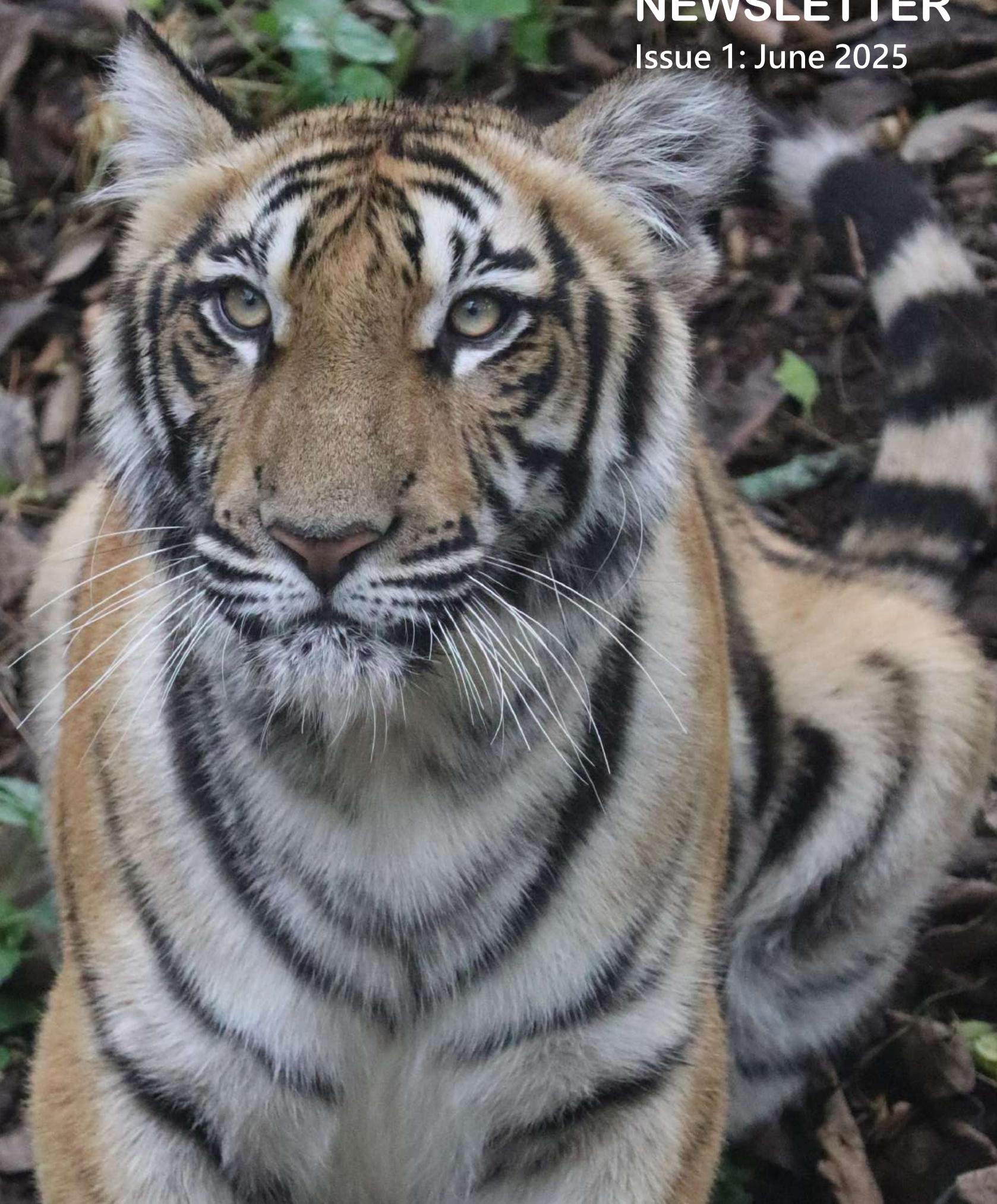




WILDLIFE & NATURE CONSERVATION TRUST

NEWSLETTER

Issue 1: June 2025





We are thrilled to present our very first edition of our newsletter, designed to keep you connected to the vital work in the space of wildlife and nature conservation. Through this platform, we aim to share our stories, success, challenges, while also inspiring our readers to take action.

The purpose of this newsletter is to foster a sense of community among those passionate about wildlife and nature. We want this to be a space for learning, sharing and taking action, as each edition will feature updates on our projects, rescue efforts, research and other initiatives. We hope to bring to light the incredible work being done by our diverse group of volunteers - researchers, biologists, photographers, and nature lovers - all united by the goal to protect and preserve our planet's rich biodiversity.

For now, we plan to release this newsletter every 6 months, but we are open to changing the frequency based on the interest and the volume of articles we receive. We'd like to encourage submissions in both English and Tamil, as we strive to be inclusive and engage a wider audience.

Thanks to the enthusiastic response from the community, we've received more articles than we could include in this edition, some will be featured in the next one. We deeply appreciate your support and contributions, which are key to driving our shared goal. Through this newsletter, we hope to inspire you to reflect on how each of us can contribute to conservation efforts. Together, let's create a ripple effect that encourages others to join in, and collectively, make a meaningful impact on the world around us.

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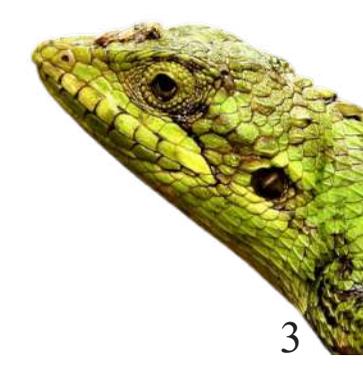
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A CHRONICLE OF CONSERVATION

WNCT Volunteers

The Wildlife & Nature Conservation Trust (WNCT) has consistently demonstrated its unwavering commitment to environmental stewardship and wildlife conservation in the Nilgiris, Mettupalayam and Coimbatore region. The dedication of WNCT members extends beyond wildlife rescue and research as their time and energy fuel a variety of impactful projects. Their efforts include awareness programs, community engagement, active rescues, and collaborative initiatives aimed at preserving wildlife and habitats.

Raising Awareness and Educating the Community

Informative Sessions and Tribal Meetings

In the past, WNCT volunteers conducted informative sessions on topics like responsible wildlife feeding, human-animal conflict, wildlife conservation, plastic waste management, road safety for wildlife, and snake awareness. These sessions targeted tribal communities, villagers, farmers, and students across private and government educational institutions. Tribal awareness meetings led by Mr. Azad Kamil and Mr. Mani focused on fostering harmonious relationships between humans and wildlife through education on human-animal conflicts.

School and College Programs

Initiatives like Forest and Biodiversity awareness sessions, led by Mr. N. Sadiq and Mr. Azad in educational institutions, demonstrate a proactive approach to educating future generations about environmental conservation. During the World Forest Day rally, spearheaded by Coimbatore District Collector Mr. Krantikumar Badi E.A.P. in partnership with the Coimbatore Government College of Arts, WNCT highlighted the importance of forest conservation through a public rally.

Eco-Friendly Practices and Celebrity Involvement

To promote eco-friendly practices, WNCT volunteers distributed yellow cloth bags “meendum manjapai” to participants, aiming to reduce plastic bag usage. Additionally, social media influencers were involved in awareness meetings at the Municipal Police Commissioner’s office, focusing on the significance of planting saplings and nurturing urban greenery.



Community Support and Reviving Green Spaces

Water Bowl Distribution for Birds

For the past six years, WNCT has addressed water shortages affecting wildlife by distributing earthen bowls for birds during summer. This year's event was inaugurated by Coimbatore District Collector Mr. Krantikumar Badi E.A.P. and Coimbatore Police Commissioner Mr. Balakrishnan IPS, underscoring the importance of community efforts in wildlife conservation.

Tree Planting Initiatives

Mr. Sirajdeen and Mr. Vahid collaborated with the Indian Railways Workshop and the Forest Department to plant 2,500 trees in Pothanur, Coimbatore, reviving the green cover. During the awareness meeting, saplings were gifted to participants to promote reforestation.

Rescue Operations and Environmental Clean-Ups

Animal and Snake Rescue

WNCT actively engages in the rescue of domestic and wild animals. Volunteers like Mr. Rajesh and Mr. Pintu successfully rescued an injured Gaur with the Forest Department's help, ensuring timely treatment. Snake rescue operations are crucial, with volunteers like Mr. Raghu, Mr. Yeshwanth, Mr. N. Sadiq, Mr. Shahir, and Mr. Prajwal playing significant roles in the Nilgiris, and city-based rescuers Mr. Mohan, Mr. Chithran, and Mr. Vignesh averaged 60 rescues per month in Coimbatore.

Volunteers Mr. Balakrishnan and Mr. Balakrishnan actively participate in dog and horse rescues, while, Mr. Vinod Iyer and Mrs. Kavitha Maheshwari coordinate dog rescue efforts.

Railway Track and Elephant Corridor Clean-Ups

WNCT conducted clean-up drives to remove plastic waste from high-traffic areas like Tiger Hill and the Mettupalayam-Kotagiri Checkpost elephant corridor. Volunteers Mr. Sirajdeen and Mr. Vahid, in partnership with the Forest Department, helped safeguard animals from accidental ingestion.

Survey, Document, and Study Initiatives

Scientific Research and Biodiversity Monitoring

WNCT members have been surveying and documenting various species, contributing valuable data to scientific research. Their focus includes Sparrow population conservation and addressing human-animal conflicts involving dogs. Volunteers have also been monitoring the biodiversity of Ooty Lake as part of a holistic approach to ecosystem management.

Collaborative Efforts and Recognition

WNCT actively participates in forest surveys, postmortems, and other collaborative efforts with government agencies. Notably, WNCT members led the first-ever moth survey in the Nilgiris region, documenting over 160 species and earning recognition on the Indian Biodiversity Portal.

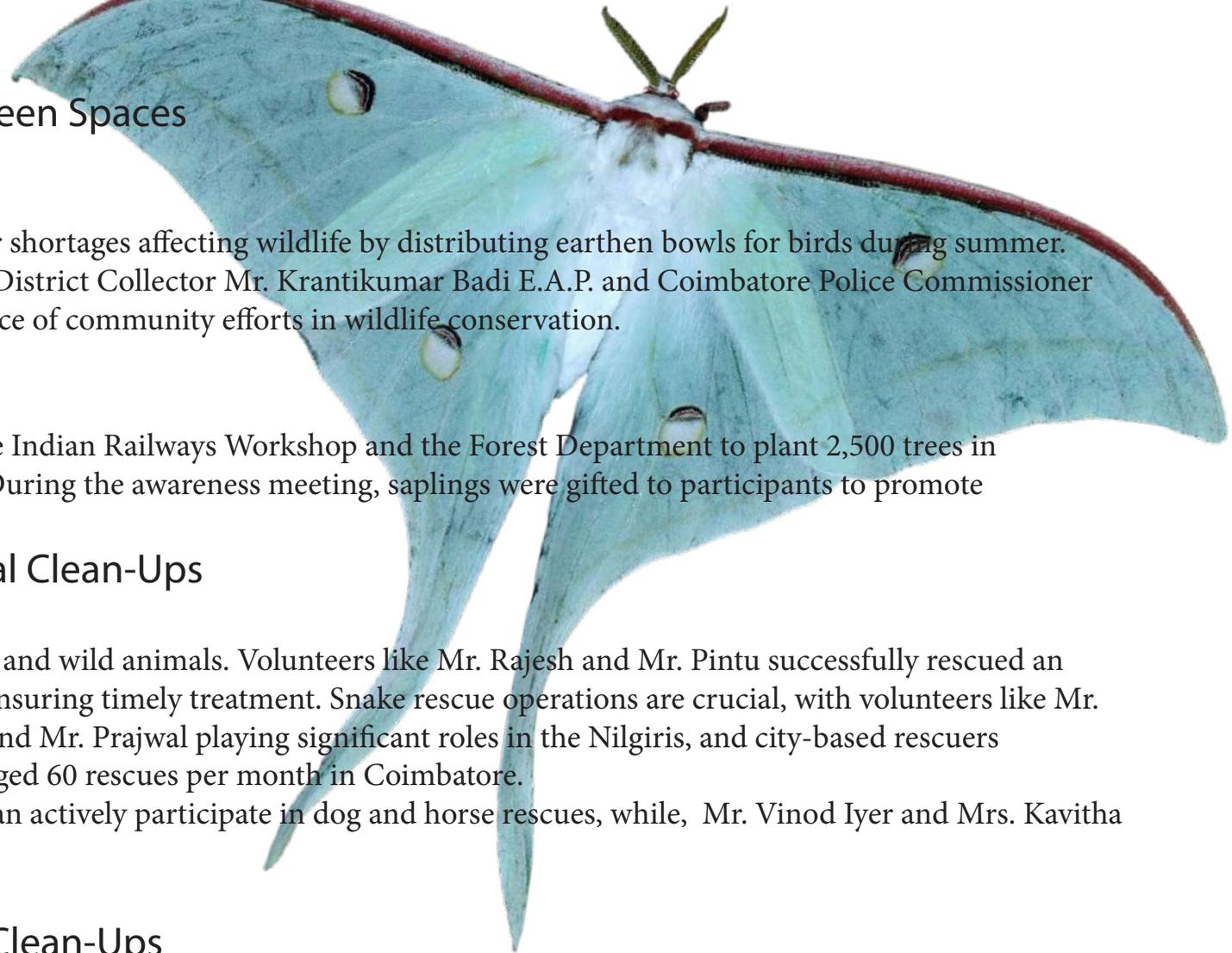
Sustaining Conservation Efforts

Community Engagement and Support

WNCT volunteers distributed water bowls to ensure birds have access to water during harsh summers. Volunteers like Mr. Sirajdeen and Mr. Vahid provide guidance to snakebite victims, ensuring they receive appropriate medical attention. Passionate volunteers like Mr. Sumit consistently support WNCT and its conservation initiatives. Numerous silent contributors lend their help in various ways, from capturing wildlife photos to providing financial resources.

Biannual Newsletter and Continued Advocacy

The creation of a biannual newsletter showcases the impactful work of WNCT volunteers. Through their collective efforts and unwavering commitment, WNCT continues to be a beacon of hope for wildlife and environmental conservation.





Rescuing Leopards :

A Compassionate Endeavor

N.Sadiq Ali
Founder of WNCT

Wildlife is a precious treasure that enriches our planet's diversity and beauty. However, when wild animals like leopards find themselves trapped in perilous situations such as barbed wire fences, it becomes our responsibility to intervene with care and compassion. In this article, we delve into the meticulous process of rescuing a leopard ensnared in a barbed wire fence, emphasising the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders and the importance of humane handling techniques.

Understanding Wildlife Rescue

Wildlife rescue is a noble act aimed at safeguarding the lives of wild animals and ensuring their safe return to their natural habitat. Whether it's navigating through vehicular traffic, avoiding pitfalls, or escaping from the clutches of barbed wire fences, these majestic creatures often find themselves in precarious situations where they require our assistance to survive.

The Tri-Departmental Approach

When a leopard is entangled in a barbed wire fence, swift action is imperative to prevent further distress and potential harm. The tri-departmental approach involves coordinated effort between the Police Department, Fire Service and Forest Department. The Police Department manages crowd control, while the Fire Service addresses any

potential hazards in the area. Then, the Forest Department with its expertise in wildlife management, takes the lead in coordinating the rescue operation.

Collaboration with Wildlife NGOs

In moments of confusion and uncertainty, the involvement of wildlife-related NGOs proves invaluable. These organisations provide specialised knowledge and assistance, enhancing the effectiveness of the rescue effort. By working together with governmental departments, wildlife NGOs contribute significantly to the successful rescue and rehabilitation of wild animals.

Expert Handling and Minimising Risks

Handling a leopard requires finesse and expertise, especially considering the potential dangers involved. While tranquilisers may be used to subdue the leopard during rescue, their usage carries inherent risks, including the possibility of fatality. Therefore, every effort should be made to capture the leopard without resorting to tranquilise, minimising risks to both the animal and rescuers.

The Role of the Ketch Pole

A crucial tool in leopard rescue is the Ketch pole, a Five foot long stick with a short rope attached on both ends. This specialised tool enables rescuers to safely handle the leopard from a distance, without causing undue stress or harm. Care must be taken to avoid placing pressure on sensitive areas, ensuring the safety and well-being of the leopard throughout the rescue process.

A good example of WNCT's partnership with the Forest Department.

WNCT has been designing dismantable lightweight cages to trap leopards, sloth bears, and tigers. The forest department staff are using these cages and find them very useful as they require less manpower to handle due to the reinforced fibre material. This innovation demonstrates how prioritising safe handling techniques benefits both wildlife and rescue personnel.

Assessment and Treatment

In cases where the leopard sustains significant injuries, tranquilisers may be necessary for medical assessment and treatment. Once the leopard is unconscious, immediate medical attention should be provided to address any injuries or ailments. Following treatment, the leopard should be released back into its natural habitat, ensuring its continued survival and well-being.

Rescuing a leopard trapped in a barbed wire fence is a testament to our commitment to preserving and protecting wildlife. Through collaborative efforts, expert handling, and compassionate care, we can ensure the safe return of these magnificent creatures to their natural habitat. By raising awareness and fostering a culture of empathy towards wildlife, we can create a world where humans and animals coexist in harmony, respecting each other's right to thrive.

Reporting Wildlife Crime in Tamil Nadu

Aswath C. [unreadable]

Introduction to Wildlife Crime

Wildlife crime encompasses illegal activities that exploit wild animals and plants. This includes poaching, trafficking of wildlife and wildlife products, illegal logging, and the unlawful trade of endangered species. These crimes not only threaten biodiversity but also disrupt ecosystems and contribute to environmental degradation. In Tamil Nadu, a state rich in diverse flora and fauna, the protection of wildlife is crucial. Effective reporting and intervention can significantly aid in the conservation efforts of the region.

Step-by-Step Guide to Reporting Wildlife Crime in Tamil Nadu

1) Identify the Crime: Before reporting, it's essential to understand what constitutes wildlife crime. Common examples include:

2) Gather Information: Collect as much information as possible about the crime. This includes:

- The nature of the crime (poaching, trafficking, illegal logging, etc.).
- Location where the crime is occurring or has occurred.
- Date and time of the incident.
- Description of the individuals involved, including any vehicles or equipment used.
- Photographs or videos if it is safe and legal to obtain them.

3) Contact Authorities: In Tamil Nadu, several authorities and organisations handle wildlife crimes:

• **Tamil Nadu Forest Department:** This is the primary body responsible for the protection and conservation of forests and wild life. They have district-level offices that can be contacted directly.

- Website: Tamil Nadu Forest Department
- Phone: Each district office has a contact number available on the website.

• **Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB):** A statutory body under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

- Website: WCCB
- Email: wccb.sr.tn@nic.in (Southern Region Office)
- Local Police: In case of immediate danger or ongoing criminal activity, contact the nearest police station.

4) Online Reporting: Many organisations provide online portals for reporting wildlife crimes:

- Tamil Nadu Forest Department Online Grievance Portal: Forest Department Grievance Portal
- WCCB Online Complaint Form: WCCB Complaint Form

5) Helplines and Hotlines

- Forest Department Helpline: 1800-425-45454 (Toll-Free)
- WCCB Helpline: 1800-11-6000 (Toll-Free)

6) Follow-Up : After reporting, it is advisable to follow up with the respective authorities to ensure that the report is being acted upon. Keeping a record of your report, including any reference numbers or acknowledgements, can be helpful for future follow-up.

Importance of Reporting: Reporting wildlife crimes is crucial for several reasons:

- **Conservation:** Protecting endangered species and preserving biodiversity.
- **Legal Compliance:** Ensuring that laws protecting wildlife are enforced.
- **Community Awareness:** Educating and involving the community in conservation efforts.

By following these steps, residents of Tamil Nadu can play a pivotal role in protecting their state's rich wildlife heritage. Active participation in reporting wildlife crimes not only aids in immediate intervention but also fosters a culture of vigilance and responsibility towards nature conservation.

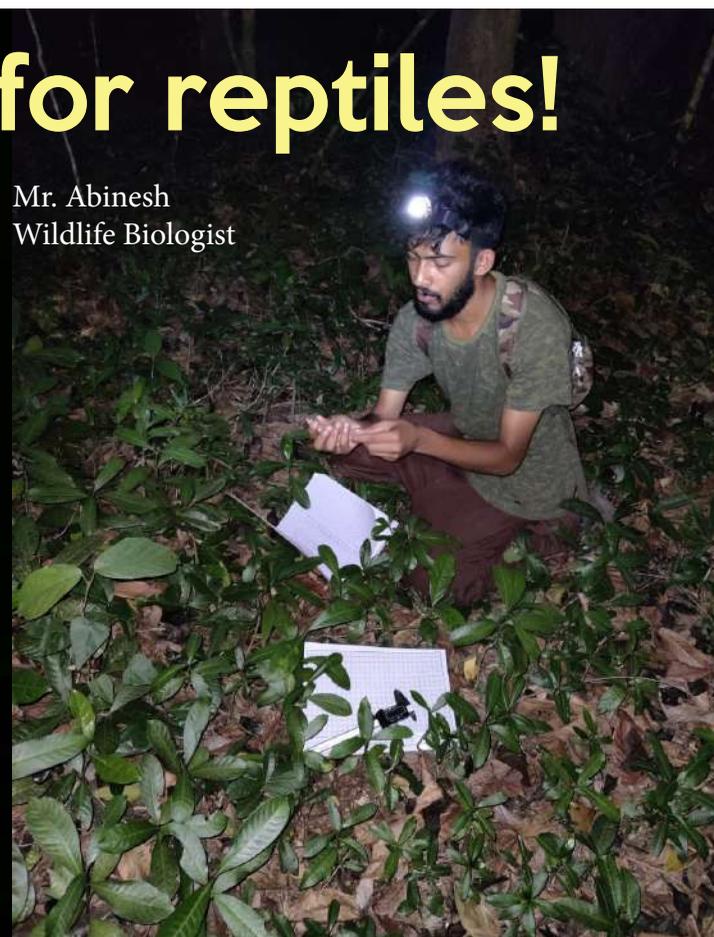


How important is a habitat for reptiles!



Exploring the Wilderness: Scaling Herpetology through Wildlife Academia

Mr. Abinesh
Wildlife Biologist



Wildlife biology is a broader branch of science that facets many subjects, which include the study of reptiles and amphibians as herpetology.

I was greatly intrigued about the rarity and endemism that has been inhabited by the native vegetation of the Nilgiris. Also known by the term “sky islands”, the higher elevation landscapes of Western ghats host Shola (Southern tropical montane wet evergreen forest) grassland mosaic as their native vegetation.

Nilgiris being one such region, I worked as a volunteer herpetologist in Tamil Nadu Biodiversity greening project where I could notice point endemics (species that confine to a specific location eg. Coonoor bush frog is known only from Coonoor, Kotagiri and Naduvattam of the Nilgiris, although such places are found similar in Western ghats where it is absent) and narrow endemics (species that are found to have a pattern of similarity amidst their known geographical range eg. Nilgiri marten is known from Shola montane grasslands of Southern Western ghats at an altitude of 1500 m asl up to ~2500 m asl) inhabiting specific habitats in the sky islands of the Nilgiri hills.

Some to mention, Striped narrow headed snake (*Xylophis perroteti*), is a wood snake

that’s found in rotten woods of Shola forest, Horseshoe pit viper (*Craspedocephalus strigatus*) basks in rocks of a shola grassland mosaic habitat, Horsfield’s spiny lizard (*Salea horsfieldii*) bask at short shrubs or stunted trees of Shola grassland habitats. On the same landscape, I could see how reptiles choose habitats and microhabitats.

Again I felt “How important a habitat (space) is for a Reptile.”

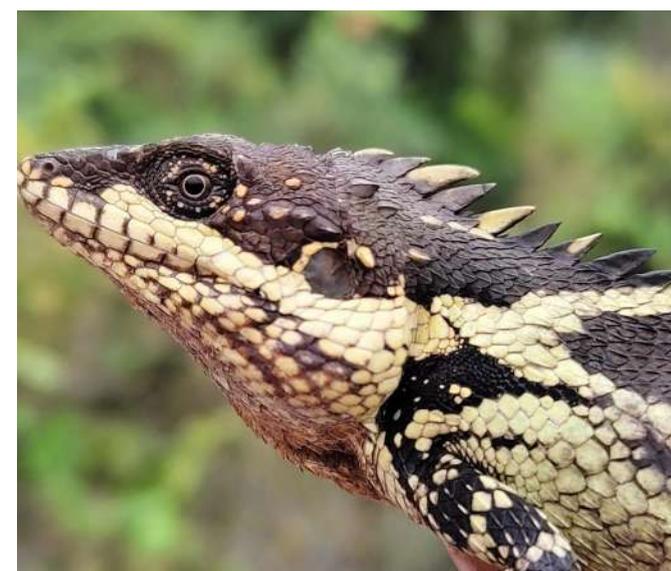
Taxonomy and novel species

Western ghats, a mountain of species diversity is a taxonomist’s treasure. In geckos, initially it was thought that endemic species are spread throughout the ghats of similar elevation that share the same vegetation but researchers started investigations which led to the fact that the species they thought to be Endemic showed point endemism which were thought to be narrowly endemic. The reason we thought a species is found throughout the ghat was because they look similar at first sight, but a deeper understanding on their morphological and molecular characters would indicate the difference.

Being similar is what is called cryptic and mostly all the “lookalike” fall in a group.

One such lineage is the gracilis group in the gecko genus *Cnemaspis*. Cryptic the species, played hide and seek with taxonomists since the beginning. In recent times, it started unveiling novel species and denoting conserved distribution ranges. I was happy to author one such nomen *Cnemaspis reticulata*, known only from Thiruparankundram hill of Madurai.

Once again I felt “How important a habitat (space) is for a reptile.”



After my masters degree I joined as a project intern at Wildlife Institute of India. It was a herpetology project that aimed at assessing the spatio-temporal distribution and thermal biology of Indian rock pythons (*Python molurus*) in the Moyar valley of Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve.



same places. I could observe one trait, if an individual is released apart from the place of capture there could be visible effects like either fighting, a conflict phenomenon or returning back to the exact location, a site fidelity phenomenon.

We captured, performed surgery, monitored health, released, tracked and it went on loops. Day by day the increasing individual count contrastingly dimmed our small crew. We had to walk miles keeping track of the pythons, collecting data and searching for more individuals. We were always accompanied by an antenna top of our heads and a receiver gelled to our ears. The frequency sound was kept low as it might lure wildlife, where we had to take a sprint in the woods chased by Elephants at most.

The project covered a total of 14 pythons that were also tracked and released. Hard work paid forth with surprising results. All the pythons that were left at different places from where it was originally caught returned to the same places. What was more surprising to me was that the maximum distance was 11 km. The study was also published in a peer reviewed journal in 2023 (Vishnu et al. 2023). It meant a lot to me that the study threw a lot of light on how important a habitat and home range was for reptiles. What baffled everyone was the long distance hikes back to the home range. Quantum biology might have answers to this someday! Once again I felt “How important a habitat (space) is for a reptile.”

We have separate homes

Occurrence and distribution were the factors that acted as a precursor to jump into another research question. My study design involved geckos as the study species asking, “Can there be a distribution boundary between gecko genera?” I arrived at this question just because I was impressed about the higher endemism and greater adaptive radiation in Nilgiris. If one species of gecko is different from another, that’s delineated

from smaller geographical boundaries then why is there an assemblage? We unveiled the ecological boundaries of geckos in the Nilgiri Hills, using machine learning models and geospatial tools to identify occupancy, abundance and distribution.

Geckos were shown to be influenced by microclimate as many were climate specialists rather than generalists that tend to maintain specific elevations. There were distinct regions that were shown to have an altitude based boundary in the geographic space where genera were restricted to specific habitats. My Mphil dissertation kept me intrigued as Species getting differentiated from different habitats was somewhat common but a genus? Interesting right!

Once again I felt, “How important a habitat (space) is for a reptile.”

Waking up to understand sleep

Waking up from the deep sleep of the pandemic, I felt an eon pass away. I was desperate again to be a herper someday. Clearing an interview with the Macrophysiology lab of the prestigious Indian Institute of Science under the Centre for Ecological Sciences department, I joined as a Project Associate 1 to work with reptiles, but something different this time.

Sleep ecology, a novelty to science and reptiles. Across a broader spectrum the project engaged in different aspects and technology. I was allowed to work in the field to study Indian agamid lizards, also referred to as dragon or dragon lizards. They keep their name for their look with beautiful spines and ornamental scales.

Travelling a stretch of Western ghats I studied more than 550 individuals under 10 species. The study involved diurnal and nocturnal work to cover a wide range of data, which included releasing them at the

Once again I felt, “How important a habitat (space) is for a reptile.”



From all walks of my herpetology life I knew that reptiles are very sensitive to temperature and other bioclimatic factors. In the ongoing climate warming scenario there are plenty of research articles that alarm the endangerment of species, particularly those reptiles that live at higher altitudes. This is also called local extirpation. To thermo-regulate and survive, reptiles rely on their own habitats. The strictness towards habitat makes some even habitat specialists, which if lost would endanger them.

That’s where, once again, I feel “How important a habitat (space) is for reptiles.”

Understanding natural systems is a curiosity like any other school of science. Where I learned one good point, “to continue understanding nature and leaving it informed through scientific contributions for trailing researchers, just like Darwin et al left in academia”.



Understanding Forest Fires: Causes, Impacts, and Solutions

Dr Vaithianathan Kannan
Wildlife Biologist & Environmental Consultant

Forest fires are natural phenomena that have been shaping ecosystems for millennia. However, in recent years, the frequency and intensity of forest fires have increased significantly, posing immense challenges to ecosystems, communities, and economies worldwide. This article will explore the causes, impacts, and management strategies related to forest fires and delve into various aspects of how such forest fires affect the environment.

Causes of Forest Fires

Natural Causes: Lightning strikes are a common natural cause of forest fires. These fires can occur spontaneously during thunderstorms, particularly in regions prone to dry conditions and lightning activity. Climate change exacerbates the problem by creating conditions conducive to fire spread, including higher temperatures, prolonged droughts, and increased fuel availability.

Human Activities: The majority of forest fires are caused by human activities, including unattended campfires, discarded cigarette butts, arson, and machinery sparks. Human encroachment on forested areas increases the likelihood of accidental ignitions.

Impacts of Forest Fires

The impacts of forest fires are far-reaching and multifaceted. Ecologically, fires can lead to habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and changes in composition of vegetation and soil. Intense heat from fires can alter soil structure, causing compaction and reducing porosity. This can decrease water infiltration and increase runoff, leading to erosion. Fires can alter soil pH, nutrient availability, and organic matter content. High temperatures can volatilize nutrients like nitrogen and sulphur, making them less available for plants. Overall, the effects of fire on soil properties depend on factors such as fire severity, soil type, vegetation characteristics, and climate conditions. Forest fires cause major air pollution, decrease air quality and directly affect the health of the population. Economically, forest fires can cause damage to infrastructure, loss of property, and disruptions to industries such as tourism, agriculture, and forestry. The social impacts of forest fires include displacement of communities, loss of livelihoods, and psychological stress.

Ecological Impact on Forests

Fires can result in the destruction of vast areas of forest habitat. This loss directly affects the flora and fauna. Intense heat from fires can alter soil properties, making it less fertile and prone to erosion. This can inhibit the regeneration of plant species and disrupt the balance of the ecosystem. Some plant species are more resilient to fire and may thrive in post-fire environments, leading to shifts in species composition. This can impact the structure and biodiversity of the forest ecosystem. Forest fires can have both immediate and long-term ecological impacts. Destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity, and alterations in vegetation composition due to fires can thus cause permanent changes to forests. Some plant species depend on fire for seed germination or ecosystem regeneration. In such cases, controlled fires are common, which when left unchecked can cause serious collateral damage.

Forest fires release large amounts of smoke and particulate matter into the atmosphere, degrade air quality and pose health risks to humans and wildlife. Smoke from forest fires can exacerbate respiratory conditions and contribute to visibility impairment. This then has a significant economic consequence, including damage to infrastructure, loss of property, and impacts industries such as tourism, agriculture, and forestry apart from the quality of life and productivity of people. The costs associated with firefighting efforts and post-fire recovery can be substantial.



Impact on Wildlife

During a fire, many animals perish in the flames. This includes both terrestrial and arboreal species, from small mammals to larger animals like deer and bears. Even if wildlife survive the fire itself, their habitats may be severely altered or destroyed. This can force animals to migrate to new areas in search of food, water, and shelter, leading to competition with existing populations and increased vulnerability to predation. Forest fires can fragment habitats, creating isolated pockets of vegetation surrounded by burned areas. This fragmentation can disrupt migration patterns and gene flow among populations, potentially leading to reduced genetic diversity and increased susceptibility to disease.

Long-term Effects

While some species may adapt to fire and be able to regenerate quickly, others may struggle to recover or just perish. The severity and frequency of fires, as well as the availability of seeds and other propagules, play crucial roles in determining the pace and success of forest regeneration. Forest fires can impact the provision of ecosystem services, such as water purification, carbon sequestration, and climate regulation. Changes in vegetation cover and soil properties can affect the capacity of forests to provide these services, with potential implications for human well-being. In the face of increasing fire activity due to climate change and human activities, forest management practices must adapt to mitigate the impacts on forests and wildlife. This may involve strategies such as prescribed burning, fuel management, and land-use planning to reduce the risk and severity of wildfires.

Management of Forest Fires

Prevention:

Preventing forest fires involves both natural resource management practices and public education initiatives. This includes implementing fire bans during periods of high fire risk, promoting responsible land use and recreation practices, and conducting controlled burns to reduce fuel loads.

Detection and Early Response:

Early detection of forest fires is critical for effective firefighting efforts. Remote sensing technologies, such as satellites and aerial surveillance, are used to monitor forested areas for signs of smoke and heat. Rapid deployment of firefighting resources, including firefighters, aircraft, and specialised equipment, can help contain fires before they escalate.

Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation:

Fire suppression efforts aim to contain and extinguish wildfires to minimise their impacts on ecosystems and communities. This may involve constructing firebreaks, deploying water or fire retardants, and employing firefighting crews to extinguish flames. After a fire is extinguished, rehabilitation efforts focus on restoring damaged ecosystems through revegetation, erosion control, and habitat restoration.

In conclusion, forest fires are a complex and dynamic phenomenon with profound ecological, economic, and social impacts. Effective management of forest fires requires a comprehensive approach that addresses prevention, detection, suppression, and rehabilitation to minimise the risks and consequences associated with these events. By understanding the causes and impacts of forest fires, society can work towards sustainable solutions to mitigate its effects on ecosystems and communities. Forest fires have far-reaching consequences on forests and wildlife, affecting ecological processes, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. Collaborative efforts from governments, communities, and stakeholders is the key to tackle fires and minimise its impact. Ultimately, a sustainable approach to managing forest fires is essential to safeguarding ecosystems, protecting communities, and ensuring the well-being of future generations.

Author Note:

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Picture credits: Rishi Kesavan



My first encounter with the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher (*Ficedula nigrorufa*) at Sim's Park, Coonoor, The Nilgiris

Dr. Reza Khan- a nature lover



Pretext

I got married on the 9th of December 1973. It happened at a district headquarter, some 200 km away from Dhaka - the capital city of Bangladesh. So, I had to spend the first night at my in-laws' house and headed to Dhaka the next morning. On arrival at my elder sister's house, where I used to stay, she handed me over an envelope that came from the Bombay Natural History Society - BNHS. Upon opening it, I found the letter - that I expected for over the last half a year or so. It was a scholarship award letter from the Sálim Ali - Loke Wan Tho Ornithological Research Fund, managed by BNHS to support my doctoral programme that was to be guided by Dr.Sálim Ali. He was the head of the Ornithology Department of Bombay University stationed at the BNHS. Also, Dr Ali was the president of the BNHS. My wife Nazu, being my classmate, was not surprised at the scholarship award letter as she knew about it from the time I had submitted my application almost a year back. The award letter mentioned that I should join the Ph.D. programme as soon as possible. The main hindrance to my joining BNHS was the Indian Visa, and it must have been a study visa that took nearly 6 months to get from the time of application in Mid-December 1973. So, after all the formalities at home and for the Indian side, I was able to join the BNHS during the last week of June 1974 resting all responsibility to my wife to take care of the would-be newborn during September-October! This separation was not so sweet but an amicable one.

My first encounter with the BIRDMAN of India

On the first day I met Dr.Sálim Ali at the Hornbill House, which is opposite Lion Gate, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Fort, Bombay, he asked me to study Black and Orange Flycatcher for my doctoral thesis. Of course, at first, I was in shock because I had no clue about the flycatcher as I have never heard of it before. After overcoming the preliminary shocks and with the help of BNHS colleagues I had decided to work on the task bestowed upon me by my 'Guru'. The Black-and-Orange Flycatcher study After spending almost three months in the Hornbill House collecting background information and writing up a work programme for the study of the flycatcher in the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, I left for Coonoor, in the Nilgiris District in Tamil Nadu as advised by my Guru. He selected Coonoor because BNHS had only one information of sightings of the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher during the past year or so. And the gentleman, a life member of BNHS, Mr ERC Davidar, was the informant. He is no more. Mr Davidar is the father of Dr Priya Davidar who lives in Masinagudi with her husband and younger brother Peter. Mr Davidar was my 'godfather' and his entire family with aunty, eldest offspring Priya followed by Mark and Peter were extremely helpful to me when I stayed in Coonoor from end of 1974 to the end of 1976.

Finally found the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher

Davidar uncle, who was the secretary of the Planters Association of Tamil Nadu, took me to Sim's Park, located just below the Canowie bungalow, which housed the PAT office and his residence. When we walked inside the Sim's Park, Uncle showed me the shola forest below the forest ranger's bungalow and rest house where he had seen a Black and Orange Flycatcher, months back.

From the first to the seventh day, I visited every part of the park from dawn to dusk looking for the elusive and enigmatic flycatcher. On the seventh day, I was in the middle of the shola trying to have my lunch resting my back on the trunk of a tree. My breakfast and lunch consisted of Suji or semolina halwa, two boiled eggs, potato, carrot and full sized white sliced bread. My food items remained spread out on the grassy forest floor. After a few bites, suddenly I saw a female Black-and-Orange Flycatcher picking up insects just a metre or so from my feet. It melted in the shola undergrowth in no time. Out of sheer discovery or rather enjoyment I left everything in the field and virtually ran to reach the Canowie to inform Uncle. Upon hearing the news, he did take lots of interest and accompanied me back to the field where my belongings were. Of course, by that time there was no sign of the flycatcher.

Within a week of first sighting of the flycatcher, I discovered that in shola forests the only clue to locate a Black-and-Orange Flycatcher is its 2 to 3 types of call notes and a distinctive song, usually sung during the breeding season. Soon, I found three pairs of 'my flycatcher' in the Sim's Park, several pairs in the Ooty Botanical Gardens and Longwood Shola in Kotagiri. For the next three months I covered areas between Coonoor and Kotagiri, Kallarghat, and Ooty and Gudalur. By November 1974, I considered it to be one of the commonest birds of the Shola forests, usually above three thousand feet above mean sea level. Accordingly, I had requested Dr.Sálim Ali to visit me in Coonoor and he did so on his birthday on 12 November 1974 stamping my findings and allowing me to pursue ecology and behaviour of the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher in the Western Ghats for my doctoral thesis. By the beginning of 1975 I started surveying forests from the Nilgiris to the south of the Nelliampathy Hills to Kodaikanal and found the flycatcher to be common even in Munnar and Kodaikanal Hill Stations.

vWherever I have gone, I used to wait to hear the call notes of the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher. Finally that became my key to spotting this in forests I had visited between the Honnametti Estate in the Biligiri Rangan Hills in the Chamarajanagar District under Karnataka to the forest range of Arahiapandupuram (Azhagiapandiapuram) in the Nagercoil (Kanyakumari) District of Tamil Nadu and mountains of Kerala in between. Finally, I had conjectured that this flycatcher's range extends from about three thousand feet elevation to the shola forests near the highest peaks, Mukurthi, in the Nilgiris and the Eravikulam National Park near Munnar, under Kerala State.



My sojourn with the WNCT

In the end, I had fallen in love with the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher that has kept me connected to the Nilgiris. After leaving the Nilgiris in November 1977, I had no clue whether I would be able to revisit this beloved hill region ever again. However, prior to 2016, I had three opportunities to be in Coonoor and Ooty in the early 2000s. But for an everlasting memorable visit one was in 2016 December when friends in the SACON at Coimbatore, Dr. Priya Davidar, Dr.Samantha Iyanna and younger friend Jude (Michael) Thaddaeus helped me get connected with Jamuna Raju, Sadik Ali, MS Anandi Chandran, Mr. Prajwal and Mr. Murli of Ooty for a weeklong visit to South India with a 3-day stay at Ooty. At this visit I got fully reconnected to my old friends and the areas that I have walked through between 1974 and 1976 looking for the Black-and-Orange Flycatcher.

Finally, Mr.Sadik Ali became a great friend after visiting me in Dubai Safari Park in 2017 when we discussed some issues related to animal rescue and conservation of the wildlife of the Nilgiris, and we got hooked. Considering my love for the Nilgiris he got me connected to the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Trust founded by him and his compatriots in Ooty and Coimbatore. And here I am with the editorial team for the Newsletter for the WNCT.



Into the Heart of the Snow Leopard's Realm: A Journey to Spiti

Arjun & Nithya from CBE to Chichan.

Our motivation to do long road trips in India was to explore our incredible Nation, rich and diverse in culture, landscapes and history. One such opportunity was a trip to Spiti, Himachal Pradesh to see the elusive snow leopard in its natural habitat.

Preparation and Departure from Coimbatore
In the crisp January air, we embarked on this road journey from the southern city of Coimbatore, our sights set on the remote and breathtaking region of Lahaul Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. With a distance of over 3000 kilometres to cover in our Mahindra Thar, our route took us through the vibrant cities of Bangalore, Hyderabad, Nagpur, and Gwalior before reaching our first major stop: Chandigarh.

Reunion in Chandigarh and the Road to Naldehra

Our spirits soared as we reunited with our daughter, studying in the bustling college town of Chandigarh. After a joyful rendezvous, we continued our journey northward, finally arriving at our home in Naldehra, where we spent a week acclimatising to the altitude and soaking in the serene beauty of the hills. Short hikes carrying our photography gear helped us not just acclimatise but explore the bird life around our home in the hills.



Embarking on the Snow Leopard Expedition

On January 28th, our adventure truly began as we set off for Sangla, the starting point of our snow leopard expedition. The landscape transformed as we ascended into the majes-

tic mountains, the air growing crisper with each passing mile. Arriving in Sangla, we were greeted by a winter wonderland.

Meeting Our Expedition Team

Eager anticipation filled the air as we met our fellow adventurers, hailing from different corners of the country. Among them were passionate birders and photographers, united by a shared love for the wilderness. Our tour guide welcomed us warmly, despite the camp being covered in 4 feet of snow, with no electricity, outlining the exciting days that lay ahead.



Acclimatising in Chitkul and Journey to Chicham

A day trip to Chitkul provided the perfect opportunity to acclimatise to the altitude and snow driving. Amidst pristine landscapes, we spotted elusive foxes and marvelled at the avian wonders that graced the skies above. We never imagined seeing a Tamil Nadu registered vehicle would add more joy to this trip. The following day, we embarked on a challenging 10-hour drive to Chicham in Spiti, where the Tethys Himalayan Den awaited us.

In the Realm of the Snow Leopard

For eight exhilarating days, we immersed ourselves in the realm of the snow leopard, guided by the expertise of Ismail Shariff, a true maestro of wildlife photography. Despite the biting cold of -22°C, our spirits remained high as we ventured into the snow-covered wilderness, accompanied by our trusty porters. Each day brought new

sightings – snow leopards, lammergeiers, blue sheep, and foxes – a testament to the incredible biodiversity of the region.



Exploring Chicham and Kee Monastery

In between wildlife excursions, we took time to explore the cultural treasures of Chicham, including the awe-inspiring Kee Monastery. Perched atop a rocky outcrop, the monastery offered panoramic views of the rugged terrain, a fitting finale to our unforgettable journey. Chicham is also home to the world's highest suspension bridge, a marvel of engineering perched at a staggering altitude, offering breathtaking views of the surrounding valleys.

One of the many road trips...

As we bid farewell to Chicham and began our journey back home, our hearts were filled with gratitude for the unforgettable experiences we had shared. From the snow-covered peaks of Spiti to the camaraderie of our fellow travellers, our expedition had been a journey of discovery in every sense of the word. And though our adventure had come to an end, the memories we had made would remain etched in our minds forever. Needless to say, we're hungry for more. Atulya Bharat never disappoints!





A Hornbill Journey

K. Kavya

But the next day, I heard the mother became courageous and fed its young one, it was a relief to all birders. Everything was great until the mother hornbill disappeared.

Where would it go? Why would it leave its chick? Was it attacked? Is it alive? More questions started gathering up. The forest department checked on the young one every day. In a few days, the chick died due to starvation. I felt so bad for it, it could have been a magnificent bird in the future.

But what I admired is what the mother did before disappearing. Unlike other hornbills which die if their mate dies, this one had taken all the courage knowing that she had a chick to support. She showed that obstacles that come in life should be overcome with courage rather than giving up. Even though her mate passed away, she knew she had to guide her chick.

This incident taught me a valuable lesson not to give up and face obstacles with strength and courage.

I started birding at an early age of eight. After a few weekend trips and wildlife safaris, I learnt about a few species of birds. Identification and learning the details were both fascinating and interesting. For quite a long time I was looking forward to sighting the Great Indian Hornbill.

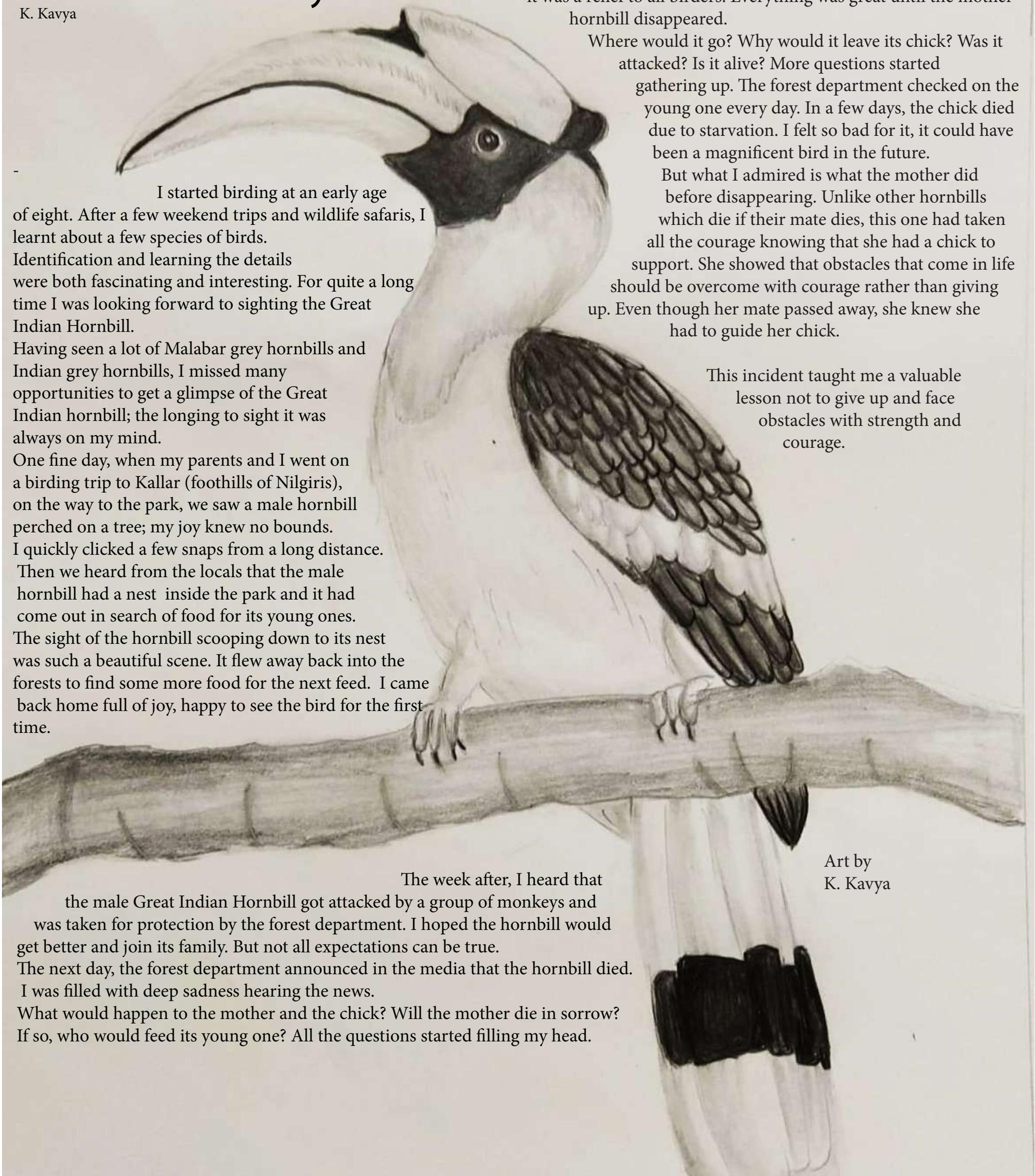
Having seen a lot of Malabar grey hornbills and Indian grey hornbills, I missed many opportunities to get a glimpse of the Great Indian hornbill; the longing to sight it was always on my mind.

One fine day, when my parents and I went on a birding trip to Kallar (foothills of Nilgiris), on the way to the park, we saw a male hornbill perched on a tree; my joy knew no bounds. I quickly clicked a few snaps from a long distance.

Then we heard from the locals that the male hornbill had a nest inside the park and it had come out in search of food for its young ones. The sight of the hornbill scooping down to its nest was such a beautiful scene. It flew away back into the forests to find some more food for the next feed. I came back home full of joy, happy to see the bird for the first time.

The week after, I heard that the male Great Indian Hornbill got attacked by a group of monkeys and was taken for protection by the forest department. I hoped the hornbill would get better and join its family. But not all expectations can be true. The next day, the forest department announced in the media that the hornbill died. I was filled with deep sadness hearing the news. What would happen to the mother and the chick? Will the mother die in sorrow? If so, who would feed its young one? All the questions started filling my head.

Art by
K. Kavya





Lifestyle - Kurumba Tribes

Author - Azaad

The Nilgiris district, also known as the Blue Mountains, is situated on the confluence of the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats. Six tribes namely Kurumba, Irular, Paniyar, Kattunayakar, Kothar and Toda live here. Anthropologists and historians believe that the Kurumba tribes are one among the ancient tribes with their stone memorial pillars, rock paintings, ancestral burial sites and memorial rock slabs dating back four thousand years. According to researchers, the Karikkaiyur rock paintings are 5,000 years old.

Language

The language of the Kurumbas is a mixture of Tamil and Kannada. They use a lot of ancient Tamil words. The name of their language is called "Kurumba Mozhi". It is one of the sixteen Dravidian family languages. The language has no alphabets, only dialects.

Categories

The Kurumba community is further divided into subcategories and are native to different taluks of the Nilgiris. Aloo Kurumba people are predominantly residents in four taluks namely Coonoor, Kotagiri, Kundah and Udhamandalam. They are further divided into two subcategories. Petta Kurumba, Mullu Kurumba and Jenu Kurumba live in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks.

A small population of Jenu Kurumbas are found in Mudumalai also. Jenu Kurumbas coexist with Petta Kurumbas in many areas and are predominantly involved in collecting honey in the forest. It may be because of this that they have been called so, "Jenu" literally means Honey. I have had some close interactions with the Tribal communities and have found them to be affable. Once while accompanying anthropologist Mr. Amudhan Valluvan, We witnessed their conversation with a Jenu tribal woman, a Kattunayagar tribal woman, who volunteered to act as an interpreter. They were comfortable communicating with her and seemed to have so much in common that even language was not a barrier. So it is certain that the Jenu Kurumbas are also Kattunayakar tribes

Lifestyle

Kurumba tribespeople live as a harmonious community with unique rituals pertaining to birth, death, marriage etc. Their life and livelihood is intertwined with nature and even worship nature. A noteworthy point is that they do not marry among the same sub category, it is always inter category matches. They live in close knit communities in different parts of Nilgiris, a visitor to one home and the entire village gets together to feast and enjoy. Each village is one big family.

Agriculture

Being nature lovers, Kurumbas have been practising sustainable agricultural practices for long. They cultivate millets like Finger millet (Ragi), Little Millet (Samai), Foxtail Millet (Thinai), different kind of beans and pulses, turmeric, gourds and greens along with tubers like sweet potato and tapioca. They have many rituals pertaining to each stage of farming like tilling the soil, sowing etc which adds character to their tribal culture. They have now ventured into coffee, pepper and

such cash crops too. Being forest dwellers, they have a knack for gathering forest produce and have a good knowledge of herbs and their importance. They gather honey and medicinal herbs from the forests for their personal use and even sell them locally.

Lifestyle Problems

Like many other tribes, Kurumbas are also affected by the modernization around them. Those who were used to agriculture and forest produce, have now started working as farm hands in the many tea estates around the Nilgiris. Since their land holdings are meagre, and restrictions on forest land use, they are forced to work outside of their lands to sustain and this has brought a marked change in their food habits and lifestyle. While they predominantly lived on their farm produce along with what they gathered from the forest, change in their dietary pattern and lifestyle has led to present day women and children from the community to be severely malnourished.

Music and Culture

Kurumbas have their own cultural practices with a lot of music and dance pertaining to every life incident from birth to death. They predominantly use flute and percussion as instruments along with anklets for their dance movements making it a veritable treat.

Education

With changing times, few Kurumba people have educated themselves. Some have even got technical education and managed to get bachelors degrees thanks to government schemes. However, participating in competitive exams and finding employment in government institutions remain a challenge because of lack of awareness among the people. They are still unaware of the many welfare schemes proposed by the government. Distance to schools is another major deterrent since children then have to travel through jungle paths and face relevant hurdles to reach their classroom. Girls predominantly stop with primary education. State government has since provided boarding facilities for students in order to further their education, it has made an impact on their lives.

Environment

Kurumbas have always dwelled in closed connection with the forest. They have been involved in gathering forest produce, firewood for their use, honey, and herbs to name a few. Their approach to the environment has always been sustainable use, take only what you need being their policy. They always cared to leave some for the future and not hoard on things they get from the forest. There was never a commercial intent in their gathering practices. Their older generation took utmost care in saving the forest, clearing it without damaging, setting up mild forest fires to remove weeds and prevent major forest fires. It also improved the grazing area for wild animals. Their practices did only good for the forest and its beings and they took utmost care not to cause harm. Not much research has been done on their sustainable practices, this would help future generations appreciate their culture and lifestyle.



Xylophis perroteti



"Hey Ssslither, have you spotted Xylophis Perroteti lately? I hope he's avoiding those dangerous roads."

hey Sssammy,

"You know it, those asphalt ribbons are a snake's worst nightmare. Poor Xylophis and the others in the Western Ghats face so many dangers."



"It's tough out there. With their habitat in the shola grasslands and hiding in rotten logs, they're vulnerable to all sorts of human interference."

"Exactly! We need to spread the word about protecting their homes and keeping them safe from road kills."



"Let's round up the reptiles and organize a campaign. We'll educate those humans about sharing the road with our non-venomous pals."

"And we'll make sure Xylophis gets the spotlight, using his jazzy tunes to charm them into action."



"With Xylophis leading the melody, we'll slither our way to safer roads and a healthier habitat!"

