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EDITORIAL

A dagger through island hearts

Its name notwithstanding, Little Andaman Island in the Bay of Bengal is not little by any stretch of the imagination. Spread over nearly 700 sq km it is one of the largest in the Andaman and Nicobar group and unique in a number of ways. It is a stand-alone island covered in thick tropical forest and home to innumerable species of endemic and rare flora and fauna. The creeks here have lush mangroves with important crocodile populations, the coastline has important nesting beaches of the magnificent Giant Leatherback turtles and the surrounding waters are rich with turtles, dugongs, sea grass beds and coral reefs.

Nearly 90% of the island is designated a reserve forest and nearly 70% is also protected as the Onge Tribal Reserve making it a unique socio-ecological-historical complex of great interest and importance. No part of the island maybe a national park or sanctuary under the provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act, but it is as rich, if not richer, a protected area than any other one can think of.

So when the Niti Aayog rolls out a vision for the 'holistic and sustainable' development of this island, can one be blamed for wondering what this could actually be? How will this development be achieved? What could sustainable and holistic mean? To read the vision is to dive deep into delusion. Spread over 240 sq. km of some of most pristine forests in this country this holistic and sustainable vision includes the construction of – and this is only a small sample so please hold your breath – a financial district and medi city that will include an aerocity, and a tourism and hospital district, a leisure zone that will have a film city, a residential district and a tourism SEZ, a nature zone that will have an exclusive forest resort, a nature

healing district and a nature retreat. There will be underwater resorts (yes, under water!), casinos, golf courses, convention centres, plug and play office complexes, drone port with a fully automated drone delivery system and nature cure institutes. There will be a 100 km greenfield ring road along the coast and a mass rapid transport line that runs parallel to it. The jetty at Hut Bay will be developed and expanded to a marina and there will be an international airport capable of handling all types of aircraft because “all successful case studies and references” studied by the visioning team indicate that an international airport is the key for development. And this is not the whole list!

The process for the de-reservation of the forests and de-notification of the tribal reserve has been initiated and there is even a suggestion that the Onge community members could be shifted to other parts of the island in case they became an impediment in this holistic and sustainable development. The vision document is peppered with maps of the island with rectangles in multiple colours marked all over – not unlike a cake cut up piece by piece by excited children, but much more ominous - a dagger thrust deep through the heart of a unique island!

Much further south of Little Andaman is another large and unique island. Spread over an area of more than a 1000 sq km, this is Great Nicobar Island, also the southern most of the Andaman and Nicobar group. Like Little Andaman Great Nicobar is also thickly and richly forested, is home to hundreds of species of endemic flora and fauna, has freshwater streams that drain into bays where sea turtles come to nest, and has a coastline rich with mangroves, coral reefs and diverse marine life. It is home to the Shompen tribal community and like Little Andaman almost the entire island is a tribal reserve under the provisions of Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes 1956.

Unlike Little Andaman, this is a protected area in the most legal sense of the term. Great Nicobar has three protected areas in fact – the Campbell Bay National Park (NP), the Galathea NP and the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). It is also a UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve that we have sought to proudly promote in international fora as an example of our biodiversity wealth and our commitment to protecting it.

But nothing of this matters because there is a plan for development here too that includes increase of defence infrastructure, promotion of tourism and the construction of a trans-shipment port that will rival the likes of Hongkong. The Galathea Bay WLS is one of the most important nesting sites in the entire Northern Indian Ocean of the Giant Leatherback but that does not matter either. The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) in its meeting held on the 5th of January has agreed to its denotification so that the trans-shipment port can come up here.

Clearly it's not one, but many daggers that we are talking about here. And the wounds being inflicted will be deep and irreversible.

NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

NBWL nod for denotification of Galathea Bay WLS for trans-shipment port

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has recommended de-notification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS), an important nesting site of the Giant leatherback sea turtle on Great Nicobar Island with certain riders after local authorities submitted a proposal for setting up a trans-shipment port here. It has suggested the implementation of a mitigation plan to facilitate nesting of turtles as well as

connectivity between the Galathea river and the Bay of Bengal. The decision was made in a meeting held on January 5.

The minutes of the meeting say the Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration had sought to declare Galathea Bay as a sanctuary over an area covering 11.44 sq. km through a notification dated September 15, 1997, under the Wildlife (Protection) Act. Another notification was issued on October 14, 1997, for initiating its acquisition, but the final notification for the sanctuary has not yet been issued.

They say further that the islands administration had sought an opinion from the law ministry on the matter. The ministry suggested that the de-notification of the sanctuary is not needed and that the notification on the intention to declare Galathea Bay as a sanctuary is void because the rights were not settled within two years.

The A&N Forest Department along with the researchers from the Andaman and Nicobar Environment Team, Dakshin Foundation and the Indian Institute of Science have been studying turtle nesting here for many years. Galathea Bay, which has been monitored for three decades and others like West Bay on Little Andaman Island are believed to host the largest nesting population of leatherback turtles in the northern Indian Ocean.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'Denotify turtle nesting site in Andaman for shipment project: Wildlife board', www.hindustantimes.com, 28/01/2021.

Draft notifications issued for notifying ESZ of Campbell Bay and Galathea NPs

Separate draft notifications for the eco-sensitive zones (ESZs) of the Campbell Bay National Park (NP) and Galathea NP were issued recently. They were uploaded on the website of the Andaman and Nicobar Administration in November 2020 for comments and objections for a sixty-day

period. If accepted the Campbell Bay NP ESZ will cover an area of 65.81 sq. km spread from zero to one km from the boundary of the park. The ESZ for the Galathea NP will similarly cover an area of 14.93 sq. km also ranging zero to one km from its boundary.

The notifications list out a total of 16 activities that will be prohibited in the ESZ, 13 that will be restricted and 14 that will be promoted.

Both the draft notifications also propose to constitute a monitoring committee, comprising of the deputy commissioner, Nicobar District as chairman, with the following as members: member, zilla parishad, Campbell Bay; executive engineer, Andaman Public Works Department (APWD), Campbell Bay; director, agriculture or representative; director, fisheries or representative; senior veterinary officer, Campbell Bay; One member of an NGO working in the field of environment nominated by the A&N administration; one expert in environment or ecology or wildlife from a reputed institution to be nominated by A&N administration; and a representative of Andaman and Nicobar Islands Biodiversity Council.

The Divisional Forest Officer, Nicobar Division would be member secretary.

Source: 'Draft notification for notifying eco-sensitive zones of Campbell Bay National Park and Galathea National Park published', www.nicobartimes.com, 02/01/2021.

ASSAM

Two elephants die of anthrax in Dehing Patkai WLS

Two elephants, one a female calf, the other an adult female, were found dead within a period of two days in the first week of December in the Joypur Range of Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary. Both were found in similar conditions with blood oozing out of their

mouth, trunk and anus. Tests confirmed both had succumbed to anthrax, following which the forest department (FD) embarked on a vaccination drive. Both the carcasses were cremated as per the standard operating procedure set up to deal with deaths by anthrax or suspected cases of anthrax.

The FD staff also initiated an awareness program in the surrounding villages; going from village to village to find out if there were similar, unrecorded deaths in the past, and if yes, how these carcasses were buried.

Source: Tora Agarwala. 'Assam: Two elephants die of anthrax, authorities try to trace source', www.indianexpress.com, 10/12/2020.

GOA

CEC raises questions over three infrastructure projects through Mollem NP, other protected areas

The Supreme Court's central empowered committee (CEC) will be conducting site inspections of the three proposed infrastructure projects in Mollem National Park (NP) – a highway project, a railway double tracking project and another for an laying an electricity line - in early 2021. This was announced during hearings conducted on a complaint filed by Goa Foundation against approvals granted by the National Board of Wildlife's (NBWL) standing committee to the three infrastructure projects. The complaint noted that the three projects could not be allowed through the PA in view of Section 29 and Section 35 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which explicitly forbids any development in any sanctuary unless it is certified that the development is in the interest of wildlife or improvement of the habitat.

During the hearing of the highway project, the CEC found it difficult to understand how Karnataka is restricting road width to the existing 12m whereas Goa wants

to increase it to 24m. The CEC asked the Union Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) if it had considered the contiguous nature of the project and recommended that it examine the proposal as a whole.

On the railway double tracking project, the CEC questioned the need for the project with many of Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd.'s projects facing difficulties in South Goa on account of falling prices of iron ore, exports stopping and imports increasing and also in wake of chief minister Pramod Sawant's statement that ore transport would be reduced to half. The CEC asked why it couldn't consider a corridor in a different stretch and pointed out that the Konkan Railways are under-utilised. It noted that there must be an exceptional reason for the project that pierces through the ghats.

In relation to the Tamnar electric line project, the counsel for the Goa Foundation told the CEC there were alternatives available for the alignment, which did not require it to be taken through the PA. The foundation noted that despite their complaint being filed in June 2020, the lawyers and officials appearing for the three projects did not have adequate or ready information when queried by the CEC.

Source: 'CEC to inspect Mollem projects' site early next year',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
17/12/2020.

MAHARASHTRA

Maharashtra to set up study group for pangolin conservation

The Maharashtra government has given a go ahead to the forest department (FD)'s proposal to form a study group to prepare a five-year conservation action plan for pangolins. The study group will look into various aspects such as population estimation, distribution, habitat protection and illicit trafficking hotspots. The panel will be headed by additional principal chief conservator of

forests (wildlife-west) Sunil Limaye and also include the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), among other members. The proposal was planned based on a detailed proposal by Vishwas Katdare, founder of non-profit, Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra, who is also a member of the State Board for Wildlife and of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Pangolin Specialist group member.

Cases of pangolin poaching are regularly reported from Maharashtra; the WCCB reported six major such incidents in 2020. On June 10, six persons were arrested from Nanded and one from Pune where two live pangolins were rescued. On August 30, similarly, six persons were arrested at Satara with a live pangolin and items worth Rs. 1.10 lakh. Based on interrogations with those involved in the trade, WCCB found out that the modus operandi involved local villagers training hunting dogs to catch pangolins (Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXVI, Nos. 3 & 1 and Vol. XXV, No. 1).

The principal chief conservator of forests (PCCF) of Gujarat had written to PCCF Maharashtra about a case from Navsari district wherein a live pangolin was seized in November. The pangolin was brought by one of the accused from Katkol village in Nagpur. In all 13 people were arrested in a joint operation by WCCB and FD.

In February 2020, a study by the South China Agricultural University identified pangolins as the potential intermediate host of the novel coronavirus. The study confirmed a 99% genetic match between the virus and a strain of the virus found in pangolins. It was hoped that this connection would result in a reduction in trade of the pangolins. Wildlife trade monitoring group, TRAFFIC India, has noted, however, that this has not happened and trade continues like it was happening in the past.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'Maharashtra becomes first state in India to get dedicated action plan to protect pangolins',
www.hindustantimes.com, 15/12/2020.

Gaur sighted for the first time in Dnyanganga WLS

The presence of gaur has been recorded for the first time in the Dnyanganga Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). No occurrence of this species was reported or documented from this sanctuary in the Vidarbha region prior to the animal being photographed by forest guards in early December.

Gaur is regularly spotted across other sanctuaries in Vidarbha, including in Tadoba and Melghat. The field director of the Melghat Tiger Reserve of which Dnyanganga is a part, noted that the animal may have come from Melghat and found this area suitable enough to settle down here.

Last year, a three-year-old male tiger (T1C1) had walked 3,020 km over 13 months from Tipeshwar WLS and established his new territory in the Dnyanganga forests, making it the longest ever recorded movement of a tiger in India (*PA Update* Vol. XXVI, No. 3).

A proposal is now being considered by the chief wildlife warden's office for releasing a mate for T1C1 to increase tiger population here. The tiger's arrival has boosted tourism here making the sanctuary one of the most visited small sanctuaries in Maharashtra.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'In a first, Indian bison spotted at Maharashtra's Dnyanganga Wildlife Sanctuary', www.hindustantimes.com, 08/12/2020.

Leopard deaths increase by 57% in Maharashtra in 2020

A total of 173 leopards died in Maharashtra between January and November 2020, an increase of over 57% from 2019, when 110 deaths were reported. The highest number of 70 deaths was recorded in Nashik district, followed by 26 each in Pune and Kolhapur districts.

As per the state forest department (FD) data, of the 173 leopard deaths, 85 were

natural, 64 accident-related, 17 were on account of poaching while seven leopards died because of electrocution. Leopard deaths due to road and train accidents have doubled from 2019 – from 17 last year to 34 till November 2020. Deaths due to drowning were 25 in 2020, compared to 10 in 2019.

The report has also recorded a three-fold increase in loss of human life due to leopard attacks. While eight people died in human-animal conflict in 2019, the number for 2020 (till November) was 23. A total of 37 leopards were also rescued this year.

A number of steps have been suggested to deal with the situation. Zilla parishads of Pune, Nashik, Aurangabad, Dhule and Amravati have been asked to construct parapet walls and nets to reduce the number of wild animals falling into wells. Rapid response teams have also been formed in a few areas. The FD has also written to the public works department to take precautionary measures and follow the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Road and Transport and the Wildlife Institute of India where road construction is concerned.

As per the Phase IV tiger estimation conducted in 2020, 669 leopards were recorded in Maharashtra. However, all the areas were not considered in the census exercise. The state FD is planning to conduct a population estimation exercise of leopards over the next two years.

Source: Sanjana Bhalerao. '57% increase in leopard deaths from last year, highest in Nashik', www.indianexpress.com, 14/12/2020.

SGNP suggests mitigation measures month after pregnant leopard's death in road accident

Weeks after a pregnant leopard was killed in the month of November in a road accident on Ghodbunder Road, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) has suggested mitigation measures such as construction of

underpass and overpass, and upgrading existing bridges and culverts for larger animals to pass through. The animal aged between three and four and carrying three unborn cubs, was killed in a road accident on Western Express Highway near Mira Road on November 16.

At present, four infrastructure projects are under construction or coming up around SGNP and Tungareshwar Wildlife Sanctuary. Road widening work has been going on for over two years and forest officials said they have suggested several mitigation measures along this route like the construction of bigger culverts. They said they were also working on sensitising motorists to follow the speed limit or drive slowly when passing through a forested patch on highways. Signboards about wildlife crossings were also being considered on Thane-Ghodbunder Road, Ghodbunder-Tungareshwar stretch and Dahisar-Versova bridge stretch. Speed breakers however cannot be added on the existing road.

According to the 2020 data from the state forest department, leopard deaths due to road and train accidents have doubled in comparison to last year. In 2019, 17 animals died in road and train hits as compared to 34 in 2020.

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXVI, No. 5).

Source: Sanjana Bhalerao. 'SGNP suggests mitigation measures month after pregnant leopard's death in road accident, www.indianexpress.com, 17/12/2020.

NGO questions tree felling in Umred-Karhandla-Paoni WLS

Former honorary wildlife warden of Nagpur district, Roheet Karoo, has issued notice to officials of wildlife and territorial wings of the state forest department and the Maharashtra Rail Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (Maharail) under the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WPA), 1972, and

Environment Protection Act (EPA), 1996, for felling of trees in Umred-Karhandla-Paoni Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). Karoo who is also secretary of the NGO Wildlife Conservation & Development Center, Umred, noted that over 300 trees were felled in the sanctuary's compartment number 1439 without following due process like getting the no objection certificate from the gram panchayat and non-verification of documents to confirm if the land or trees belonged to the railways.

Karoo said the South Umred RFO and tree officer Vaishnavi Jhare had granted permission to cut the trees without consulting wildlife officials in an area that was an ESZ of the PA. Earlier, in February 2020, Jhare is said to have granted permission to fell over 350 trees in the tiger corridor between Titur and Shivni for the same project without following the requisite procedure of transit pass (TP) and applying hammers on the felled timber. The project in question is located in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve-Bramhapuri and Umred-Karhandla corridor and Maharail is upgrading a narrow gauge line into a broad gauge one. It has already started construction of bridges in the corridor patches without any mitigation steps.

Maharail spokesperson Vinod Toke said that they had approached the Wildlife Institute of India for mitigation structures at the disputed site. He also noted that they had not felled trees but only removed bushes. Chief conservator of forest (CCF) P Kalyan Kumar, Nagpur circle, said in response that they had set up a committee of both wildlife and territorial officials and their report was expected soon. The committee that was set up on December 7 was to submit its report in seven days. This, however, had not been done even three weeks later due to the differences in opinions of the members.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Umred NGO notice to forest dept for felling in sanctuary', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 31/12/2020.

Action sought against temple trustees and road contractor for mining in Katepurna WLS; complainant terms it eyewash

In a report to the high court (HC), the revenue and forest department (FD) have recommended the filing of a complaint against trustees of the Gupteshwar Gajanan Maharaj Temple Sansthan, Waghagad, and road contractor, Shree Swami Samarth Engineering Company, Pune, for illegal extraction of murrum in the eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of the Katepurna Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Akola and Washim districts.

The report submitted by Akola district collector and deputy conservator of forest has also recommended inclusion of the Barshitakli tehsildar in the complaint after a green signal from Amravati divisional commissioner. Tehsildar Gajanan Hanmad had allowed the Pune-based firm to extract 600 brass (2.81 cum) murrum from the ESZ.

The report with the signatures of Akola district collector and deputy conservator of forests was prepared on November 27, 2020, and submitted to the Nagpur bench of Bombay HC recently after the court sought a detailed report from APCCF, Melghat Tiger Reserve. The findings are based on submissions by three separate committees set up on 14 October 2020, to verify the area of extraction, whether it was done in the sanctuary or outside, illegal tree felling and measurement of the mined area. The report had been sought by the HC after local environment activist Sheikh Mohammed Sheikh Makbul of Akola lodged a complaint.

Makbul has, however, termed the report an eyewash, adding that it protects both revenue and forest officials even though they were hand in glove with the contractor. The temple trustees and the contractor were being made scapegoats he has claimed. The report says that extraction was done in E Class land in survey number 45, which is around 300m away from the sanctuary in the ESZ. Makbul

noted that there was no village called Waghagad as mentioned in the report and that his complaint was about extraction in sanctuary compartment number 122 in Kasmar beat but the report makes no mention about it.

On the large-scale tree felling in the ESZ, the report states that no trees were felled in the ESZ while extracting murrum. The 30-odd trees that were found dumped in the disputed area were the ones felled in July 2020 during widening of the Mangrulpir-Mahan road and were transported illegally on the request of temple trustees for fuelwood. Makbul has questioned this claim as well asking why a temple would need so many trees for fuelwood?

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Katepurna mining report seeks action against road contractor', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 06/01/2021.

Karvy (*Strobilanthes* sp.) growth impacting gaur habitat in/around Radhanagari WLS

Uncontrolled growth of the karvy (*Strobilanthes* sp.) shrub on the slopes of the Western Ghats in and around the Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) is now being cited as a reason for gaur leaving their habitat and entering the adjoining sugar cane fields and residential areas. Samrat Kerkar, a wildlife activist and convenor of the Bison Nature Club-Radhanagari, noted that the shrub was eating into the grasslands, forcing the animals into the fields and human habitations. Part of the reason for this is said to be the fact that local communities, who used dried-up karvy shrubs for construction of roofs and walls and thereby control its spread, have now stopped doing so.

Prakash Abitkar, the MLA of Kolhapur's Radhanagari constituency is reported to have asked foresters to remove the karvy shrubs and also ensure that the gaur population is controlled. He had earlier even

pitched for culling of the animals citing the fact that gaur had killed more than 35 farmers in 10 years in and around Radhanagari.

Source: 'Uncontrolled karvy growth eating into bison habitat',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
28/12/2020.

TAMIL NADU

IIT Madras to tag stray dogs inside campus

In continuation of its efforts to save wildlife on campus, the Indian Institute of Technology - Madras (IITM), which adjoins the Guindy National Park has begun microchipping stray dogs to prevent entry of new ones inside the campus. A third-party agency, Jeevakarunya Animal Welfare Charitable Trust, has been entrusted the task after obtaining approval from the National Green Tribunal (NGT) nominated permanent committee, which has the Chennai wildlife warden (CWW) as a member.

According to estimates, there are about 176 dogs on the campus and only 70 are friendly. About 40% of the dogs are located in the residential zone, 36% in the hostel zone and 23% in the academic zone.

The animal welfare agency has conducted a reconnaissance survey of the dogs here and segregated them as feral and stray dogs as per Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) guidelines. They will be taken for vaccination, animal birth control surgery, de-worming, and microchipping. Currently, there are 14 designated dog-feeding locations on campus; besides enclosures are built to separate feral dogs and there are isolation units for dogs under medical treatment. All the steps are in accordance with AWBI guidelines.

The CWW pointed out that 90% of deer and blackbuck deaths on campus were due to stray dog attacks. However, the death rate has significantly fallen now after feeding restrictions were imposed and aggressive feral

dogs were identified and isolated in closed enclosures. Meanwhile, the NGT-nominated committee has suggested to IITM to form campus wildlife watch groups to monitor and report unauthorised feeding at undesignated locations and initiate action against violators under service rules and estate rules of the institute.

Some of the faculty members have raised concern before the committee about increase in feeding locations. Demanding a reduction in feeding locations from 14 to four, they noted that visiting faculty and students from foreign countries have raised serious concern over the dog menace. It adversely affects the reputation of the institute. The CWW said that the feeding locations will be reviewed in the next committee meeting. Unused or less used feeding points will be closed after collecting data and obtaining approval from the committee members.

A few animal rights activists, however, are unhappy with IITM caging dogs in the enclosure and have started an online petition demanding their immediate release. The activists alleged that the institute is capturing and caging dogs, which are already sterilized and objected to the fact that an NGO from Nagercoil was engaged for sterilising the dogs.

Source: SV Krishna Chaitanya. 'Microchips for stray dogs inside IIT-Madras',
www.newindianexpress.com,
13/12/2020.

UTTAR PRADESH

Tourism picking up in UP PAs

After a lukewarm start in November, tourism is picking up in PAs in Uttar Pradesh, with end of the year seeing a big rush. More than 90% of the accommodation in sanctuaries (WLSs) and national parks (NPs) in the state was booked for the Christmas-new year period.

The accommodation available includes ten cottages and two dormitories at Dudhwa NP, 13 cottages and two dormitories at Katarniaghat WLS and four Tharu huts and one tree hut in the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve.

Restrictions due to Covid-19 pandemic continue to be in force - wearing masks and carrying along a bottle of sanitiser is mandatory for tourists with a fine of Rs. 500 being imposed if caught without a mask. People over 65 years of age, pregnant women, those with comorbidities, persons with more than one ailment and children less than 10 years old are not allowed.

Source: Neha Shukla. 'Tourists inflow surges in wildlife sanctuaries, parks', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/12/2020.

UTTAR PRADESH / UTTARAKHAND

Temporary picket to protect swamp deer near Bijnor

A temporary forest picket has been set up in the marshy khadar area near Bijnor to keep an eye on nearly 145 swamp deer that have been spotted there. The 30-km stretch of the khadar area, between Ganga barrage and Balawali, is a wildlife corridor linking Uttar Pradesh's Hastinapur Wildlife Sanctuary with the Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand. The swamp deer presence here is being attributed to better vigilance by the foresters.

Farmers, especially those indulging in allegedly illegal farming in the khadar area, were known to scare the animals away. The picket will ensure that this does not happen. It will also check illegal fishing and farming besides preventing poaching of the animals. The FD has also activated its informers network in the area to help protect the deer.

Source: Harveer Dabas. '145 swamp deer spotted in Bijnor's 30-km khadar stretch', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 08/12/2020.

UTTARAKHAND

Two special units formed to fight wildlife crime in Uttarakhand

In an effort to control wildlife crime in the state, the Uttarakhand government has created one seven-member Wildlife Crime Control Unit each for Garhwal and Kumaun divisions. Each will have jurisdiction — spanning over an entire region — to take action against poachers, register cases and pursue them in court, and maintain records of criminals and their wildlife crime history.

According to an order issued by chief wildlife warden, JS Suhag announcing the formation of the two units, these will act as a consultancy for the government on wildlife crimes. They will also serve as nodal bodies sharing information and coordinating with the central Wildlife Crime Control Bureau.

While the Garhwal unit has members from Rajaji Tiger Reserve (TR) and Kedarnath wildlife division, the Kumaun unit has members from Corbett (TR) and Bageshwar forest division.

Source: 'Paw patrol: Units formed to fight wildlife crime in Uttarakhand', www.indianexpress.com, 03/01/2021.

Corbett Tiger Reserve appoints women nature guides

Corbett Tiger Reserve (TR) recently appointed women as nature guides. 488 candidates, 102 of who were women had appeared in the guide recruitment test in October 2020. A total of 67 candidates, including seven women, cleared the test. Four of these women have now been posted at Garjiya while the other three are at Sonanadi.

In less than a month since appointment, they have won over tourists but are also facing challenges both at the professional and the personal level.

28-year-old Urmila Belwal who is posted at Garjiya gate, said that working as a

nature guide was an enriching experience but came at the cost of her eight-year-old son staying some days with relatives without his parents. Both Belwal and her husband work with the reserve. 22 year-old Deeksha Kargeti from Dhela village who also works in the Garjiya zone said that she was enjoying the opportunity and trying to learn as much as possible about wildlife. She was, however, finding travel through the forests in the early hours of the morning a little risky and scary.

Not all the seven women have had the same experience though. The three guides from Luthiya village in Pauri district said they were still waiting for tourists to arrive amid COVID-19 pandemic. These women are also facing multiple challenges like a lack of transportation and lesser number of tourists compared to other gates of the reserve.

Having learnt of the transportation related problems, and also that tourism had not taken off in the Pauri side, the authorities said they were trying to shift these guides from Sonanadi to Bijrani or the Garjiya zone.

Source: Suparna Roy. 'Challenges, adventures and joys of being first tiger ladies of Corbett Tiger Reserve', www.hindustantimes.com, 07/12/2020.

In a first for Uttarakhand, tigress shifted from Corbett to Rajaji TR

In a first for Uttarakhand, a team of around 50 forest officials with the help of two sniffer dogs and two elephants succeeded in tranquilising and translocating a five-year-old female tiger from the Bijrani area of Corbett Tiger Reserve (TR) to the Motichur area of Rajaji TR in the last week of December. The entire exercise was carried out over a week.

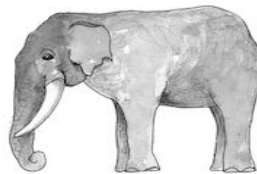
The animal was medically examined and radio-collared before her soft release in the Motichur area of Rajaji. A total of five big cats, including three females, are slated for translocation from Corbett to Rajaji in a phased manner. A male tiger in Corbett has already been identified for the purpose and

will be tranquilised and brought to Motichur at an appropriate time. The other animals will be brought in subsequently.

Spread across 557 sq. km, Rajaji TR has 37 tigers. It has a capacity to hold 83 and the current effort is to bring the tigers to the western part of the reserve that has very few of the big cats. The eastern part of the reserve with 35 tigers is separated from its western side by a traffic corridor, making it near impossible for any big cat to cross over.

Source: Shivani Azad. 'In a first for Uttarakhand, tigress shifted from Corbett to Rajaji Tiger Reserve', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/12/2020.

Three elephants radio-collared in a week in Haridwar forest division



In a bid to reduce the threat of conflict involving wild elephants ahead of the Kumbh Mela 2021, the Wildlife

Institute of India (WII) and Uttarakhand Forest Department (FD) radio-collared three elephants within a week in December in the Haridwar forest division. Two of the three were collared in Shyampur range while the third was radio-collared in Rasiyabad range.

According to the project funded by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the FD has permission to radio-collar ten elephants, all of which have been identified by the WII scientists. Elephants in the Rajaji landscape, Dehradun and Narendra Nagar forest divisions will be collared next as part of the exercise.

This collaring is part of a larger project initiated in 2018 by GIZ along with the Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change and three partner states – Uttarakhand, Karnataka and West Bengal, to identify 10 animals as 'conflict' species and

come up with guidelines to control the negative interactions between human and different animals.

Source: Shivani Azad. 'WII scientists radio-collar three jumbos within a week in Haridwar forest division', 28/12/2020.

NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

The Habitat Trust announces its grant recipients for 2020

The Habitats Trust founded in 2018 to support conservation initiatives that tackle the threats to the lesser-known wildlife and habitats of India recently announced the awardees in four categories of their conservation grants:

The Strategic Partnership Grant, worth Rs. 25 lakh, was awarded to The Corbett Foundation for the 'Conservation and Recovery of the Great Indian Bustard in Kutch'. This grant reaches out to mid to large-sized fieldwork oriented organisations, in order to foster a two-way partnership for the common cause of conservation.

The Lesser-known Habitats Grant, which is open to organisations working to secure and regenerate the overlooked and unaddressed habitats of the country was awarded to SEEDS Trust for 'Conserving the Ayyalur Habitat in the Eastern Ghats, and its Biodiversity'. The grant value is Rs. 20 lakh.

The Lesser-known Species Grant, worth Rs. 15 lakh, has been awarded to Bat Conservation India Trust for 'Research and Conservation to Prevent Extinction of the Kolar leaf-nosed bat', and

The Conservation Hero Grant, worth Rs. 10 lakh, was awarded to M. Suraj for his project 'Anti-snare Walks in Protected Areas of Chhattisgarh to Curb Poaching'. A mechanical engineer by training, Suraj will use the grant to scale up efforts to curb poaching and hunting through anti-snare walks, and will also develop strategies to

sensitise local communities about conservation efforts.

The grant recipients were selected by a jury comprising Bahar Dutt, wildlife biologist, author and environmental journalist, Brian Heath, founder and CEO of the Mara Triangle Conservation Area, Kenya, Dr. MK Ranjitsinh, wildlife expert and Roshni Nadar Malhotra, Chairperson of HCL Technologies, founder and trustee of The Habitats Trust.

Source: 'Meet the dedicated conservationists, who have been awarded The Habitats Trust Grants 2020',
www.hindustantimes.com, 10/12/2020.

New grasshopper species described from Eravikulam NP; IUCN to conduct Red list assessment of grasshoppers in India

The Grasshopper Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is carrying out the Red List assessment of grasshoppers in India for the first time. Dhaneesh Bhaskar, regional vice chair for Asia, IUCN SSC Grasshopper Specialist Group, informed that so far none of the Indian grasshopper species have been listed in the Red List. The insects remain a neglected group.

The Red List assessment will begin with the endemic grasshoppers of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR). Thirty endemic species of the NBR will be listed. Conservation status will be assigned to each species in the coming year. The new species discovered in Eravikulam National Park (ENP) will also be added as another target species to the list of 30. Bhaskar will be working with the financial support of the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund and ground support from Chennai-based Care Earth Trust for the assessment.

Bhaskar, along with a team of other researchers, recently published details of a new grasshopper species in the journal *Zootaxa*. The paper states that there is an old specimen, recognised already by Ignacio

Bolívar as a new species, and labelled “*Potua suspecta*” (París 1994), in the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, Madrid, Spain. The specimen was collected more than a 100 years ago in South India, on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but never published as a new species. Bhaskar observed the species in its natural habitat in the Western Ghats and collected one male specimen and documented it in January 2018 in the ENP.

The new species *Tettilobus trishula* has been given the common name ‘Shiva’s pygmy trishula’ since it has protrusions on its pronotum that are shaped like the trident, the weapon of the Hindu deity, Shiva.

Source: Rajat Ghai. ‘Red List Assessment of Indian grasshoppers to kickstart’, www.downtoearth.org.in, 15/12/2020.

WII scientists assessing ecology of Ganga and tributaries

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, a team of researchers of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) have started a project to assess the ecology of the Ganga and its tributaries – Ramganga, Kosi, Gomti, Ghaghara, Gandak, Yamuna, Chambal, Sone, Ajay, and Rupnarayan.

Six teams are carrying out the assessment under the leadership Dr SA Hussain and Dr Ruchi Badola of WII as part of the Biodiversity Conservation & Ganga Rejuvenation project phase II. The project, being undertaken under the aegis of National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), will be executed at an estimated cost of Rs 113 crore.

The WII scientists are being assisted by the Ganga Praharis, the villagers who were trained to identify and assess aquatic life for their conservation by WII scientists in the first phase of this project.

Source: Shivani Azad. ‘In a first, WII scientists to assess ecology of Ganga & its tributaries’, www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/12/2020.

SOUTH ASIA

Nepal

First confirmed sighting of tiger above 3,000 m in Nepal

A tiger has been sighted at an altitude of 3,165 m above sea level for the first time in Nepal. The animal was camera trapped on November 13 and 21 in forests of the Illam district of eastern Nepal. The departments of forest and soil conservation, and national parks and wildlife conservation confirmed it to be the first sighting of a tiger at this high altitude in Nepal.

Both the departments have stressed the need for special attention to the area as the lynx has also been spotted here recently. The departments’ press release mentions that this sighting demonstrates the importance of the Kanchenjunga Landscape in eastern Nepal, and needs special attention since the forests provide connectivity to India’s Singalila National Park in north Sikkim and the Dooars in north Bengal.

Tigers have been sighted at these altitudes in recent years in other areas too – in Bhutan at an altitude of 4,038 m in 2018 and in the Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh at an elevation of 3,630 m

(Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXVI, No. 1 and Vol. XXIV, No. 1).

Source: ‘Royal Bengal Tiger spotted at a height of 3,165 m above sea level in Nepal, raising concerns about impact of global warming’, www.thefinancialexpress.com, 12/12/2020.

SRI LANKA

Highest elephant deaths in Sri Lanka in man-elephant conflict

Sri Lanka is reported to have experienced the highest number of elephant deaths globally in

instances of human-wildlife conflict. The highest number of human deaths in such conflicts have been reported from India, followed by those in Sri Lanka. The number of elephants killed in Sri Lanka in 2020 was 407 as against the previous annual average of 272. The number of people killed also increased from an average of 85 humans to 122 per year in the country.

Sri Lanka's Committee on Public Accounts (COPA) has, in response, ordered a special audit into the issue by elephant expert and head of the Centre for Conservation and Research, Dr. Prithviraj Fernando. COPA has emphasised the need for the wildlife department and other relevant agencies to work together on a more efficient programme to resolve the conflict. It directed the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) to set up a national coordinating committee with all relevant institutions as soon as possible to reduce the conflict.

It has been pointed out that although 4,211 km of elephant fences had been constructed by 2016 to deal with the situation, these became inactive in a short period of time due to improper maintenance. Although Rs. 86 million is spent annually for the maintenance of the fences it is necessary for DWC to monitor whether this is being carried out on a daily basis. The meeting also discussed people's protests in some areas as they thought that the elephant fences define the boundary of their lands.

Source: 'Sri Lanka records highest elephant deaths in world',
www.hindustantimes.com, 13/12/2020.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

India to be co-chair of Asia Protected Areas Partnership

India will be the co-chair of the IUCN-supported Asia Protected Areas Partnership (APAP) for three years. The APAP is a regional platform to help governments and other stakeholders to collaborate for more effective management of protected areas (PA) in the region. It consists currently of 21 members from 17 countries including China, Japan, South Korea, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Launched at the IUCN World Parks Congress in Australia in 2014, APAP is chaired by IUCN Asia and co-chaired by an APAP country member. India will replace South Korea, which held this position for three years till November 2020.

Source: Vishwa Mohan. 'India to be a co-chair of regional forum to conserve wildlife habitats',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
01/01/2021.



IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS UPDATE

NATIONAL NEWS

Power ministry, Rajasthan government say no to underground power lines in GIB habitat

A proposal to put all power transmission lines passing through Great Indian Bustard (GIB) habitat underground did not elicit support from the Union Ministry of Power (MoP) and the Rajasthan government. A meeting between the two was held virtually on 3 November 2020, ahead of the hearing in the GIB conservation case in the National Green Tribunal (NGT). The agenda of the meeting was to have a detailed discussion on the action taken by the concerned agencies on recommendations made by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) as directed by the NGT in September 2019.

The Rajasthan Forest Department informed the meeting that the principal secretary, forests and energy department, Rajasthan, had decided that putting the transmission lines underground would not be possible while the MoP representative said that putting high-tension power cables above 33 kV underground was not feasible.

The Union Ministry for Renewable Energy (MRE) has issued an advisory in February 2019 for mandatory installations of bird diverters in power lines. MRE had sought feedback of the state governments and union territory administrations on the implementation of the advisory. It was noted that they had not received the action taken report from all states.

The MRE has also not agreed with WII's recommendation on disallowing new wind turbines and solar farms in the 13,000 sq. km priority GIB habitat in Rajasthan and Gujarat. It stated that many private sector projects had been allocated in this area after competitive bidding that could not be stopped at this stage.

It was decided in the meeting that WII would map the critical area for GIB conservation and share it with the environment ministry, MoP, MRE and the governments of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka for further action. During the meeting, the participants informed the environment ministry of the actions had been taken on WII's other recommendations related to GIB conservation. These included the development of predator-proof enclosures 5-10 sq. km in area as well as delineating priority GIB habitats outside the Desert National Park in Rajasthan as eco-sensitive zones.

In an NGT order issued in December, the Union government and the states have now been directed to install bird diverters on electricity wires related to solar energy within four months. The order applies to five states with GIB populations - Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Wildlife biologist Sumit Dookia said that he had strongly recommended that all existing lines be laid underground. If not possible, bird diverters, which emit light at night must be installed since most incidents involving GIB deaths are reported to happen at night. He noted that reflectors placed recently between Chacha-Dholiya did not emit light and were not therefore visible at night. (Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXV, Nos. 6 & 5 and Vol. XXIV, No. 1))

Source: Ishan Kukreti. 'Bustard conservation: No agreement on underground power lines, ban on new projects', www.downtoearth.org.in, 15/12/2020. 'NGT orders to install bird diverters in GIB habitat', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/12/2020.

ASSAM

Stop resort development in Janjimukh-Kokilamukh IBA: NGO

The Guwahati based NGO, Aaranyak, has urged the Jorhat district administration to stop the ongoing resort development activities in the Nimati-Kokilamukh area of the Upper Assam district. The area falls within the Janjimukh-Kokilamukh Important Bird Area (IBA) and is home to a number of threatened bird species such as the Swamp francolin, Common pochard, Marsh babbler and the Yellow-breasted bunting. It is also the breeding and wintering ground for over 200 species of birds.

Source: 'Assam NGO plea to stop resort development work in bird habitat', www.thenortheasttoday.com, 28/12/2020.

CHANDIGARH

WWF prepares management plan for Sukhna lake

The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) - India is preparing a management plan for Sukhna lake. The Chandigarh administration had sought help from WWF in November 2019 to draw up the plan. It will include management of migratory birds, fishing and maintenance of the lake and control of boating, trekking and tourist activities. It will also focus on issues related to de-siltation and water availability in case of poor rainfall.

The lake has a 26 sq. km wildlife sanctuary towards its north. Created in 1958, the lake has lost about 66% of its original water holding capacity due to silting and often dries up during the summer. De-siltation and pumping of additional water from other sources too have not yielded results. Following this, check dams were built in the catchment area, but even then the water level has been going down.

The Punjab and Haryana High Court is monitoring the protection of the lake, initiating a *suo motu* petition in 2009 to save the water

body. The Union Territory (UT) administration had in June 2019 issued a final notification for declaration of 493 acres of the lake as a wetland under the Wetland Conservation and Management Rules 2017 (*PA Update* Vol. XXVI, No. 2).

Encroachment, setting up of any industry and expansion of existing industries are prohibited, as is conversion to non-wetland uses. Solid waste dumping, discharge of untreated waste and effluents from industries, cities, towns, villages, and other human settlements into wetlands are also banned. Any construction of a permanent nature except for jetties within 50m of the mean high-flood level observed in the past decade is not allowed.

Source: 'Managing migratory birds, boating and trekking part of WWF's Sukhna plan', www.hindustantimes.com, 10/12/2020.

LADAKH

Tso Kar now a wetland of international importance

India has added the Tso Kar Wetland Complex as its 42nd Ramsar site, the second one in the Union Territory (UT) of Ladakh. The Tso Kar Basin is a high-altitude wetland complex, consisting of two principal water bodies - Startsapuk Tso, a freshwater lake of about 438 hectares to the south, and Tso Kar itself, a hypersaline lake of 1,800 hectares to the north, in the Changthang region. It is called Tso Kar, meaning white lake, because of the white salt efflorescence found on the margins due to the evaporation of highly saline water.

The Tso Kar Basin is an A1 category important bird area (IBA), as per Bird Life International and a key staging site in the Central Asian Flyway. The site is also one of the most important breeding areas of the Black-necked crane in India besides that for the Great crested grebe, Bar-headed geese, Ruddy shelduck, Brown-headed gull, and Lesser sand-plover.

Source: Vibha Sharma. 'Ladakh's Tso Kar now a wetland of international importance', www.tribuneindia.com, 24/12/2020.

ODISHA

Over 11 lakh migratory birds counted in Chilika; highest in two decades

The bird population in Chilika Lake touched its highest in the last two decades with officials estimating around 11.4 lakh birds during the annual bird census carried out in the first week of January. The total number of species spotted were 190.

The count was conducted by 21 teams comprising 111 wildlife officials, experts and environmentalists who covered five ranges under the Chilika Wildlife Division - Satpada in Puri, Rambha in Ganjam and Balugaon and Tangi of Khurda districts.

Source: Debabrata Mohanty. 'Odisha's Chilika Lake logs its highest ever count with 11.42 lakh migratory birds', www.hindustantimes.com, 05/01/2021.

Bird Flu Update

There have been reports of wild birds dying in separate incidents at different locations in the country. The following table presents selected news that have reported considerably large number of deaths in wild birds, however, not all of these incidents have confirmed the causes of death. (Source: <https://birdcount.in/dead-or-dying-wild-birds/> checked 25/01/2021)

State/Union Territory	District/Locality	Date of incident	Species found dead	Number of birds found dead
Delhi	-	07-08 Jan 2021	Crow	35+
	Sanjay lake & Jasola park	07-09 Jan 2021	Duck, Crow	10, 24+
Gujarat	Vadodara, Surat	Unclear	Crow, Pigeon, Peafowl	25+, 30, 3
Himachal Pradesh	Bilaspur	06 Jan 2021	Crow	50+
Jammu & Kashmir	Udhampur	07 Jan 2021	Crow	150
Karnataka	Mandya (Kokrebellur)	07 Dec 2020-07 Jan 2021	Spot-billed pelican	6
Madhya Pradesh	Mandsaur, Khargone, Indore	24 Dec 2020-04 Jan 2021	Crow	100+
	Indore	12 Jan 2021	Crow, Pond heron, Pigeon	17
Maharashtra	Thane	06 Jan 2021	Pond heron, Parakeet	14, 2
Rajasthan	Baran	05 Jan 2021	Crow, pigeon, wild sparrow (species not specified)	50+
	Banswada	Unclear	Weaver bird	7
	Nagaur	01 Jan 2021	Peafowl	50
Tamil Nadu	Villupuram	28 Dec 2020	Coppersmith barbet	30+
Uttarakhand	Dehradun (Rishikesh)	10 Jan 2021	Crow, pigeon	28, 1
	Dehradun	10 Jan 2021	Crow, others (species not specified)	162, 3
Uttar Pradesh	Kanpur Zoo	05-07 Jan 2021	Red Junglefowl	10

NATIONAL NEWS

Avian influenza confirmed in wild birds in 12 states

The Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying has confirmed the outbreak of avian influenza in Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab (a total of 12 states) for crow/migratory/wild birds and in Kerala, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab (nine states) for poultry.

The ministry said that a post-operation surveillance plan has been issued for one epicenter for Kerala, three epicenters for Madhya Pradesh, and five epicenters for Maharashtra. Control and containment operations (cleaning and disinfection) were going on in the rest of the affected epicenters of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttarakhand.

All states were reporting to the Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying on a daily basis regarding the control measures adopted by them based on the Revised Action Plan for Prevention, Control and Containment of Avian Influenza 2021, the ministry said.

Source: 'Bird flu confirmed in 12 Indian states for crow, migratory and wild birds: Centre', www.newindianexpress.com, 24/01/2021.

Centre asks states to form monitoring panels to keep check on avian influenza

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has written to state chief secretaries and chief wildlife wardens asking them to constitute monitoring committees for avian influenza. The states have been asked to undertake intensive surveillance to look for any unreasonable bird

behaviour or death among wild as well as migratory birds, and, to also step up vigilance in zoos.

States were advised to collect samples of dead birds with utmost caution and under scientific supervision. The advisory from the centre also noted that surveillance should not be restricted to the protected areas alone and should include all wetlands and habitats that host migratory birds and areas with any possibility of interaction of migratory and poultry birds.

The MoEFCC also asked states and union territories to report all deaths of migratory birds including the number and cause of death. The states have been asked to send weekly reports to the ministry with details from important bird sites, number and species of birds that arrived, approximate period of arrival and stay, any changes in migratory pattern vis-a-vis number, arrival sites, etc. as compared to previous years.

Source: 'Amid mass bird deaths, Centre asks states to form monitoring panels', www.hindustantimes.com, 06/01/2021.

HIMACHAL PRADESH

Nearly 5000 avian influenza related deaths in Pong Dam Lake WLS

A total of 4874 migratory birds including a large number of Bar-headed geese were reported killed by avian influenza till the middle of January at the Pong Dam Lake Wildlife Sanctuary.

The first deaths – four Bar-headed geese and one Common teal - were recorded here in the Fatehpur area on 28 December by wildlife staff of Dhameta. The incident was followed by the field staff of the sanctuary searching and reporting deaths of a total of 421 migratory birds in various parts of the sanctuary including the Dhameta and Nagrota ranges on 29 December. 325 more birds were found dead the next day, 30 December. Following this, bird carcasses were found in

large numbers in and around the vast reservoir each day. H5N1 avian influenza as cause of death was confirmed on 4 January based on testing of samples of some of these dead birds.

The chief wildlife warden of the state pointed out, however, that the mortality among migratory and other birds had seen a substantial decrease since 12 January.

Source: 'Another 38 migratory birds found dead in Pong Dam sanctuary', indianexpress.com, 15/01/2021.
'Himachal: 750 migratory birds found dead at Pong Dam lake', indianexpress.com, 31/12/2020.

MAHARASHTRA

More than 3,000 bird deaths including wild birds in Maharashtra in 2nd week of January

A total of 3378 bird deaths were reported in 24 districts of Maharashtra till the second week of January. 382 of these deaths were recorded on a single day - 15 January; 331 were poultry while the others included herons, sparrows and parakeets.

Of the dead birds, 34 were found in Sangli and one each in Amravati and Solapur. Eight peafowl deaths were reported from Wardha. Seven crows were also found dead – one each in Nashik, Yavatmal and Nandurbar and two each in Pune and Jalgaon districts. The number of districts that recorded unexplained bird deaths was 24. This include the districts of Yavatmal, Akola, Amravati, Mumbai, Thane, Ratnagiri, Beed, Parbhani, Latur, Gondia, Chandrapur, Nagpur, Nashik, Nanded, Satara, Ahmednagar, Pune, Solapur, Bhandara, Raigad, Sangli, Wardha, Nandurbar and Jalgaon.

The Bombay Natural History Society also decided to halt the ringing of flamingos that arrive in the city between November and March every year.

Source: Sanjana Bhalerao. 'Bird deaths now in Raigad, toll rises to 3,378 in 24 districts', indianexpress.com, 15/01/2021.

RAJASTHAN

Avian influenza in 16 districts of Rajasthan; 4000 bird deaths reported

A total of 3947 birds were reported to have died of avian influenza in Rajasthan till the 2nd week of January. The first deaths were reported on 25 December with the most recent being for 12 January. The flu has been reported in 16 districts of the state with Jaipur reporting the highest number of deaths at 686 followed by 433 in Jhalawar.

Source: 'Rajasthan: Avian flu in 16 districts; 626 birds die in a day', timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 13/01/2021.



Contemporary research in & around protected areas: An overview

1. Impact of Forest Fire Frequency on Tree Diversity and Species Regeneration in Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest of Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh, India

Author(s): Tapas Ray, Dinesh Malasiya, Radha Rajpoot, Satyam Verma, Javid Ahmad Dar, Arun Dayanandan, Debojyoti Raha, Parvaiz Lone, Praveen Pandey, Pramod Kumar Khare and Mohammed Latif Khan

Keywords: Forest fire, Fire frequency, Diversity, Regeneration, Central India

Summary: 7873 individuals of 45 tree species and their regeneration status were recorded by sampling 40 plots laid in different fire frequency classes in Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh. Species diversity declined with increasing fire frequency. Certain fire-tolerant species showed increased dominance in such areas.

Link:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10549811.2020.1823853>

2. Conservation opportunities and challenges emerge from assessing nuanced stakeholder attitudes towards the Asian Elephant in tea estates of Assam, Northeast India

Author(s): Divya Vasudev, Varun R. Goswami, Prity Hait, Pragyan Sharma, Bhavendu Joshi, Yogita Karpate, Parvathi K. Prasad

Keywords: *Elephas maximus*, Human-wildlife interactions, Landscape-scale conservation, Perspectives, Production landscapes, Stakeholder engagement

Summary: In Assam's Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape, 2252 people from 17 tea estates were interviewed to assess nuances in stakeholder attitudes and underlying beliefs towards the endangered Asian elephant.

Link:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989419302173?via%3Dihub>

3. Philopatric and natal dispersal of tigers in a semi-arid habitat, western India

Author(s): Randeep Singh, Puneet Pandey, Qamar Qureshi, Kalyanasundaram Sankar, Paul R. Krausman, Surendra Prakash Goyal

Keywords: Bengal tiger, Dispersal distance, Motion-sensitive cameras, Natal area, Philopatric, Ranthambhore

Summary: The natal dispersal pattern of Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) was studied by tracking 29 cubs using motion-sensitive cameras and intensive searches from April 2005 to June 2011 in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan. The cubs were tracked from birth till they established independent territories.

Link:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140196320302196>

4. A checklist of mammals with historical records from Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya landscape, India

Author(s): Thangsuanlian Naulak, Sunita Pradhan

Keywords: Biodiversity hotspot, Eastern Himalaya, Research trends, Updated checklist

Summary: An updated checklist of mammals of the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya landscape was prepared reviewing literature from 94 publications, spanning 178 years (1841 to 2019). Out of the 173 historically recorded species, 168 species are currently present.

Link:

<https://threatenedtaxa.org/index.php/JoTT/article/view/6062>

5. Navigating paved paradise: Evaluating landscape permeability to movement for large mammals in two conservation priority landscapes in India

Author(s): Anisha Jayadevan, Rajat Nayak, Krithi K. Karanth, Jagdish Krishnaswamy, Ruth DeFries, K. Ullas Karanth, Srinivas Vaidyanathan

Keywords: Animal movement, Central India, Human Land-use, Landscape permeability, Linear infrastructure, Western Ghats

Summary: Movement and dispersal of five wide-ranging species in the Western Ghats (elephant, gaur, leopard, sambar and sloth bear) and four in Central India (gaur, leopard, sambar and sloth bear) were simulated to evaluate landscape permeability. The movement of each species was compared in response to land-use land-cover, infrastructure and human population.

Link:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320720306716?via%3Dihub>

6. Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* Linnaeus, 1758 (Mammalia: Carnivora: Canidae) distribution pattern and feeding at Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary, India

Author(s): Nagarajan Baskaran, Ganesan Karthikeyan, Kamaraj Ramkumaran

Keywords: Diet composition and preference, Spatio-temporal variation in diet, Southern India

Summary: The distribution pattern, diet composition and prey preference of Golden Jackal was assessed through systematic field survey between December 2013 and June 2014 in Tamil Nadu's Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary. Direct sightings and indirect evidence of the animal were recorded in 41 locations. As per scat analysis, 19

different food items were present in the jackals' diet.

Link:

<https://threatenedtaxa.org/index.php/JoTT/article/view/4489>

7. A multi-species occupancy modeling approach to access the impacts of land use and land cover on terrestrial vertebrates in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), Western Ghats, India

Author(s): Sameer Bajar, Saunak Pal, Mrugank Prabhu, Pinal Patel, Rahul Khot, Deepak Apte

Keywords: Land-use, Mumbai Metropolitan Region, Vertebrates, Western Ghats

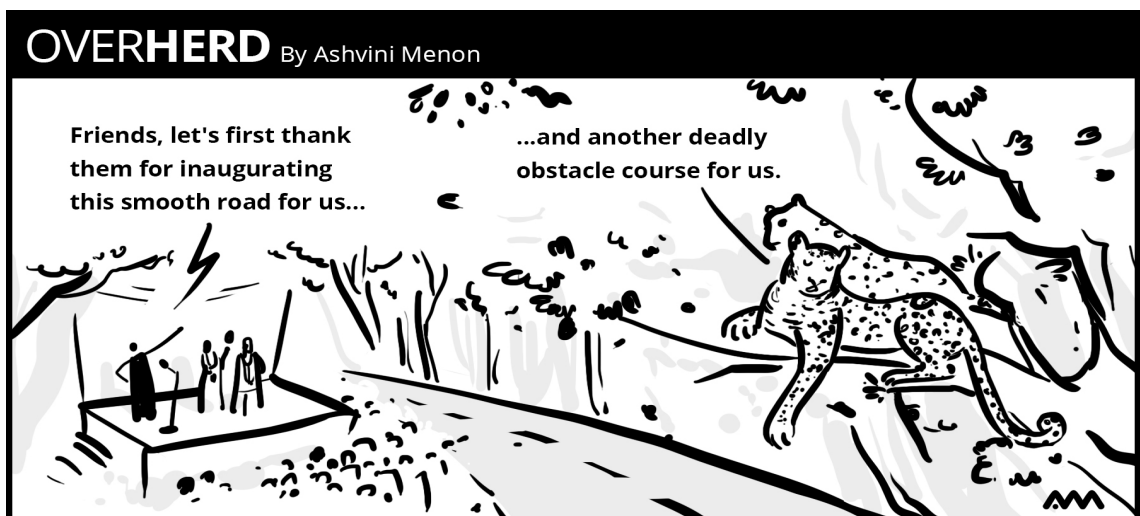
Summary: Different habitats in the MMR were sampled between December 2015 to January 2017 by multiple sampling methods to quantify target vertebrate taxa - amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals, and assess the effect of various land-use and land cover on different species.

Link:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0240989#abstract0>

This section has been collated by Anand Pendharkar and Aradhya Sardesai (SPROUTS Environment Trust, Mumbai).

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ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Five villages in Arunachal Pradesh come together to conserve Red Pandas

Five villages in the high-altitude areas of Arunachal Pradesh have come together to form the Pangchen Red Panda Conservation Alliance. The alliance, formed with support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) India, has been named after the Pangchen valley in which the five villages - Socktsen, Kharman, Kelengteng, Lumpo and Muchat villages - are located. The villages are situated at a height ranging from 6,000 to 14,000 feet above sea level and have been conserving 200 sq km of forest area in the valley.

The initiative aims at ensuring protection of the animal's habitat and plant species on which it is dependent. It also involves reporting the sighting of the animal by villagers and maintaining a record of it. The immediate plan of action is to ban any kind of hunting or capturing of the Red panda. Work will also be taken up in consultation with the villagers to identify the threats and pressures on the animal and its habitat to develop a long-term management plan.

The residents of two community conserved areas (CCAs) in Tawang district, the Thembang Bapu CCA (312 sq km), and Pangchen Lumpo Muchat CCA (98 sq km), had started similar initiatives in 2008 to protect the wildlife and in the process it is said to have earned good revenue from tourism. It has helped the villagers earn over Rs 4.24 lakh by providing home-stay facilities, home-based restaurant operators, porters, guides, cooks and helpers, besides entry fee, camera fee, camping site charge and camping material charges.

Source: Roopak Goswami. 'Villagers form alliance to conserve red panda', *The Telegraph*, 08/12/10.

UTTARKHAND

Imprisonment for train driver for running over elephants in Rajaji NP

A court in Dehradun recently sentenced a train driver to three years' rigorous imprisonment for running over three elephants crossing rail tracks inside the Rajaji National Park (NP) 12 years ago. A fine of Rs. 10,000 was also slapped on the driver, Vijay Pal, after he was found of violating the permissible speed limit of 30 kmph in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, which led to the accident in September 1998.

This is the first instance of a train driver being convicted of driving a train at a greater speed than the permissible limit and killing wild animals. The prosecution argued that locomotive driver was not only driving the train at a speed of 60-70 kmph but also did not apply brakes despite seeing elephants on the track. Three elephants, including a calf, were killed after being hit by Janta Express driven by Pal when they were crossing the Dehradun-Haridwar railway track in Kansaro range of the park.

Wildlife experts and enthusiasts have welcomed the verdict. According to statistics available with the Elephant Task Force, over 160 elephants have been mowed down by speeding trains in the country since 1987. Of these, 36% of the deaths occurred in Assam and 26% in Bengal. The most recent and one of the biggest such incidents occurred on September 23, 2010 when seven elephants were run over in the Dooars in West Bengal by a goods train. (See Edit *PA Update* Vol. XVI, No. 4. Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XVI Nos. 6, 5, 4 & 1; Vol. XV, No. 1; Vol. XIV, Nos. 5 & 1; Vol. XIII, Nos. 6, 3 & 1; Vol. XII, No. 3 and Nos. 49, 47, 39, 36, 34, & 29).

Source: 'Train driver gets 3 yrs' RI for crushing jumbos', <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>, 27/11/2010.

PERSPECTIVE

Don't blame migratory waterfowl for avian influenza

The ongoing pandemic has brought avian influenza outbreaks to the forefront this year. Had it not been for the pandemic, we probably would not have panicked so much on hearing about dead birds and mass culling of poultry. At the heart of the problem is a lack of in-depth studies that involve ecological epidemiology, monitoring and surveillance.

We have had avian influenza outbreaks every year since 2006. There is a seasonality, which coincides with the arrival in India of migrant waterfowl species like bar-headed geese and ruddy shelduck. While it is easy to blame birds for spreading the virus, there is little or no discussion on why such outbreaks are more prominent now?

Birds are natural reservoirs of many different low-pathogenic viruses, which circulate between multi host wintering grounds. While a few infected individuals with high pathogenic virus (e.g., H5N1) successfully reach their wintering locations, many others undoubtedly die due to a compromised immune system or exhaustion.

The influenza viruses rely on contact transmission and wetland habitats provide ideal conditions, exposing other birds to bodily fluids and excreta of dead birds or infected individuals. It is fundamental to understand the disease ecology and key factors triggering such spillover of pathogens to control and mitigate such outbreaks. The 'One Health' approach both from wildlife and human health perspectives should be very useful here.

Habitat loss and urbanization are serious threats to biodiversity as they force greater contact between wild animals thus creating opportunities for spillover of new infectious pathogens to humans and domestic animals. In the context of wild birds, wetlands

become particularly important. With continued urbanization, pollution and changes in land use patterns, the loss of crucial wetland habitats has led to greater disturbance in regular staging sites. This means birds are often using suboptimal ephemeral water sources nearer to human habitation.

Furthermore, in recent years, domestic poultry production has risen dramatically, by 10% annually. The limited regulation of poultry hygiene and transportation allows for easy transmission of infections between poultry farms causing major disease outbreaks, not only of avian influenza but for a range of other diseases. Improved hygiene and increased control and monitoring of the poultry industry should be made important priorities.

Meanwhile, let's stop blaming the wild migratory birds. While they may very occasionally spread such diseases, they are unlikely to be the main culprits. It's more likely that they are themselves suffering the consequences of our increasingly urbanised world.

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