

From the Director Desk



Dear Members,

This month, I visited Jalgaon in Maharashtra to support the green education courses that BNHS plans to undertake in collaboration with universities. Meeting the dynamic Superintendent of Police, Mr Shrikant Dhiware, in Jalgaon could help us finalise a training workshop for police personnel on illegal wildlife trade.

I found it difficult to spare time for field visits, but I wanted to personally see the BNHS plantation at Mulashi, near Lonavala. Here, we planted around 90,000 saplings across 14.7 acres of private land owned by Tata Power, in the watershed of the Mulashi Reservoir. The plantation has grown remarkably well, and the site was thriving in the monsoon mist.

In mid-August, I decided to take our team to Gadchiroli district to see the wild buffalo habitat and plan project activities in the 180 sq. km Kolamarka Conservation Reserve (CR) in Maharashtra. I had first visited the forests of Gadchiroli in 2003 and found them virgin and serene, but overshadowed by fear due to extremist activities. I always travelled here under the shadow of Naxal threats. During my visits in 2003, 2004 and 2011, I spent several weeks in the region but could not fully enjoy the forest's beauty, birding or wildlife sightings because of this fear. After 15 years, I returned to these forests. This time, for the first time in my life, I was able to enjoy my dream area, Kolamarka, without the fear of Naxal violence.

The virgin forest patch known as the 'Glory of Alapalli' has since been declared a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS). We visited the wild buffalo habitat along the Indravati riverbed and also met residents of two villages to discuss how they could be engaged in wild buffalo conservation. Kolamarka CR includes six villages – Chitveli-1, Chitveli-2, Tonder, Bangarampetha, Asha and Mukhanpalli – spread across an area of just 5 sq. km.

Today, the situation in Gadchiroli district has changed. With the decline in Naxal presence, the government is planning several infrastructure projects, including the expansion of a National Highway cutting through the corridor between Kolamarka CR and Pranhita Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). While such development may threaten parts of the district's green heritage, there is also encouraging news: wild elephants have begun reclaiming the northern part of the district. Their presence is stronger in the Wadsa and Gadchiroli forest divisions, though less so in Bhamaragad. I hope the government will designate a reserve for these elephants, providing them with a safe space while helping to reduce the growing human–elephant conflict.

With the fading of Naxal fear, villagers are now venturing deeper into the jungle. As a conservationist, I feel that the responsibility of the Forest and Tribal departments has increased significantly, particularly in engaging with communities around the forests. The role of the Forest Department, in particular, has become more challenging.

We also visited the adjoining Pranhita Wildlife Sanctuary, which was notified in August 2014. We were amazed to see open grasslands and Anjan-dominated forest patches in this stretch of Pranhita WLS. A few uncultivated agricultural

fields were covered with lush green natural grass, creating meadows that attracted grassland birds. Could the Lesser Florican occur here? However, proposed mining activities may threaten this sanctuary.

BNHS is a partner of BirdLife International. Mr Martin Harper, CEO of BirdLife International, visited Delhi for the AVPN meet at Pragati Maidan. We seized this opportunity to invite him to learn more about BNHS projects. A meeting with selected BNHS scientists was organised at the Gothangaon Nature Conservancy near Nagpur. He was fortunate to witness a tigress with four cubs and a male tiger, along with several bird species.

He also visited the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) to see the BNHS vulture aviary and was able to observe N06, one of the released birds. In addition, he inaugurated BNHS's National Centre for Bird Hazard Management and Avian Safety at Bhisai, Chimur. We hope this visit will further strengthen the ties between BirdLife International and BNHS.

By the time you read this newsletter, we will be celebrating International Vulture Day on September 5. I will share the amazing programmes that the BNHS vulture team has organised across the country.

If you are not already following BNHS on social media, I encourage you to do so and stay updated with our latest activities and conservation initiatives.

Do read the page on Handbook of the Birds of India (and South Asia) in the June issue of *Hornbill* magazine, and consider contributing your observations to the revised edition of this magnum opus on ornithology. Finally, I encourage you to read the BNHS Blog (<http://blog.bnhs.org>) for more inspiring stories from the field. Please feel free to contribute articles in any language. We also encourage academic institutions to subscribe to *JBNHS* (<https://bnhsjournal.in/index.php/bnhs/ga>), one of India's oldest scientific journals, which can also help institutions earn NAAC accreditation credits.

If you have not yet completed the Yearbook form for Life Members, you can do so here:
<https://forms.gle/12gPTSYTs9P2khue7>

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For event reservations and content submissions, please send your photos and write-ups to Mr Gopi Naidu at g.naidu@bnhs.org.

Thank you for staying connected with us. For any suggestions or queries, I am always available at director@bnhs.org.

Kishor Rithe

Director

Bombay Natural History Society