



BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



SEPTEMBER, 2022

CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Dear Members,

Each month we bring you, our valuable members, the BNHS conservation newsletter that is packed with updates from our field work, publications, and the events we conduct for nature conservation.

This is our attempt to make sure you get to know about our work in real time, our attempt to make sure you are with us on our journey!

BNHS helps in care and rehabilitation of rescued hornbills and other wildlife at Jowai, Meghalaya

Jowai, a relatively nondescript place, 66 km from Shillong in Meghalaya, has attracted a whole lot of attention ever since the seizure of exotic birds and mammals in the first week of August, 2022. In a series of three seizures, a total of two dozen exotic birds and mammals, belonging to 11 species originating from at least nine countries, were recovered. The extremely dedicated wildlife staff of Jowai is striving to save the lives of several tender young ones of exotic hornbills and mammals detained and handed over by the local police from these three seizures. The rescued animals are presently housed at Salaroh Wildlife Complex, Jowai, West Jaintia Hills district. The police arrested four people allegedly involved in illegal transport of these CITES Appendices I & II listed species; they had no supporting ownership documents or import permits.

On August 6, 2022 the first haul took place at Phramer, West Jaintia Hills, which consisted of one Kloss's Gibbon *Hylobates klossii* – an Endangered CITES I species from Sumatra; one Critically Endangered CITES I Black-shanked Douc *Pygathrix nigripes* found in Cambodia and Vietnam; one Australian Near Threatened non CITES Lumholtz's Tree-kangaroo *Dendrolagus lumholtzi*; two Annamese Langur *Trachypithecus margarita* from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; two endemic Javan Gibbon *Hylobates moloch* – Endangered CITES I species, and finally one Vulnerable CITES II Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*



Black-shanked Douc *Pygathrix nigripes*

RAJAT BHARGAVA

which is distributed in Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Thailand, and Malaysia. These animals were transported from Mizoram and were bound for Guwahati.

Two days later, on August 8, 2022, seven hornbills were seized at Jowai bypass on NH6 in West Jaintia Hills district, from a vehicle coming from Aizawl to Guwahati. The consignment included a pair of Vulnerable CITES II Knobbed Hornbill *Rhyticeros cassidix* found in Sulawesi, five Vulnerable CITES II Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*, and a single female of the Near Threatened CITES II Writhed Hornbill *Rhabdotorrhinus leucocephalus* from the Philippines.



Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*



Writhed Hornbill *Rhabdotorrhinus leucocephalus*

The third seizure on August 13, 2022, yielded three Meerkat *Suricata suricatta* from South Africa; four unidentified Marmosets *Cebuella* spp, and two hedgehogs, probably Long-eared *Hemiechinus auritus*, seized from a medical van in Ladrymbai, East Jaintia Hills district, coming from Silchar, Assam.

BNHS took the lead in assisting Meghalaya Forest Department from August 19 onwards, sharing hands-on expertise by sending Dr Rajat Bhargava, a well-known expert in handling captive birds. With full cooperation from Ms Nimanchwa Laloo, DFO and Mr Shanbormiki Law, RO, Jaintia Hills (WL) division, and veterinarians Dr Zoyadaka Timung and Dr Mandahame Kyndiah from Jowai Veterinary Hospital, Dr Bhargava immediately contacted international hornbill experts to learn best practices for saving these exotic birds and animals. Dr Anuj Jain from BirdLife International; Dr Jessica Lee, Head of Avian Species Program and Dr Luis Neves, Vice President of Animal Care, both working with Mandai Nature Singapore, provided critical inputs towards the care of these rescued animals, especially the hornbills.

Since most birds were fledglings, it was necessary to hand-feed them at regular intervals at least thrice a day

with minced fruits, a little minced chicken or boiled egg as supplements. A team of four grassroots level staff was imparted hands-on training by Dr Bhargava to handle such emergencies. The birds were shifted to a spacious natural lit east facing room, that was turned into a temporary aviary. The birds having been kept for several weeks in cramped cages, their plumage was soiled with food remnants and faeces. The staff carefully cleaned and washed each bird, inducing them to exercise and preen comfortably. To prevent fighting among individuals of different ages, the team segregated weak individuals with lost primaries in smaller individual cages. Such individuals were given extra care, by sunning each morning in open perch setups safe from ground or aerial predators. A little shower induced the birds to preen more regularly.

Although the officials of Meghalaya Forest department are trying their best to save the lives of these exotic birds and animals, their fate remains a big question. BNHS recommends that they be shifted to a proper zoo (the zoo in Guwahati is the nearest) for their welfare. We also need to resolve how illegal trade in live threatened species can be prevented, when hundreds of live animals are languishing in captivity. Of the 59 species of hornbills belonging to 14 genera found worldwide, our country is home to nine species. According to the Handbook of the Birds of the World, 24 hornbill species (40%) are at risk worldwide – most of these inhabit Asian forests. Apart from the global issue of deforestation resulting in a loss of habitat, hornbills are hunted for food, ornaments (made from their casques and feathers), and captured for pet and zoo trade.

BNHS would like to acknowledge Dr Abhijit Das from Wildlife Institute of India, Advocate Ritwick Dutta, LIFE, and Abhinav Srihan for their support throughout this entire episode. ■

Discovering new species: Hegde's Rock Gecko

BNHS has long been involved in the study of neglected and lesser-known species, with a focus on point-endemics (animals found in just one place). In the process, we have discovered and rediscovered many species.

BNHS scientist Saunak Pal, along with Zeeshan Mirza from the National Centre for Biological Sciences, recently described a new species of rock dwelling gecko from the low elevation forests of Kanyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. The researchers named this new species Hegde's Rock Gecko *Hemidactylus hegdei* to honour Mr Vithoba Hegde, senior zoologist at the Natural



SAUNAK PAL

Hegde's Rock Gecko *Hemidactylus hegdei*

History Collections of BNHS for his immense contribution of nearly 40 years towards curating and maintaining the invaluable zoological specimens in the Society's museum. ■

Nordmann's Greenshank: New species added to Indian bird list



RAJU KASAMBE

Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*

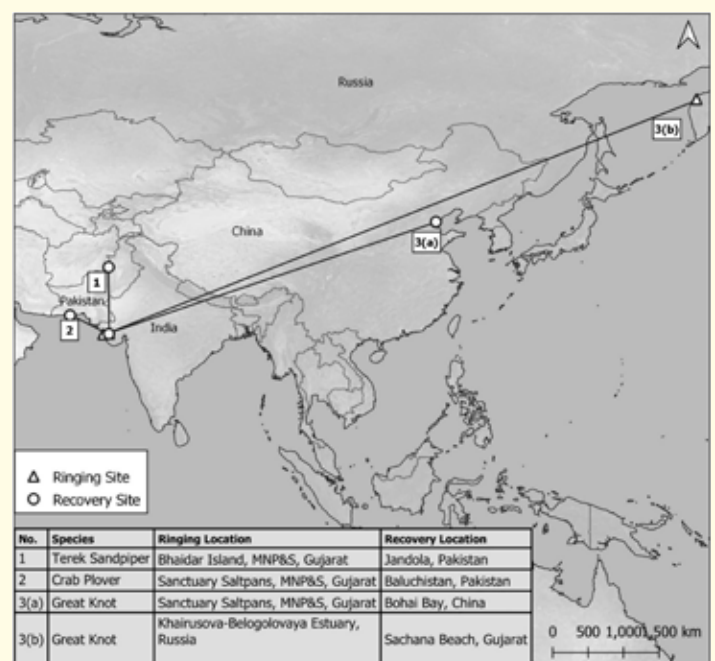
Dr Raju Kasambe, Assistant Director – Education, and Mr Vedant Kasambe, a BNHS student member and volunteer, added the Endangered Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* to the list of India's birds. All previous records were without any substantiation, and were possibly records of the Common Greenshank. Dr Kasambe and Vedant had photographed two birds at Akshi Beach, Alibaug, Raigad district in Maharashtra, while searching for BNHS tagged birds on December 21, 2020.

This discovery has been published in *Indian Birds* Vol. 18, No. 1. ■

Links between the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF) and Central Asian Flyway (CAF)

In a recent article, BNHS scientists Madhumita Panigrahi, P. Sathiyaselvam, and Tuhina Katti write about resightings and recoveries of shorebirds in Marine National Park and Sanctuary (MNP&S), Jamnagar, Gujarat from February 2017 to May 2021. The recovery of Crab-Plover *Dromas ardeola* and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* in the MNP&S area, and other neglected parts of the flyway, highlights the need for greater efforts to understand site connectivity in this least studied flyway. Two resightings of Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* strengthen the connection between the EAAF and CAF with respect to this species. These records add to the existing knowledge of site connectivity from Gujarat and MNP&S in particular. MNP&S is crucial for both wintering and migrating shorebirds on the western coast of India.

This short communication was published in *Wader Study* Vol. 2, No. 129, August 2022. ■



Changes to the Wildlife Protection Act

India's Wildlife Protection Act is 50 years old. The Wildlife Protection Amendment 2021 was introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2022. BNHS submitted detailed comments on this important legislature to the Environment Ministry. We were also invited by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment and Forests to provide expert comments.

Environment Minister Shri Bhupender Yadav referred to BNHS comments in a speech in Lok Sabha, acknowledging our work and contribution.

The Bill passed by the Lok Sabha has accepted several suggestions by BNHS. Now, there are safeguards on captive elephant trade, as suggested by us.

Schedules of the Act (that rank different species in levels of protection) have also been made better and our suggestions have been accepted. We had pointed out the Masked Finfoot was missing in the Bill. It has now been included.

We had also suggested that critically endangered Sociable Lapwing, Spoon-billed sandpiper and Yellow-breasted bunting be moved to Schedule I (they were in Schedule II of the 2021 version), and this has been done. ■

Invaluable insights on White-bellied Herons

The Critically Endangered White-bellied Heron (WBH) is one of the world's rarest and most threatened birds, with a remnant population estimated at a mere 60 birds in Bhutan, Myanmar, and India. Namdapha Tiger Reserve is its main stronghold in India. Himadri Sekhar Mondal, Scientist, BNHS has published his PhD research on the WBH in Namdapha.

WBH is a solitary piscivorous forager, which waits for its prey in fast-flowing river water. Dr Mondol's article discusses foraging success of WBH in different situations, like different water depths and the bird's body orientation to water flow. He finds that WBH made more strikes to

capture fish in shallow water, and was more successful in capturing them while facing the flow of the stream, which he terms upstream water. His analysis of the combinations of various foraging situations indicate that upstream-shallow was the optimal foraging situation for this species at the study area.

This research will help to strengthen conservation management plans for this Critically Endangered species, particularly in the context of protecting its crucial foraging habitat, i.e, the fast flowing rivers of north-eastern India.

The article has been published in *Waterbirds: Journal of the Waterbirds Society* Vol. 44, No. 4, 2021. ■



White-bellied heron

BNHS conducts bird survey in the National Security Guard campus in Manesar, Haryana

BNHS Conservation Education Centre (CEC)-Delhi, in collaboration with National Security Guard (NSG), is conducting a rapid survey to assess the avian diversity at their training campus in Manesar, Haryana. NSG or Black Cats is an elite counter-terrorism unit of India under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The campus is spread over an area of 1,600 acres and is part of one of the oldest fold mountains in the world, the Aravalli Range. The campus bears dry deciduous thorny scrub forest with abundant patches of native old growth Dhau *Anogeissus pendula* interspersed with invasive species like Vilayati Keekar *Prosopis juliflora* and *Lantana camara*.

The bird survey was initiated in the first week of August 2022 and will continue till October 2022; several dawn, dusk, and night surveys are planned for the coming months. The survey will help develop baseline data on the bird diversity of the area, and aid in assessment of the restoration effort carried out by NSG at the site. Till now, 63 bird species have been recorded, including the White-tailed lora *Aegithina nigrolutea*, a rare bird for the area. Other highlights are Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator*, Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica*, Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus*, Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus*



Indian Golden Oriole at the survey, photo by Mr. Sumit Kum Sum, an active BNHS member of Delhi and Bihar

kundoo, Black headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*, and Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*.

Along with the CEC-Delhi team, BNHS members of Delhi area are actively participating in the survey and contributing to photo-documentation. ■

Soil and Water Conservation Project, Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary, New Delhi

BNHS CEC-Delhi, in collaboration with Department of Forests & Wildlife, Government of Delhi, has been monitoring the rain watershed and run off in Asola Bhatti WLS. We have developed over 150 gabion check dams over 11 seasonal streams, and recently revived four water bodies of more than 0.5 acre each. We have also added aquatic plants like Lotus, Nymphaea, Hydrilla, Utricularia, and Typha to prevent eutrophication of the water. Grasses like *Saccharum spontaneum*, *Desmostachya bipinnata*, *Tripidium bengalense*, and *Chrysopogon zizanioides* have been planted to stabilize the banks.

These water bodies will not only provide ecosystem services to the forest but also be a recreational spot for birdwatchers and visitors coming to the sanctuary. The restoration of this erstwhile mining site to old growth native Aravalli forest will be greatly aided by these soil and water conservation measures. ■



The Buzz from BNHS CEC-Mumbai

BNHS Conservation Education Centre-Mumbai conducted the inaugural session of the Basic Course in Ornithology, 2022 and get-together for the Basic Course in Ornithology, 2021 on August 7, 2022. 38 participants from both the batches were present at the session. A nature trail was conducted in the morning, and indoor sessions were conducted by the eminent naturalist Mr Sunjoy Monga who is a BNHS Life member, and Dr Raju Kasambe.

On August 14, 2022, CEC-Mumbai conducted an online inaugural session for the Basic Course in Butterfly Studies, 2022. 15 participants attended the session.

CEC-Mumbai organized nature trails and employee-engagement activities for employees of Mahindra Holidays. The participants enjoyed helping to build small rock bunds in a stream to slow down surface run-off and prevent soil erosion. ■



BNHS PHOTO LIBRARY

Nature trail for Billabong school students

CEC-Mumbai Nature trails for school students

CEC-Mumbai conducted educational nature trails for Parle Tilak School, Vile Parle on August 8, 2022, in which 48 students and two teachers participated.

On August 10, a nature trail was conducted for Billabong School, Santacruz in which 91 students and eight teachers participated. ■

BNHS Library catalogue is now online!

After a lot of anticipation, our BNHS Library's Catalogue is now online. It is available on the following link

<http://libopacbnhs.informaticsglobal.com/>

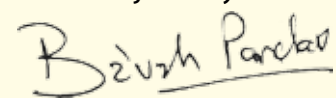
This provides information of the Library holdings, new arrivals etc.

The same link is available on our Website also.

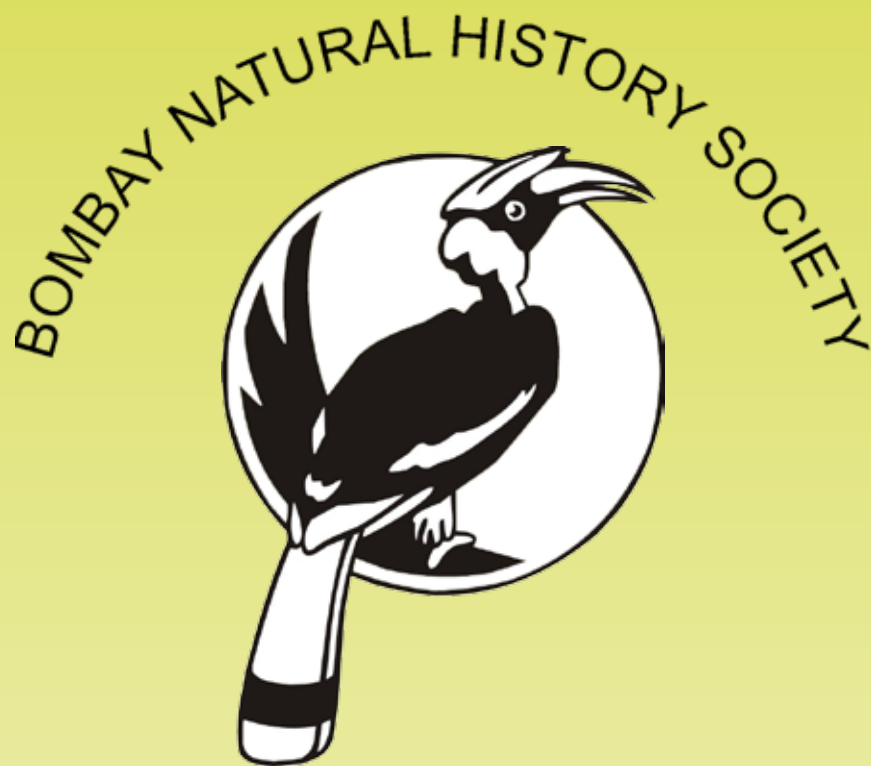
Thank you for reading and for being with us on this conservation journey!

Dr. Bivash Pandav, Director, BNHS

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BNHS MISSION

Vision: Premier independent scientific organization with a broad-based constituency, excelling in the conservation of threatened species and habitats.

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

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