utilizing these freshwater bodies in fish culture practices, it is of utmost importance to have knowledge of the existence of fish fauna. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to deal with the status of fish diversity of Bhagda or Bhagta Taal, a wetland of Balrampur district of Davipatan division of Uttar Pradesh, India.

Materials and Methods

Bhagda or Bhagta Taal is situated in Gurhra (Kushmor) village, of Shriduttganj Block of Utraula Tahasil of Balrampur Uttar Pradesh. It is situated between 27° 25' 48//N to 27° 43' 08// N, altitude and 82°18'48// E to 82°30'18// E longitude. It is a large shallow lentic water body with about 10 ha catchment area but in the summer season its water spread area becomes reduced up to 7.0 ha. Its water is used for agriculture and fish culture. The Taal is enriched with several types of aquatic plants (such as *Nymphaea*, *Nelumbo*) and aquatic birds (like Duck, Saras and Bagula). The abundant food attracts hundreds of resident and migratory birds including the Siberian crane during the winter season. As an important resort for the native faunal diversity and beautiful habitat for the phytodiversity, it has never been a subject of scientific or geological study. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to evaluate the wetland in terms of its ichthyofaunal diversity as well as ecological significance for the area.

Fish samples were collected in different seasons from January 2021 to December 2021 from Bhagda Taal, a wetland of Balrampur district of Davipatan division of Uttar Pradesh with the assistance of a local fisherman by using hand-nets, gill nets, drag nets, dip net including hooks and lines mainly during the time of fishing. The collected small-sized fishes were directly placed in a plastic jar containing 10% aqueous formaldehyde solution. But larger specimens were preserved with an incision on the belly in the plastic containers. Fresh or preserved samples were identified up to species level. Identification of fish specimens was done with the help of its shape, colour, the pattern of scales, fins, mouth pattern and other morphological characters and after following standard taxonomic keys for fishes (Day, 1889; Datta Munshi and Srivastava, 1988; Menon, 1992; Srivastava, 2002; and Jayaram, 2010).

The study was related to the threat parameters like reduction of open water area, shrinkage of fish breeding areas due to rapid siltation. All other parameters including the anthropogenic stress were determined by the general observations during the field studies during 2021.

Results and Discussion

In the present study, 41 fish species were identified which belong to 29 genera under 16 families and 8 orders. The list of fish inhabiting Bhagda Taal along with the status of occurrence, economic importance and IUCN conservation status of the fish is given in Table 1. The species composition of different orders in terms of percentage is given in Table 2 and Figure 1. The order Cypriniformes was having the highest species composition with 16 species (39.02%) of 11 genera and all are belonging to the same family, Cyprinidae. Next to Cypriniformes was the order Siluriformes having 10 species (24.39%) of 8 genera under 5 families. The order Perciformes comprised of 5 species (12.20%) belonging to 5 genera under 5 families. The order Ophiocephaliformes comprised of 4 species

(9.75%) belonging to single genera and a single family. Both orders Osteoglossiformes and Mastacembeliformes were having 2 species (4.88%) each belonging to single genera and a single family. On the other hand, orders Clupiformes and Beloniformes were having single species each.

IUCN conservation status of the fish species of this Taal in different categories can be represented as 4.88% Endangered (EN), 2.44% Vulnerable (VU), 12.20% Near threatened (NT), 75.60% Least concern (LC) and 4.88% Not evaluated (NE) (Fig. 2).

The fish diversity of the Taal has been facing significant threats due to anthropogenic activities. It was also observed that the Bhagda or Bhagta Taal is in surrounding agricultural fields and heavy encroachment by villagers with their cattle spoils the wetland ecosystem. The major threats observed during the study were as follow:

- The open water area decreased rapidly with increasing the dead area of the wetland within the last 10 years due to eutrophication.
- Due to encroachment, the catchment area reduced year by year with the result auto stocking capacity of the Taal has been significantly reduced.
- Due to succession, breeding areas of fishes also shrank.

Wetlands are often subjected to expansion and contraction in an area with changes in the water level due to the fluctuation in the receiving water and rainfall, as a result, the species richness varies depending upon the period of flooding. Physico-chemical conditions of water and entering of chemicals during runoff in the wetland stimulate the biological diversity due to "Spatial Heterogeneity" (Alfred and Ramakrishna, 2002). On account of the fish diversity of the Taal, the present study revealed a good diversity with 41 species, which is found to be higher in comparison to some other wetlands of the Tarai region of Uttar Pradesh (Prakash, 2020a,b; Prakash and

Table 1: Fish diversity of Bhagda or Bhagta Taal, a wetland of Balrampur district, Uttar Pradesh

Order	Family	Scientific name	Common Name	Economic Importance	IUCN Status	Status of Occurrence
Osteoglossiformes	Notopteridae (Feather back/ Knife fishes)	<i>Notopterus notopterus</i> (Pallas 1769)	Patra	FF, OF	LC	++
		<i>Notopterusvchitala</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Chitala	FF	NT	+
Clupeiformes	Clupeidae (Herrings)	<i>Gudusia chapra</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Suhia	FF, LF	LC	–
Cypriniformes	Cyprinidae	<i>Labeo rohita</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Rohu	FF	LC	++
		<i>Labeo bata</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Bata	FF	LC	+
		<i>Labeo calbasu</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Karaunchh	FF	LC	+
		<i>Labeo dero</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Gargi	FF	LC	+
		<i>Catla catla</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Bhakur	FF	LC	++
		<i>Cirrhinus mrigala</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Naini/ Mrigal	FF	LC	+++
		<i>Cirrhinus reba</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Reba	FF	LC	++
		<i>Hypophthalmichthys molitrix</i> (Valenciennes 1844)	Silver carp	FF	NT	+
		<i>Ctenopharyngodon idella</i> (Valenciennes 1844)	Grass carp	FF	NE	+
		<i>Cyprinus carpio</i> (Linnaeus 1758)	Common carp	FF	VU	+
		<i>Puntius sarana</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Sarana	FF, OF	LC	–
		<i>Puntius ticto</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Two spot barb	FF, OF	LC	+
		<i>Rasbora daniconius</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Slender rasbora	FF, OF	LC	+++

		<i>Oxygaster gora</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Dariaichalho	FF, OF	LC	–
		<i>Danio devario</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Patukari	FF, OF	LC	++
		<i>Esomus danricus</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Dendua	FF, OF	LC	+++
Siluriformes	Bagridae	<i>Mystus cavasius</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Tengara	FF, OF	LC	+
		<i>Mystus vittatus</i> (Bloch 1794)	Tengara	FF, OF	LC	+
		<i>Mystus tengara</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Tengara	FF, OF	LC	+
		<i>Rita rita</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Rita	FF, OF	LC	–
	Siluridae	<i>Wallago attu</i> (Schneider 1801)	Pardni	FF	NT	+
		<i>Ompak pabda</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Pabdah	FF, OF	NT	+
	Schilbeidae	<i>Pangasius pangasius</i> (Valenciennes 1840)	Pangus	FF	LC	–
		<i>Ailia coila</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Gangeticailia	FF	NT	–
	Clariidae	<i>Clarias batrachus</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Mangur	FF	EN	+
	Saccobran- chidae	<i>Heteropneustes fossilis</i> (Bloch 1794)	Singhi	FF	LC	++
Beloniformes	Belonidae	<i>Xenontodon cancila</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Kauwa	FF	LC	+
Ophiocephaliformes	Channidae	<i>Channa punctatus</i> (Bloch 1793)	Girai	FF	NE	+++
		<i>Channa marulius</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Saura	FF	LC	+
		<i>Channa striatus</i> (Bloch 1793)	Saura	FF	LC	++
		<i>Channa stewartii</i>	Sauri	FF	LC	–

		(Playfair 1867)				
Perciformes	Gobiidae	<i>Glossogobius giuris</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Balia	FF, OF	LC	++
	Badidae	<i>Badis badis</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Blue Perch	FF, OF	LC	+
	Anabantidae	<i>Anabas testudineus</i> (Bloch 1792)	Kawai	FF, OF	LC	++
	Nandidae	<i>Nandas nandas</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Dhebri	FF, OF	LC	++
	Ambassidae	<i>Chanda nama</i> (Hamilton 1822)	Chanda	LF, OF	LC	+
Mastacembeliformes	Mastacembelidae (Spiny eels)	<i>Mastacembelus armatus</i> (Lacepede 1800)	Bam	FF, OF	LC	+
		<i>Mastacembelus aculeatus</i> (Bloch 1786)	Bam	FF, OF	EN	+

+++ : Most common; ++ : Common; + : Rare; - : Very Rare

LC=Least Concern, NT=Near Threatened, VU= Vulnerable, EN=Endangered, NE=Not Evaluated; FF: Food Fish; OF: Ornamental Fish; LF: Larvivorous Fish

Table 2: Number and percent composition of families, genera and species of fishes under various orders

Orders	No. of Families	Percentage (%)	No. of Genus	Percentage (%)	No. of Species	Percentage (%)
Osteoglossiformes	1	6.25	1	3.44	2	4.88
Clupeiformes	1	6.25	1	3.44	1	2.44
Cypriniformes	1	6.25	11	37.93	16	39.02
Siluriformes	5	31.25	8	27.58	10	24.39
Beloniformes	1	6.25	1	3.44	1	2.44
Ophiocephaliformes	1	6.25	1	3.44	4	9.75
Perciformes	5	31.25	5	17.24	5	12.20
Mastacembeliformes	1	6.25	1	3.44	2	4.88

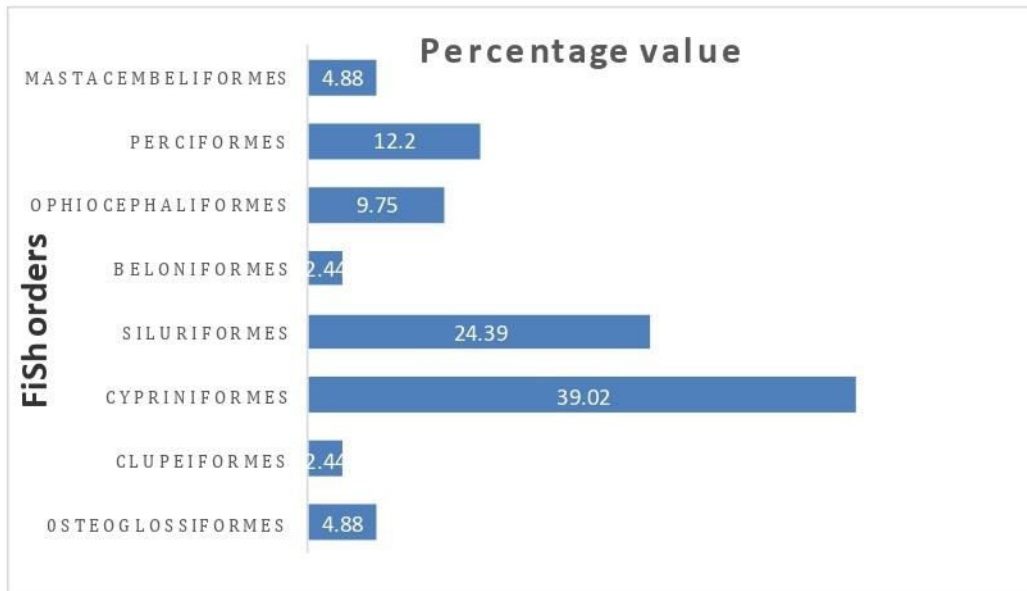


Fig. 1: Species composition of fish orders in percentage.

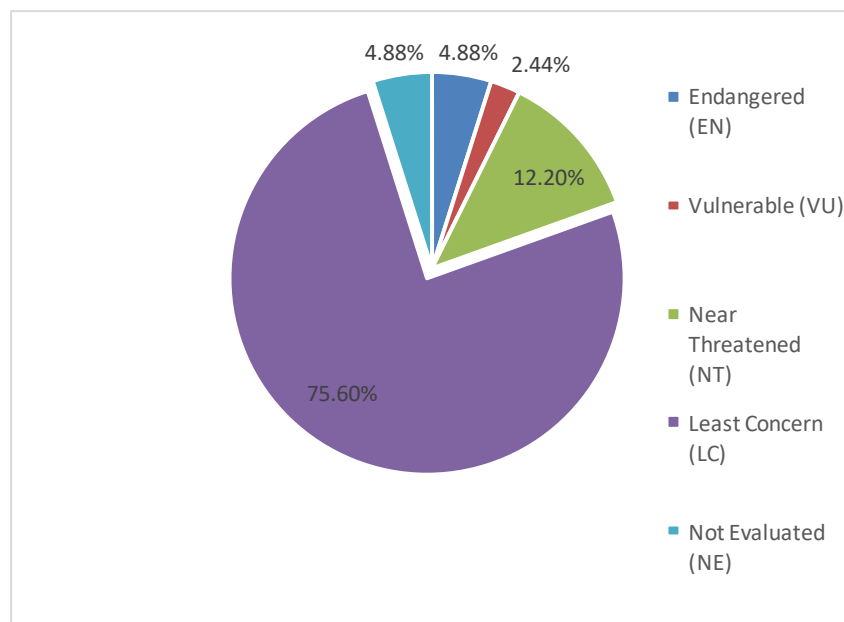


Fig. 2: IUCN conservation status of fish species of Bhagda Taal.

Singh, 2020; Prakash and Yadav, 2020). According to the fish species composition, the orders can be arranged as Cypriniformes> Siluriformes> Perciformes> Ophiocephaliformes> Osteoglossiformes>Mastacembeliformes>Clupiformes>Beloniformes while the families can be arranged as Cyprinidae>Bagridae> Channidae> Notopteridae> Siluridae> Schilbeidae> Mastacembelidae> Clupidae> Clariidae> Saccobanchidae> Belonidae> Gobiidae>Anabantidae> Ambassidae>

Nandidae>Badidae. The families, Clariidae, Saccobanchidae, Ambassidae, Clupeidae, Notopteridae and Mastacembelidae showed the least contribution including a variety of fishes which are endangered, ornamental, larvivorous, exotic/invasive species, etc. Such fish orders, families, genera and species composition were also reported from the wetlands of Uttar Pradesh. Moreover, other studies on fish diversity of various wetlands of this Tarai region revealed that

there were more species found in this Bhagda / Bhagta Taal (Verma and Prakash, 2016; Prakash, 2020a, b; Prakash and Singh, 2020; Prakash and Yadav, 2020; Yadav and Sharma, 2021). Osteoglossiformes, Clupeiformes, Beloniformes, Ophiocephaliformes and Mastaecembeliformes with single family were noted during the study period. The dominance of Cyprinids in the population, as seen in the present study, was due to their high adaptive variability to occupy all possible habitats and the presence of an appropriate physicochemical condition of water and food abundance. Recently, Prakash (2020b) and Prakash and Singh (2020) recorded seven species each of the Cyprinidae family from Semara and Baghel Taals, a wetland in the Tarai region of Uttar Pradesh. Yadav and Sharma (2021) also recorded fourteen species of the Cyprinidae family from Chittaura Jheel, a wetland of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The status of fish species of this wetland included two endangered, one Vulnerable, five Near threatened, thirty-two Least concern and one not evaluated. The fish diversity and density of fishes of this wetland have been drastically declined in the past two decades as reported by local people. This is the first systematic survey on the fish diversity of this wetland. Thus, it is needed to explore more fish diversity from different wetlands of eastern Uttar Pradesh, India.

Regarding the threats, many workers reported that directly or indirectly anthropogenic activities are responsible for decreasing the diversity and density of fishes in natural water bodies (Lakra, 2010; Sarkar *et al.*, 2015; Prakash, 2020a; Prakash and Singh, 2020; Pathak and Goswami, 2021; Prakash, 2021; Verma, 2021). The threats to Global freshwater biodiversity have been described under some common interacting categories such as overexploitation, water pollution, destruction or degradation of habitat and invasion by exotic fishes (Pathak and Goswami, 2021). Bhagda/Bhagta Taal is located in the semi-urban area and the practice of traditional agriculture by the native people try to keep the environment of the wetland free from pollution and other chemical hazards but the

overexploitation of fish potential, the killing of brood fishes and reduction in the breeding ground or degradation of habitat are of great concerns for the decline of density and diversity of fish species in this wetland. Thus to conserve the fish diversity in wetlands the following recommendations are suggested to be implemented immediately:

- Overexploitation and indiscriminate fishing should be prevented at any cost to save the fish diversity in the Taal. Strict measures should be taken for those who will catch juvenile fish.
- To maintain a sustainable stock, the fishing net with a lower mesh size should be avoided.
- Regular inspection by the authorities of the fisheries department should be undertaken to prevent such malpractices.
- All types of fishing activities should strictly be prohibited in monsoon season
- As the wetland is thickly infested by a number of aquatic weeds, the eradication of these aquatic weeds should be undertaken at regular intervals. To eradicate these aquatic weeds, different weed-eating fishes might be introduced in addition to mechanical methods.

Conclusion

India has a wealth of wetland ecosystems that support diverse and unique habitats. These wetlands provide numerous ecological goods and services but are under tremendous stress due to rapid urbanization, industrialization and agricultural intensification, manifested by the shrinkage in the area, and decline in the physicochemical condition of water and soil as well as ecological functions they perform. The present study has documented the fish diversity of Bhagda/Bhagta Taal, a wetland and revealed that this wetland is endowed with a rich diversity of fish species which can be utilized for decision making in conservation and management of wetlands fisheries in a scientific manner. A proper management policy also needs to be conceptualized and implemented at the earliest

for sustenance and optimum utilization of the natural fishery resources of the Davipatan division of Uttar Pradesh. Also, there is an immediate need for more conservation programs in order to retain this natural freshwater heritage in the Tarai region of Uttar Pradesh.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to M.Sc. students for helping in the collection of fishes and to the Principal, M.L.K.P.G. College, Balrampur for providing support and facilities.

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