

FROM THE DIRECTOR DESK



Dear Members,

I have just returned from Chandrapur Forest Academy (Maharashtra) after attending the Annual Research Seminar (ARS)–2023 of the BNHS. Around 50 staff members attended the presentations at the ARS, which was conducted after a gap of three years. The researchers presented not only their findings, but also discussed the conservation outcomes of the research. Mr Praveensingh Pardeshi, President, attended the ARS and sat through to the presentations, until 9:00 p.m. Deliberation on the progress made so far on the BNHS strategic Action Plan 2015–25 helped the staff to understand the objectives that BNHS aims to achieve. Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve never disappoints any visitor; during a safari to the Reserve BNHS staff were thrilled to watch the tigress Sonam and her three cubs in a Telia meadow.

November was a hectic month for all of us at Hornbill House as we had lined up several programmes to celebrate 'Bird Week' from November 5–12. Launched in 2020 by the Government of Maharashtra, Bird Week is held from November 5–12 to celebrate the birth anniversary (November 5th) of the famous naturalist, and Marathi writer Shri Maruti Chitampalli, a state forest officer from Maharashtra, and the birth anniversary (November 12th) of the late Dr Sálim Ali, who was the first Indian to systematically conduct comprehensive bird surveys in the country. This 8-day event honours their immense contribution to Indian ornithology. Glimpses from Sálim Ali's archives were exhibited from November 5–12, at Hornbill House. The exhibition was inaugurated by Dr Ashok Kothari, former Honorary Secretary and ex-Chairman of Library Subcommittee. The exhibition, which also included screening of select documentaries filmed by Dr Sálim Ali, was thoughtfully designed by our Librarian Ms Nirmala Barure, Mr Sachin Kulkarni, and Mr Ankush Pimpalkar. The exhibition was well-appreciated by the visitors and we hope to repeat it in subsequent years. Also, this activity has set us pondering to start a museum of Dr Sálim Ali's archives.

For the Bird Week, Your Society collaborated with other NGOs like Maharashtra Pakshimitra, Dr Metan Foundation, Nature Conservation Society of Nashik, Maharashtra, and Lal Bahadur Bhandari Govt College, Gangtok, Sikkim, to organize several events. The Maharashtra Pakshimitra organized a series of webinars by BNHS scientists on various topics related to birds. I visited Solapur to extend greetings of the Governing Council and the entire BNHS family to Shri Maruti Chitampalli and present him with copies of his communication with Dr Sálim Ali in the BNHS archives. Shri Chitampalli appreciated the work of BNHS and expressed desire to visit Hornbill House to see its natural history collection.

Indian Army has had a long association with BNHS. Several senior officers from the Armed Forces like General Bipin Rawat, the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Indian Armed Forces, Air Chief Marshal Vivek Ram Chaudhari have visited us in the past. On November 6, 2023, Lieutenant General Ajai Kumar Singh, General Officer-Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) of Southern Command in the Indian Army, paid a special visit to Hornbill House and promised support for conservation actions on several issues.

“BNHS Talks” have always been a great platform to learn and to interact with experts. This November our interim Honorary Secretary Dr Anish Andheria invited Ian Lockwood – a distinguished photographer – to deliver a talk on his challenging photographic journey. His evocative storytelling through imagery of Sky Islands – a unique ecosystem perched like islands in the sky, in the southern Western Ghats of India, and the Sri Lankan Highlands, was mind boggling and an immersive experience for the audience. His landscapes pictures were portraying not just their geographical beauty, but also the delicate ecological balance they house.

Your Society has started putting huge efforts in building capacities of the staff, as well as members. This November several capacity building workshops were organised at CEC-Mumbai at Goregaon; many participants from the workshop have begun volunteering with BNHS, both at Hornbill House and in our projects.

BNHS has become a very vibrant organisation. Our members interact with each other daily. Several email responses to my letters from Prof. H.S.A. Yahya, New Jersey, John Manjali, R. Ravikumar, Col. Rohit Gupta, Governing Council members – Dr. Asad Rahmani, Usha Lachungpa – and Advisory Council members – Dr Y.V. Jhala, Dr M.K. Ranjitsinh – indicates that we have begun walking together. A recent example, we acted on a post from our former Honorary Secretary Mr Debi Goenka on the stranding of a Blue Whale *Balaenoptera musculus* calf at Ganpatipule in Sindhudurg District of Maharashtra. The Mangrove Foundation, Maharashtra Forest Department, local NGOs, JSW Group, and other agencies working along the west coast came together for a rescue operation. However, unfortunately the calf could not survive in the sea.

This has prompted us to bring all stakeholders together to address such stranding, and most important, the threats to our coastal ecosystem. The BNHS marine staff informed me that there has been regular incidents of marine mammals stranding (including blue whale and sharks) along the Maharashtra coastline. In 2020–2021 alone, 109 incidents of stranding were recorded of which 27 animals washed ashore were dead, and this trend is increasing every year, probably due to more vigilance.

Hence, your society and Mangrove Foundation organized a workshop on “Marine megafauna (dolphins, whales, etc.), seabirds, shorebirds, their habitats and addressing the threats” on November 30, 2023, at Airoli, Mumbai. Most of the stakeholders, including the local fishermen, forest officials, coast guard, and coastal infrastructure agency officers, participated in the discussions and have identified the critical issues to work together.

All these actions require funds and this is where we want your help; can you help us arrange fund-raising events?. I really appreciate Zycus Infotech Pvt. Ltd, Infinity Cars Pvt. Ltd, SITA Information Networking Computing (India) Pvt. Ltd, Hemendra Kothari Foundation, and some individual donors, who proactively approached us and supported our projects and programmes.

Kishor Rithe

Director

Bombay Natural History Society

6th DECEMBER 2023.