



# WILD

## SOJOURNS

March  
April  
2016



► **SPECIAL FEATURE**  
Saving our Grasslands

► **PHOTO STORY**  
Struggle for Existence

► **MALAIKA**  
A Story of a  
Proud Mother

► **KIRAN POONACHA**  
An Exclusive  
Interview



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**A Pair of Red-necked Falcons**  
*Image by Suresh Kumar Rathod*





# CONTENTS

## Top Story

**Kiran Poonacha**

### An Exclusive Interview

A tete a tete with the world renowned wildlife photographer Kiran Poonacha. An eye opener on his amazing skills, love of raptors, the penchant to achieve the pinnacle of success and his message to fellow photographers.



54

38

## Conserve or Perish

**Indrajit Ghorpade**

Our grassland habitats are dying. An article written with utmost concern by a worried citizen, conservationist and wildlife photographer.



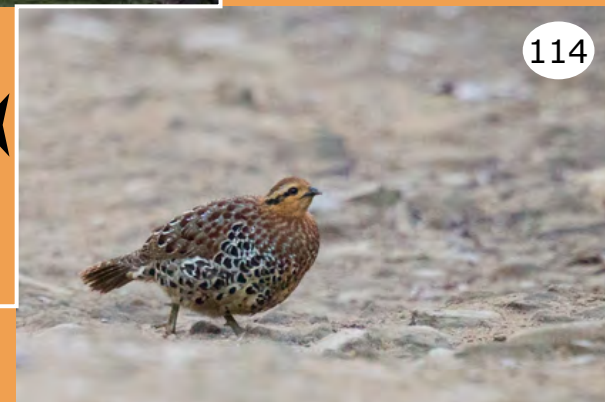
138

## Travelogue

**B R Hills**

-Shashank Birla

**Khonoma- Nagaland**  
-Sarita & PV Subramaniam



114



74

## Environs

**Daroji- Sloth Bear Sanctuary**

-Pampayya Malemath



87

## Struggle for Existence

-Ripan Biswas



08

## Malaika- A story of a Proud Mother

-Suresh Basavaraju

## Photo Story



102

## A family which shoots together stays together

-Eash Hoskote  
Pallavi Kaiwar  
Drishti Hoskote



26

## Shortwings

-Roon Bhuyan



126

## Macro Photography with Budget Equipment

-Yogendra Joshi

## Spot Light

### Grey Slender Loris

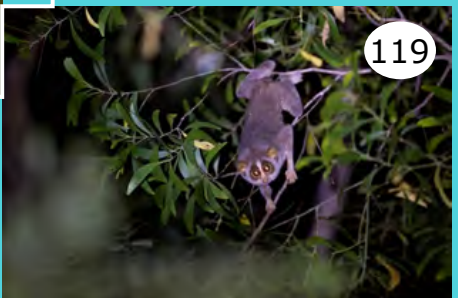
-Angad Achappa



124

## Blue-bearded Bee Eater

-H B Varun



119

## Other Features

### Nilgiri Shortwing

-Natesan Saravanan & Abhishek M B

### Feral Dogs

-Hrishikesh Sagar

## Natural History



32

## Territorial Fight

-Praveen K Bhat

## Special Feature

Chosen Images from Our Facebook Group

## Guest Editorial

## In Danger



**Bikram Grewal**

## Chief Editors



**Megh Roy Choudhury**



**Ritesh Nangare**



**Prasanna AV**



allocate to its wildlife. Several of my friends who work so hard to protect this magnificent beast, often counter my arguments on their single-mindedness by saying if we save the tiger and its habitat then we save your birds too. My, mostly ignored, rejoinder is that nowhere in the world does the habitat of the Great Indian Bustard and the tiger overlap.

Talking of which, the Great Indian Bustard is down to circa 50 birds, and if nothing drastic is done should be extinct by 2020. A dubious record indeed! Its congeners the Bengal Florican and the Lesser Florican too are hovering around the 400 mark with no help in immediate sight. The list is endless and goes on forever. It is not birds alone but big mammals like the Pallas's Cat, Golden Cat, Fishing Cat, Desert Cat and others of the felid family too are under great duress with no one caring a hoot. Let us not even try and talk of bats and other smaller mammals! And of how we are marauding our oceans, with nary a thought of the future.



Several years ago, I was involved in publishing of a book called "In Danger", a compendium of writings on Indian wildlife, edited by Paola Manfredi. It was a wonderful collection, but one article stood out like a colossal amongst the others and it was called "Are Warblers less important than Tigers". It was written by a young scientist called Dr. Madhusudan Katti, now settled in America. Sadly the book is out of print, but a scan of this masterpiece can be viewed at <http://coyot.es/reconciliationecology/>. I won't spoil your enjoyment by paraphrasing his story, but I can tell you that little has changed in the intervening years.

The mega-fauna dominance continues even today, the tiger continues to command the wildlife scene as is evident from a casual glance at the endless pages of Facebook! It is indeed a commanding predator, quite rightly at the apex of the food-chain and the national animal of our beleaguered country. But it does consume a majority of the paltry funds that the government deigns to



In its unending greed for "progress" the powers-that-be have decided to sacrifice its once-abundant wildlife. It is indeed alas true that animals and other creatures carry no votes, but nature knows how to hit back. And it does so with a viciousness. All you have to do is to witness the recent tsunamis and the aggressive floods, not to mention the hard-hitting outcome of climate change that we have already started to experience.

**I have little or no answers to this predicament but perhaps we could start by asking ourselves the same question yet again "Are Warblers less important than Tigers"?**

**Bikram Grewal**

# MALAIKA

Suresh Basavaraju

A story of a proud mother

**T**he Cheetah is one of the most remarkable species that brings a lot of visitors to Africa. With its present range limited to few areas in Africa, the stories of its speed and agility and the record of the fastest land animal makes a sighting ever more exciting. With ever shrinking areas, the Cheetah, like other big cats, is fighting for survival and when a story of a bold mother raising six cubs makes it to the headlines, it makes it even more special.





The earliest reference to a Cheetah in any book that a child would read is always about its speed, the fastest mammal on earth is the introduction we all grew up with. A cheetah runs so fast that its legs might touch the ground only half the time it's in motion.

In fact, a Cheetah is not just about speed, it is also about its ability to twist and turn at that speed following its prey - the agility that makes its hunts so remarkable.

While there are other species that a visitor to Africa would wish to see, the sheer number of

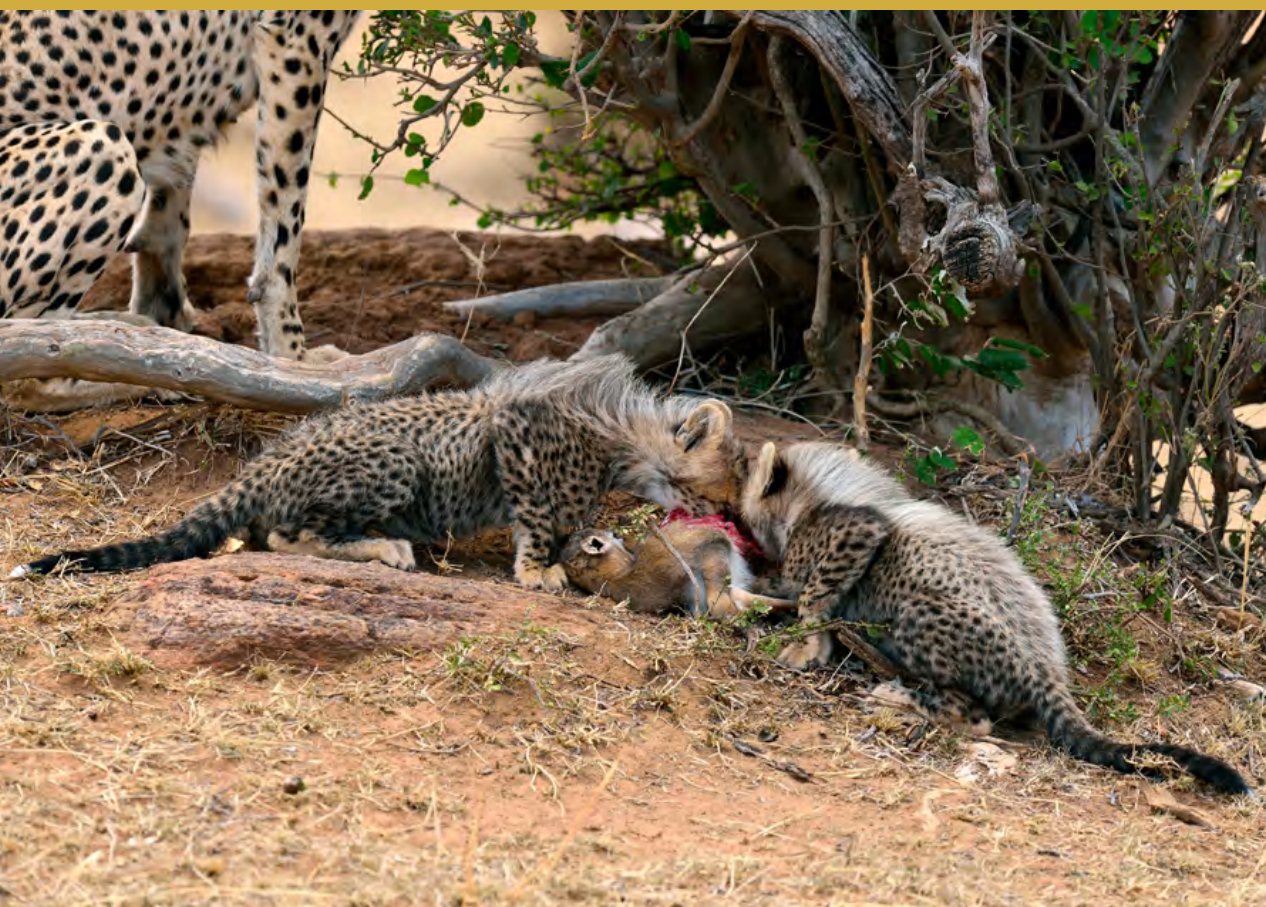
vehicles around a Cheetah sighting are testimony to its stardom.

Being built for speed, a Cheetah does have its disadvantages, its relatively smaller size when compared to other predators makes it difficult to survive. Not every hunt results in a kill and often a Cheetah has to surrender its kill to other predators. It can only hunt herbivores like Gazelles, smaller calves, and Hares.

The Cheetah with its ever shrinking habitat and prey base is now facing a tough challenge in survival.



The hunts are in daylight spread around mornings and evenings. I have witnessed hunts in noon time. Cheetah sprints consume a lot of energy and its body temperatures soar. After a failed hunt, a Cheetah spends more than an hour resting before attempting another one.



One such mother (in the adjacent picture) who had three cubs, failed in a hunt on an afternoon and the guides were telling of her being a unsuccessful mother who had lost her earlier litter as she could not hunt often. After resting for a while, she attempted another one. This time there was a herd of Gazelle grazing on the horizon which was about a kilometre or so away, I could barely see the herd and the mother had sighted the prey and started a slow canter, taking cover behind termite mounds and shrubs. As she neared her striking range, lunged forward and isolated a Gazelle with a fawn. Following the Gazelle as she turned trying to shake off the predator, the Cheetah turned and tripped the fawn which by now was separated from its mother.

A swift kill it was and it took almost double the time to cross back to the mound where hungry cubs were waiting.

Once the fawn was brought back to the waiting cubs, the mother rested for 15-20 minutes. I was not sure what would happen next and it was surprising to see the mother bite out the thick skin of the fawn and left to rest, while the cubs started feeding. Over the next few days, I saw other Cheetahs do the same. The fawns are brought back killed for the smaller cubs to feed on and the mother feeds on larger kills.

When the cubs are older and ready to hunt, still alive fawns are often brought and left for the older cubs to hone their hunting skills.

**The Cheetah with its ever shrinking habitat and prey base is facing a challenge in surviving. One can only visualise these magnificent creatures in the Indian plains before they went extinct.**







**Malaika**

It was in the month of Aug 2014 that I first saw Malaika. By this time, she was already famous for the litter of six cubs she had. The cubs were a couple of months old and rangers and researchers used to keep a close watch to keep off tourist vehicles that would get too close or hinder her movements during hunt.





Bringing up cubs in the open lands of the Masai Mara is no easy task for a Cheetah. With numerous predators around, protecting the cubs and feeding them is a daunting task. With six cubs already in their 3rd month, Malaika was succeeding against all odds.

Mornings would start with the cubs playing around under the watchful eyes of Malaika, Hunting for her was quite an effort. I saw her failed attempt one morning when she was stalking Gazelles and the hunt came to an abrupt end when the Zebras gave her away. She did hunt later in the afternoon.

Spending two days watching her daily routine does create a sense of bonding and I would follow her progress through photographers who were documenting her journey. During the year she had lost one cub.

It was natural that seeing Malaika and her cubs was on the top of the list for the next trip. It was October 2015 and fourteen months later, I wanted to see the cubs which by now had grown to her size. Reports of the five cubs doing fine was encouraging.





**Band of Brothers!**



The sighting was even more exciting as Malaika had hunted a small Gazelle and had brought it alive to the cubs. This seems to be the mother's way of teaching hunting skills to the now growing cubs. I could only see four fully grown cubs with the white mane still intact. The fifth one was not seen for couple of days and I hope it is still doing well. The cubs who by now sensed the hunt were running to her. She left the calf and for about 5 minutes the cubs took turns in chasing the Gazelle and tripping it, waiting for it to run again and the chase would start all over again. After a few minutes, the four siblings carried the trophy around and started to feed under the watchful eyes of their mother. Malaika could successfully raise her offsprings braving all odds amidst a hostile environment. It is an inspiring and heartwarming tale of a very proud mother.

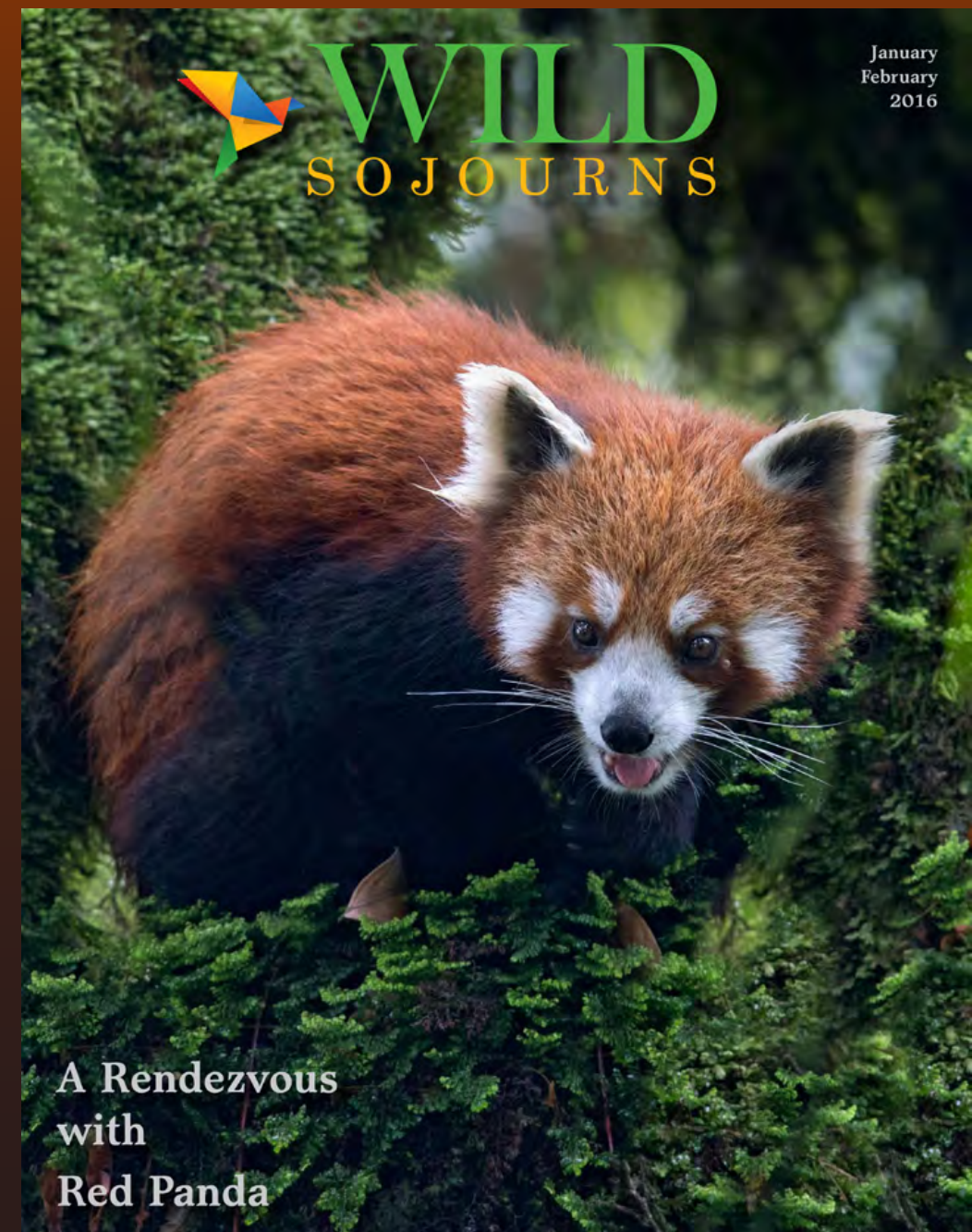
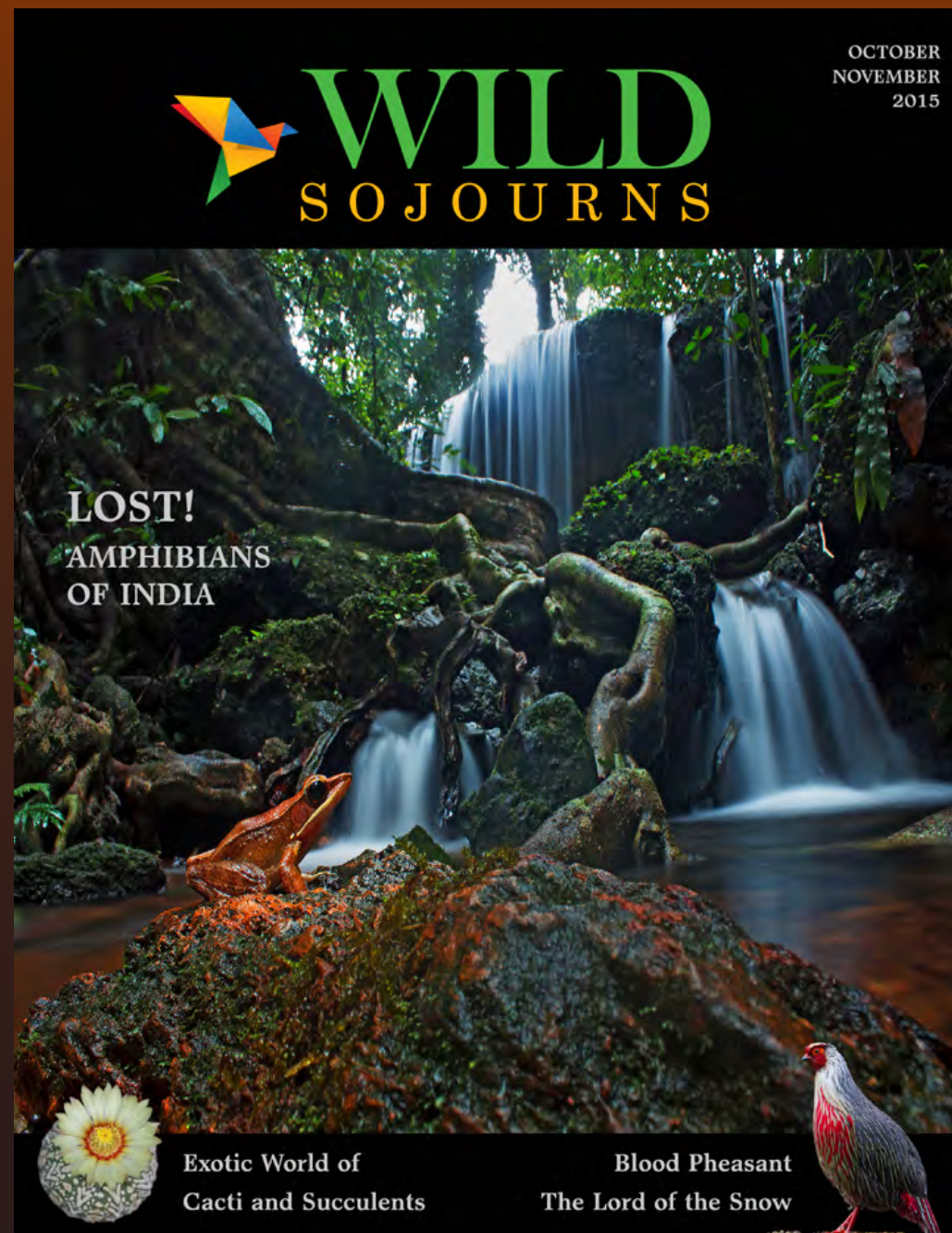
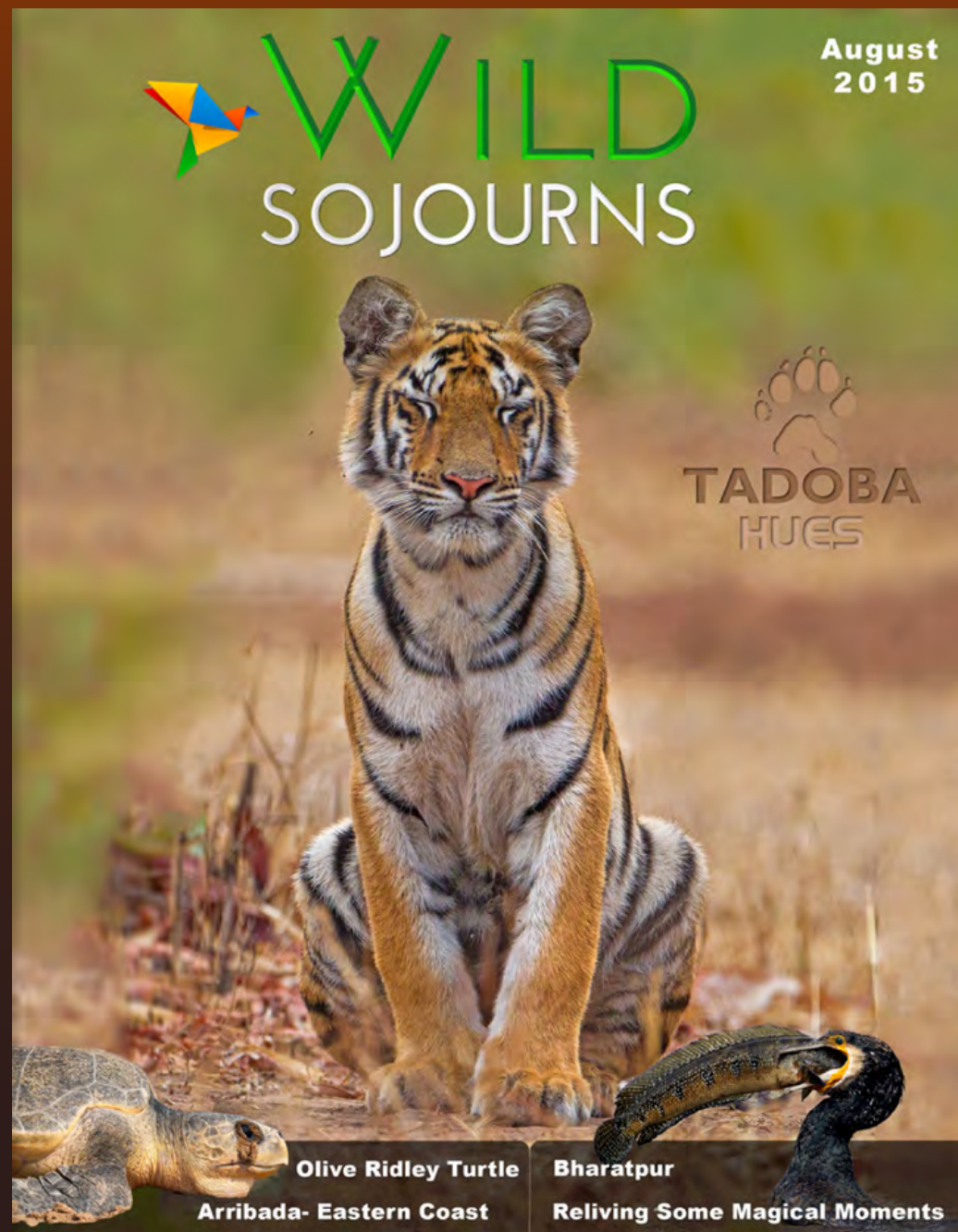
*Text and Images by Suresh Basavaraju*

**Suresh Basavaraju**

A passionate photographer, during the twenty four years journey in photography, had his works published in wildlife books, nature periodicals, calendars, conservation articles, presentations, catalogues, and in advertising. He is a life member in Photographic Society of India and Bombay Natural History Society. He is a founder member of Indian Wildlife Conservation Trust([www.IWCT.in](http://www.IWCT.in)). A dedicated teacher, he has mentored many budding wildlife photographers.



# MISSED ANY OF THE EARLIER ISSUES?



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at [www.wildsojourns.com](http://www.wildsojourns.com)

# From our Facebook Group



A Dhole dives into a Spotted deer's belly to fish for meat.



**Rajesh Kumar Reddy**



Two vulnerable species, Gharial and Indian Skimmer in one terrific frame.



**Shreya Singha Ray**

A colourful pair of Black-necked Storks resting in green pastures.



**Ashish Dwivedi**

Greater Spotted Eagle with it's juvenile. [Fulvescens, pale morph]



**Narendra Aravind Pandit**



# SHORTWINGS



## **Rusty-bellied Shortwing**

Male of this species has a rich orange-chestnut plumage on its belly that extends up to the throat. The rest of its plumage is a very dark blue with a short white eyebrow. The female lacks the rust-coloured belly, and is slaty-brown

above, with a dark brown face, a pale rufous throat, and a pale belly. It is a skulker and forages in the low vegetation and on the ground. It is possible to sight them during the breeding period which is between April and June, following their high pitched call. Breeding territories

are typically situated over 1,800 meters above sea level, mainly in steep, damp, and densely vegetated gullies. Its numbers are diminishing due to habitat loss. It has been placed under 'Near Threatened' category in IUCN. This image is taken in Myodia Pass, Arunachal Pradesh.



**Roon Bhuyan**

**S**hortwings are a group of insectivorous birds mainly found in Southeast Asia. Five species are found in the Indian Subcontinent except the Great Shortwing which is endemic to Sulawesi in Indonesia. Four species are found in Eastern Himalayas while the Nilgiri Shortwing is found in the Western Ghats. These birds are altitudinal migrants choosing to winter at lower altitudes. All are notorious skulkers and Roon Bhuyan has managed to record all these four eastern Himalayan beauties.



**Gould's Shortwing**

This is alternately called Chestnut Shortwing and is endemic to Eastern Himalayas. Adult bird has a rich dark reddish chestnut upper parts except the rump. It has a black face and slaty underparts, finely vermiculated with black and marked with small white arrowheads. It is a rarely seen bird but is thought to be of least concern due to a wide distribution.

Sexes are alike in this species. It is less skulking than other shortwings. Generally silent, it becomes better accessible in breeding period due to its characteristic high pitched call.

This image was taken in Myodia Pass, Arunachal Pradesh which is at the Indo-China Border at an elevation of 2655 meters above sea level.

**Lesser Shortwing**

It is a small Shortwing with long pinkish legs and a very short tail. Male has dark upper parts and whitish throat and centre of the belly. White supercilium is more distinct in the male. Two subspecies nipalensis and carolinae are known which have dark

blue grey and dark russet brown upper parts respectively. It is predominantly a ground dweller and a persistent singer. It is very widely distributed well across its distribution. This image was taken in Tiwarigaon, Mishmi hills.

**White-browed shortwing**

It is also called Himalayan Blue Shortwing and is a resident in Eastern Himalayas. Male is dull dark greyish-blue with a relatively short white supercilium. Females normally have a variable amount of brown color and very little blue in the plumage. White-Browed Shortwing is a high-elevation mountain bird that prefers to live on or close to the forest floor. It is often found in dense mountain forests near small streams. This bird is very shy and has a typical unobtrusive behaviour in undergrowth. They are better visualised during the breeding time. This image is taken in Myodia Pass, Arunachal Pradesh.

**All Images by Roon Bhuyan**



# NILGIRI SHORTWING

The Nilgiri Blue Robin, also known as Nilgiri Shortwing, White-bellied Shortwing or Rufous-bellied Shortwing is a bird in the family Muscicapidae endemic to the forests of the Western Ghats. The natural habitat is forest patches in the valleys of high altitude grasslands known as sholas. The species has been found to occur only above 1200 m altitude. It is found on the forest floor and undergrowth of dense forest patches sheltered in the valleys.

The Nilgiri Blue Robin has black lores and

the upper side, the throat, breast are dark slaty blue but the lower plumage is rufous. The centre of the belly is buffy white. The brow is not as well-marked as in the other species and is diffuse bluish. The breeding season varies from April to June and the nest is usually placed in a tree hole. Both parents share the nesting duties like incubation and feeding the nestlings. The sholas are highly restricted in size and the species is thus threatened by habitat loss. This bird is placed in the 'Endangered' status.



**Natesan Saravanan**  
Coimbatore, Tamilnadu

**Abhishek MB,**  
Virajpet, Karnataka





# Territorial Fight

## A Twist in the Tale of Angry Birds

*Images by Praveen K Bhat*

*Text by Rhucha Kulkarni*



**I**nstances of fights amongst individuals of a species are often heard - be it the majestic big cats or the teeny-weeny spiders of the insect world. Territoriality is a widely observed and inbuilt instinct that manifests in the life cycle of species across mammals, birds, insects and fishes; either in individuals or in groups. It seems to aid the dispersion of competition, aiding survival and widespread propagation of species in a world that is wrought with competition and with little chance of survival for the weak.

### **Background**

A territory is a space defended by a species as a means to secure and safeguard shelter, food, mate and breeding or either one of these. Territorial instinct is used for defense as well as offense. When challenged with a territorial threat, an animal within its established territory may ward off uninvited encroachers through its display of

might. This is a defense reaction. At the same time, a new individual without its own established territory may challenge the other's territory through attack, despite repetitive warnings to back off; this is an offense mechanism to establish one's dominance. The dynamics of territorial encounter are determined by the capacity of the contenders in fight, the premiumness of the territory at stake and the life stage or reproductive stage of the animal. Aggression or combat is not the only means of territorial defense. Many species have evolved elaborate mechanisms to minimize the risk of loss and damage due to territorial fights. These tactics seem to be a preventive mechanism to avoid entire elimination of the species in itself due to frequent combat. Cats and dogs define markers through chemical secretion, urine and faeces markings, while birds may establish their territory through singing calls as an announcement to "stay away".



Typically a series of processes help to minimize the opportunity cost (injuries) of territorial fights -

**Stage 1 - Signposts:** Animals and birds create "signposts" that define and advertise the boundaries of the territory as an indication to 'keep away'. This is a strong communication channel that may inform others about the sex, life stage and dominant status of the marker.

**Stage 2 - Ritualized Aggression:** An animal or bird who ignores the warning "sign posts" and encounter the markers is then subject to face to face 'ritualized

aggression'. This involves a mock display of aggression through fear-inducing tactics such as calls, barring of defense tools and territorial sounds to frighten away the intruder without actual risk of injury.

**Stage 3 - Combat:** The last resort is an actual territorial fight, which more often leads to serious injuries and even death.

#### Human attempts to understanding territoriality

Man has attempted to understand territorial behaviour of various species by developing various theories to explain the probability of win of territoriality.

**Aggressive-Aggressive Theory:** According to the "War of Attrition" theory, both opponents persist while accumulating various 'payoffs' in the form of injury, tenacity etc. Each side accumulates these pay-offs till the time it can bear them.

**Aggressive-Passive Theory:** According to the Hawk-Dove theory, one opponent follows the "Hawk strategy" - a highly aggressive attack mode that persists till he ends up injuring the opponent. Alternatively, the opponent may follow a "Dove strategy", wherein he tries to avoid injury by sticking to ritualized aggression or withdrawal if badly cornered.

**Selective Aggression Theory:** Some animals display selective aggression (either heightened or diminished) towards others depending on how familiar they are. For example, neighbouring individuals may display more tolerance of each other as long as their territorial boundaries are well in place; however aggression towards unfamiliar animals remains the same. This is called the dear-enemy effect. The reverse behaviour is a heightened aggression towards neighbours due to a history of encroachment, this is called the 'nasty neighbour' effect. This is learned behaviour on the basis of past experiences.

**Territoriality in the avian world:** Similar to animals, the intensity of territoriality amongst avians depends on population density and the subsequent competition for food, space, mate etc. Many birds operate key activities in a small 'core' zone whereas they defend the 'buffer' zone. Also, seasonal variations in territoriality have been observed; this behavior may be heightened during the breeding season and get diluted as the breeding season ends. This is especially pronounced in group-migrators when they get together to embark on their long journeys together. Studies of territoriality indicate that there also exist 'floaters' or birds without territories and these prove to be a constant threat to established fellow individuals. These birds then due to their unique habitats, use following mechanisms to ward off competition.

**Singing/drumming:** Vocal communication depending on the vocal capacity allows for singing or drumming to carry the message of territory occupancy across long distances.

**Nesting:** Sometimes, nesting is used to demark territorial boundaries. For examples, Wrens build several nests around the boundaries of its

territory to deter intruders.

**Visual actions:** Puffing up of feathers, fanning tails and spreading wings are used as display of strength to opponents as a form of defense.

**Chasing:** Used as a last resort tactic, chasing and attacking with beak and talons is the precursor to a full-fledged territorial fight.

A case in point is the turf defending behavior of Pacific Reef Egrets. A highly territorial species, the egret feeds alone and defends patches of shore that it inhabits.





**Feats of Ferocity:** The Pacific Reef Egret  
Pacific Reef Egrets are commonly found in mudflats, beaches and river banks, they compete for food – small fish, crabs, insects, molluscs etc. This highly individualistic behaviour has been documented on film by Praveen Bhat, a regular visitor to the estuary at Mulky, Karnataka.

Praveen's third visit to the estuary bestowed him the privilege of witnessing the ferocity of the fight and freezing it in frames. Armed with information about the tidal changes, he and his friend sought patience since they knew it was a good 30 minutes before the tides reached its lowest threshold, exposing the habitat of these estuarine beauties. A short wait and behold: a pair of Egrets emerged. Surely this was to be a unique moment, after all a mating pair was a great catch to observe avian behavior. The duo jumped with joy with their long lenses unfurled to capture the rare moment of creation of life. Action enthralled them as their shutters flew one click after another - rare moments captured through a series of actions as follows-

**The Stretch:** Display of grace and might: A typical behavior amongst males, used both in courtship and defense, it involves raising the head in a "stretched" position with a call given out at the peak. A display of the crest and plumage erection of the lower neck occurred, each male trying to intimidate the other with sheer power-strokes. The stunning grace of this action must have been enough to misinterpret it as a courting dance.

**The Snap:** An instinctive defense mechanism,

the snap involves extending the head ahead and downwards, and snapping the mandible shut. Typically the last warning signal before an attack, this combined with the Stretch scares away the intruder. However, in this case it did not seem to affect the trespasser as the combatting pair moved to the next stage.

**The Forward:** The most common territorial display to ward off the unwanted, the Egret with erect head and neck plumage extends them vertically while maintaining the bill horizontally. A major wing-lifting then follows, in this case the attacker was seen lunging forward in attack mode and performing the Snap to create a scare. This seemed to be the 'final warning', after which the actual sequence began.

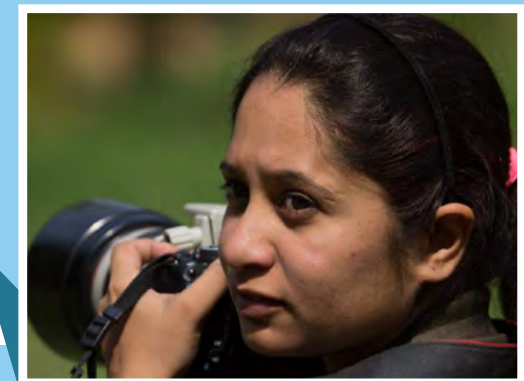
The behavior of Reef Egrets in mating and territorial disputes seems to be quite similar, distinguishable only on close observation. In this case, it was only much later that injury marks were identified on the defendant's head on closer observation of the photographs clicked. It was thus concluded that the pale morph may have been a newcomer in that area, never before observed by the photographer during his prior nine visits in the area.

Territoriality is the decree of the wild. Tolerance to outsiders is few and far between. Truly it is a war of the species, and incidentally, war within the species. Nature has her own ways and means of protecting the strong and eliminating the weak. It seems intricate and very well woven together. After all, isn't this true in our fabricated society of human beings as well?



**Praveen K Bhat**  
Bangalore, India

**Rhucha Kulkarni**  
Mumbai, India



# Contested Spaces

**Indrajit Ghorpade**



**Conserve or Perish**

**Saving our grasslands has assumed the topmost priority today.  
The creation of a Grasslands bio sphere in Karnataka,  
Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and  
Telangana is a grave necessity.**

"Contested spaces" in a nutshell, is the description of the problems faced by conservationists, naturalists and environmentalists. I firmly believe that it is the degradation and loss of habitats that is singularly the most important reason for the loss of numbers of fauna and population decline of most threatened and endangered species. And the total misconception that lands devoid of trees and forests have no value and harbor no wildlife. Grasslands, Savannah, Thorn and Scrub jungles, Wetlands, Marshes and Arid habitats are ignored, neglected and misunderstood. Our country and its policy makers are what I term as "tiger centric". Other diverse and equally important habitats and ecosystems have been either ignored or forgotten. Grasslands are one of the most unique and at the same time distinctly fragile habitats at present. These are home to extremely endangered species of flora and fauna. Loss of habitat, man-animal conflict, development and growth is a part of progress and the price we pay for development and modernization. But the total ignorance and lack of understanding of conservation and its multifaceted implications are a major cause of concern. Large tracts of these habitats (grasslands and wetlands in particular) have been cleared and drained for converting to farmlands and diverted to the industrial sector for mega plants and ancillaries. This is apart from the areas near urbanized sectors that have been swallowed for housing. The classic case near Bangalore regarding the long drawn legal battle for saving the Hessarghatta grasslands is an eye opener for us. It is like converting Cubbon Park or Lal Bagh for housing. In fact it is happening in Cubbon Park where the Govt. residential accommodation has taken land from the Park because of its proximity to the Vidhana Soudha. The Bangalore Turf Club is another example of land grab. It is unfortunate that we have to fight our own Governments to save wild spaces. Wild spaces near towns and cities are being

usurped by land sharks at the cost of the habitat. Unscientific growth, greed, ignorance and apathy of the powers in charge, policy makers and bureaucracy have played havoc with nature and reduced such prime and pristine habitats to just small isolated pockets that cannot sustain healthy populations.

The Deccan peninsula is the oldest geological formation of the subcontinent. During the Continental shift a part of Gondwanaland merged with the Asian continent creating the mighty Himalayas and later giving rise to the Western and Eastern Ghats that cut through the plains with rain laden winds and clouds of the Monsoon creating rivers that flow East through the Deccan to the Bay of Bengal. This also created unique riparian riverine eco systems that also have a fascinating and diverse wildlife, flora and fauna. Deccan Plateau has a wide range of habitats of which grassland habitat forms a very essential component.

Barren lands, open spaces, scrub, grassland and savannah are considered wastelands, a terms coined out of ignorance. These are no wastelands but are unique ecosystems that harbor unique wildlife. Similarly with wetlands, scrub and semi deserts. Indira Gandhi made a revolutionary and path breaking policy decision and created "Project Tiger". This umbrella gave an opportunity to save a host of other species that coexist in these forests and jungles, the tiger being on top of the food chain and the top predator.

It is said that when Indira Gandhi was on her way to the famous Jog Falls in Karnataka, a majestic male crossed her motorcade. She was in awe of this animal. And this is what fuelled her desire to save this animal. The



Indian Wolf

Blackbuck Female



entourage that accompanied her, relate the story of how dumb struck she was, and watched in total silence as this huge animal slumbered slowly and majestically across the road. It gave her a great view and experience of the tiger first hand.

Also, when Rajiv Gandhi took the young family to Ranthambore on holiday, they loved it and this is how they developed love for this animal. I think this was the time the Clintons were in India for an official visit and Ranthambore was in their itinerary too. The result is the book published by her on the tigers of Ranthambore. This is the largest wildlife effort in our history, but unfortunately we have not learnt anything from this success story.



Striped Hyena



Indian Wolf

Experiment Project Tiger happened in the 80s. We now have a unique situation that the success of Project Tiger has led to the saturation in the Park and Sanctuary limits and these animals are fighting to kill for territory. Others are leaving to buffer zones, straying into villages to cross them looking for new areas to create territories for themselves. Tigers crowded in Ranthambore are moving through the Chambal River and valleys to reach Madhya Pradesh, Kuno and Shivpuri forests. Newer and more space has to be created for them. But where?

It is difficult to find large tracts for them. Most Wildlife Sanctuaries, National Parks etc. like Bandipur, Bharatpur, Panna and Velavadar were once the old hunting grounds of the former Princely States. I remember before the 1971/72 ban on hunting in India, 'tiger hunting blocks' were rented to hunters from Princely India and other hunters in Barchi, Dandeli etc. My family used to annually hunt tigers and other large games in Barchi.

Bharatpur has invited many foreign

dignitaries apart from Royalty for their annual duck shoot. Carved in stone is the records of thousands shot for game and sport.

Where have we replicated this project with other endangered species?

The classic example is the extinct Cheetah. Extinct and gone forever!

This is where I am going to confine and restrict myself to my theme, GRASSLANDS. THE Great Indian Bustard, Florican, Wolves, Coursers, Hyenas, winter migratory birds that winter in grasslands and the raptors with their roosting sites etc. are just a few of the many species that inhabit this ecosystem.

Coming back to the extinct Cheetah. Was hunting, or loss of habitat, the cause and reason for its extinction? I say it was the habitat. Cheetahs lived in wide open spaces of very large areas of grasslands, scrub and savannah. Strong herds of Blackbucks that were their main prey species roamed these grasslands. Habitat and prey loss was their doom.

The same will go for the Bustard. Their numbers are in handfuls. Totally ignored and neglected their habitats are still being destroyed in thousands of areas every year. In Koppal, Bellary districts of Karnataka that this ecosystem exists, hundreds of mega industries, steel plants and other ancillary projects have been given prime grasslands for their plants. So much so that the local MLA once told me that there are no grassland left in these three of four districts to create a sanctuary or reserve to protect the last living herds of Blackbucks that roam here. Surviving in farm lands they have become a pest and bane of the farmer, who look at them as pests and vermin. The dry streams and small pockets of remaining 'government lands' are their refuge, where they breed and avoid human contact. Once, the private hunting reserve of a princely state, Velavadar, is now a result

of forward thinking of rulers of that era. Bharatpur, Bandipur are few examples of such modern thinkers. Khedda of Mysore, duck hunts of the Bharatpur wetlands were all converted to protected spaces that today stand as living testimony to what one can do if they put their mind to it. The most recent example is in my own area. Our family that once ruled this area created a space for the Sloth Bear and created the first bear sanctuary in Daroji in Bellary district of Karnataka. It has now become a success story in a species conservation and is thriving with healthy population of Indian Sloth Bears. But where is the space once these numbers saturate and need to expand? We are fighting tooth and nail against the same bodies that are supposed to protect and conserve, by asking them to include the buffer zone around the sanctuary and merge with this core area.



Great Indian Bustard



Chinkara

The tiger has adapted and lived in various types of habitats. From Ranthambore to the Sundarbans, from the Sholas in the Sahyadris to the central plains in Kanha, adapting and evolving in varied landscape, climate and habitat.

Unlike the tigers, the grassland species, especially the Great Indian Bustard cannot adapt and evolve in other landscapes. It can only live comfortably in the habitat that it prefers i.e. the grasslands. From Rajasthan to Tamil Nadu, there are a few last remnants and areas that are ideal and the home to the last remaining population of Bustards. Numbering less than five hundred, their survival depends, and is in our hands. Their fate, not going the way of the Cheetah lies with us. What can we do to reverse and arrest the decline and near extinction status of this majestic bird? They are the 'tigers' of the grasslands. Save them and like the tiger we can help conserve and preserve a host of other

species endemic to the grasslands and Savannah.

Like the Blackbuck, Chinkara, Wolf, Jackal, Indian Courser, Florican and Sandgrouses, beautiful and exotic species will surely die out if nothing is done now.

There is a dire need for educating, creating awareness and measures need to be taken to start the process. From the top as well as on the ground in the very spaces that they co-exist with man.

Politicians, government, bureaucrats, public, corporate, media and NGOs alike must join forces and brainstorm a conservation policy and road map to help these species survive and their 'spaces' conserved and protected. Even the youth and students must partake in this mission. We must all come together to put in action a master plan for this endeavour.

It can be done!

Under their umbrella a host of endangered flora and fauna can survive.



Leopard



Blackbuck Male



Bar-headed Goose

We need to arrest the indiscriminate destruction and conversion of these spaces. Blitzkrieg high visibility campaigns, balance the areas under such spaces between industry, and development vis a vis the areas needed that are free from human disturbance and conflict. Apathy, ignorance, greed, misplaced priorities, lack of policies and conservation measures are to be addressed. Issue based and result oriented policies and plans must be made and activated with earnest sincerity and passion.

Saving our wildlife heritage is a responsibility. We owe to our children and our country. We owe it to the species that have roamed free in these vast spaces for thousands of years only to be obliterated in under a century. All for development and human needs. We have to plan and find the balance. Leave the fauna alone and they will procreate to healthy numbers and sustainable populations. They will be our pride and our legacy.

There is fluidity in the movement of birds and animals. They do not know political boundaries or restricted spaces. Human and man-animal conflict must be minimized. In certain seasons

species will migrate or move to other areas that they have being doing for centuries. Domestic migration of the Bustard is a known fact and documented. Migratory birds journey thousands of miles over the mighty Himalayas to winter in the sunny subcontinent when their homes are snowbound and covered in sheets of ice. They winter all over where food and sustenance is available.

For generations the adults have journeyed with their flock of young and wintered in our lands. They are our guests and we Indians have it in our tradition and heritage to give them our home to share. Look at the Bishnoi in the deserts of India. And the villagers of Kokkare Bellur near Mysore in Karnataka. With meagre personal wealth they play host to the Cranes that they shelter and co-exist. Can we all not learn from this?

I am only referring to the savannah and grasslands. What about water bodies, wetlands, marine ecosystems are others? Who will look into their problems and interests? Wildlife tourism is a success story and a reality in many continents and also as far as the tiger in India is concerned.





©Prasanna AV

Monitor Lizard

Now other spaces and habitats like Velavadar, Bharatpur, and Andamans are all tourist destinations for wildlife tourists and tourism.

A national grassland conservation foundation and trust with task force should be set up, under the aegis of the central government. Forest and environment departments need to work closely with other relevant bodies in both central and state levels. Breeding programmes and relocation proposals must be implemented.

Look at the Sariska and Panna exercise. Why only with tigers? What happened to similar plans for the Lions and the reintroduction of the Cheetah from Iran?

Pride in our natural heritage, awareness of our national wealth in wildlife must be carried out.

Let not what happened to the Cheetah be the fate, and make Dodos of other grassland species. Beginning with the Bustard, that wonderful species is surely going to die out in the coming years. I have been a witness to the sharp and alarming decline in numbers due to loss of habitats and breeding grounds. Let there be a level playing field between the tiger and others.

Corporate and industry especially those who benefit from living of the natural resources sourced from these spaces must give back. There are many multinational conglomerates, who became what they are with the 'raw materials' mined, extracted and taken from the natural wealth of India. They have dug into the very hearts of our lands, drilled deep into our bodies to

become giants. I don't spite them or am against this. But you MUST GIVE BACK. At least a proportion of your wealth created by using the natural resources by displacing, and evicting the natural residents must be ploughed back. There must be legislation where certain percentage of the revenues must go back to preserving nature and creating biospheres and restricting them so

species are not endangered because of loss of habitat. If we can pay income tax, sales tax and what not, then why not conservation tax that will save our natural heritage and wild spaces?

The Cheetah is gone! It can never come back. No one will ever see this creature in the wilds of India, where it belonged. Are we not ashamed or sorry or have regrets? Can we not do something about this?



Grey Francolin

©Prasanna AV



Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse

©Prasanna AV

I, as a grassland conservation enthusiast, am restricting myself to this habitat and these contested spaces.

Identify states that have these habitats. Map and update data of these remaining areas and do something or everything necessary to protect and conserve what is left and create more lost areas and repossess and bring them to their original pristine status. Restock, breed and populate these areas with endemic species and allow them to propagate. Over the years they will thrive and future generations will be blessed to experience these wilds and thank us for doing what we should have done generations ago. Are we up to the challenge? Are we ready to protect our heritage like the Taj Mahal and other monuments, the areas which are living natural wealths? Saving the grasslands and the species within must be a topmost priority. Contested spaces must

become shared spaces. Man and animal should be living in harmony co-existing with each other.

This brings me to the larger, long term plan of a Grassland biosphere comprising of the last remnants of these ecological hotspots. Wildlife do not know or understand political boundaries. I am going to dwell a bit as an example to the Great Indian Bustard. They are domestic migratory birds. Wintering and breeding in specific areas of the grasslands. They fly from Maharashtra to Karnataka and on to Andhra to breed. Nannaj to Ranebennur to Sirguppa to Rollapad. Who protects them? They are all outside protected areas. More than half of India's wildlife live outside protected areas. where the Government has no reach and influence, where the Forest Department has no jurisdiction or powers. They are already over stretched, understaffed and underpaid.



© Prasanna AV

The need for a biosphere covering grasslands, scrub and thorn jungles and the riverine and riparian ecosystems of rivers that cut through the Deccan and the land between the rivers called doabs must be protected.

This has to be a joint operation with a strong dedicated team and panel from all areas of expertise to formulate a long term policy and roadmap for achieving the terms of reference and plans to preserve and conserve these habitats and the flora and fauna that exist. Unique wildlife found nowhere else on the planet exist here. Endangered and vulnerable to the juggernaut in the name of development and modernization. The Four-horned Antelope, the Rusty Spotted Cat, the Yellow-throated Bulbul, the Coursers, the Bustards and other birds are all staring at extinction. Because we have not understood them and their importance. We are custodians of our natural heritage and wealth. Cultural and natural conservation go hand in hand. Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, Bijapur and the

Sultanates, to the great Vijayanagar Empire on the Tungabhadra River, where Lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman came to Hanumanahalli near Anegundi and met Lord Hanuman. Hanumanahalli exists till this day. A sleepy hamlet, forgotten, polluted and ignored.

We will work towards getting together like minded, dedicated and passionate persons from all walks of life. Involving at the grassroots locals and villagers as strategic partners is the key. This has to be a grassroot movement where wildlife is not disconnected with humans and urbanization. Isolating wildlife from the human angle creates conflict of interest and a negative response from the stakeholders that are the key. If contested spaces was not an issue we would have no problem. Man and animal would live in harmony like they did centuries ago. We must learn to respect each other and share the planet with all living beings. Like man needs a roof over their heads to live, so does wildlife need land under their feet to survive and propagate their next generations.

### A Wolf-Scape



### Indrajit Ghorpade

Hailing from the Gajendragad branch of the Ghorpade family, Indrajit Ghorpade has always had deep rooted links with the Deccan plateau. Brought up living in the wilderness and having lived with legends in nature and wildlife, he has been fortunate in cultivating an intense fondness for nature from a very young age.

He has been working tirelessly in creating sustainable habitats and protected areas in the deccan plateau. As a local person whose family has its roots and history in the region for over three centuries, he has travelled extensively in the area and has a strong and extensive network for the benefit of conservation and creating awareness among the people. Being a wildlife photographer himself, he has roamed the Deccan peninsula and all over India and its forests, jungles, grasslands,



wetlands, deserts and mountains for over four decades. Interacting and having grown up with renowned naturalists, researchers, policy makers and the local rural population he can relate to the issues on hand and the daunting task ahead.

He has also been invited to accept the post of Honorary Wildlife Warden of Koppal district by the Government of Karnataka. He has also been appointed Co Convener of the Hampi Anegundi chapter of INTACH.

#### Deccan Conservation Foundation:

DCF has been constituted and formed as a trust by a team of passionate and dedicated team of naturalist and lovers of nature from all walks of life. The common goal is to protect the environment and save the last remnants of the remaining habitats. Supported by a team of equally committed staff and backed by strong and strategic partners, the foundation is taking its effort to grassroot levels by initiating and encouraging the involvement of common man.

DCF has been working on locating and collecting data of the last remaining populations of birds and animals in selected habitats. Right now the efforts are concentrated on Koppal district in Karnataka.

It is also trying to create the infrastructure of equipping organisation with modern communication tools, vehicles' etc. to help manage the needs in this endeavour. Educating and coordinating the local population, farmers and policy makers for their involvement and support in the protection and conservation is a main area of its efforts. Effective policing of the area also is planned as mainly being dryland and grasslands, majority of these habitats lie outside protected areas and house a wide variety of fauna.

#### Proposed plans include:

To initiate immediate patrolling of the entire black cotton soil area to prevent any instances of hunting or killing of fauna. To appoint guards to patrol entire habitat to

monitor hunters, movements, observing the dynamics especially, Black Bucks and Wolves, to record and document all the wildlife in this habitat, to identify the areas of preferences for Black bucks, Wolves and Great Indian Bustards and try to buy the farmland so as to allow the wildlife to have their "own" land, to facilitate research and documentation, to conduct awareness and anti poaching programs in villages. DCF is also overseeing a long term plan to ensure that these unique habitats and ecosystems don't disappear altogether.

**Deccan Conservation Foundation requires a Chief Administrative Officer. Accommodation, vehicle, expenses, support staff and suitable remuneration will be provided. Posts are available for Research fellows interested in studying the grassland habitats, man-animal conflicts and fauna such as Blackbucks, Wolves etc. Contact hi5id@hotmail.com**

**Text and Images by Indrajit Ghorpade**

**Top Story**



**KIRAN  
POONACHA**

**An Exclusive  
Interview**



Malabar Trogon



Velvet-fronted Nuthatch

**K**iran Poonacha is one of the most talented wildlife photographers in the country. Every wildlife aficionado in the country has been enjoying the fruits of his labour and his images are a sight for sore eyes. We had the privilege to have a one on one conversation with him and these are the excerpts.

#### **How and when were you introduced to the world of birds?**

I was born in Coorg but grew up in Bangalore. My interest in birds started at a very young age. I used to accompany my grandfather to collect honey into the forests of Coorg and would always be fascinated by the different variety of birds. Also a lot of that credit is due to the fact that my parents, being very fond of pets, had a whole lot of birds at home. There were also a lot of injured birds that were found on the streets such as Black Kites, Owlets, Crows etc. which landed up to be cared for at our home. By the age of 8, I was racing pigeons with grownups in my

locality and used to breed my own racers. This led to such an issue at home as I did not concentrate on my studies, the result of which, I found myself being sent to a hostel about 80 kilometers from Bangalore. This actually worked in my favour as the place was full of wild birds, giving me the opportunity to see different species of birds, thus firing my curiosity to understand them better. This motivated me to read and learn a lot about them. My first step being an opportunity to start a nature club at school where we also tended to many injured birds and animals in our campus. Life took over after completing my education, for about ten years, I got too involved with my career and lost touch with my passion for birds, until one morning when I found a pigeon which had fallen outside my home and took him in. The realization that working with birds has always been my first love, just reignited me. As bird photography slowly took importance, photographing raptors captured my interest. Now I am completely lost in them.

**What is your profession and how do you balance it with photography?**

I work as a director of land banking in one of Bangalore's largest Land Banking Company called Cornerstone Properties. As both my photography and my job require a lot of dedication and time, I had to make a lot of sacrifices. I gave up socializing completely which included cigarettes and my evening drink. I had a 9 handicap in Golf, which I have stopped completely. I have no friends now and since I work alone, I don't even have many photographers as friends and at times feel like a complete loner. The social media is my only way

to connect to the world. It was still alright till such time I used to just drive around and photograph whatever that used to come my way or visit bird setups where one can make beautiful pictures of birds that visit there. But I knew that I was not giving enough to do justice to my passion. As I started to focus on specific subjects it involved a lot of outside travel and I knew I needed to dedicate a lot of time to study the subject. So I have ultimately resolved to devote more time towards photography as I feel it's my oxygen. I think it is very important to finely balance both your passion and profession.



Common Kingfisher





Peregrine Falcon with a kill



### Why mainly raptors?

When I first started photography I was focusing in an area, which had a lot of raptors to photograph. As I spent a lot of time around them, I got to know them better and was totally fascinated with them. I really have no explanation why I am after them but, in reality my heart skips a beat every time I come across

a raptor and I just cannot get enough of it. Also they display a lot of character very similar to humans and the power they exhibit gives me a high when I am around them. Though I have photographed other birds often, creating an image of a raptor, particularly in action, fills me with a great surge of adrenaline and immense satisfaction.



Tawny Eagle

### What points are to be considered for raptors in flight and in action?

It is not just about raptors but any wildlife action photography involves an intimate knowledge of the subject and anticipation. This helps you foresee the next move or the next moment and helps you be prepared for the shot. It's not like you can be 100% on what the subject is going to do next, but it will help you more often than not. The secret lies in studying the bird, so you need to spend a lot of time in the field, the more you know about the bird you want to photograph, the better your images are going to be.

Coming to the technical point of it I always ensure that I have minimum 1/2000sec of shutter and ensure that there is enough space around the subject so when the action is happening I don't get some wing tips cut or parts of the action missing.



Shaheen Falcon



Short-toed Snake Eagle



Shaheen Falcon



### What is the secret of creating award winning images?

In today's world exposure to wildlife photography has increased the level of competition tremendously. First you really have to be lucky, because in most world class competitions you can't really pick from the last 10-15 images as every image is so competitively equal. It has to be Your Day. But then to be in the top 15, you have to mature as a photographer or you have to make that lucky shot which is going to wow everybody. I remember, when I first started to send images for competitions I used to always think why I never won, when I used to have such great

action and such beautiful images of birds, but over the time I realized it is finally been judged by a very senior wildlife photographer, who has been through all these moments of a budding photographer and he/she surely realizes the thought process and difficulty level involved. So he/she is surely looking for something where there is great effort put forward by the photographer, technically, aesthetically or a frame defining a great moment.

The only thing I would say is that the more time you spend around your subjects the more your subject will teach you photography and the more chances that you will make award winning frames.



### White-eyed Buzzards



### How much of a pre-visualization do you have in your shots?

I would say it's more to do with pre-planning than pre-visualization. For example, on a particular day if I have to plan my photography, there are so many factors I need to consider, like what season it is, what kind of bird would I find to photograph in this season, what kind of activity I am expecting in this season from this bird, in which area this bird would be doing this activity the most, and then when I reach the place and if I am lucky enough to find the bird I want to photograph, this knowledge would help me anticipate/pre-visualize what kind of moment I might get to photograph in the situation. So, I would say pre-planning is an important

part of the final process along with pre-visualization.

### How important is it to understand the subject you shoot?

As quoted earlier, your subject is your real teacher of photography. It's the subject that gives you those moments and those perspectives that help to make your dream frame. You're a wildlife photographer because of your wildlife subject, without your subject there is no you. Understanding your subject is the basic of wildlife photography, without it you would never grow as a photographer. I would also like to add that respecting your subject is also a key requirement of a wildlife photographer. He/she is fully responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the subject.

**Please narrate in brief about your Bat image?**

This image took about 3 months of planning to make. I was always fascinated about bats, as they come close to birds in terms of flight. I still call them birds at times during a conversation and correct myself embarrassingly.

I used to observe a few bats visiting a Singapore cherry plant close to my home at Bangalore and always enjoyed observing their acrobatic moves and the games they play while chasing each other. I never really observed them from an angle of photography as they are always out in the dark and too fast to really freeze in a frame. Then while browsing the internet I came across a few brilliant images of bats made by few photographers from other countries and this immediately triggered my photography senses and thus began my quest to freeze one in flight.

The initial images that I saw were made while the bats left their roost from caves or attics which had small openings. The photographer would set up his camera pre-focused just outside such openings with the flash on and with a remote trigger would keep clicking till he/she got his/her shot right. So, I went looking for roosts but sadly most of the Short-nosed Fruit Bats roosted on coconut trees or in old buildings where I could not get a set path to capture them in flight and most attempts did not yield proper results, but I had also seen a few beautiful images of bats made as they skimmed the water for a gulp. After doing a lot of reading I realized that I need an infrared camera trigger, a few flashes and yes a camera surely, not to forget bats that fly in a certain path. Though it burnt my pockets, I ordered out the IR trigger from Germany and 4 basic flashes.

My best bet was the Short Nosed Fruit Bats that would come every night to feed on the Singapore cherries. But where to set up the trigger was the big question as they would fly to the fruit from all directions and take off as they wished. This was where I truly spent the time that helped me to make this frame. I sat for almost 15 days beside the cherry tree and studied their flight pattern, also captured them in slow motion mobile cameras and watched the videos. Then I realized one thing, no matter from which angle they approached the cherry, most bats would fly out with the fruit in their mouth in one particular direction towards another large tree and would



return only after they finished enjoying the cherry. I set up the trigger in this path (The IR transmitter emits an infrared light pulse train, which is reflected by a reflector and thus thrown back to the receiver, if anything breaks this IR path then the sensor would trigger the camera), connected the trigger to a 5D Mark III full-frame camera coupled to a 100–400 mm lens with a long cable on a tripod, used four flashes with flash stands facing towards the IR beam path which was connected to the camera through a wireless flash trigger. The camera was set up in manual mode with the shutter speed of 1/200sec as faster shutters would leave a black band on the frame, set up

the ISO to 200 and pushed the aperture to about 11. After all this, I prayed to the almighty photography Gods to help me pull this off.

Well it worked the first night itself, but the issue was there was no focus on the subject at all. I went back to understand why. The issue was most bat images were made in bulb mode with the IR trigger mainly triggering the flashes in complete darkness. I could not do that as I had street lights close to the cherry tree I had chosen, and in bulb mode this light would burn out the sensor even before the flashes.



Mahseer Fishes

### Tell us about your famous underwater image?

I have been observing these Mahseers, at my backyard in Coorg since childhood, and was always fascinated with underwater photography, but due to lack of access to underwater photography equipment, the whole process was delayed, so when the Go-Pro was released I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it. So when I got the camera I didn't have to do much research on where to position it, and after few attempts that frame was captured.

**Description:** The Wayanad Mahseer is a critically endangered species that are endemic to the streams of southern Western Ghats. They are now disappearing fast due to habitat destruction such as loss of forests and illegal sand mining. Also due to all the chemicals that flow down to the streams they live in, used by the adjoining plantations.

At Kodagu, Karnataka there are certain places that still worship and follow the ancient codes of conservation and do not hunt or fish in forest areas reserved for their Gods and these Mahseers hold there last ground in one such habitat. Me, being a local to that area try to do my bit in educating the local villagers about the importance of this species and always wanted to capture the beauty underwater.

So when I got my GoPro, I knew exactly what I need to capture and setup the camera underwater in a stream close to a local house where these fish are more used to humans and set the camera in continuous shoot mode. I could get a few very good images. I really loved this frame as it shows how these rare fish are now living around humans, protected and swimming along with a farmer's mallard.

### What are your usual post processing strategies?

There is no real strategy involved in post processing. I approach different images differently and over time you grow and start doing less processing. My usual flow involves noise cleaning, levels, contrast, brightness etc., but what is most important is I try to reproduce what I actually saw at that moment of time. For me processing is like a prayer and it's that moment of time when you get to relish the fruits of that prayer. Because what I am processing is a frame which I am truly in love with. I don't mind removing out a couple of nits as long as it does not affect the moment and surely I want my frame to look at its very natural best and I put my little art knowledge into making it look beautiful. I am slowly trying to avoid too much processing but at the same time the impact of the image is really out with only proper processing. Post

processing is an important part of learning photography.

### What are some of your unforgettable moments in bird photography?

I enjoy every moment spent around birds, there is no one moment, every image of mine you can ask me where I took it, at what time I took it, even after ten years, I remember very well.

The moments that really moved me in bird photography, would be, the first time when I saw a Tawny Eagle perched on a mound. I still can remember that because it was love at first sight and I still have the memory very fresh in my mind. The other moment was, when I made my first Pallid Harrier flight image. After taking the shot when I saw in the viewfinder I was totally in love with the frame, because till that moment I never believed that I could make an action picture which I would be proud to show the world.

**All Images by Kiran Poonacha**



Crow with a Kill

# Message from the Maestro

If you want to be a wildlife photographer you need to first have a subject that you're really passionate about. It could be anything from ants to elephants. It's only true passion that will keep you going for long and will help you forget all the pains, disappointments that you may go through and make you go back and try harder. You need to have a lot of respect for your subjects too, because it's that respect that is critical for the wellbeing of both the photographer and the subject. I would also advise one to have an idol, whose work you look up to as a benchmark and try to reach that goal yourself. It's also very advisable to join an online nature photography forum where you meet a lot of other seasoned photographers from whom you could learn a lot. Never forget that there is a steep learning curve. There are no shortcuts with hard work and perseverance. Only way to succeed is to aim higher and work harder. And surely one highly essential quality that every wildlife photographer should work on is "Patience". IT REALLY PAYS!



Regards  
Kiran

Amur Falcon



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**Painted Bushquails by Gowtham K C**

Environs

# DAROJI

## Sloth Bear Sanctuary

**Pampayya Malemath**



**H**ampi near Hospet, in Bellary district is a renowned world heritage centre. Daroji Sloth Bear Sanctuary is situated only 15 kilometers from Hampi. The Bilikallu Reserve Forest was declared as the Daroji Bear Sanctuary, by the Karnataka government in October 1994. The rock-strewn hillocks that extend between Daroji of Sandur taluk and Ramasagar of Hospet taluk in Bellary district have been the abode

of Indian Sloth Bears since time immemorial and have proved to be a safe haven for the Indian Sloth Bears in a very short span. In 1994, the forest had nothing but barren stony hillocks and thorny trees. Thanks to the hard work and efforts of the staff and support of the surrounding villagers, the sanctuary has transformed into a lush green area boasting of a rich forest with abundant local species of flora and fauna.



### **Indian Sloth Bear**

Indian Sloth Bear [*Melursus ursimus*] is arguably the star of this sanctuary. It is found only in India and Sri Lanka. It has a long, dark unkempt coat of hair with a characteristic v-shaped chevron on its chest. Forelimbs are longer than the hind limbs. The hairless feet are armed with white, blunt, curved claws, which extend up to three inches. They have plantigrade feet like humans where the entire sole touches the ground.

Though the head is comparatively large, the Sloth Bears have relatively small ears and eyes. Hence their sense of hearing and vision is poor. But they have an outstanding sense of smell. Their short-haired, grayish-colored muzzle is extremely flexible and ends in the nose.

The mating period which is in summer months is often accompanied by a lot of fights between the males and the females. Usually two to three cubs are born in winter. The newborn cubs are small, hairless and blind for three weeks. The mother rears the cubs for two to three years. The lifespan is 40 to 50 years. The Sloth Bears are nocturnal animals.



### Food Habits

Sloth Bears are omnivorous. Their food habits vary as per the seasonal availability of food. The bears relish on ants and honey. A special feature of the bear's food are the termites. This is the only species of bear adapted specifically for myrmecophagy [act of eating ants and termites]. A bear rips open the termite mound with its stout claws, pokes its muzzle in the hole, and blows the dirt and debris away. Then it enjoys the termites by sucking them just like a vacuum cleaner. Vacuuming ants and termites is so noisy that it can be heard 300 yards away! For this it is especially equipped with an elongated palette, loose and protrusible lips and nostrils which can be closed at will and two missing incisors.

They are crazy over honey. They climb trees to obtain it and no attack from bees can drive them away from the honey. The bears also eat the fleshy

flowers of various trees. Bears help in propagation of many plant species as the consumed seeds of the forest fruits are distributed throughout the forest in the form of stool and they germinate easily in the monsoon. The bears are good tree climbers. There are instances of them climbing and drinking even toddy! They are good swimmers too. Remarkably these bears don't wander off and remain confined within the sanctuary. Reasons are easy to understand. According to the forest officials, the sanctuary has innumerable wild fruit-bearing trees and bushes in its premises. These trees and bushes yield fruits one after the other. Also, the authorities have started raising orchards of other fruits like Singapore cherry, mango and banana within the ranges of the sanctuary. Bears are fond of termites and honey, which are also available in plenty here. There are waterholes too, for quenching the thirst of the wildlife.







Painted Sandgrouses



Yellow-throated Bulbul

### Biodiversity in Daroji

It is estimated that about 150 Sloth Bears are living in this sanctuary. Other mammals include Leopard, Hyena, Jackal, Wild Boar, Porcupine, Pangolin, Star Tortoise, Monitor Lizard and Ruddy Mongoose, Star attractions for the bird lovers include Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Jungle Bush Quail, Yellow-legged Buttonquail, Indian Eagle Owl and many other grassland and scrubland birds.

Painted Sandgrouse and Painted Spurfowl are the two very treasured and colourful residents of this delightful habitat. A significant population of Yellow-throated Bulbul, which is a globally threatened bird is also seen here.



Star Tortoise

**Piggy backing**

Cubs are born in an underground den, and stay there for several months. After emerging from the den, cubs stay at their mother's side for two to three years before heading off on their own. A very special feature about the rearing of the cubs is 'piggybacking'. Young ones are carried on the mother's back. Though females are smaller than male, thicker and longer furs help in piggybacking. February is the best month to watch this cute parental behaviour.





### **Pampayya Malemath**

After the formation of Daroji Sloth Bear Sanctuary, he worked as a volunteer in controlling poaching & ritual hunting practices in the surrounding villages. He is also creating awareness among the local people & for school children by showing wildlife related films & presentations. He is a bird watcher since the last 15 years & doing wildlife photography since the last 6 years. Many of his pictures are used in various publications. From the last 2 years he is also doing snake rescue work and he has rescued nearly 400 snakes. He is also working as a naturalist and wildlife guide in and around Daroji.

### **Conservation:**

This species has been recognized as one of the most threatened with extinction by the IUCN- Bear Specialist Group and is placed as "Vulnerable". Main reasons for decline are habitat loss and human-bear conflicts. The Sloth Bears are non-territorial and are not innately aggressive. Most bears run away on hearing and smelling people. But these Sloth Bears get so absorbed in what they are doing that they neither notice the presence of people nor smell them, until a sudden encounter.

During such sudden encounters, the annoyed animal stands on its hind legs and roars to scare away the people. Sometimes the frightened bear might assault and injure people before rushing away in panic. Best thing to do is to shout back or run away. Bears usually don't follow as they are merely defending themselves and not making predatory attacks.

Some villagers kill these bears owing to fear and anxiety over losing their crops. The ever-increasing human population is clearing forests for agriculture and deforestation, which eventually results in destroying the habitat of the bears.

Collection of minor forest produces like honey and fruits is also forcing the bears to move to the neighbouring agricultural lands in search of food and water. In this context, admirable conservation strategies in Daroji Bear Sanctuary has provided them a safe haven. Villagers and the eco-lovers have extended voluntary support towards natural regeneration of forests. Wildlife photographer and Ex-Minister of Karnataka, M Y Ghorpade is the guiding force behind the development of this sanctuary.

The best time to visit the sanctuary is between August and April.

**By Road:** Bangalore to Chitradurga(199 kms) on NH-4, then to Hospet(135 kms) on NH-13. And then to Kamalapura(12 kms), which is 10 kms from the sanctuary.

**By Rail:** Nearest railway station is Hospet where trains from Bangalore and Hubli are accessible.

Various accommodation facilities including government run facilities are available.

### **References:**

- a] [http://aranya.gov.in/downloads/Daraji\\_MgmtPlan.pdf](http://aranya.gov.in/downloads/Daraji_MgmtPlan.pdf)
- b] <http://www.karnataka.com/author/raggi/>

**All Images by Pampayya Malemath  
Text by Megh Roy Choudhury**

# Orange-bellied Leafbird



© Niladri Karmakar

Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, West Bengal

# Struggle for Existence



*Images by Ripan Biswas  
Text by Rhucha Kulkarni*

**“He was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survive.”**

### The Call of the Wild

This famous statement from a renowned international jungle lore exhibits the Law of the Untamed Land – a Law that each of its denizens is bound by, a law that the mighty and the meek, alike, abide by. A law that acts as a driver of core instincts. This is the law of Survival – Survival of the Fittest. A formula that dictates - Eat or be Eaten. Merciless, at first glance to us humans, this very rule is the benefactor of balance; preserving life across all levels; from the scum of the waters to the Uno Apex hunters. It keeps the chain of food well-oiled by empowering both the predator and the prey. This law presents opportunities to hunt and opportunities to defend or escape. A rule that ensures that only the stronger genes are preserved and passed on to descendant populations. This is the law of nature as outlined in the theory proposed originally by Charles Darwin: “Natural Selection”. It forms the basis of natural evolution of species.

As I inspect and observe the world of the Wild; I can sense, I can feel it manifested in the plethora of diversity that amazes me no end. A diversity that cuts across species; be it insects, mammals or feathered friends; be it the gigantic or the microscopic. Each of God’s creation has been offered unique gifts – to flourish and to outlive; to fight battles of survival each day on this Earth.

It is especially in the micro world

that these struggles multiply and the ecological balance is finely maintained. A staggering fact is that if any one species is allowed to multiply in an unhindered fashion it will outrun all the other species of the world easily in a short span of time.

I cannot help but compare it to the somewhat perfect efficiency of cogs in the wheel, each possessing its individual uniqueness, yet smoothly aligned and snug-fit in the overall scheme of things. And yet nature seems a notch above perfect. Nature seems to foster both harmony and balance. I marvel at the exquisiteness of Mother Nature – a perfect blend of enablers and disablers to maintain this fine equilibrium on planet Earth.

In this photo feature we see how this decree manifests in the animal instincts and learned behaviours. Let’s look at how the fittest win their battles.

Gifted with some unique prowess; these traits help promulgate their race:

Unique physical traits of varied species become their path to predatory prowess, enhancing their chances of securing prey base. Size, claws, teeth, venom, armour are some of these common physical gifts to those who are proclaimed as “Killer” in the natural world. Stealth, camouflage, speed and power play a monumental role in clinging on to life. A strong capacity to adapt to diverse and ever changing circumstances also earmark who will win the race for survival.



In nature, often size determines the result of a battle. As a general rule, the bigger, the better. But surely exceptions prove the rule. A fascinating case in point is the tiff between the Indian Bull Frog and the Common Toad. An Indian Bull Frog grows several times larger than a Common Toad (size). The Bullfrog also outperforms the Common Toad in strength and speed, yet the Common Toad is gifted with an unmatched weapon – the ability to self-inflate. This struggle between life and death has been captured at close quarters. At first, when the bulkier frog caught a small toad from behind, the battle seemed to be entirely one-sided. But suddenly the toad was seen sucking in air and inflating itself. As its size increased considerably, the frog was taken by surprise and in the quest for food, held on despite this first form of defence. The toad then unleashed his lethal second defence tool and a whitish venom oozed out from the parotid glands of the toad. Accepting defeat against this war with death, the toad had no option but to let go. This proved an amazing display of special powers against mere strength and size. Thanks to its hidden prowess the victorious toad was seen vanishing into the bushes.

#### **An Indian Bullfrog in a foiled attempt to catch a Common Toad**



#### **Neither venom nor puffing up its body helped this toad to become an easy meal to that Buff-striped Keelback snake.**

If observed carefully, nature provides stark examples of role reversals. What may overpower and rule at one instant becomes easy target at the next moment. Uncertainty is the code-word out in the wild. The once powerful toad who had escaped from the jaws of the bullfrog, now seemed to be at the receiving end of the speedy ones. While the Common Toad may have escaped the vicious grip of the Bullfrog,

this dual defence mechanism stands no chance of defence against the vicious speed of certain snakes. Here we see the Buff-striped Keelback snake leveraging its lightning-speed strike to stun and overpower the Common Toad. After all, the show must continue – the chain of predator and prey must work higher up the ladder to ensure the apex of the food chain survives!



**A Checkered Keelback snake eating a Skipper Frog**

The slithering and dangerous snakes are the merchants of speed and death. The skittering creatures are no match to the 'Terror of Teeth' and finally face death. The tables turned yet again. This image speaks volumes about the horror of being caught in the rows of teeth of the Checkered Keelback snake. These are the true dealers of death; designed to kill by seizing the hapless amphibians with their sharp teeth. The very jaws of death defy the once fortunate little frogs, creating interesting twists in the survival tale.

Humans are not the only creator of war strategy and technique. In fact, much before man created war; nature had developed its own unique capabilities to kill, each technique different from the other. Stealth and ambush, speed and strength (either solitary or in groups) are the differentiators that help predators easily overpower prey and sustain their species.

The keelback is physiologically designed to strike and swallow whole prey: its lower mandibles are not joined to the other bones of the skull allowing it to open its mouth wide. One grasp and gulp and the



**A Striped Keelback snake eating a Skittering Frog**



**Crab Spider hunting a Hornet**

once seemingly powerful toad is devoured. As I get a glimpse of this spectacle of speed in the vivid image, I cannot help but wonder at the relativity of all things wild. What seemed powerful in one context, is held helpless in another context. Indeed, the dwellers of Mother Earth are ephemeral; with time, place and presence of mind dictating their very fate.

Camouflage has emerged as an effective technique in the race for existence. Animals that are not easily detectable conserve energy for the 'actual kill' rather than wasting energy on pursuing prey. For example, Crab Spiders are known to be excellent ambush predators, thanks to their striking resemblance to colourful flowers, fruits and even bird droppings. They wait, inconspicuous to the eye, for a prey to land near them and then strike. The poor victim is taken unaware of the fact that what it thought to be its food turned out to be its destroyer. This is what we call optimum utilization of resources to achieve the goal!

Here we see an example where a Crab Spider is hunting a Hornet.

**"Spiders are vicious hunters hunting all kinds of prey sometimes bigger than their size, including bigger spiders and many times their mating partners!"**

A unique capability that is seen often in the insect world is that of the agile Jumpers. The Jumping Spider seems to be master of the High Jump, worthy of being awarded a medal in this unique skill. This ability combined with an outstanding vision, makes it an indomitable predator. Four pairs of eyes (three fixed and one movable), with the movable one possessing wide-angle motion detection capability ensures the spider can sense movement on its behind. An advanced internal hydraulic system allows it to adjust the pressure of its body fluids, thereby greatly extending its limbs without even possessing the muscular strength. As I take in these predatory facts, it is clear to me that these gifts of nature leaves the target prey of the Jumping Spider with almost no chance of survival. A true work of genius in agility and hydraulics, the "jump" is made fool-proof by letting out anchoring silk threads that the spider can hang onto if the jump fails.

In fact the aggressive nature of Jumping Spider reflects not only in its hunting techniques but also in its mating rituals. 'Spider cannibalism' is known to be exhibited wherein the female eats the male after mating. In some cases, females may also attack and devour males due to an over-aggressive trait in juvenile females that gets spilled over into adulthood. At such times, these females will prey on their own kind when food is scarce.

Injecting venom to secure food base is seen commonly especially in insects, reptiles and amphibians who do not possess the advantage of size or strength.

Jumping Spiders can kill a spider much larger in size by 'ambush jumping' onto the target and then injecting the lethal dose of venom through its fangs. The venom acts as a neuro-blocking agent, paralysing the prey within no time and liquefying its mass for easy digestion. A gross way to kill, yet fair enough for the sake of survival. Don't we say that all is fair in love and war? And war of the wittiest this is!

Similarly, Lynx Spiders, though speedy runners and leapers, primarily use ambush as the means of kill. They are seen to take up position on plants and lie in wait of approaching unaware pollinators. Like Crab Spiders, they seldom make use of webs for hunting and prowl plant leaves to identify their perfect hiding spot for 'ambush mode'.





**Calculations:** Nature is queer in its own way. While we as 'intelligent' humans may try to apply logic and reason to everything we do, there thrives some specimens of nerdy mathematicians in the insect world.

And not just the theory, it is mind boggling to see how this expertise of mind calculations is applied while hunting. The much ignored Common Dragonfly is a stunning example of the "Perfect Kill" based on logical analysis. This insect is capable of capturing prey in mid-air through the science and art of "interception". Its prowess appears comparable to those endowed with complex nervous systems. Having spotted a prey, the dragonfly uses predictive analytics to identify where the prey will be in the future. So rather than wasting energy chasing prey, they arrive at the exact point where the prey will come to them. Exceptionally brilliant! More so, since this involves intense calculations - parameters such as the distance of the prey, the direction it moves in and the speed of flight are put together and processed to deliver the "Perfect Kill". So much so for us self-proclaimed geniuses, Nature has its own genius!



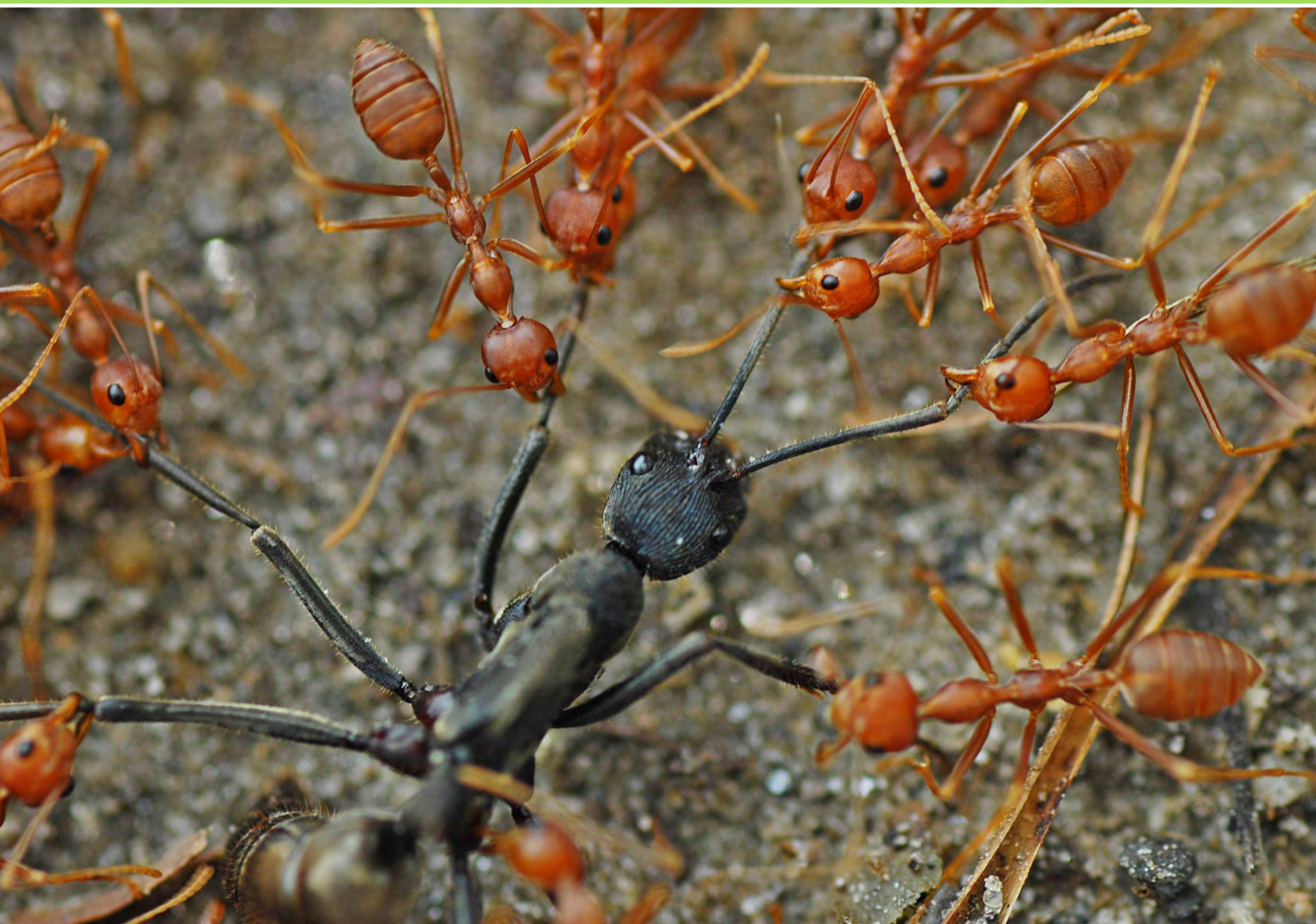
**A dragonfly eating another dragonfly**



**Having learnt some brilliant techniques; the animal world shows diversity:**

**Stealth:** And then there are those who have learned to make their mark in this complex world of danger and threat. Those without the lasting speed or the long-lived strength. These are the masters of stealth. From the world of insects, the Robber Fly commonly called the Assassin Fly is a notoriously aggressive predator that applies stealth as seen in this photograph. They are very dangerous aerial hunters of the

insect world. They can hunt while flying. Opportunists to the core, these insects lie waiting in ambush and strike and seize their prey in flight, quickly injecting the prey with saliva containing neurotoxins. An absolutely phenomenal strategy that combines physical traits and behaviour to ensure there is no escape. Their aggressive predatory instincts and minimal courtship behaviour is evident from the picture where we can see a robber-fly eating while mating.



**“It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.”**

— **Leon C. Megginson**

**Pack Hunting:** Some species have been conditioned over generations to live in groups. Especially the lesser predators of the forest harness their strength of numbers by pack hunting. To ensure food for huge groups, they effectively strategize their attacks, assigning roles and responsibilities for the group hunt. All our

warfare and business strategies may fall flat in front of these highly evolved social creatures, who seem to have mastered the art of communication and societal living. At the first sight of prey, a Major Ant latches onto the victim while another grabs a leg or antenna. Carefully coordinated and intelligent moves ensure that the pack

identifies the weak points of the victim, gnawing it at those points to ensure death. Chunks of the kill are then carried back to the nest for consumption by all in a highly coordinated fashion. Intelligence abounds in the form of identifying strengths and weaknesses: the heavier chunks are carried by more number of stouter ants whereas the smaller ones are left for the weaker to deal with. The entire exercise is not unlike our heavily rehearsed ‘march-pasts’. Note though that this is a display of ‘group coordination’ without a chance to rehearse. For one chance is all they get to emerge successful in their quest for food. Change is imperative, and with change, changing yourself becomes critical for subsistence. Some of the best examples of learned behaviour and habits to adapt to change are found in the realms of nature. With depleting natural cover thanks to urbanization and human activity, many creatures have modified their feeding habits. Many defence mechanisms have evolved while carnivores keep on polishing their hunting techniques.

Nature is a melange of well-balanced chain of events. While many of these events may seem

barbaric, inhuman and gruesome, this struggle for existence is the core to maintaining a equilibrium and harmony. Each of the species has their own role to play in this conundrum.

Yet, as I contemplate the role of human beings, I am left with a dissonance of sorts. We, the self-proclaimed super intelligent, strive to dissuade the laws of life and death. Artificially curated life-experiences seem to make humankind exist in its own silo of pride and haste. We have perched ourselves on top of the prey-predator relationship by our own will, sometimes at the expense of those below in this ladder. My thoughts drift to the reality of today.

Where do we fit into the scheme of nature?

Are we or are we not nature itself?

Are we recreating nature by drafting new laws of the land?

The questions seem endless, some answered, and some begging to be answered.

I am left with lingering thoughts not about our “Struggle for Existence”, but humankind’s

“Struggle for Living” in harmony and in balance with Mother Nature.



**Ripan Biswas**

Being Born and brought up in Coochbehar, a heaven on earth, Ripan Biswas had enough reasons to enrich his vision from the very beginning. A teacher by profession and a photographer by passion, he always wants to see mother nature with all its aspects and feel her from the core of his heart as a source of inspiration. His pictures are featured in many esteemed magazines and he also has won numerous awards.

# From our Facebook Group



A brilliant mid air freeze showing the wing pattern of the Great Indian Hornbill



**Saminathan Babu**



Giri's Bronzeback is a beautiful reptile which is endemic to the Western Ghats of India.



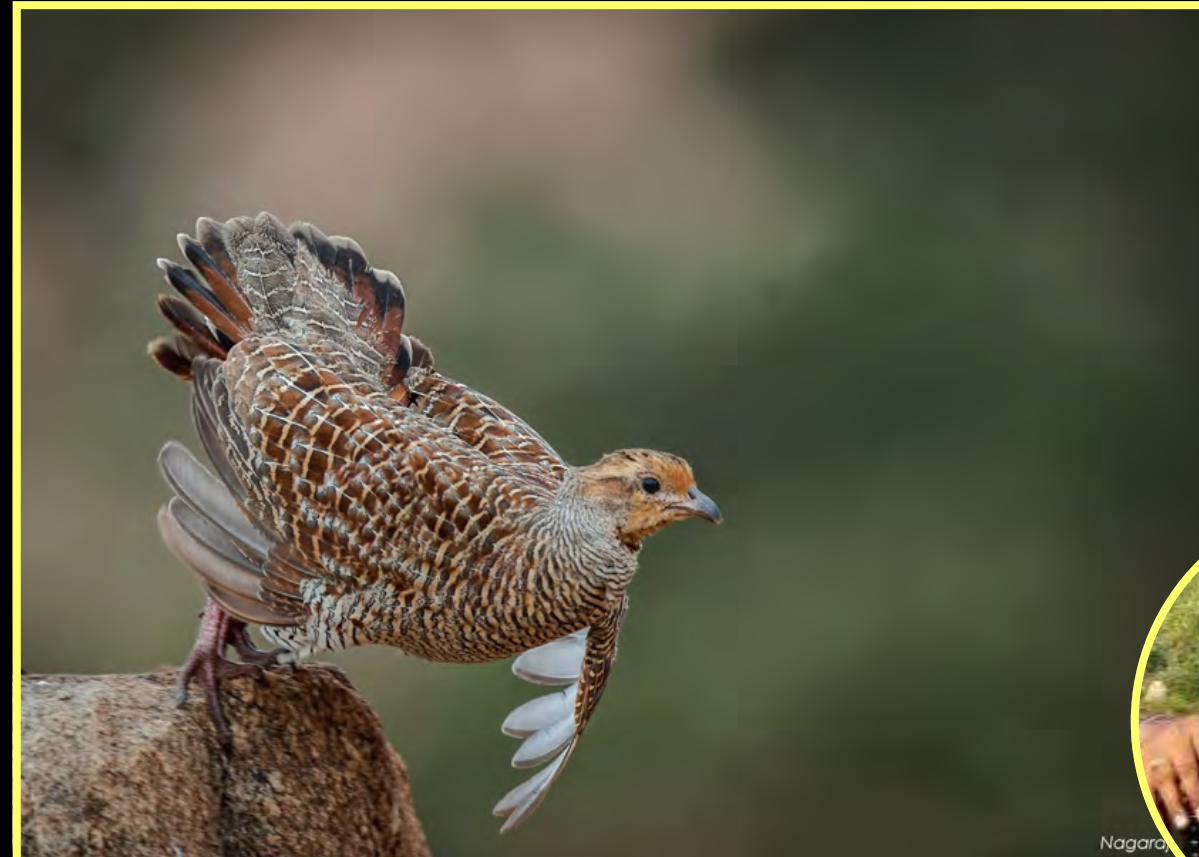
**Mayuresh Hendre**

This is a breathtaking high adrenalin freeze of a tiger chasing Chital (Spotted Deer)



**Aditya Sahadev**

A commoner though this Grey Francolin decides to jump from it's perch.



**Dr Nagaraj**



# Love for Nature

## Forging an Enduring Family Bond

Eash Hoskote  
Pallavi Kaiwar  
Drishti Hoskote

A family which shoots  
together stays together!!!



*“Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home, that wilderness is a necessity, that parks are fountains of life.”*

*-John Muir*

It was just another day in the life of the family trio as they set out on their family escapade, one of the many wildlife trips that had now become an inseparable part of the family. Over the years, it had become a religion of sorts – a religion of all things wild and free, a religion of pursuing what the heart wanted. That particular day was none the different, with telephoto lenses in tow and hope in the heart, they set

out in the jungle, for that one glimpse of its denizens, for that one “Wow” moment. And an occasion it was, for this heady habit of the wild was not just an escape but had occupied primary pedestal in their lives – forming the foundation for many a familial discussion, fodder for open sharing of views, and forger of inseparable ties to last beyond what words could pen down.

©Eash Hoskote





This is no fairy tale, this is a leaf from the lives of Dr. Eash Hoskote, his wife Pallavi Kaiwar and their daughter Drishti. Ensnared like all of us human-folk in the intricacies of everyday livelihood and careers, this is the story of how one turning point irrevocably changed the course of life of an entire family. It all happened when a patient of Dr. Eash Hoskote handed him a DSLR and encouraged him to venture into the forest. Heeding this advice, he took off to Masai Mara, the haven for African wildlife and window to one of the greatest natural phenomena in the natural world – The Great Migration. This was in the August of 2012, and then there was no looking back. The bug had bitten and the thirst for exploring the world of wildlife and photography soon had Dr. Hoskote enrolling in formal learning experiences with his shooting artillery. Focussed efforts entailed - learning through observation & practice, reaching out to stalwarts

in the field, and consciously dedicating time to this new-found love provided the impetus to sharpening the saw. One fine day, a tiny voice in his head beckoned - Why not extend this new-found love to his first love? And so he planned the 'Wilderness Celebration' – a celebration of Eash and Pallavi's 15th wedding anniversary amidst the serene backwaters of Kabini. This wildlife excursion proved to be the eye-opener to both of them; a glimpse into an enchanting world. A world that they could intimately share together. An universe that they would enjoy together. A family ritual was unfolding as their daughter also started getting involved, developing interest in the field and thereafter took a head-start in learning the nitty-gritties of photography and wildlife in particular. Little did they know that this would be a life-changing vacation, opening the doors to possibilities immense.





Slowly but surely, jungle escapades became the family mantra. By the end of 2013, all the family outings involved a wildlife destination. The trio had taken it upon themselves to fuel this unending passion and add a dash of spontaneity to their otherwise routine urban existence. Wildlife was their constant companion, the common thread that fuelled and at the same time unfettered all differences of opinion. It emerged as the common baseline, the basis for creativity and conversations flowing. Be it a heated argument about the status of a wild species, or an agreeable discussion on the best habitat, a hundred opinions converged and collided, sparking intellectual and passionate discussions. More importantly, their ties grew stronger as these wildlife expeditions wove together the underlying spirit that bound the family together – an unquenchable thirst to explore and an indomitable urge to break free into the unknown. With their hectic

schedules and life-commitments, an unsaid pledge emerged – to escape as One Family, to pursue this shared purpose, come hail or high water.

And so each had his or her role to adhere to this pledge - where to go, when to go and which species to concentrate on. Loads of time and involvement over discussions and re-discussions, brought the family close to each other, with only one goal in sight. Conscious priorities were laid out as a group. After all, what is the joy of being family without a bit of fun? Playful banter sprinkled with a dash of fun entailed post-vacation. Each of them would typically click similar photographs of the subject with only slightly differing angles, and then all three would battle it out on social media, construing as to whose shot was the best. Laughter and love seemed to enjoy an exalted status in the Hoskote household, thanks to a single mission and vision – Wildlife Travel and Photography!





©Eash Hoskote



Yet, the endeavour to create this common connection involved great commitment. While Dr. Eash is a consultant paediatrician & a neonatologist practicing in Bangalore from the last 18 years with a thriving practice, his wife is a Director in Philips healthcare, an equally demanding job. Their daughter is appearing for her 10th grade exams, a major milestone for a student's future. What makes this family-passion a reality is matter-of-fact realization – that balance is the key to a fulfilled and purposeful life. A fine balance between professional and personal life accompanied by unflinching conviction to make it happen, despite all the differences and hurdles thrown. Advance planning involving everyone and securing an efficient support system at the workplace by building relations has helped the Hoskote family achieve and sustain this lifestyle choice. So profound is the impact of this culture of wildlife-travel that Drishti is now considering career options in nature, wildlife & conservation. She is seen following in the footsteps of Pallavi and Eash, having contributed articles in Sanctuary Asia, Sanctuary Cub and NIF. Eash himself is a certified naturalist from the past 2 years and has been part of a wildlife conservation through a trust which involves Children Education Programmes under the name of 'Kanana Darshana'. Both Pallavi and Eash have received recognition for their exemplary images in different forums since the past 2 years. Shared accolades and resultant bonding has brought everyone closer as a family, seeking each other's constant support and encouragement for the long haul. Giving a serious consideration to a chance interaction with a DSLR has served an important

purpose of instilling in today's youth, a deep respect and understanding of the ecosystem and built awareness of its connection with the human clan. What started as a newly discovered interest has evolved into something more ephemeral with a larger meaning for our planet and future. Vitamin N is what shall make a difference to foster genuine relationships by enhancing the quality of our bonds. Vitamin N has the immense power to help us lead more fulfilling lives as individuals, families and communities\*\*.



©Drishti



**This is a true story of inspiration.**

**A tale that defines the quality of human relations.**

**In short, a story with the potential to inspire a better future for mankind.**

Realms of research and many books have captured the joy of nature and its effect on human bonding and companionship. Nature-interaction has been observed to bestow individuals with obvious tangible benefits such as stress reduction, increase in happiness levels and faster healing. Yet, the true essence of time spent in nature and wilderness extends to groups as well – families, couples and the community. According to field studies conducted by Kuo and Coley at the Human-Environment Research Lab, time spent in nature connects us to each other and the larger world. A similar study at the University of Illinois outlined that urban residents who lived in communities with trees demonstrated stronger feelings of unity with neighbours, being more concerned with helping and supporting each other, and having stronger feelings of belonging than tenants in buildings without trees\*. Human-Nature Social Capital, a concept much talked about has seen organizations come up with nature-group outbound programs to encourage people to disconnect from the virtual and grow relations in the real.

Sources:

\*<http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/enhance-your-wellbeing/environment/nature-and-us/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing>.

\*\* The Nature Principle – Reconnecting with Life in a virtual age, Richard Louv.



# KHONOMA

## Nagaland - A trip report

**Text by Sarita Subramaniam**  
**Images by PV Subramaniam**

**A** little more than three days is all it took to fall in love with this charmed village and its surrounding forests. Birding in Khonoma, the only bird-rich place in the whole of Nagaland, was to be a life changing experience. Initially, it seemed like it wouldn't be worth the effort, time and ofcourse, the money. Little did we know that the sublime forests and the survivors of centuries of hunting would grow on us so much that we are considering another trip to Khonoma. After entering Nagaland, on the drive from Dimapur, we had passed barren, burnt hillocks devoid of flora and fauna. We were in for a pleasant surprise as we entered the Khonoma



**Mountain Bamboo Partridge**

jurisdiction, where the emerald green, dense forested slopes provided a magical contrast.

Abracadabra...!!! Birds in Khonoma are all disciples of Houdini, the magician - each one of them seem to have post-graduated at the escape act. Clairvoyant about our focus on them, they would simply 'dive' into bushes, thickets, flowers, inflorescences, leaves, bramble, branches, undergrowth, lichens, rocks and even puddles left behind by the melting frost.

Forget my partners in crime lifting their cameras, I could barely lift my binoculars to see the birds. Initially, it was rather frustrating, as we could hear the mocking calls of the Spot-breasted Scimitar Babbler, but we barely managed to catch more than a teasing glimpse. Doggedly, I decided to take up the challenge to see these beauties with my newly acquired binoculars. Persistence paid, and Khonoma graciously opened her treasure trove to us.

A relaxed sighting of five Mountain Bamboo Partridges by the roadside marked the beginning of our day. Sunrise ushered in from limpid blue skies, and a Mountain Hawk Eagle glided past to further lift our spirits. Emboldened and fortified with six layers of clothing (including two pairs of woollen socks) to brave the bitter cold, I waddled about like an Emperor Penguin to look for the Laughingthrushes.

The Spot-breasted Laughingthrush has one of the most amazing calls I have heard in decades - a vast repertoire of notes all stitched together to form an elaborate song. Part of it even sounded like the horn of a reversing car. We caught a glimpse of the bird only on the third attempt, after treading through the boggy undergrowth of overgrown forests along the roadside. These ace skulkers always moved along the understorey of overhanging brambles, and seeing them was a major achievement.



**Crested Finchbill**



**Spot-breasted Scimitar Babbler**

Striped Laughing thrush



Rusty-fronted Fulvetta

Black Bulbuls were plentiful and the only ones who would always greet us at every site, followed by the raucous but charming Grey Sibilas. Crested Finchbills safely perched high up on the canopy of Rhododendron bushes, while Flavescent Bulbuls were seen in small flocks of 4-5 in a few restricted habitats. Olive-backed Pipits and Common Rosefinches were the two frequent flyers we encountered. Fiery Fire-tailed Sunbirds flitted around, occasionally joined by the brilliantly coloured Gould's Sunbirds. The Himalayan Bluetails and Blue Whistling Thrushes also helped drive the remainder of the blues away. Thankfully, the mellifluous Red-faced Liocichlas that had eluded us in the Mishmi Hills graced us with their appearance on several occasions.

The next day, I was worried that the steep and vertical climb from the 'parking lot' of the Tragopan Sanctuary would be an Achilles' heel for my fractured ankle. Yet, the sighting of a singing male Naga Wren Babbler proved to be the 'upper' we were seeking in the plummeting temperatures. Assam Laughingthrush, the White browed Scimitar Babbler and another skulker, the Blue-winged Laughingthrush gave us their brief but esteemed visitations.

The Sangti Valley in Dirang, Arunachal Pradesh had been unproductive for us last year for the Black-tailed Crake, but we were eager to see one in Khonoma. On our vigil in the reeds along fishery ponds, we were finally given a brief glimpse by this rarity of the NE hills.

While we tried for the Blue-naped Pitta in three different sites, we were unsuccessful in even eliciting a RSVP. A short walk into another site, a tad drier area, and we saw the Striped Laughingthrush. By Khonoma standards, it seemed like a mere apprentice of David Copperfield. This striped beauty was quite vocal and much more confiding, unlike the other Laughingthrushes. We also saw many flocks of another evasive bird, the Rusty-capped Fulvetta. Hoary-throated Barwings along an abandoned road graced a five kilometre walk, with startled Kalij Pheasants and Maroon Orioles screeching their displeasure at pesky humans disturbing their solitude.

Silent, contemplative Large Hawk Cuckoos were seen perching three or four times along the valley near the village. Distant calls of the Rufous-throated Partridges echoed through the hillside, but the birds wouldn't show. The shadows of the coppiced Alder trees couldn't shield the shimmering blue of the male Large Niltava, and we saw quite a few of them feasting in the woodlands. Silver-eared Mesias and Red-tailed Minlas appeared, before the jittery and trilling Chestnut-vented Nuthatches announced their arrival. Black-throated Prinias basked in a slender ray of sunbeams falling on a Rhododendron inflorescence. A lull in the birding session post a picnic lunch was enlivened by Rufous-capped Babbler cohabiting with Oriental White-eyes and numerous Warblers (which we hope to identify soon).

We are eternally grateful to the people of Khonoma village for having the wisdom and foresight to conserve and preserve their rich natural heritage. Had it not been for their initiative to stop hunting practices in the year 2000, we wouldn't have been blessed to see all the rarities of this magical land.

Flavescent Bulbul



Grey Sibia

Black-throated Prinia



While Khonoma village is holding its ground on the ban on hunting, it's rather surprising that none of the surrounding villages want to emulate Khonoma's success story. While the recent road construction has made the birds wary of human activities once again, we are hoping that the birds will soon settle down to trusting us humans.

Since the year 2000, there have been 2-3 leniency periods when the ban against hunting was lifted. Though it was only for a few days, it did disturb the cycle of life, and more importantly, betrayed the trust that the birds had begun to place in us humans. We hope that in the coming years, the elders of this amazing village are able to stave off the sporadic demands for moratoriums on the ban on hunting.

We would like to thank Angulie, our wise birding guide par-excellence, for his wonderful insights about the unique Naga traditions. Peppered with a sublime touch of understated wit, he revealed an intelligent mind lurking behind the cheery face.

Last, but not the least, a big thank you for bringing us this fabulous birding experience, to the ever charming and enthusiastic birder, Firoz Hussain!



Naga wren-babbler



Dr. P V Subramaniam and Dr. Sarita Subramaniam are from Mumbai and both are dentists. They are avid nature lovers, travellers and conservationists.

# Grey Slender Loris

Angad Achappa

Once seen, this cute ball of fur captures your imagination with the pair of wide and ever so curious eyes. This strictly arboreal and nocturnal animal, the Gray Slender Loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*) is a species of primate found in India and Sri Lanka. India has two subspecies, The Mysore Slender Loris (*L. l. lydekkerianus*) which inhabits the Eastern Ghats, in southern and eastern

India, and the Malabar Slender Loris (*L. l. malabaricus*), found along the west coast of India and in the Western Ghats. Sri Lanka has two more subspecies.

The Gray Slender Loris has been recorded in a range of habitats including forests, plantations, and dry shrub jungles. It appears to prefer degraded forests, rather than primary forest, and is often associated with areas near human habitations.



**Slender Loris photographed in the heart of Bangalore city while working as a core group member with the Urban Slender Loris Project. The project is a participatory collaborative study of urban biodiversity with slender loris as a focal species bringing amateur citizens and professional scientists together as a community.**

The Gray Slender Loris is a nocturnal primate that hunts primarily in the night. It's eyes and vision show remarkable adaptations to aid this. The retina is configured in such a way that vision is perfect even in very low light levels. The Gray Slender Loris is predominantly insectivorous and prefers ants particularly. Tree gum is another favoured



Photographed in Devrayandurga, Karnataka.

food item. It is a tree dwelling mammal and is seen to perform various acrobatic manoeuvres while hunting and moving from one branch to another. With its feet clinging to a branch in a vice-like grip, the Gray Slender Loris can reach up with both arms to snatch an insect from the air, or hang down from the branch to pluck insects from the undergrowth. Often, the Gray Slender Loris will silently stalk its prey, before reaching out to grab it, in a hunting manner that has been compared to a cat. Although this species often forage alone, it is actually a very social primate and can be seen to interact well within a group of six to seven individuals. Each group typically includes one dominant female, its offspring and one or more males. Physical contact and grooming are the other social behavioural patterns seen. Adult females don't react to other females while males aggressively defend their territories against males other than those within the group.

Both the subspecies are classified as "Near Threatened" in the IUCN redlist of threatened species. Human-animal conflicts and loss of habitats are the principal threats to this species. These animals are also hunted for pet trade and medicinal uses. Many road kills are also seen.

Strict conservation measures need to be taken to preserve this beautiful animal.

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- 2] Nekaris, K.A.I. (2006) Social lives of adult Mysore slender lorises. American Journal of Primatology, 68: 1171-1182.

**All Images by Angad Achappa**

**Angad Achappa lives in Bangalore, Karnataka.**

**These images of Grey Slender Loris were clicked by him in Devarayanadurga, Karnataka**



Photographed in Devrayandurga, Karnataka.

# From our Facebook Group



This endearing image portrays a Desert Fox feeding its puppies.



**Dilipsinh Chudasama**



A game of hide and seek between a Spot-billed Pelican and fish.



**Raj Kiran**

A beautiful butterfly scape against the magnificent back drop of Dooars, Bhutan.



**Sumit Das**



A very aggressive but tiny parent defending it's nest against a mighty predator.



**Nitin Dua**

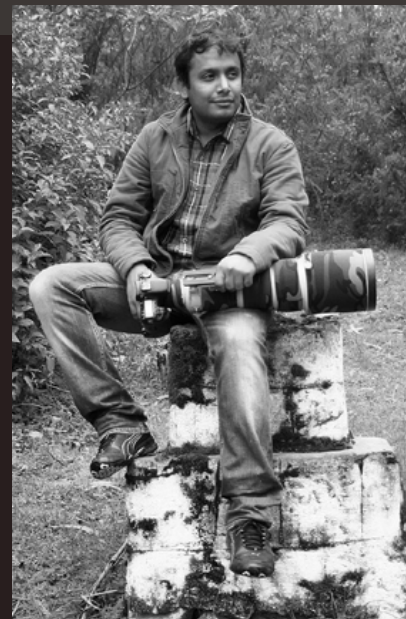


# Blue-bearded Bee eater

**B**lue-bearded Bee-eater (*Nyctyornis athertoni*), also known as the Blue-necked Bee-eater, is the largest meropid in the world. It has a large sickle shaped bill and the square ended tail lacks the "wires" that are typical of smaller Bee-eaters. It fluffs out the turquoise feathers of the chin which gives it a beard like appearance. It is typically found in the Western Ghats in the clearings of the dense forest. This is one Bee-eater which appears to feed exclusively on bees.

The Blue-bearded Bee-eater exploits the defensive behaviour exhibited by the Giant Honey Bees (*Apis dorsata*), by deliberately provoking guard bees to defend their nest. When a massive exodus of the guard bees occur, the bird captures and eats its pursuers. Although mainly foraging using aerial sallies, the Blue-bearded Bee-eater also gleans insects from tree barks. These birds may sometimes associate with mixed-species foraging flocks.

## Images by HB Varun



Varun HB is a professional photographer who is very passionate about birds and has been doing bird photography for more than 10 years. He also conducts multiple levels of photography classes ranging from the basics to on-the-field live photography. He has contributed his

photographs to leading magazines and calendars like WWF, BNHS, Cornell Education. He lives in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.



# Macro Photography with Budget Equipment



**Yogendra Joshi**



## **K**ey Challenges in Macro Photography and how to solve them

Macro Photography is an art of getting close to the tiny subjects to create a large photography on the camera sensor. Typically these include insects, seeds, water drops and any other tiny subjects. There are 3 key challenges in doing Macro Photography.

- (i) Photography Equipment: Getting close to the subject
- (ii) Lighting : Getting sufficient and correctly diffused light
- (iii) Techniques: Finding, Approaching and Focusing on your subject

### **Photography Equipment: Getting close to the subject**

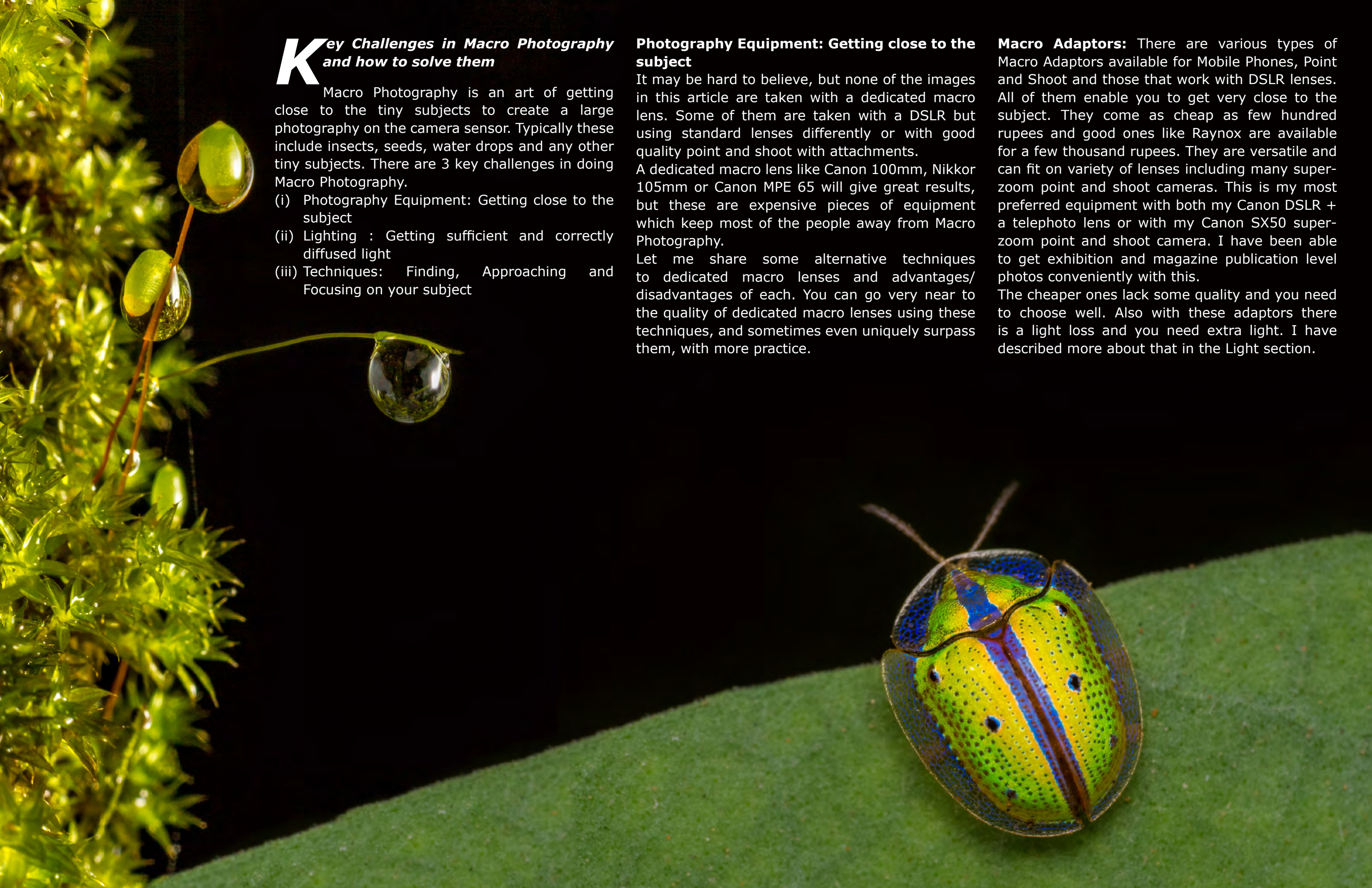
It may be hard to believe, but none of the images in this article are taken with a dedicated macro lens. Some of them are taken with a DSLR but using standard lenses differently or with good quality point and shoot with attachments.

A dedicated macro lens like Canon 100mm, Nikkor 105mm or Canon MPE 65 will give great results, but these are expensive pieces of equipment which keep most of the people away from Macro Photography.

Let me share some alternative techniques to dedicated macro lenses and advantages/disadvantages of each. You can go very near to the quality of dedicated macro lenses using these techniques, and sometimes even uniquely surpass them, with more practice.

**Macro Adaptors:** There are various types of Macro Adaptors available for Mobile Phones, Point and Shoot and those that work with DSLR lenses. All of them enable you to get very close to the subject. They come as cheap as few hundred rupees and good ones like Raynox are available for a few thousand rupees. They are versatile and can fit on variety of lenses including many super-zoom point and shoot cameras. This is my most preferred equipment with both my Canon DSLR + a telephoto lens or with my Canon SX50 super-zoom point and shoot camera. I have been able to get exhibition and magazine publication level photos conveniently with this.

The cheaper ones lack some quality and you need to choose well. Also with these adaptors there is a light loss and you need extra light. I have described more about that in the Light section.



**Extension Tubes:** This is the cheapest way of converting your normal lens into a great quality macro equipment. The prime lenses work best with these. A cheap 50mm f/1.8 lens can give super crisp results with this technique. The auto-focus extension tubes are available under 5000 rupees, but I would recommend manual extension tubes around 600 rupees which work really well. In macro, auto-focus is mostly pain than help and using manual focus gives greater control. It does need bit of practice though. And yes, this too needs extra light to avoid noise. In this type there are also bellows but they are slightly more difficult to use.

**Reverse Ring:** I started my macro photography with this but do not recommend it anymore. You can use the reverse ring to flip around your standard 18-55 kit lens to take stunning macro with huge magnification, but you also run a risk of spoiling the lens and introduce dust into your DSLR sensor unless you take good care. The reverse ring is generally available under 300 rupees.

There is also an option of tele-converters, but they are expensive and not most well suited. Another option is to reverse mount the prime lens on a telephoto lens. That too works like a macro adaptor, but that's not the most common way.



### Lighting: Getting sufficient and correctly diffused light

Once you have decided on your equipment, whether dedicated macro lens or one of the alternatives I have suggested above, the next biggest problem is getting the exposure right. You need a lot of light for Macro Photography to get the required depth-of-field and also all the details.

If you are using a dedicated macro lens, you can sometimes use natural light but it can use help from external light source. If you are using an alternative macro equipment, you always need extra light and natural light is seldom sufficient to give quality results. Also just blasting your subject with a lot of light is not a solution, the light needs to be diffused well so it can bring out the details without blowing them out and making it pure white.

You can use pop-up flash on your camera or a flashgun. Even the cheapest flash guns under 2000 rupees give great results. You can use light diffusers available in the market or make your own. If you use them well you can't make out the difference in your photos. Below are some examples.

This type of simple diffuser is available under 1000 rupees.

You can make your own diffuser from a simple plastic/thermocool plate(ensure not to pollute the environment by throwing them though).

Or you can make an elaborate pop-up flash diffuser which can transport the light with limited light loss close to your subject and still diffuse it very well. I built this with a plastic bottle and have been using it for the last 5 years.

You can search for hundreds of designs and make one that works for you.



**Exposure:** Another important tip while we are on the subject of light. You tend to get a lot of shake in macro photography. The way I solve this problem is to ensure to keep the camera settings in such a way that the image comes out black if the flash does not fire. For DSLR I use a f/16 aperture, ISO 100 and shutter speed of 1/200sec. This ensures that when flash fires, I always get a crisp picture if the focus is right, that's because the flash fires at a very quick burst typically around a few thousandths of a second which is good enough to freeze any action. You can start with similar exposure and then adjust according to what's required by the scene.

#### **Finding, Approaching and Focusing on your subject**

Now that we have talked about getting the equipment and light to shoot Macro, it's time to decide what to shoot and where to find the subject.

I would recommend starting from home,

take a few flowers or bird feathers and spray some water on them to make them interesting. Practice hard till you get great results and you are absolutely comfortable with your equipment and light. You can also try your hand on various spices, coffee beans, some man-made intricate things of your choice.

Now it's time to venture out. Surprisingly you can find a wide variety of wildlife around your house, garden or just go to a lake/river nearest to your house. Get ready to bend down, sit and slip in a bit of dirt if you want to find interesting subjects like insects, seeds, leaves and spider webs.

Early morning is the best time to go out since you can find morning dew on spider webs and even the insects will be a little slow to react. You can find fascinating patterns of dew drops on spider webs as well as hanging on grass. I would recommend start with that.



Tiny wild flowers are another great subject to start with. Ensure to choose clean, unharmed flowers for shooting. Go down to the level and decide how much magnification is needed.

Insects are the hardest and most interesting part. It will help if you learn about the habits of some of them before you shoot them (or you can learn some of it on the field itself). Insects present some of the most complex biological structures which are a pure pleasure to photograph. Insects like dragonflies and damselflies will come back and sit on the same perch after a few minutes, or jumping spiders will freeze at one place if you take a few shots before running away. Robber flies and dragonflies generally keep still if they have a prey in their mouth. Such traits are very interesting to observe.

**Some Ethics:** While you are trying to take photos, make sure you don't disturb the insects or move them away from their natural habitat. Exercise extreme caution

in conserving the habitat, even if it means losing a few shots. You will get an opportunity sometime again.

#### **A quick word on processing:**

I always recommend shooting in raw mode which can give you better control in post-processing. With little practice you can learn to use tools like Photoshop and Lightroom or even simple free software like Picasa to get the best results from your photos. You don't have to over-do the processing, just a bit of crop and adjusting contrast, highlights and shadows can do wonders. Your macro should always be focused correctly and should disclose as much detail as feasible and pleasing to the eye. Avoid the temptation of over-sharpening the photos. Sharpening cannot bring the details which are not captured by the camera and will only make the edges thicker. It should have interesting and yet soothing colors. Sometimes you can also go pure black and white for variety.



### **Personal Experiences (or my Aha! Moments)**

Here are a few images I have made over the years that fundamentally changed the way I look at nature.

#### **Protective Parents from Insect world**

This is a picture of a spider which I had taken a few years back. While I was coming out of Pashan Lake compound in Pune after a macro shoot, I saw something move in the low hanging coconut leaves. I climbed on the fence to look at it closely and I was greeted by hundreds of eggs glued to the leaf that was dangling vertically. And then quickly the spider arrived on the scene. I

really wanted to shoot the bunch of the translucent eggs clearly and tried to shoo-away the spider to get a clear view. But the tiny guy refused to budge even after multiple attempts and then finally decided to go ahead with the shot. I think the way the spider covered the eggs gave a better picture and also gave me a precious lesson in parenting.

Another picture is of another spider, which was carrying around hundreds of baby spiders on its whole body. It's a bit creepy to look at, but we can appreciate the length to which the insects have to go to protect their offspring.



**About this Article:** I am writing this article to share the joy I have experienced over the last 5-6 years as I slowly ventured into the world of small and tiny, hidden around our day-to-day life. And while I do that, my attempt is to convince you that you don't need to blow all your money on expensive macro lenses and macro lighting equipments.

#### **About the Author:**

I am Yogendra Joshi from Pune. Chartered Accountant by education and IT Professional by employment. I got drawn to the world of Photography in the year 2009 and in early 2010 I realized my keen interest in Macro Photography. I have been passionately

following the field of Macro Photography ever since, learning from people around the world, developing my own techniques

and sometimes even equipments which I use and sharing the knowledge to anyone who is interested in Macro.

I did not start off as a naturalist but after following the field of Macro Photography I have managed to learn so much about the tiny plants and insects that I have developed a special relationship with nature,

the nature of tiny and usually hidden to our eyes. It has given me insight into the strange, sometimes outright bizarre world of plants and insects. Through these experiences it's possible to grasp the importance of nature and the role it plays through unseen ways in our life and importance of keeping it intact for the generations

to follow. Now I am at a point where I consider Macro Photography as my meditation time.





Travelogue

# Communing with Nature: BR Hills, Karnataka



**Shashank Birla**

**I**t was late evening on our 3rd safari, and I had squeezed myself in the gap between the two seats on our jeep, crouched, pointing my camera lens slightly upwards. Light was falling, and I was thanking my stars for bringing along the bean bag to provide additional stability. Along with my wife and other co-passengers in my jeep including our naturalist, Nataraj, we silently waited for the sleeping head to rise.

But that's just me rushing to one of the highlights of our trip to the Biligirirangan Hills, Karnataka (locally known as Biligirirangana Betta). We had decided to forego our annual trip to one of India's wildlife reserves during our anniversary, and after much debate and discussions, we finally settled on the K Gudi Wilderness Camp, BR Hills. Why this particular choice? For one, it was a JLR (Jungle Lodges & Resorts) property and every nature enthusiast who has visited Karnataka's wild havens will swear by the outstanding location and knowledgeable staff that make staying in any of JLR's properties a special experience. Many of India's present day well-known photographers and conservationists have actually served long stints as JLR naturalists, and that is just a reinforcement of the service levels you are promised.

There were two other reasons

we had chosen K Gudi. One of them was that both Kabini and Bandipur, owing to the relatively easier access, would be seeing a far greater rush of visitors. The second, and what really sold us, were the experiences shared by past visitors, both on Tripadvisor and on forums such as India Nature Watch. The BR Hills, in spite of being declared a tiger reserve in 2011, have never been very well-known for sightings of big cats and other megafauna, but this is more than made up by the incredible natural beauty of the place, its diversity of birds and the amazing location of the K Gudi Wilderness Camp, bang within the tiger reserve with wildlife moving freely through the campus.



**Night View**



been built. Interestingly, the reference to Lord Ranganatha came only during the 18th century when Tipu Sultan had visited this temple, and it is only since then the name, Biligiri Rangaswamy came into being. Prior to this, it is thought that the temple itself was established after Sage Vashishtha made a small shrine here when he received the blessings of Lord Balaji(also known as Lord Venkateshwara, all forms of Lord Vishnu) here in these hills.

And not just culturally, the BR Hills also represent a vital ecological connection, acting as a bridge between the Western and Eastern Ghats, thus facilitating an important corridor for movement of a wide variety of biodiversity and also serving as a repository themselves. It was for this reason that approximately 540 sq. kms was declared a protected area in 1974, as a sanctuary under the Wildlife Protection Act. And thanks to conservation efforts, it was upgraded to a tiger reserve in 2011.

Surely some of the credit for this thriving biodiversity haven, must go to the strong connection between nature and the indigenous residents of the BR Hills, the Soligas(the name itself translates to 'people of the forest'). Many of their deities and folklore relate to the forest and you would still find this reverence even in their modern-day lives, as they pay visit to deities located within the forest, including Doddanayi(the tiger deity) and Doddasampige(a grand Champaka tree located in a sacred grove just outside the BR Hills). The Flame Of The Forest(Butea monosperma), locally known as Muttuga, plays an important role in their culture. The leaves of the tree have many uses including being sewn together to serve as a cup, and the flowers are used for celebrating many of their festivals.

This is because the JLR property was established in 1994, well before this was declared a tiger reserve and it is only now that in consonance with guidelines, the property is required to shift away from its present location. Yet another reason why we wished to visit this treasured gem of JLR as soon as possible.

**The BR Hills- The Place & Its People**

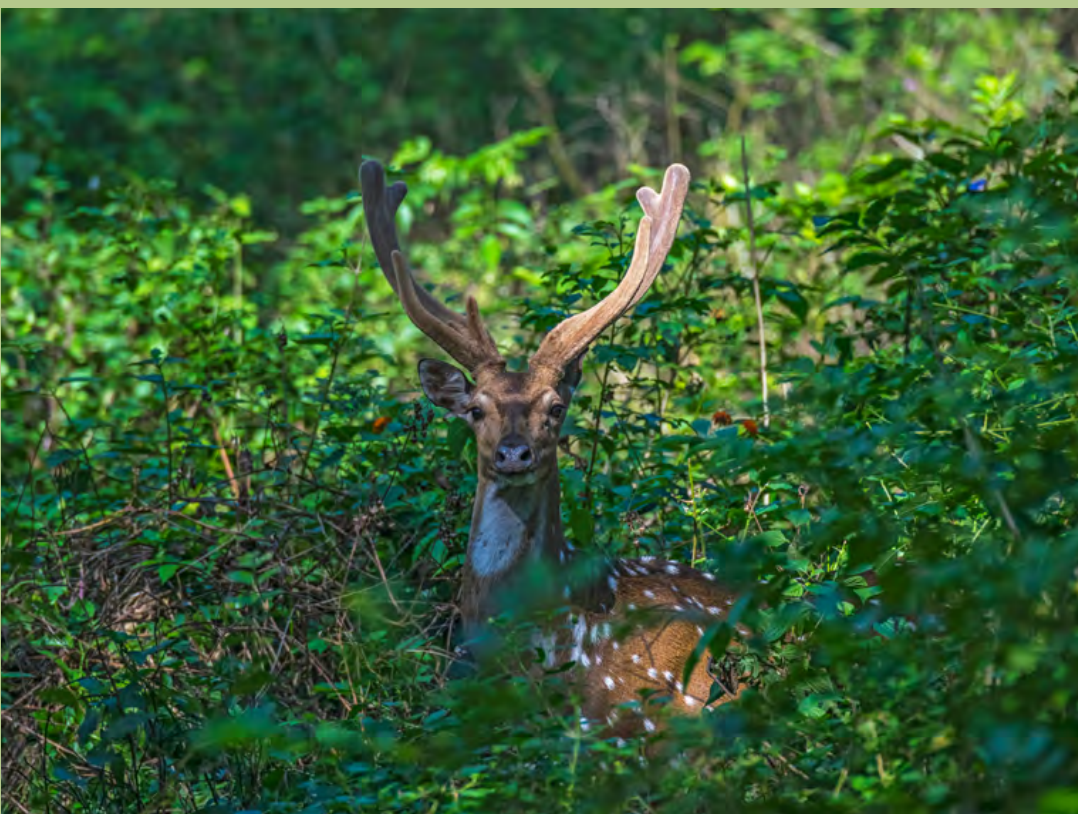
The Biligirirangana Hills while not widely known outside Karnataka, have stood sentinel here since time immemorial. The name of the hills literally translates to 'white rock' after the granite face of the hill on which the temple of Lord Ranganatha(a form of the Hindu God, Lord Vishnu) has



At one time, a spectre had loomed over this area for many years, the dreaded dacoit, Veerappan. Along with his gang, they carried out sandalwood and ivory smuggling with impunity. However, post the operations in 2004 leading to his death, visitors have slowly and steadily increased to this area, drawn by the rich natural and cultural heritage.

**Biodiversity**

At such a strategic location from the ecological perspective, the BR hills play host to a stunning variety of biodiversity, easily seen in the incredible variety of habitats, ranging from dry scrub to broad-leaved deciduous forests. The characteristic habitats of the Western Ghats, such as the Sholas(a combination of high-elevation grasslands and evergreen forest) also form a part of the landscape here. A study published by J.Gireesha and N.S. Raju in 2013 mapped the ecology of the hills as follows: deciduous(61.1%), scrub(28.2%), grassland(3.4%), evergreen(6.5%) and shola(0.8%).



The bottom line, it's an absolute pleasure to wander here discovering the area's natural beauty, which changes character from the yellowish-brown hues of the foothills, to the dark green sunlight-dappled canopy of the higher elevations. The flora here is incredibly diverse with over 800 species of plants making their home here. As many as 38 species of medicinal plants have been identified in the study mentioned above.



As regarding fauna, surely one of the greatest attractions of the BR Hills is the incredible diversity of birds, and while estimates vary, at least over 250 species are known to reside in these verdant hills and these include endemics of the Western Ghats such as the Rufous Babbler, Malabar Parakeet, Grey-headed Bulbul. Curiously though, some charismatic species such as Great Hornbill and Malabar Trogon have not been recorded here. Rest assured though if you are a birder, you are going to be one happy camper.

The smaller life-forms abound here, with a multitude of species of spiders, scorpions, dragonflies, damselflies, and over a 100 species of butterflies and moths including India's largest butterfly, the Southern Birdwing, and rarities such as the Sahyadri Painted Courtesan. The reptile and amphibian diversity here needs further documentation, but there can be no question that the area is a potential hotspot for the same. *Microhyla sholigari*, an endangered species of narrow-mouthed frog was discovered here in the BR Hills in the year 2000, and there are even reports of a possible caecilian species. Estimates put the number of reptiles here at close to 22, including the endemic of the Western & Eastern Ghats, *Draco dussumieri*, the Southern Gliding Lizard, in addition to a variety of other lizards and snakes, the latter including the Indian Rock Python, Green Keelback, Spectacled Cobra, and Striped Coral Snake.

Moving to the mammals, most estimates put the mammal species here at approximately 26. This habitat particularly represents an important area for India's largest land mammal, the Asian Elephant supporting one of its largest populations in the Eastern Ghats. Owing to its crucial location within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, the area remains one of the most important from the conservation perspective of this species. The other keystone species of this habitat, the Tiger is also said to be doing well in the reserves. Recent estimates point to tiger numbers here between 50-60 individuals



inside the BRT Reserve., and the news gets even better with populations reported recently from the contiguous MM(Malai Mahadeshwara) Hills Sanctuary and Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, which were not part of the earlier census, re-emphasizing the need to protect this crucial corridor. The above numbers are indicators of habitat health, as these forests provide a home to many other charismatic species such as Leopards, Wild Dogs, Sloth Bears, Gaur, the smaller cats including the Leopard Cat and Rusty Spotted Cat, Indian Giant as well as the Flying Squirrel, deer including the Chital, Sambar, Indian Muntjac and Mouse Deer, primates including the Hanuman Langur and Bonnet Macaque, and a host of other mammals.





### Amazing encounters

Apart from the daily safaris, my wife Deepi and I would spend most of the day, at the serene little sit-out of our log hut, Chamundi, her with binoculars and me with the camera, watching and photographing those flashes of beauties that included Orange Minivet, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Bronzed as well as White-bellied Drongos, Blue-capped Rock Thrush, Indian and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch among many others. As if the diversity of birds hadn't been enough, we would get the surprise of our lives on the first day, a surprise I wish I had been better prepared for. Post our evening safari and some snacks, we had returned to the log hut late in the evening

around 7:30 PM. After keeping our gear, I stepped out to our sit-out area, flashlight in hand, to do a quick scan of our log hut surrounds. There was no barrier behind our log-hut and the forest, so wildlife moved freely. My flashlight caught the eye-shine of two dark shapes resting about 15-20 metres away from our log-hut. Their size and dimensions seemed to suggest the ubiquitous Wild Boar we had seen all day at campus. Nevertheless, I asked Deepi to retrieve a pair of binoculars to confirm. While this was happening though, both the animals rose to move, and as they rose, suddenly up went the long quills on their back. Porcupines! I dashed into the room, to retrieve the camera, but these shy animals

had already retreated into the undergrowth by the time I had adjusted the camera settings, leaving me with no record shot of this elusive nocturnal species. A missed opportunity for a capture on my camera, but at least the image in our minds would stay with us. And yes, getting back to the beginning of my story, it was our 3rd safari during another lovely evening in the BR Hills. The sightings as always were not as plentiful as you might see in some of the other popular reserves, but with the forest bathed in golden light, it was still a pleasure to drive through this wilderness, punctuated by the odd shy Barking Deer and flocks of Hill Mynas. The sun was setting on the horizon, when we chanced upon another jeep parked at an intersection. As always when this happens, there was a sense of anticipation as we neared closer, except this time, it was not just the feeling of anticipation we'd take back. Because as our naturalist

silently pointed to a network of branches and leaves mid-canopy, my eyes just didn't form, but saw rosettes. Without a moment's hesitation, I peeked through the lens of my camera to the spot about 10 metres further in, and saw the form that every wildlife enthusiast longs to see. A gorgeous sub-adult Leopard was enjoying an extended afternoon siesta. I looked at my wife Deepi, big happy grins on both of our faces as we exchanged glances. After a few record clicks, I borrowed her pair of binoculars as well to just enjoy the sight of this secretive cat. And it was only after a little bit of waiting, that the leopard sleepily raised his head, gave us a piercing gaze, looked into

the distance, and resumed his lazy evening, dozing off again.

One thing you have to be prepared for, when you travel here is to not carry the same expectations of sighting wildlife, as you would say, in nearby Kabini. Courtesy the invasive lantana which has unfortunately taken over much of the reserve, and which the forest department continues to battle, seeing wildlife is not easy here and which may disappoint some visitors. The key here is enjoying the wilderness as it is, thick and impenetrable perhaps in vision, but thrumming with life, evident as we warmed our limbs near a campfire at K Gudi late one evening, and somewhere in the distance, a Sambar persistently called out its alarm, and once, just once, a loud 'Aaaaaaongh!' punctuated that silent winter air.

### Stays in the BR Hills

Courtesy the earlier limited traffic of tourists, the BR Hills have not seen the kind of infrastructure growth and commercialization as seen in some of Karnataka's hill stations and wildlife sanctuaries. Hence, staying options for travellers have been often limited to homestays. Presently for visitors on a budget, some modernized homestays have since become available like Rajathadri Hill Villa and Giridarshini, the latter actually is a well-known landmark here, a popular eating joint set up here since the 1950s, which has ever since expanded to offering stays as well. For a more intimate experience, the resort Gorukana run in conjunction with VGKK (Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra) is a good bet.

Undoubtedly though, BR Hills' most well-known and popular place to stay is JLR's Kyathadevara Gudi Wilderness Camp. A mix of tented cottages, log huts and 2 family rooms, located about 20 kms further in from

the forest checkpost, passing by the beauty of the forest (drive slow and keep your eyes peeled), among K Gudi's greatest strengths is the incredible location. The proof is in the roaming herds of Chital, curious Wild Boar that might surprise with their close approach, the absolutely stunning variety of birdlife which would make you question whether you should leave the camp at all for birding and yes, nocturnal visitors as well, including predators indicated by the nightly alarm calls, and should you be carrying a flashlight and a bundle of luck, by the sight of a large feline form, more so the one with rosettes, all of this, within the grounds of K Gudi. The amazing location is further supplemented by the warm service of the staff and the credible guidance of the knowledgeable naturalists. Food is simple, homely and one shouldn't expect a great variety of cuisines.

Another major advantage with staying at K Gudi, is you can avail the JLR jeep safari. Most visitors staying outside would anyway have to come to the forest department quarters situated next door to avail the jeep safari on a first come, first serve basis, whereas if you're staying at K Gudi, it is included in your package, and while there are specified time bands in the morning and evening, with JLR's safari, you do end up spending more time inside the forest within the prescribed time band (on average between 1.5-2 hours), something nature enthusiasts would appreciate. You can of course, also choose to explore the forest around K Gudi with the help of one of the camp's guides. Physical fitness would be recommended, as the initial climb can be a bit strenuous, though well worth the effort courtesy the scenic views once you ascend the rise. In case you're staying for more than 2 nights, they also arrange for an excursion to Lord Ranganatha temple at no extra charge. Jump at this

opportunity as along with the cultural heritage, it is another chance to explore the forests of the BR Hills, which you will pass through. Price-wise, this would be definitely considered in the higher end and it is one of JLR's more premium properties, however, it remains for the traveller to decide how much bang for the buck K Gudi provides, especially considering the camp's possible shift in the near future.

#### How to reach there

Travellers to the BR Hills most often access the area via Bengaluru (approximately 200 kms, a 4.5-5 hours drive) and Mysore (approximately 80 kms, 2 hours drive). A few flights and plenty of train options are available, connecting Bengaluru and Mysore. The third option, a few visitors avail of is Coimbatore (approximately 175 kms). The distance makes Coimbatore the most accessible international airport, however do check flight timings and taxi rates if hiring a private car (inter-state taxes can vary according to vehicle), as typically most visitors like to reach BR Hills before late afternoon, so they don't miss the opportunity for the evening safari. The nearest railhead is Chamarajanagar, situated about 25 kms away. If coming by road directly from Bengaluru to BR Hills, it is recommended to come via Yelandur, and in case of Mysore, via Chamarajanagar.



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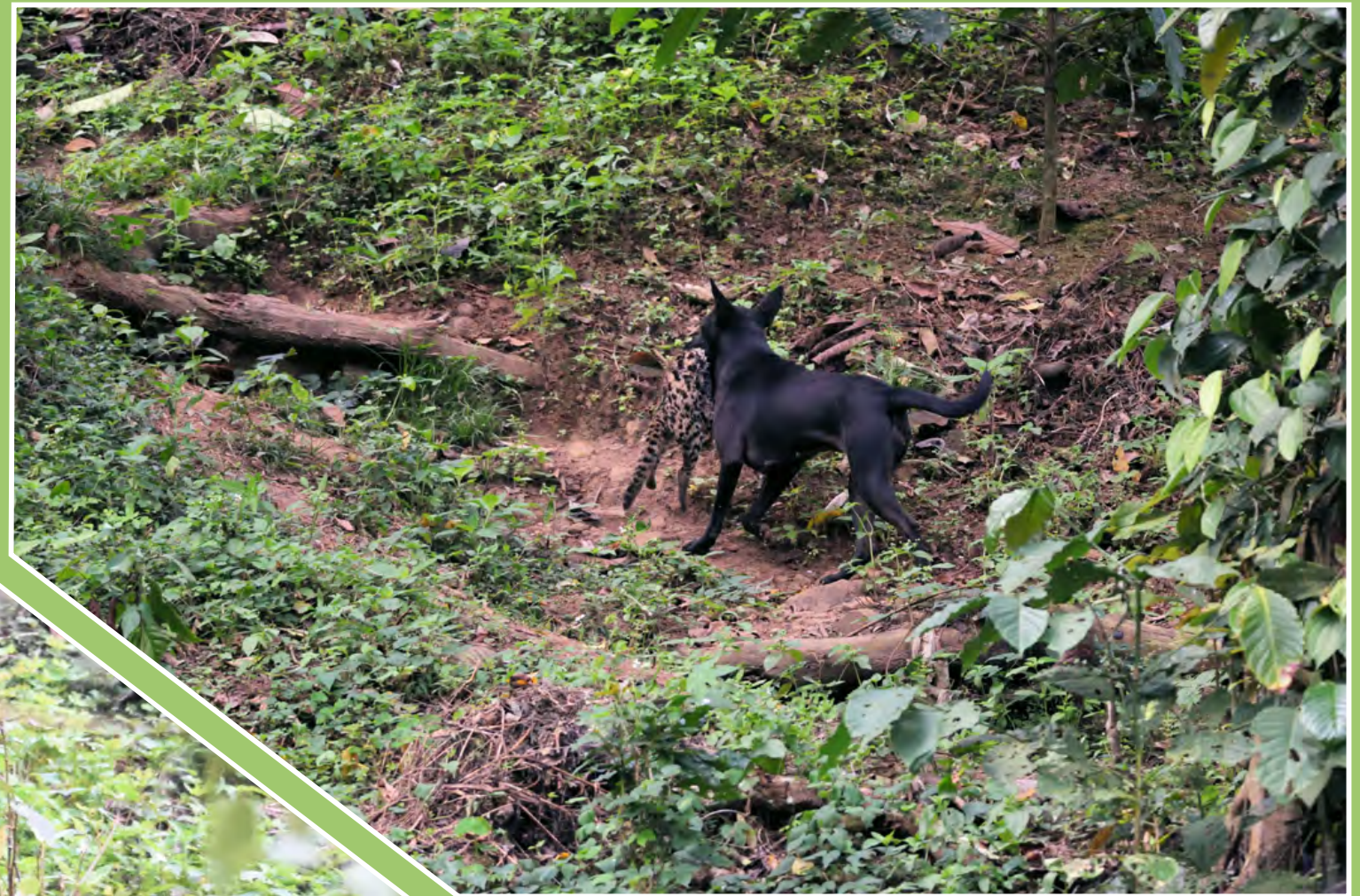
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Natural History

# FERAL DOGS— A Menacing Threat to Wildlife

Hrishikesh Sagar



**M**an's best friend is gradually turning out to be a formidable enemy to wildlife in many parts of India, especially by preying upon or harassing them, and by transmitting diseases.

During my recent birdwatching visit to Coorg (Suntikoppa), Karnataka on December 13, 2015, I witnessed a tragic incident in which a Leopard Cat was killed by feral dogs. A bunch of friends and I were busy photographing birds close to a coffee estate when one of my friends noticed 2 dogs trying to catch something in the bushes close by. He alerted us about the situation and the next moment one of the dogs caught something and started running towards a ridge.

After viewing it through my telescopic lens, my first impression was that the dog's prey was a Leopard cub. I couldn't believe my eyes, hence clicked few images to confirm what I was seeing was right. Immediately, I started running towards the dogs, hoping that I could still save the cub, if it was not seriously injured. However

with additional weight of my camera and lens I couldn't cover a large distance. I was climbing up a steep ridge which didn't make it easier either. That dog was also not too bothered about my presence.

My concern was that if I were to shout the dog might bolt away with the cub, however one of the dogs did notice me climbing and signalled the dog with the kill and within a split second they both vanished into a coffee workers' settlement. I immediately came down and with the help of my friends managed to contact the estate manager. I showed him the images and requested him to help save the cub.

He immediately recognized the dogs and told that they are feral and he saw them regularly in and around the estate, he informed his workers about the situation

and we insisted them to help us find the dogs and they were happy to help. After a while one of the workers came to us with the carcass and we realized that the prey was a Leopard Cat and not a Leopard Cub. It was dead. We could see that it had suffered some grievous injuries around the chest. With a lump in my throat I departed from that place after requesting the manager to keep the forest department informed about this incident.

We usually neglect the impact of dogs on wildlife mostly because we think of them as our companions. With the growing number of feral dog population across the country, especially around the fringe areas of the forest, the nuisance value is increasing manifold. By preying on wild animals, they are becoming a serious menace for wildlife.



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Image by Rohit Sant





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