

## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK



Dear Members,

Our Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, is widely recognized for his deep commitment to wildlife conservation. Earlier this month, he chaired a meeting of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) – India's highest wildlife policymaking body – held in Gujarat. During the meeting, he provided guidance on a range of critical issues, including curbing poaching and wildlife trade, conserving our wetlands and grasslands, and fulfilling India's commitments to the CMS COP. In essence, he urged NBWL members to ensure that India remains a global leader in wildlife conservation. We are proud to share that the Bombay Natural History Society's (BNHS) efforts to save the endangered Jatayu (vultures) and its work on the Central Asian Flyway were acknowledged and appreciated during this important meeting.

The first phase of our proposed BNHS Centre, with financial assistance from the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), is progressing well on the 19-acre land acquired in July 2018 at Navegaon Brahman village in Chimur Taluka, Chandrapur District. We are hopeful the building will be fully operational by the end of 2025.

As one of India's oldest conservation institutions, BNHS strongly believes in collaboration with like-minded organizations. One such partner is EcoSikh, a dedicated non-profit working on forest and environmental protection. EcoSikh represents a faith-based response from the Sikh community to the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, linking Sikh values and institutions with pressing global ecological issues. BNHS has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with EcoSikh for the conservation breeding of the northern goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*, locally known as 'Baaj', in the Punjab-Haryana landscape. This majestic bird has deep cultural and spiritual significance in Sikh history and has been associated with several Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who revered

the goshawk as a symbol of strength and nobility. Falconry was practiced and enjoyed by four Sikh Gurus – Guru Hargobind Ji, Guru Har Rai Ji, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, and Guru Gobind Singh Ji – making the Baaj a powerful emblem of leadership and valour.

Recognizing its cultural importance, the Government of Punjab declared the northern goshawk the State Bird on September 18, 2015. While the BNHS Journal has reported sightings of this winter visitor raptor in Sindh (1911), Bhavnagar, Gujarat (1940, 1953), Gir (1948), Khadakwasla, Pune (1981), Hingolgaadh, Gujarat (1985, 1986), Mysore and Bangalore, Karnataka (1993), Wayanad, Kerala (2000), and Kaziranga, Assam (2023), its wintering in Punjab and Haryana has diminished, likely due to habitat loss, degradation of grasslands, and excessive pesticide use. This month, BNHS ornithologists and EcoSikh representatives visited both states and engaged with a wide range of stakeholders – from political and religious leaders to forest officials – to discuss this conservation initiative. I look forward to sharing more updates on this inspiring project.

Meanwhile, our BNHS team at Pinjore (Haryana) is diligently working on drug safety testing for vultures and preparing for the next phase of vulture releases in Melghat, Pench, and Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserves in Maharashtra. Our teams in Bhopal and Assam are also preparing for upcoming bird releases in the coming months.

A major concern remains the threat posed by transmission lines to large birds. Despite our best efforts, some released vultures continue to perish due to collisions and electrocution. Tragically, a sarus crane ringed in Maharashtra's Gondia district also died from electrocution this month. This issue is deeply troubling, and BNHS is actively engaging with government bodies and corporate stakeholders, urging them to adopt and implement mitigation measures.

On a brighter note, BNHS celebrated March 13 with great enthusiasm at Hornbill House, marking 60 years at our historic headquarters on Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, opposite Lion Gate, in the Fort area of Mumbai. We launched a commemorative coffee mug featuring the great pied hornbill – our beloved mascot, inspired by 'William', the bird that once resided at BNHS – along with a few other special products for our members. Hornbill House has become a landmark not just for Indian nature lovers, but for enthusiasts from across South Asia – including Pakistan, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Myanmar (Burma), Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.

Coincidentally, this year Hornbill House will undergo a much-needed transformation, with a new look and expanded storage facilities to accommodate our growing specimen collection.

We also fondly remember Mr H.M. Phipson, who initially provided a large and more suitable accommodation for BNHS at his office in 1886, at 6 Apollo Street for the meetings of the Society, and for the display of the collection. It was Dr Sálím Ali who helped shift BNHS to our current home at Hornbill House, with support from the Prince of Wales Museum (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya), where the new building was formally inaugurated on March 13, 1965 by then Union Education Minister Mr M.C. Chagla, in the presence of Dr Sálím Ali and Mr Karl Khandalawala, Trustee of the Museum.

In recognition of Hornbill House's significance, then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi visited the building on September 15, 1983 during BNHS's centenary celebrations. She released a special commemorative stamp featuring 'William' in full colour and spent a significant amount of time learning about the natural history of the Indian subcontinent.

We are celebrating this Diamond Jubilee year by inviting more nature lovers and institutions to become part of the BNHS family. A special membership campaign has been launched, including offers for other organizations and corporate partners. We request your support in spreading the word and encouraging others to join BNHS.

I also invite you to explore the "Systema naturae" section in the latest issue of Hornbill magazine and contribute your observations to the BNHS 150-Year Omnibus Collection.

Lastly, if you have not yet completed the online form for the Yearbook for Life Members, please do so here: <https://forms.gle/12gPTSyTs9P2khue7>. For any assistance, please contact:

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For event reservations and submissions, feel free to reach out via email, and do not forget to send your event photos and write-ups to Mr Gopi Naidu at [g.naidu@bnhs.org](mailto:g.naidu@bnhs.org).

Thank you for staying connected with us. I am always available at [director@bnhs.org](mailto:director@bnhs.org) for any questions or suggestions.

Kishor Rithe

Director, Bombay Natural History Society