

# HORNBILL

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OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 2022



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**BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY**

# HORNBILL

October–December 2022



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*Caloenas nicobarica*

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### Nestled on Cloud Nine – Neora Valley National Park

Located in the Eastern Himalaya,  
Neora Valley National Park is a global  
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preserved forest patches. **Gangadharan  
Menon's** memorable birding trip to this  
lesser-known park taught him a cardinal  
natural history lesson: 'Don't miss the  
forest for the birds'. Would you like to  
add this place to your bucket list?

## PHOTO FEATURE

### Wandering Violin Mantis: A Stealthy Predator

Wandering Violin Mantis are not rare  
in the forests of Mumbai, but their  
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# Editorial...

The cover of this issue of *Hornbill* features a Near Threatened species, the Nicobar Pigeon *Caloenas nicobarica*, which derives its common and species names from Nicobar Island in the Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago, where it is found. Though not endemic, it is a rare species, of which Arjun Kumar P. has skilfully captured two individuals in one frame. Its population size is unknown, though it is recorded as decreasing due to capture for food and the pet trade, habitat destruction, and predation by introduced mammals in its restricted island habitat. The future does not augur well for this tree-and-shrub nester that lays a single egg per clutch. Therefore, all its distributional range countries, including India, would do well to follow the conservation actions proposed by BirdLife. These include protection of its known breeding islands and preservation of reserve areas of lowland forest close to its breeding islands; education of the local people to prevent trapping for food and the pet trade; eradication of rats, cats, and other alien predators on particularly important breeding islands. Most of all, further habitat loss and introduction of alien predators on its breeding islands must be prevented.

The global pandemic urged us to look for positive stories, and this issue provides us with more than one example. The title “A Village with Blue Doors” intrigues us to follow the story by Antara Kulkarni, a young student who was pushed by COVID restrictions and a life away from college and friends, to look for internship opportunities. A break came her way in the form of habitat and behavioural studies on the Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indicus* with the BNHS team in Shokaliya and Madhopura villages in Rajasthan. She writes that the Lesser Florican may appear to be well adjusted to people and anthropogenic activities in its habitat, but this understanding would be naive. Almost 60–80% of the florican’s grassland habitat has been encroached by the invasive Mesquite, forcing floricans towards agricultural fields, and away from grasslands. Sadly, even croplands are not free of threats. Excessive pesticide use is toxic to the birds, while noisy agricultural machinery and vehicles disturb the florican’s breeding behaviour. However, the BNHS team of which the author was a part is striving to bring about positive changes in the peoples’ perception, which would ultimately be a long-term solution to this and similar problems.

Moving northeastwards, we find Gangadharan Menon’s description of a memorable birding trip to Neora National Park in the Eastern Himalaya. Neora is a global biodiversity hotspot, with intact and well preserved forest patches. “Nestled on Cloud Nine” is how the author felt, surrounded by Neora’s unique biodiversity (which is well illustrated in the article), and he recollected Dr Asad Rahmani’s words: ‘If you want to gauge the health of a forest, don’t look at the canopy. Instead, look at the forest floor. The less disturbed it is, the healthier the ecosystem will be.’

Dr Asad Rahmani too has contributed a success story – the restoration of a forest estate spread across a hundred acres in the western Terai Arc Landscape, adjoining Corbett National Park. In 2016, young Udaiveer Singh bought an over-grazed and over-lopped piece of land that was unfit for cultivation, and began to work on reviving its native flora and fauna. This private estate lies between the bhabar and terai tracts, where migratory birds from the Himalaya are abundant. In an hour-long birding session, Dr Rahmani could enumerate 30 species. The “before and after”

photographic record tells a tremendously positive tale, and Udaiveer Singh is among the true conservation warriors, who give us hope that not all is lost for Indian biodiversity.

Our centrespread carries a migratory flock of Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus*, a quintessential shorebird among this highly diverse group of migrant species, which are threatened by numerous adverse anthropogenic factors, such as urbanization, environmental degradation, habitat loss, and climate change. Thus, conserving them and their habitats along the eastern and western coasts of India, where they occur in massive numbers, is crucial. India supports major wintering populations of Lesser Sandplover, which are commonly seen in all its coastal states. Bird monitoring and ringing data collected by BNHS indicates that the species' population is declining in its Indian wintering grounds, and undertaking suitable measures to conserve Lesser Sandplover and its habitats in India is the need of the hour.

Finally, it is with deep regret that we record the loss of two friends of BNHS. Ramki Sreenivasan – a name that evokes brilliant images of India's avifaunal diversity in the field – even those of us who never met him came to know him through his abiding interest in the conservation of biodiversity and the beautiful images that he generously contributed to BNHS publications. BNHS and Ramki collaborated to save the Amur Falcon from hunting in Nagaland. Along with conservationists Bano Haralu, Rokohebi Kuotsu, and Shashank Dalvi, Ramki created a video of Amur Falcon being hunted at Doyang Reservoir in 2012, which he brought to show Dr Asad Rahmani, then Director of BNHS. Immediately, with an emergency fund launched by BirdLife International, a team of conservationists began work in the area to advocate against hunting of Amur Falcons, that ended soon after. In one of the most successful conservation projects of recent time, BNHS focused on education, outreach, state-level advocacy, and long-term contact, while Ramki would visit the area and check on the birds, dedicating field days and months to the project. In the words of friend and collaborator Neha Sinha, Ramki's passing is like a flame that has been cruelly extinguished, but the flame he lit in countless others will remain alive and bright.

BNHS member Dr Ajit Kumar Mukherjee, an outstanding ornithologist and field biologist, joined the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) in 1946 under the directorship of Dr S.L. Hora. Dr Mukherjee was keenly interested in faunal surveys, and devoted his time to collecting zoological specimens, especially birds, across India. His bird collection remains a valuable part of the repository of ZSI, as do his reports, photographs, and papers on birds. His classic on the 'Food habits of the waterbirds of the Sundarban, 24-Parganas District, West Bengal' was published in five parts in *JBNHS* from 1969 to 1972. Curator of the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and Visiting Professor of Museology at the University of Calcutta for many years, Dr Ajit Kumar Mukherjee won many hearts with his simplicity and compassion. His professional and personal legacy that will not go unsung. ■