

# HORNBILL

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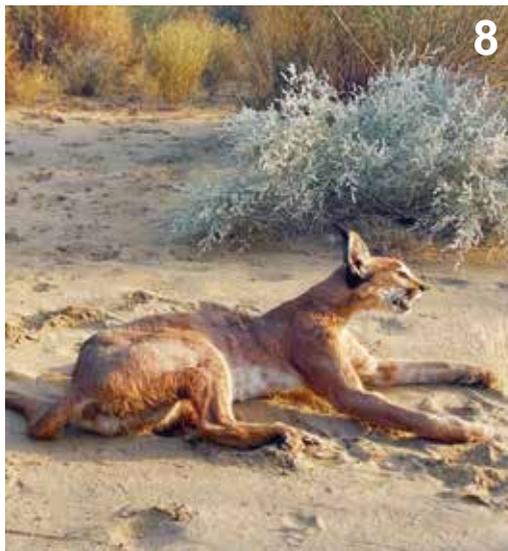
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## FEATURES

### The Nutty Nutcracker

Famed for its ability to prise open the toughest nuts, the Kashmir nutcracker is possibly among the sharpest minds in the avian world. In this issue, **Mohsin Javid** and **Asad R. Rahmani** share their encounter with this elusive member of the Corvidae family and offer insights on a remarkable bird of the Western Himalaya. Corvids and parrots are often celebrated for their intelligence simply because they have been studied more. The ingenuity and adaptability of the Kashmir nutcracker prove it deserves its place among them, and a far more detailed scientific look.



### Return of the Siyahgosh: Community Footprints in Conservation

Once common across India's open plains, the Asiatic Caracal has all but disappeared from its known range – surviving mostly in memory and stories. **Sujit Narwade** narrates an account of an expedition into the Thar Desert in pursuit of one of India's most elusive grassland cats. A secretive, mostly nocturnal hunter, the caracal is being pushed into ever-shrinking territories as rapid land-use change erodes its habitat. Its struggle for survival mirrors a serious crisis: the silent degradation of grasslands across the Subcontinent. Read on.

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# Editorial...

The last week of December always brings mixed sentiments, a sense of fulfilment for achievements, or regret over goals left unmet. I am sure you will be pleased to know that *Hornbill* has achieved many milestones in 2025, with several exciting initiatives lined up for 2026.

This issue of *Hornbill* will surely delight you with its diverse and engaging stories, ranging from the Kashmir nutcracker to the Asiatic caracal. The Kashmir nutcracker, known as *shab kann* or ‘royal crow’ in Kashmiri, looks nothing like the Common Crow; so why is it called a crow at all? The authors clearly explain the differences between the Kashmir and spotted nutcrackers and highlight their role in seed dispersal and forest regeneration. The stunning photograph of a nutcracker feeding on a walnut says it all.

By now, you may have heard the exciting news of the discovery of a potential habitat for the Indian caracal in Rajasthan. In this issue, we bring you first-hand insights from BNHS scientist Dr Sujit Narwade in his article ‘Return of the Siyahgosh: Community Footprints in Conservation’ on the Asiatic caracal *Caracal caracal schmitzi*. The article reiterates an important truth: species may still persist in suitable habitats, and what is needed are patient explorations, often with no guarantee of success. For this remarkable discovery, Sumer Singh Bhati and Pankaj Bishnoi deserve special appreciation. Following the initial sighting, Dr Sujit and his team revisited the site to confirm the evidence, capturing, in his words, “everything the desert revealed.” Beyond the sighting itself, the identification of a potential habitat is the true breakthrough. In times when positive conservation news is rare, this discovery feels like an oasis in the desert, filling us with optimism for the New Year.

You will also enjoy reviews of several engaging books – *VULTURES: LAND APOLOGUES* by S. Chandrasekaran by BNHS life member Sylvester Alphonso, and, an extraordinary work of wildlife fiction by BNHS Honorary Secretary Dr Bharat Bhushan, published by Vishwakarma Publications. Our thanks to Dr Asad R. Rahmani and Natasha Girkar for reviewing these books.

In Reader’s Space, Vijaya Bharat takes us to a village pond near Jamshedpur, where he enjoyed memorable sightings of bronze-winged jacana and ruddy-breasted crakes. At a time when electric lines and artificial light have penetrated even the remotest forests, AMK Bharos, Akhilesh Bharos, and Jageshwar Verma from Chhattisgarh present a thought-provoking article, *The Disappearing Glow*, on fireflies (jugnu). Over the past decade, light pollution has overwhelmed natural darkness, erasing the magic





of fireflies. It prompts an important question: how do nocturnal species respond to increasing light intrusion in forests?

In the Builders and Guardians section, you will read about Henry Stafford Northcote and Charles Cochrane-Baillie, the fourth and fifth Presidents of BNHS, who served the Society from 1900–1903 and 1903–1907 respectively, during its formative years and helped shape its conservation legacy.

For coastal explorers, Fatema Hirkani invites you to look closely at tidal pools – nature’s open aquariums formed by the rise and fall of the sea. Her article, *Little Pools, Big Wonders*, reveals how each pool is a tiny yet vibrant marine ecosystem.

The lesser florican continues to struggle for survival, having lost much of its native grassland habitat and now relying largely on croplands. With fewer than an estimated 500 individuals remaining in India, Sachin Bishnoi, BNHS Community Officer from Rajasthan, highlights the plight of this Critically Endangered species in his article *In Search of the Lesser Florican*, focusing on the Shokaliya region of Ajmer district.

Over the past three issues, *Hornbill* has introduced the *Systema naturae* 2033 initiative, inspired by the 1983 Encyclopaedia of Natural History edited by Robert Hawkins and published by BNHS. We look forward to receiving your contributions and to working together to create a modern-day *Systema naturae* – a fitting tribute to 150 years of natural history exploration, conservation, and discovery.

In Conservation Notes, we continue with the saga of India’s grasslands, enriched with recent field inputs from Dr Sujit Narwade and Dr A. Samson. I hope it inspires you to explore and to discover hidden facets of grasslands in deserts and high-altitude regions. I also hope 2026 brings concrete policy actions to safeguard India’s grasslands.

Enjoy reading, and I wish you a very happy New Year!

Kishor Rithe