



# BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



JUNE, 2024

CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK



Dear Members,

The BNHS celebrated World Environment Day across the country on June 5th. It was heartening to see events from Ladakh to Tamil Nadu in the south, and from the deserts of Rajasthan to Jharkhand, Odisha, and the North East.

On the morning of June 7th, we received sad news. Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh, a strong pillar of the Society, has passed on. He had been battling cancer for the past few months while continuing his wildlife research and conservation efforts from the hospital. I had the privilege of working with him during my tenure on the MoEF&CC's Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL) in Delhi from 2009 to 2014. We conducted several site inspections together and exchanged views and opinions while writing reports. The SC-NBWL greatly benefited from his vast field experience. India will not see another towering figure like Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh. Before he departed this world, he handed over a script of his new book on Indian mammals, co-authored with Dr P.O. Nameer. He also contributed six new chapters to his previous book, 'Walking the Western Ghats'. We hope to publish both books soon. I urge you to reach out to potential donors to sell the plates of handmade paintings of Indian mammals to support his book. This would be a fitting tribute to this great scientist.

I visited Pinjore, Haryana, from June 10–13, 2024. The Jatayu Conservation Breeding Centre established by the BNHS in 2003 is spread over one acre of land near the Bir Shikargaha Wildlife Sanctuary at Pinjore. The BNHS team started breeding vultures with 20 pairs at this Centre, and today the population has reached 400. The Forest Department has decided to release 25 birds into the wild in Haryana this year, the first time on such a large scale. Thanks to Chief Wildlife Warden Mr Vineet Garg and ACS (Forest) Mr A.M. Sharan for providing a special budget to procure 25 tags, enabling us to monitor the movement of these birds' post-release.

Tamil Nadu Government has set up India's first 'State Bird Authority' and appointed your Society as a member of this Authority. I visited Chennai to meet the dynamic ACS (Forest) Ms Supriya Sahu, IAS, to discuss a few issues related to birds and their habitats in Tamil Nadu. I also met Mr Vijaya Kumar and Mr K.V. Sudhakar of the Madras Naturalists' Society (MNS) at the Gandhi Nagar Club on June 13th to understand MNS's activities and explore the possibility of working together. Several volunteers are working with MNS to collect scientific observations of migratory birds. MNS shared field knowledge, which I relayed to the government during the meeting with the ACS (Forest).

While in Chennai, I visited IIT Madras on June 13th and 14th and was impressed by the contribution of BNHS GC member Mr Kumaran Sathasivan in establishing a Heritage Centre. Professor Susy Verghese showed us the biodiversity at the IITM campus and the challenges they faced. The Prakriti Eco Club of IITM has made this possible. Meanwhile, your President Mr Praveensingh Pardeshi and Vice President Mr Saurabh Singh visited the Chambal River to witness the dedicated work of BNHS scientist Ms Parveen Shaikh and her team in protecting the nests of Indian skimmer and black-bellied terns. They are trying to raise funds to support this ground-breaking work and expand it to other rivers like Mahanadi and Godavari. Ms Parveen sent us good news that the population of Indian skimmers at Chambal River has increased this year to 800 from merely 400 birds in 2017.

Following the visit of Lt. General Mr A.K. Singh, GOC-in-C, Southern Command to Hornbill House and his orders to form a study group, I had a productive meeting with Indian Army officers from Pokhara in March 2024 to discuss grassland and GIB conservation within Army areas. The committee had a meeting this month and our BNHS scientist Dr Sujit Narwade has submitted recommendations based on BNHS studies to be incorporated in to action plan.

I was in Panaji (Goa) to attend a workshop organized by the Goa State Biodiversity Board and the National Biodiversity Authority in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society-India to discuss the concept of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs). OECMs is a proposed certification mechanism for green, biodiversity-based initiatives on non-government lands. OECMs will strengthen efforts to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, 2010 (Target-3), and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), 2022, aiming to bring 30% of the earth's land and sea under biodiversity areas by 2030.

(Contd. on next page)

The monsoon brought fresh breezes to Hornbill House as our Vulture team left on a mission to work in Pench and Tadoba Tiger Reserve to put GPS tags on 20 vultures and release them into the wild. We hope these tagged vultures will successfully explore the tiger's habitat, search for wild carcasses, and later find their own breeding places.

Your Society accepts in-kind donations too. We have received donations of books from Mr Yogesh Thakkar (5 books), Mr Kamlesh Gandhi (8 books), Ms Dilnavaz Variava (41 books), Ms Shakuntala Bharwani (93 books), and Ms Rivka Israel (72 books) on behalf of Dr Rachel Reuben and Ms Elizabeth Reuben. The BNHS Library has started a book lending facility for outstation members too. The digitization work undertaken by the Library team is nearing completion, and your Governing Council has decided that these digitized books, reports, etc., should be made available to members on our website.

The Conservation eNewsletter will now publish activities of the BNHS state-wide chapters. Make a habit of reading the BNHS monthly Conservation eNewsletter for all the good news from the field. Your President expects your proactive participation in building a new BNHS. We look forward to receiving your ideas at [director@bnhs.org](mailto:director@bnhs.org).

Kishor Rithe

Director, Bombay Natural History Society

## BNHS celebrates World Environment day

This year BNHS marked World Environment Day (WED) with inspirational events designed to raise awareness and foster a deeper connection with nature. The nationwide celebrations featured various educational and hands-on activities demonstrating the Society's commitment to environmental conservation and

sustainable practices. BNHS scientists and staff organized a range of programmes, including interactive sessions, nature trails, tree planting, webinars, and online campaigns. BNHS engaged participants of all ages in understanding the importance of protecting and restoring our natural environment.



▶ In Guwahati, Assam, the BNHS team conducted an engaging educational session at Delhi Public School for forty ninth-grade students and five teachers. The session focused on vulture conservation and was spearheaded by Ms Sanchita Bhattacharjee, teacher, Delhi Public School. This event aimed to instill a profound sense of awareness and appreciation for wildlife conservation among the youth, fostering a generation of environmentally conscious citizens. ■

▶ In Mumbai, Maharashtra, a nature trail was organized at the BNHS Reserve in Goregaon to emphasize the importance of forest biodiversity and the forest's role in preventing desertification and building resilience against drought. The trail, guided by BNHS CEC staff and volunteers Ms Priyadarshini Supekar, Mr Dilip Giri, Mr Sumit Dhotre, and Mr Noah Telang, was attended by thirty-eight BNHS members. Additionally, a tree walk, led by Ms Kiran Thumma at the Nehru Science Centre, was attended by twenty-five BNHS members who explored the rich diversity of tree species. ■



▶ Over 200 people, ranging from school students to elderly individuals, gathered at the BNHS Reserve in Mumbai to build check dams across streams on the campus, in response to a call to action issued by the BNHS on World Environment Day. They constructed four loose-boulder bunds across two different streams. Thanks to the encouraging support and physical efforts of the volunteers, the seemingly difficult task was made easy! ■

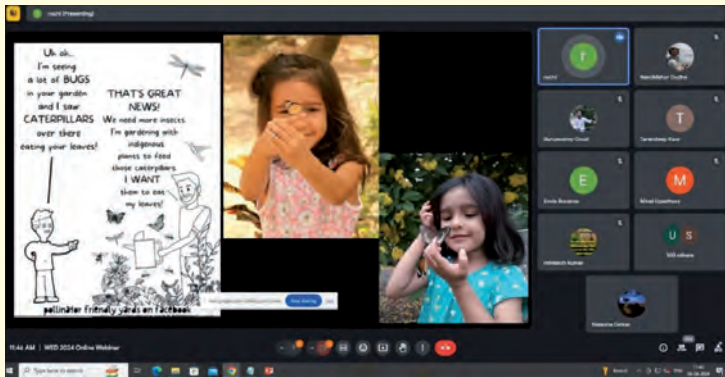


In Drass, Ladakh, BNHS hosted a comprehensive session highlighting wildlife research and career opportunities, with a specific focus on Himalayan Brown Bear ecology. Following this session, a dedicated cleanliness drive and a spirited public awareness campaign were organized. These efforts underscored BNHS's holistic approach to environmental stewardship and community engagement. ■



▶ In Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, Dr Samson Arockianathan and staff of the BNHS-Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) planted the java palm, neem, shisham, banyan, and kadam trees on their campus. This initiative underscores the critical role of nature restoration in achieving a sustainable future for all. ■

The BNHS-EIACP Division conducted a webinar on the ecological role of butterflies, led by RFO Ruchi Dave from the Gujarat Forest Department, which was attended by 117 participants from across India. Additionally, the team launched an online poster campaign to address various critical environmental issues and a birdwatching trail at Mumbai's Bhandup Pumping Station. The highlight of this trail was the sighting of 25 bird species, including seven active baya weaver nests on palm trees. ■



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## Proposing OECM's for green initiatives on non-government lands



On June 26–27, 2024, Mr Kishor Rithe, Director, attended a workshop in Panaji, Goa, organized by the Goa State Biodiversity Board and the National Biodiversity Authority in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society-India. The workshop focused on discussing the concept of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECM's), a proposed certification mechanism for

green, biodiversity-based initiatives on non-government lands. OECM's aim to strengthen efforts to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets of 2010 (Target 3) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) of 2022, which seek to bring 30% of the earth's land and sea under biodiversity conservation areas. ■

## Survey and conservation efforts for Finn's Weaver and Red Avadavat

In May, a field survey of Finn's weaver in Assam by BNHS Scientist Rajat Bhargava revealed critical insights into their status. Subsequently, a rapid survey using questionnaires among bird trappers and dealers in Kolkata's Metiabruz and Narkeldanga areas found no sightings or captures of Finn's weaver in the past 4–5 years. The small population around Joka wetland is presumed extinct.

On June 7, 2024, the Uttarakhand Forest Department convened a meeting in Rudrapur to discuss conservation strategies for Finn's weaver. Stakeholders, including the Irrigation Department, local birders, guides, and NGOs, deliberated on urgent measures such as restricting fishing during the breeding season at Haripura Reservoir and mitigating crow predation on nesting colonies. Despite extensive surveys in Uttarakhand, no Finn's weaver were found.

In Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, forest officials seized 30 red avadavat from a trader and a bird keeper, who were fined Rs 50,000/- each. The red avadavat, listed under Schedule II of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, is a frequent target for illegal trade due to its attractive plumage.



The rescued birds were rehabilitated and released in Hastinapur Wildlife Sanctuary in the presence of Mr Rajesh Kumar (IFS) and Mr Ravi Kumar, Hastinapur Ranger, along with other forest staff, with guidance from BNHS. The entire operation was supported by Mr N.K. Janoo (IFS), Chief Conservator of Forest. ■

## Rare moth endemic to Western Ghats rediscovered in Nilgiris after 132 Years

At first glance, *Chiretolpis erubescens*, a rare moth endemic to the Western Ghats, might seem unremarkable. However, a closer study of this species highlights how little is known about the health and existence of lesser-known species that were recorded in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) but largely forgotten since.

First recorded by British entomologist George Francis Hampson in 1891, *Chiretolpis erubescens* was rediscovered after 132 years in a human-dominated landscape in Coonoor by researchers Samson Arockianathan, N. Moinudheen, A. Abhinesh, R. Mahesh, and N. Sadiq Ali. Their findings were recently published in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* in an article titled

"Rediscovery of *Chiretolpis erubescens*, a rare moth species in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu". The researchers had to comb through Hampson's illustrations to identify the species.

Rediscovering lesser-known species is crucial for studying the impacts that endemic species have faced in the last century due to increasing anthropogenic pressures and understanding if certain species continue to survive in the Western Ghats or have become locally extinct. Studying these species and understanding the microclimates they exist in, their host plants, and other facets of their life cycle and behaviour will help us understand the importance of protecting the remaining biodiversity in the Nilgiris. ■





## Monsoon Blooms: Wild flower walk at the BNHS Reserve

The first rain showers in the city rejuvenated the forest with new blooms of wild flowers. The wild flower walk on June 16, 2024, at the BNHS Reserve in Goregaon was attended by around 15 nature enthusiasts and BNHS members from across the city to explore the stunning array of wild flowers in full bloom.

The participants were guided by Dr Rajdeo Singh, Assistant Professor, St. Xavier's College, and Prof Manek Mistry, Retired Professor, St. Xavier's College. During the trail, the BNHS members explored the forest to spot some of the seasonal flowers. The participants also learnt about some of the known medicinal uses of these plants in Ayurveda.

For more information about upcoming Tree Walks and events by BNHS, please email us at [programmes@bnhs.org](mailto:programmes@bnhs.org). ■



## Wild flower and fungi walk at the BNHS Reserve

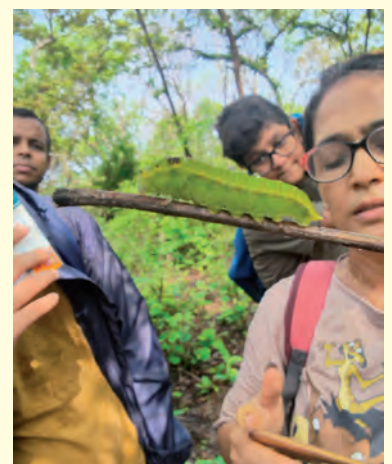


The wild flower and fungi walk conducted by CEC-Mumbai on June 23, 2024, received an enthusiastic response. The two-hour walk, led by Prof. Shyam Palkar and Ms Kiran Thumma, was attended by 38 participants. It included a talk on the fungi and wild flowers of the area and their ecology. The participants observed a variety of mushrooms and wild flowers growing on the damp forest floor and lush green cover following the monsoon showers. ■

## Leopard trail at the BNHS Reserve



On June 25, 2024, the BNHS members took a walk on the leopard trail, one of the many forest trails in the BNHS Reserve. The trail is named for its night time visitors, the leopard. During the walk, members observed a variety of seasonal herbs, plants, flowers, and insects. They also learned about the importance of urban forests and their role in the city's water resources.



The trail highlighted the pivotal role of the BNHS Conservation Education Centre (CEC) in education and conservation. Since its establishment in 1993, the CEC has been dedicated to fostering nature awareness among students, educators, government employees, and the public. With a variety of activities, including walks, workshops, and certificate courses, the CEC attracts numerous visitors each year. Its unwavering commitment to spreading knowledge underscores its importance in environmental education and conservation efforts. ■



## Naturalist training and leadership workshop



The second batch of the BNHS Naturalist Training and Leadership Workshop began on June 15th with 14 participants embarking on their journey to better understand natural systems. Wildlife biologist Nikit Surve and entomologist Drashti Danani interacted with the participants, sharing their expertise. The participants then stepped outside into the habitat to install their camera traps.

The first part of the Course concluded on June 16th; the participants were introduced to the nuances of birdwatching by

Dr Parvish Pandya, followed by a detailed presentation on interpreting bird behaviour. Shardul Bajikar then introduced the participants to the pleasures of insect watching and the diverse facets of insect natural history. In his concluding session, Shardul Bajikar took the participants back in time by showcasing many fossils from his collection, to understand the timelines and highlights of the evolutionary journey of life on Earth. The group will reconvene in a fortnight for part two of the workshop. ■

### A.J.T. Johnsingh October 14, 1945 – June 07, 2024

**“We can’t hear his voice anymore but we can hear him in the chirp of every bird, roar of every tiger and trumpet of every tusker. Generous beyond comparison and teacher beyond equal. India’s bravest green warrior and staunch defender of earth’s flora and fauna had passed away”**

**– The Johnsingh Family**

Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh, a distinguished wildlife biologist and conservationist, passed away in Bangalore on June 7, 2024, at the age of 78. His legacy as a practical conservationist and a pioneer in wildlife research will be remembered by legions of students, wildlife enthusiasts, and fellow conservationists.

Dr Johnsingh’s contributions to wildlife science were immense. He pioneered field research on free-ranging large mammals in India, studying dholes (wild dogs) in Bandipur Tiger Reserve for his doctoral thesis. His work laid the foundation for understanding these elusive creatures in their natural habitat. An alumnus of Madras Christian College, Chennai, he held various positions, including professorships and fellowships at institutions like the Smithsonian Institution and the Bombay Natural History Society. In 1985, he joined the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), where he remained until 2005, retiring as the Dean of the Faculty of Wildlife Sciences.

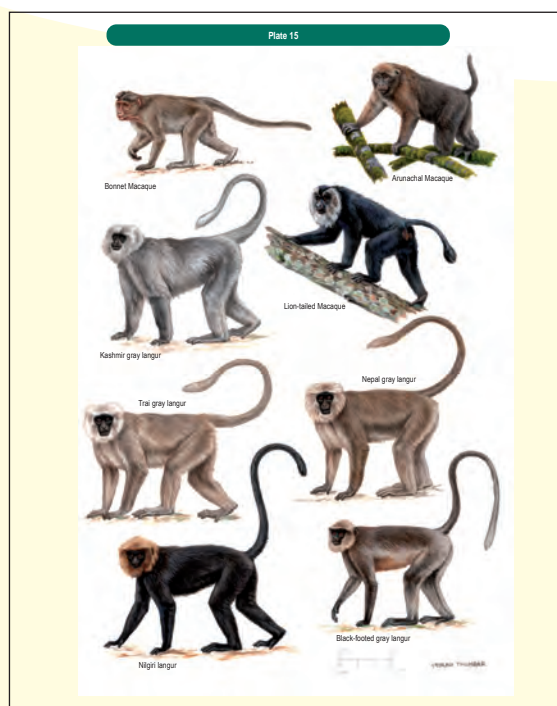
Dr Johnsingh emphasized the value of fieldwork, encouraging students to immerse themselves in observing animal behaviour first-hand. His passion for research infused every aspect of his work, even when he did not need to write about it. He was a voice for species, landscapes, and regions, leaving an indelible mark on Indian wildlife conservation.

May his memory continue to inspire future conservationists and wildlife enthusiasts. ■



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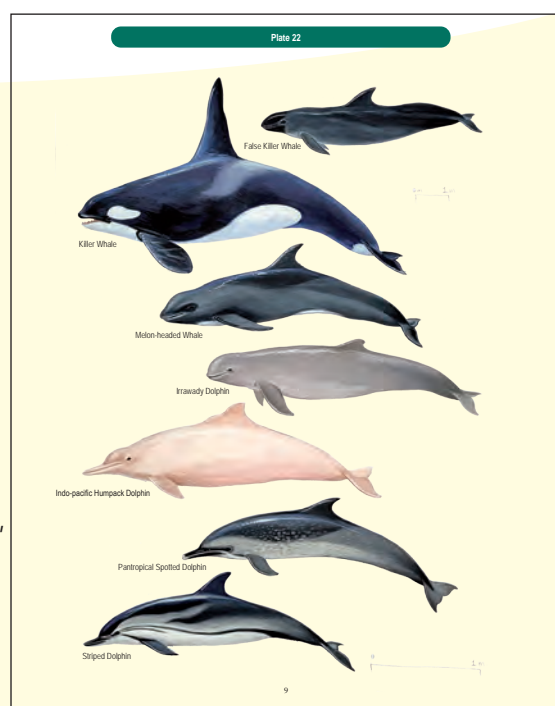
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**Mission:** Conservation of nature, primarily biological diversity, through action based on research, education and public awareness.

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