

HORNBILL

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Editorial



India's oldest magazine dedicated to wildlife and forests, *Hornbill*, was launched in November 1976 as a quarterly publication. It will proudly complete 50 years this year. I feel fortunate to be writing this editorial at such a historic moment. With great curiosity, I revisited the very first editorial, jointly contributed by J.C. Daniel, S.S. Hussain and J.S. Serrao. It was nostalgic to reflect on the transformation of *Hornbill* from a modest newsletter into one of the country's most respected wildlife magazines.

The founding editors emphasised the need for *Hornbill* to serve as a regular channel of communication among BNHS members and a platform for popular writing, ensuring that knowledge about wildlife, forests and the environment reached a wider audience. Importantly, they sought to highlight the urgent stories of India's dwindling wildlife populations and shrinking forest cover, bringing these concerns to the attention of BNHS members and beyond.

The *Hornbill* published on Dr Sálim Ali's 80th birthday, November 12, 1976. Dr Sálim Ali inspired its launch and provided financial assistance to support the magazine. The cover layout was designed by renowned artist Jamshed (J.P.) Irani, who passed away recently.

In this debut edition, Dr Sálim Ali contributed a President's Letter recounting the story of *William*, the Great Pied Hornbill. He fondly described William as the 'Society's well-loved Mascot-cum-PRO' for more than 25 years. The nestling had been brought from the jungles of Karwar in 1894 and lived until May 1920 in the gracious old building of Phipson & Co., a wine merchant that provided office space to the BNHS and whose proprietor later became Honorary Secretary. The building stood on Apollo Street in Mumbai, where the Society had established its first museum.

The first issue showcased a remarkable range of subjects – from tigers in Nepal and India to the monkeys of the Ashambu Hills near Kanyakumari, rhododendrons of Singalila, the spectacular flowering of the karvi plant, freshwater fishes, the coconut tree, the Narcondam Hornbill, giant wood spiders and much more. Most importantly, it highlighted conservation actions across the country, from Borivali (today's Sanjay Gandhi National Park) to Ladakh, alongside pioneering research.

In 1974, the then Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, visited Hornbill House and spent an hour there – a historic moment for the Society. The following year, in 1975, Dr Sálim Ali was honoured with the prestigious Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize, carrying an award of US\$ 50,000. These landmark events were proudly documented in the inaugural issue, underscoring the Society's growing national and international recognition.

I invite BNHS members to reflect critically on the 50-year journey of *Hornbill*. Have we remained true to the vision of our elders, and achieved what they expected us to carry forward? Have we added value in step with a changing world and advancing technology?

With changing times, BNHS has introduced a separate monthly newsletter and launched *Aranya*, a magazine designed for young naturalists and student members. These initiatives have created additional platforms and more opportunities to share knowledge and information.

As part of our recently launched *Project Tiger* series, we have been celebrating the completion of 50 years by the first nine Tiger Reserves. The articles on Corbett and Melghat Tiger Reserves were warmly appreciated by our readers. In this issue, we bring you the third instalment – an insightful article on Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, contributed by Dr Dharmendra Khandal, who has dedicated more than two decades to conservation work in Ranthambhore.

BNHS is currently engaged in an ambitious conservation project aimed at rebuilding the Wild Water Buffalo population in Maharashtra. As part of this effort, the BNHS team visited Gadchiroli district – the state’s last remaining habitat of Wild Water Buffalo – where they discovered inspiring stories of local protectors, from community guardians of wildlife to passionate birdwatchers.

I would also like to thank author Puskar Basu for contributing an article on the wild yak and his journey through Nepal’s Limi Valley in search of one of the Himalayas rarest mammals. I saw three individuals in Ladakh last year and later learnt that one had died, reportedly after being shot near the China border. Wild yaks are among the most enigmatic, and certainly least studied, bovines of the Himalaya. I hope you will enjoy this fascinating story.

In the Book Reviews section of *Hornbill*, you will be introduced to the fascinating review by Dr Asad R. Rahmani *STATE OF INDIA’S BATS*, produced by the Nature Conservation Foundation and Bat Conservation International, Bengaluru.

In the ‘Builders and Guardians’ section, BNHS Honorary Secretary Dr Bharat Bhushan introduces Sir Frederick Hugh Sykes, who served as the tenth President of the BNHS from 1929 to 1933, and Michael Herbert Rudolf Knatchbull, who served as the eleventh President from 1934 to 1937.

‘The Noisy Birds of the Silent Valley’ by Alok Ganguly may initially confuse you. The article is not about Silent Valley National Park; rather, it takes us to the birds of Kolakham, a hamlet nestled in the Himalaya beside Neora Valley National Park, about 108 kilometres from Siliguri. The village also offers majestic views of Mount Kanchenjunga.

When you spot an ibis – whether a Glossy Ibis or a Black Ibis – you may not give it much thought. But the Giant Ibis of Cambodia is an entirely different story. As the largest living ibis species, it is Critically Endangered, with fewer than 200 mature individuals surviving in the wild. I was fortunate to accompany the author when we observed two individuals – a truly memorable sighting. Its rarity makes it one of Southeast Asia’s most elusive avian treasures, embodying both the fragility and resilience of the region’s biodiversity.

The Chambal holds one of the most important remaining breeding populations of the Indian Skimmer anywhere in its range, making its sandbars vital to the species’ future. Every ring and flag fitted by the BNHS team, led by Parveen Shaikh, adds a valuable data point to a larger picture of where these birds travel, how faithfully they return to breed, and how many chicks survive to fledge.

The *Conservation Notes* in this issue address an entirely different dimension of conservation. Many of us have, at some point, worked under the shadow of fear or terror. Sadly, some of our country’s most beautiful forests have lived under such conditions for a long time, with both wildlife and their protectors suffering as a result.

But what happens when the terror subsides? How do forests, wildlife and local communities respond in a post-terror landscape? This thought-provoking piece explores these questions in depth.

It will be fascinating to read the article on the Ashambu Hills by Priya Davidar. Also known as the Agastyamalai or Pothigai Hills, they form the southernmost part of the Western Ghats, stretching across Tamil Nadu and Kerala near Kanyakumari. Renowned for their rich biodiversity, sacred peaks such as Agastyarkoodam and unique tribal heritage, the Ashambu Hills have long held ecological and cultural significance.

Interestingly, the inaugural issue of *Hornbill* carried an article on the Ashambu Hills. We felt it would be valuable to revisit that early description and compare it with the region’s present status. This thoughtful task has been undertaken by Dr Davidar, offering readers both a historical lens and a contemporary perspective on one of India’s most treasured landscapes.

Enjoy reading!

Kishor Rithe

