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The Secretary,
Ministry of Science and Technology
Dept. of Science and Technology
Government of India,
Technology Bhavan,
New Mehrauli Road,
New Delhi 110016

Editors

Kishor Rithe

Vibhuti Dedhia

Consultant Editors

Bharat Bhushan

Gayatri W. Ugra

Isaac Kehimkar

Editorial Assistant

Sonali V. Vadhavkar

Design & Layout

V. Gopi Naidu

Sanchita S. Kadge

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by Hayath Mohammed

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For more information on the Society
and its activities,

write to the Honorary Secretary,
Bombay Natural History Society,
Dr Sálím Ali Chowk, S.B. Singh Road,
Mumbai 400 001, Maharashtra, India.

Tel.: (91-22) 2282 1811

Fax: (91-22) 2283 7615

E-mail: info@bnhs.org

Website: www.bnhs.org

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Beauty of the Forest Litter

Ecosystems are often depicted as pyramids, with apex predators at the top and decomposers at the base. While tigers and hornbills capture attention, the vital role of leaf litter and its decomposers is often overlooked. Fallen leaves, bark, and twigs fuel nutrient cycling, supporting fungi, bacteria, and insects. Termites, for instance, break down cellulose, nourishing other species. Yet, harmful practices like burning litter threaten this balance. **Asad R. Rahmani** draws our attention to forest floors. He believes that protecting leaf litter means preserving the very foundation of biodiversity.

From Nest to Net –

The Silent Struggles of Sea Turtles

In January 2022, **R. Surya** – a young conservationist – embarked on a nocturnal sea turtle survey in Tamil Nadu's mangroves – unaware that the experience would change his life. Witnessing both the wonder of new life and the tragedy of bycatch, he found his calling. Now, he fights to protect India's marine giants.



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Laughingthrushes of Indian Himalaya

For over four decades, **Rajat Bhargava's** fascination with Indian laughingthrushes has endured. Unlike today's birders, his first encounters were not in the wild, but in bamboo cages at his Meerut home. As a child, he watched these birds, captivated by their laughter-like calls. Now, as an ornithologist, he studies them in their natural habitat, uncovering their secrets and the threats they face. This is his journey – from a backyard observer to a field researcher.

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Editorial...

Let me begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks for your wonderful feedback. I am delighted to know that you appreciated the improved presentation of Hornbill, especially its content. Such feedback inspires our team to strive better and also helps us understand if we are delivering what you expect – and whether we are offering something new and engaging for you.

We hope this issue will once again meet your expectations. With winter behind us and summer setting stronger, the forest trees have already begun to shed their leaves. Nature's message to them is loud and clear: survive this lean season and conserve what you have gained. A fitting article that explores this phenomenon is "Beauty of the Forest Litter" by Dr Asad Rahmani. He explains the vital ecological role of fallen leaves, bark, and twigs in nutrient cycling, and how they support fungi, bacteria, and insects like termites. The article also highlights how burning this litter poses a serious threat to biodiversity at its very foundation.


India's mangroves, along both its east and west coasts, are under increasing threat from infrastructure projects. Mechanised overfishing has further exacerbated the problem, impacting fish populations and endangering marine species like sea turtles. This issue features an interesting article for developers and the commercial fishing industry alike. R. Surya, a young conservationist, shares insights from his nocturnal sea turtle surveys in Tamil Nadu's mangroves, shedding light on the turtles' incredible lives and the looming threat of bycatch. He now fights passionately to protect India's marine giants.

Having spent most of my life inland, my visit to the east coast – particularly Point Calimere in Tamil Nadu – was a revelation, especially witnessing the vibrant red crabs. The Reader's Space article by Alok Ganguly on 'Saving the Red Beach (Lal Kakra Beach)' in Tajpur, Bengal, now makes me eager to visit. He writes, "This stunning red colour view is especially prominent during the evening, making the beach a photographer's paradise." Sadly, this pristine beach – and Odisha's Dogra Beach in Balasore District – is now suffering due to plastic waste, pollutants, and vehicular traffic, all of which threaten its wildlife, including migratory birds.

I also reviewed the book *LIVING WITH BIRDS: THE MEMOIR OF ONE OF INDIA'S GREATEST ORNITHOLOGISTS*, by Dr Asad Rahmani (Juggernaut, 2024) – a must-read! Another recommendation is *ICONIC TREES OF INDIA* by S. Natesh (Roli Books, 2024), reviewed by tree lover and former BNHS Honorary Secretary Dr Ashok Kothari. Both books deserve a place on your reading list.

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), India's oldest NGO, recently celebrated 60 years at its iconic 'Hornbill House' on March 13. Located on Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, opposite Lion Gate at Mumbai's Kalaghoda area, the building





has a rich history. To mark the occasion, we launched commemorative products including a coffee mug featuring the great pied hornbill – BNHS’s mascot, inspired by ‘William’, the hornbill once housed at BNHS. While buildings are important, it is the people who manage and conserve them that truly protect our planet’s natural treasures.

BNHS was founded in 1883 when eight nature-loving Bombay residents gathered at the Victoria and Albert Museum on September 15. These founding members – Dr D. MacDonald, E.H. Aitken, Col. C. Swinhoe, J.C. Anderson, J. Johnston, Dr Atmaram Pandurang, Dr G.A. Maconochie, and Dr Sakharam Arjun – set the foundation. We must remember the key contributions of past office bearers and scientists. One such visionary was Donald James Mackay, 1st Baron Reay and Governor of Bombay, who served as BNHS’s first President from 1886 to 1890. Our Honorary Secretary Dr Bharat Bhushan has written a brief tribute to his work.

Some landscapes in India are renowned for their natural wealth – Jim Corbett National Park being one of them. Often, we think only of tigers, but Ram Gopalakrishnan invites us to explore beyond. His article documents rare bird sightings in Corbett’s Himalayan foothills, including the koklass pheasant, cheer pheasant, brown-fronted woodpecker, and the elusive cupwing – offering new perspectives for birders planning future trips. Also featured is “The Tale of a Black-naped Monarch” by Aniket Pawar and Sachin Ranade – an ode to this charming bird.

This is the third issue of *Hornbill* under the ‘Systema naturae 2033’ initiative. Inspired by the 1983 Encyclopaedia of Natural History, edited by Robert Hawkins and published by BNHS, this initiative, led by Dr Bharat Bhushan, will culminate in the BNHS 150 Years omnibus on natural history. This issue includes expert contributions from Dr P. Sathiyaselvam and Dr Rajat Bhargava.

When we think of wetlands, we often envision migratory birds, but seldom consider native species that rely on these habitats. Dr P. Sathiyaselvam, Deputy Director, BNHS and an expert in satellite tracking, highlights this in ‘Fishing Cat – Endangered Shadows of Vanishing Wetlands in India’. His decades of research offer invaluable insights.

I am sure readers will also enjoy the photo story ‘Laughingthrushes of the Indian Himalaya’ by Dr Rajat Bhargava, Senior Ornithologist at BNHS. His fascination with laughingthrushes spans over four decades – from his childhood encounters in bamboo cages at his home in Meerut to field observations in the wild.

I work diligently to bring you solid Conservation Notes from across India, highlighting pressing environmental concerns of various ecosystems. In this issue, I share my views on the recent Supreme Court order concerning sacred groves and its implications in my article ‘Supreme Court to the Rescue of Sacred Groves’. I hope it encourages readers to use this opportunity to protect these spiritual forests – nature’s temples – in their respective states.