



# WILD

## SOJOURNS

May  
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▼  
**Bonding with  
Bandhavgarh**

▼  
**Five Incredible tips  
for Bird Photographers**

▼  
**Sasan Gir - Thriving  
Asiatic Lions**

▼  
**Global Bio-diversity  
and Climate Change**

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This was shot in Ecuador in the Andes mountains by Sudhir Nambiar



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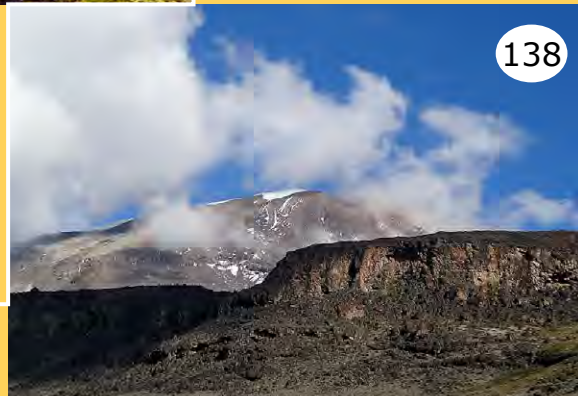
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## Chief Editors



Megh Roy Choudhury



Ritesh Nangare



Prasanna AV

### Is Earth Burning???

There is great debate on whether global warming is real and some even call it a hoax. But climate scientists looking at the data and facts agree that the planet is irrefutably warming. As the mercury scales unprecedented territories and throats are getting parched by the acute shortage of water, there is no doubt in the minds of the common man that the much feared phenomenon is very real. A gradual increase in the average temperature of the Earth's atmosphere and its oceans is now unquestionably apparent. Scariest more is that the change is believed to be permanently remoulding the Earth's climate. Is it even remotely possible to restore everything?

Where the deforestation has become synonymous with development, humans appear to be hell bent on destroying what the Mother Earth has bestowed up on us.

The problems appear to have sky rocketed out of control and solutions are not simply forthcoming. Earth is burning indeed and the loss of 3000 hectares of prime forested areas in Uttarakhand due to raging forest fires is a flagrant example.

Acute water shortage has hit many parts of the country and it is facing severe drought. Temperatures in many cities have crossed 40 degrees and some places have even touched 50 degrees. When humans are facing unsurmountable challenges in day to day living, the less said about the birds, animals and the lesser fauna, the better.

One can't help but fear whether a very wicked vicious cycle has really begun. Whether that the doomsday is near and how much more desecration our earth can tolerate is open to speculation. Only a radical change in the ideology and an integrated approach can bring about some solutions. In the US, President Barack Obama's words convey the mandatory concern, **"The world must tackle this global threat before it is too late"**.

- Megh Roy Choudhury



# Asiatic Lion

A Safe Refuge at Sasan Gir

Hardik Pala





**A**siatic Lion (*Panthera leo persica*), is one of the lion subspecies out of two & one of the five big cats found in India including Bengal Tiger, Indian Leopard, Clouded Leopard and the Snow Leopard. Its presence in India at the Gir Forest & National Park, allows India to proudly reside/host all five big cats in one single country. Once hunted to extinction, Asiatic lions differ from their other subspecies, African Lions (*Panthera leo leo*), by its size and its mane only. Lions are the 2nd largest cat species globally and can be compared with the tigers in all measurements except the skull which is, in fact, bigger than that of tigers. Today, Asiatic Lions' last home is the Gir National Park in Junagadh District of Gujarat.

#### **About Species & its History**

Lions were the most widespread large land mammals around 10,000 years ago and Asiatic Lions have roamed almost in the entire continent,

however, over the time, they are wiped out from their range and today they were in just one corner of our country, Saurashtra Region of Gujarat state. Persecution and trophy hunting by the Britishers, Mughals and the rulers of 19th century including our Maharajas, the lion population in "Princely India" remained at 25 individuals only by the start of the 20th century. It was the strict protection imposed for the species & the foresightedness of the Junagadh Nawabs in the early 1900s, that the Asiatic Lions still survive in the country and the result of the conservation has helped achieve a number of 500+ individuals in Saurashtra peninsula and surrounded areas. Since centuries, lions are deeply rooted in our culture and religion right from our Maharajas' thrones with lion faced armrests to Indian National Emblem and Indian Goddess Durga mounted on a lion, today the lions have lost the attention and importance it deserves.





### **Current Scenario, About Gir & other habitats**

Unique among all the big cats, lions are social animals and they have proved to be social with the people of Gir as well, as they reside within the local communities of Kathiyawar called Maaldharis. The unique bond between the man and animal is seen here in the region with high tolerance of the animals and of the community as well, who has affection & cultural reverence towards the majestic cats. The Maaldharis, living in the Gir region with their old profession of milk and cattle still have their homes called Nes inside the sanctuary area and often compromise their livestock being the meal/prey of the animals. The word Gir, is as good as synonym of the history of the Asiatic Lions today, its existence has appeared in the ancient literatures and has historic importance.

The uniformly colored big cat, lions, has made



Gir their home because the forest remains dry and pale for most of the months except monsoon. Although, lions may reside in broad variety of habitats, Asiatic Lions have chosen the dry deciduous and teak forests with acacia savanna. The Gir forest is a semi-evergreen flora with grasslands, hills, streams and rivers with a couple of large water bodies which also has the maximum number of Muggers crocodiles. Indian Leopards, jackals, foxes, Jungle Cats, Rusty-spotted Cats are the few carnivores housed by the Gir. The other fauna of Gir is Sambar, Spotted Deer, Blue Bull, Indian Gazelle, Indian Hare and Langur, being a big prey base for the lions of Gir. Gir also has a checklist of over 300 bird species and over 40 species of reptiles and invertebrates as well as butterflies. The geographical location and varied climatic conditions of the region is such that it can house a variety of wildlife.

## **LIONESS**







Asiatic Lions are 10-20 per cent smaller than their African cousins with comparatively sparse & skimpy mane and little bald mane over the head. One of the characteristic which separate the Asiatic Lion from their African siblings is the distinct fold of skin at belly in both males and females. The only social cat, lions are however called, the Asiatic lions are less social than the Africans. Both the lion subspecies live in groups of up to 12-15 individuals called a pride, but the Asiatic pride has up to 10 individuals with 2-3 females and males mostly join in during breeding periods. The common pride you can find are 2 females with their 2-3 cubs each and they too leave the pride as soon as they enter adulthood at the age of 2.5 years to 3 years. Male lions do join the pride to eat and mate mostly. The bond between two female individuals is better than a mating pair and that is the reason the pride are without a male lion for most months of the year. Two to three male affiliations are common, mostly brothers, and such temporary partnership are for feeding & hunting purpose only, which may end upon finding a mate. Lions, being polyestrous & polygamous, mate up

to 100 times in the season in their usual short but frequent copulation.

#### **Current Conservation & Threats**

The last census carried out by the Gujarat forest department in 2015, shows approx 523 individuals with maximum numbers of lion cubs, then females and males being at last. The conservation programmes and the local NGOs as well as forest department's efforts have resulted in a spectacular population rebound. For over half a century, these animals' range have remained in the Greater Gir including the Gir National Park and sanctuary, and few other pockets of Saurashtra region around Junagadh and Amreli district with a couple of wildlife sanctuaries, with a total of 20,000 square kilometers of area. Currently, the social cats have challenges to thrive from the lack of habitat. Man-animal conflict, development and revenue lands around their range are often found to be a threat to their future. 70% of the lion populations live outside of the protected areas and still survive, they are spreading their range and may do so in future but their origin will remain same.





### Translocation & controversies

The Government of India launched the Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project to minimize the risk of extermination of the Asiatic Lion by translocating it to other places in the wild. An increasing density of the lions in a limited geography makes the population vulnerable to extinction owing to epidemics, natural calamities etc. Also, with a 23% increase in the lion population as against 2010, human-animal conflict has increased in the park. In fact, according to the 14th Asiatic Lion Census 2015, the almost 90, i.e.40% were located in regions outside the park.

The Wildlife Institute of India first proposed the idea of translocation in 1990 to save the last species of this majestic animal and harmonize its relationship with humans in the region. On the basis of a workshop on the Population

and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) of Asiatic Lion in 1993, it was proposed that some of the individuals be reintroduced into the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh. Based on this, the Supreme Court vetted out its first order for action on the same in April 2013. The Gujarat Government set up an expert committee to evaluate the project; suggesting that the IUCN guidelines be followed. The Union proposed a long term plan that involved relocating 2-3 male lions every 3-5 years and this to be continued over a period of 25 years. This will not only help create an independent lion population in a phased manner, but would ensure its adaptation by maintaining the interlinkage between the two populations, they recommended. Yet, till date, the centre and the Gujarat Government have not initiated the same.



Many reasons have been quoted for inaction of the translocation, a core issue being that the Gujarat State Government did not wish to depart with its lion population and share the status of housing the 'Pride of lions of India' with other states. Technical reasons quoted by officials are that the presence of tigers in the Kuno-Palpur sanctuary may turn out to be a source of conflict with the lions since the two big cats may not co-exist. Another reason has been that the new sanctuary needs to be expanded since the prey base is not suitable for the proliferation of the Asiatic lion in a restricted area. The Gujarat State Government therein demanded a deeper study of the local habitat and culture of Kuno-Palpur before any actual work on the translocation started. The event went to the extent of proposing new homes for the big cats in the

realms of Barda WLS and Bhavnagar Amreli Forest quoting that translocation across a great distance will break the social bonds that are vital for lion survival. The issue came to a dead-end with the dictate issued by the Union to the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department to expand the area of the Kuno WLS from 349 sq. km. to 700 sq.km. This move shall require the relocation of many big villages. This stalling move was followed by a complete turn-around by the Ministry of Environment and Forests denying the need for translocation - a move believed to be fuelled by the public opposition declared by Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. The fate of this last race of majestic big cat has unfortunately been entangled in the whims and fancies of the self-willed human race.



Hardik Pala is a civil engineer by profession. He is a resident of Jamnagar in Gujarat and is very passionate about wildlife photography. He has made numerous trips to study and photograph Asiatic Lions.



# GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY & CLIMATE CHANGE

**Rituraj Phukan**

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Secretary General,  
Green Guard Nature Organization



Image credit: Credit:SMETEK/Science Photo Library/Getty Images

## Introduction

The Earth's climate has always changed over time. But the change in recent decades has been so dramatic that impacts are being felt in wildlife habitats on land and sea. Higher temperatures, extreme weather, extensive droughts, shifting breeding seasons, migration periods based on changing food availability, new diseases, ice melt and sea level rise are evidence of an altered climate already upon us. Fascinating new facts are being discovered while researchers seek to determine how the natural world is being affected by climate change and also how species might respond in the future. It is clear that climate change is already disrupting life on our planet like never before and is expected to threaten with extinction approximately one quarter or more of all species on land by the year 2050, surpassing even habitat loss as the biggest threat to life on land. Similarly, biodiversity of the oceans and inland water bodies are also at great risk from climate change. The earth has seen relatively stable climate for the last 10,000 years, so the wildlife and species is being tested like never before. While climate change is expected to trigger extinctions, some may thrive and see extension of current ranges in the short term.

Living creatures have evolved to live within certain temperature ranges and most species cannot adapt to the rapid changes in the ecosystem. Unlike other periods of change experienced on the planet, the current situation appears to be very different for two specific reasons. Firstly, the rate at which the climate is changing may be unprecedented. Most creatures are unlikely to be able to adapt or migrate fast enough. Secondly, the natural world is fragmented and wildlife habitats are scattered and isolated, hindering natural migration in changing times.

### Habitat Impacts

The impact of climate change on biodiversity varies in different ecosystems around the world. Biological diversity, a combination of genetic variation, species richness, taxonomic diversity, ecosystem diversity and landscape diversity, is currently being lost at an unprecedented rate. One measure of this loss is the rate of species extinctions. Ecologists have developed mathematical models based on the better understanding of the mechanisms by which species and ecosystems can be impacted by climate change. These models are used to forecast the impacts on species distributions, abundance and extinctions and some of them indicate alarming consequences for biodiversity. The worst-case scenarios project extinction rates that would qualify the current period as the sixth mass extinction in the history of the earth.

Climate change has had a major impact

on marine and terrestrial habitats and species. Sea-level rise and salinization would have disastrous consequences for coastal mangroves and wetlands, which are the breeding habitat for numerous wildlife. Rise in sea levels could impact the sea turtle's nesting colonies on beaches and changes in ocean current will disrupt migration and feeding patterns. Warmer nest temperatures yield more females and thus alter the ratio of male-to-female sea turtles. In fact, entire populations of endangered birds, mammals, crustaceans and fish would be wiped out by rapid salinization of coastal areas. Flooding of mangroves would also affect the Royal Bengal Tiger in the Sundarbans.

Apex predators like the tiger are especially vulnerable to climate change due to the lack of alternative suitable habitats for them to migrate. Precipitation change could change the nature of the remaining tiger habitats in India and make them



© Sandeep Dutta

Royal Bengal Tiger

### One-horned Rhinoceros



less suitable for future survival. A deficit in soil moisture due to less rainfall could increase tree mortality in the deciduous forest habitat and trigger a shift towards open tropical dry forests, which are considered to be less productive for tigers. However, in Bhutan, tigers are expected to increase their range upslope with the expanding treeline, displacing the already endangered Snow Leopards. Warming in the Himalayas has already occurred at three times the global average and continued warming will not only fragment and isolate Snow Leopard populations, but will also cause disappearance of alpine pastures that sustain their prey base including the Himalayan Tahr.

Global warming and changes in precipitation patterns are expected to endanger a third of the world's natural forests. India's Western Ghats, the Himalayas, alluvial grasslands and island ecosystems are known to be highly vulnerable to rapid temperature rises. In the Garhwal Himalayas, a heat wave combined with absence

of winter rains resulted in the destruction of hundreds of hectares of natural forest due to forest fires. In Nepal, the Mountain Natural Resources Division of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development has attributed global warming as the cause for creating the conditions that led to the destruction of vital forest habitat in wildfires. Pests and diseases thrive in warmer temperatures and in India, large swathes of sal forests have been infested by the dark metal-brown beetle known as the Sal Heartwood Borer.

The grassland habitat of the Indian One-horned Rhinoceros is sustained by abundant rainfall during the annual monsoons. Change in precipitation in the floodplains of India and Nepal could cause floods, leading to deaths by drowning, or droughts when displaced rhinos are at a greater risk of being poached. Change in rainfall patterns and the availability of fodder could force the Indian Elephant into newer migration routes and increasing conflict situations with humans.



The ocean provides about 50 percent of the oxygen we breathe and is the pump that allows us to have fresh water. Along with the sun, the ocean is responsible for the global circulation system that transports water from the land to the sea to the atmosphere and back to the land again. The collapse of oceanic biodiversity will also have disastrous impacts for humans.

This Acropora coral field in Fiji was exposed to multiple impacts including a crown-of-thorns outbreak and cyclone damage. © Matt Curnock 2012

**Global Impacts**

In the tropical regions of the world, climate change is expected to rival change in land-use patterns as the most important impact on tropical forest biodiversity. Range shifts to higher latitudes and elevations has become routine as species expand into areas that are rendered suitable. Similarly, local extinctions or shifts from areas that changed climatically are also commonly seen. Climate warming has also impacted the phenology of species leading to potential mismatches between interacting species, for example, between pollinators and plants.

**This Acropora coral field in Fiji was exposed to multiple impacts including a crown-of-thorns outbreak and cyclone damage. © Matt Curnock 2012**

**Oceanic Impacts**

Corals are the ocean's richest biome and up to three-quarters of the existing reefs are likely to disappear by 2050. Corals are vulnerable to changes in temperature, light, and nutrients and in the Indian Ocean nearly seventy percent of coral reefs appear to have died. Ocean warming causes coral polyps to expel the algae that live within their tissues, which results in coral bleaching. Repeated and sustained bleaching events are fatal for the coral reefs as they survive without the algae providing vital nutrients. Additionally, ocean acidification has already begun to reduce calcification rates of reef-building organisms.

The catastrophic collapse of phytoplankton and zooplankton populations in the sea, estimated at

40 percent since 1950, is alarming and ocean acidification, pollution, habitat destruction and plummeting whale populations, the primary species that fertilize the phytoplankton, are all responsible. For example, one Blue Whale defecates three tons of nitrogen and iron-rich faeces a day, providing nutrients to the phytoplankton. In return the phytoplankton feed the zooplankton, the fishes and ultimately everything that lives in the sea. The North Atlantic Right Whale, one of the most endangered animals on the planet with an extant population of 300-350 individuals left in the wild, is further pushed towards extinction due to decrease of zooplankton. Besides providing oxygen and sequestering carbon dioxide, planktons form the foundation for the entire oceanic food chain.





Orangutan

In Malaysia and Indonesia, warmer temperatures, rainfall decrease, droughts and forest fires are further threatening the existence of the already imperiled Orangutans. In 2007, nearly 1,000 Orangutans were killed in uncontrolled fires caused by dry forest conditions. Changes in rainfall could also affect the availability of tropical fruits which are the orangutan's diet and affect the animal's breeding success. In Panama, a change in precipitation along with increasingly severe dry seasons has led to the drastic decline of plant species growing for in moist conditions. Another documented incident has been the decline in amphibian populations like Golden Toads in neotropical montane forests.

Across Africa, changes in precipitation patterns may cause some areas to simply become unsuitable for certain species to live in. African Elephants can drink up to 225 litres of water each day, so changing weather patterns may

mean they have to travel further in search of water, moving outside protected areas and coming into more contact with people. This increases the risk of them being poached, or coming into conflict with people, which can result in fatalities on both sides. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change these changes are occurring at a faster than expected rate, particularly in southern Africa. The numbers of mammal species in the national parks in sub-Saharan Africa could decline by 24 to 40%. One study predicts that 66% of animal species in South Africa's Kruger National Park could go extinct.

### Polar Regions

The polar regions of the Earth are where climate change is having the most visible and significant

impacts. Combined with the depletion of the ozone layer and the related rise in UV radiation, it is expected that there will be a significant fall in the population of krill, a primary food source for many marine species. Warmer ocean temperatures and melting sea ice in the Arctic and Antarctic feeding grounds may jeopardize the ecology and migration pattern of the of many large whales. The Bowhead, Narwhal, and Beluga, which live in Arctic waters throughout the year, are in particular danger.

The Arctic is warming roughly twice as fast as the global average and sea ice is melting earlier and forming later each year; sea ice in the Arctic has declined drastically in the last 30 years. Glaciers are melting, permafrost thaw has accelerated and the Northwest Passage was ice free for the first time in history in 2007. The changes documented in the Arctic climate in the last 50 years, seen with future projections, are unprecedented during the time frame of human history.

### Early melting of the Hudson Bay ice has affected the lifecycle of the Polar Bear population

The Polar Bear, Walrus, Bearded Seal, and Ringed Seal may be especially vulnerable due to life histories reliant on sea ice. For the Polar Bears of Hudson Bay, the loss of sea ice makes it more difficult to come ashore to den in the Wapusk National Park area in late autumn, and return to sea ice in spring to feast on the seal pups. It means these bears are fasting for longer periods, dramatically reducing their body weight and physical condition and making it harder for them to survive the summer season. It was common to see female polar bears with 3 cubs, but in recent years even two cubs are considered a rarity in the Churchill area, famous as the Polar Bear Capital of the World. Ironically, the loss of sea ice is also detrimental to the seals, which are the Polar Bear's main prey and equally dependent on sea ice to raise their young and rest.



### Early melting of the Hudson Bay ice has affected the lifecycle of the Polar Bear population

Temperate species and/or seasonal migrants are likely to extend their geographic range into Arctic habitats and in recent decades, Grizzly Bears have been reported in the Canadian Arctic. Red Foxes have been reported in the Arctic Fox habitat, increasing the possibility of predation and displacement. The snow loving Arctic Fox will also find fewer seal carcasses as it follows Polar Bears across the stark landscape, and fewer Lemmings to hunt for its own pups. The calls of Gray Whales have been recorded far north of its present range, in the western Beaufort Sea. These species, along with the Humpback, Fin, and Minke Whales, and pinnipeds like the Spotted, Ribbon, Hooded, and Harp Seals, are all poised to disperse northwards.

Antarctic species are dramatically impacted by climate as well. The West Antarctic Peninsula ranks second, with only some areas in the High Arctic experiencing a faster rise in temperatures. Krill often feed on algae underneath sea ice and populations

have been declining around the West Antarctic Peninsula as sea ice has decreased. Changes in sea ice concentration or the relative area of water covered by sea ice, affect not only Penguins, but also the entire Antarctic food web, down to the smallest of species.

Adélie Penguins are 'true' Antarctic penguins,

Gentoo Penguin



populations of Gentoo Penguins, with a much varied diet, has increased in recent decades. African penguin populations in South Africa's Western Cape declined by nearly 70 percent during the decade 2001-9, partly owing to climate-induced shifts in fish stocks.

In another study, scientists found that ocean temperature directly impacts the ratio of male to female Northern Elephant Seal pups born in a given year. With oceans warming globally, scientists worry about the long-term effects of this phenomenon on seal population. An example of a species benefitting from less sea ice is the Southern Elephant Seals, the world's largest pinniped. Studies have established that less ice resulted in more Elephant Seal pups in the breeding colonies on Macquarie Island near Antarctica. When there's extra sea ice the seals can't access the continental shelf as readily as when there's either an average or lesser amount of sea ice. Furthermore, a 2008 study has additionally identified Antarctic Toothfish as highly vulnerable to climate change.

meaning they spend most of their time in Antarctica. But climate change is reducing the amount of sea ice in parts of the continent and Adélie Penguin populations have been declining in recent years. This has been attributed to the long-term decline in the abundance of Antarctic krill in parts of the Southern Ocean and changing weather conditions in their traditional nesting areas. Many other birds are dependent on the krill that live on the underside of ice sheets. Emperor Penguins breed and raise their offspring almost exclusively on sea ice and are highly vulnerable as well. Chinstrap Penguins, which subsist mostly on krill, are also on the wane. In contrast,



Chinstrap Penguins



### Birds as Messengers of Climate Change

During COP21, the United Nations Climate Conference in Paris in December 2015, Birdlife International and The National Audubon Society came out with a report 'The Messengers – what birds tell us about threats from climate change and solutions for nature and people'. Hundreds of species were studied all over the globe with current and projected impacts and possible solutions were examined.

Birds are the planet's messengers, telling us that climate change is already posing danger. Recent research has documented impacts that include distribution shifts poleward and to higher ground to escape warming temperatures, disrupted interactions with predators, competitors and prey, mismatches in the timing of migration, and breeding & food supply.

The European population of Atlantic Puffin is currently declining at a rate exceeding fifty percent over three generations. Climate-induced changes in fish stocks are likely to be a contributing factor. As warming continues, threats to humans and birds will multiply and intensify. Although some species may benefit, most will not. A review of recent scientific research shows that as the planet warms, climate change will result in more losers than winners. Most bird species are expected to experience shrinking ranges, increasing the risk of extinction. Many species may not shift their distributions as fast as climate changes, resulting in population declines. Ecological communities and interactions between species will be disrupted. Current threats, including extreme weather and diseases, will be exacerbated. People will experience many of the same risks, and their responses could endanger nature.

Great Frigatebird breeding colonies in the Pacific are largely restricted to islands with a maximum elevation of 8 metres, making

them vulnerable to sea level rise. Allen's Hummingbird is projected to undergo a ninety percent decrease in breeding range by 2080 owing to climate change while only seven percent of its range is projected to remain suitable. Only fifty-four percent of the Lilac-breasted Roller's current distribution is projected to retain suitable climate by 2085. The area of suitable montane forest for Queensland's endemic Golden Bowerbird could contract by 98 percent given a 30 rise in temperature. Helmeted Hornbill is predicted to decline by over 80 percent in just 3 generations, with land conversion to oil plantations contributing to these trends.

### Conclusion

As warming continues, threats to humans, animals and birds will multiply and intensify. While humans may adapt in the long run, the projected extinction of species will disrupt the web of life and create unforeseen challenges. Although some of the extant biodiversity may benefit, most species will not be able to adapt fast enough to the changes in their natural habitat and climate change will result



Atlantic Puffin

© Saleel Tambe

in more losers than winners. Most species of birds and animals are expected to experience shrinking ranges, thereby increasing the risk of extinction. Population declines is expected as many species will not be able to expand their distribution range fast enough. We have lost more than half of the animals on our planet in the last 40 years. Up to 50% of all species could be lost this century, including many amphibians, which survived since the extinction of dinosaurs. If species that have been on Earth for over 250 million years are now being driven towards extinction, it cannot be good news for others, including humans.

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Rituraj Phukan

# 5 Incredible Bird Photography Tips for Amateurs and Experienced Bird Photographers

**B**ird Photography is the most challenging as well as the most rewarding task. Unfortunately, most bird photographers are blinded by the settings and the reach. They strongly believe that having high-end equipment will solve all their problems. All the problems...Really?

If that was true, everyone who owns high-end equipment should have been a professional photographer by now. Or at least, they should have had the best bird photographs. Is it true? Longer reach and more fps(frames per second) can only yield you more photographs and tight framing. By no means has it

translated to a good photograph.

The other set of photographers seems to care and end their bird photography with sharpness. All that they seem to care is if their image is sharp enough. Tack-sharp.

How many meaningless sharp photographs are there which doesn't evoke any emotion

whatsoever!

Let me be clear: Better equipment, better reach, and sharper image don't make you a better bird photographer. Everything depends on you...the photographer.

Any guess, what equipment and lens I used here?



I used Nikon D300S and a Nikkor 70-300mm VR lens @ 195mm. Would it be a different photograph if I had a different equipment? Would it give a different feeling?

Or, would it really matter? Think about it.

I have tried to give you a glimpse of what makes a bird photograph plausible. If you follow these tips, you might be able to see a drastic improvement in your photographs. You have to practice it. Otherwise, these tips are of no use.

For that matter, no photography tip is of any use unless you put it into practice.

### 1. Make Your Life Simple

From budding bird photographers, all that I get to hear is settings.

Their first question and probably the last one is what settings did you use? The first advice I give to all the photographers is to

forget about the settings and concentrate on appreciating the photograph.

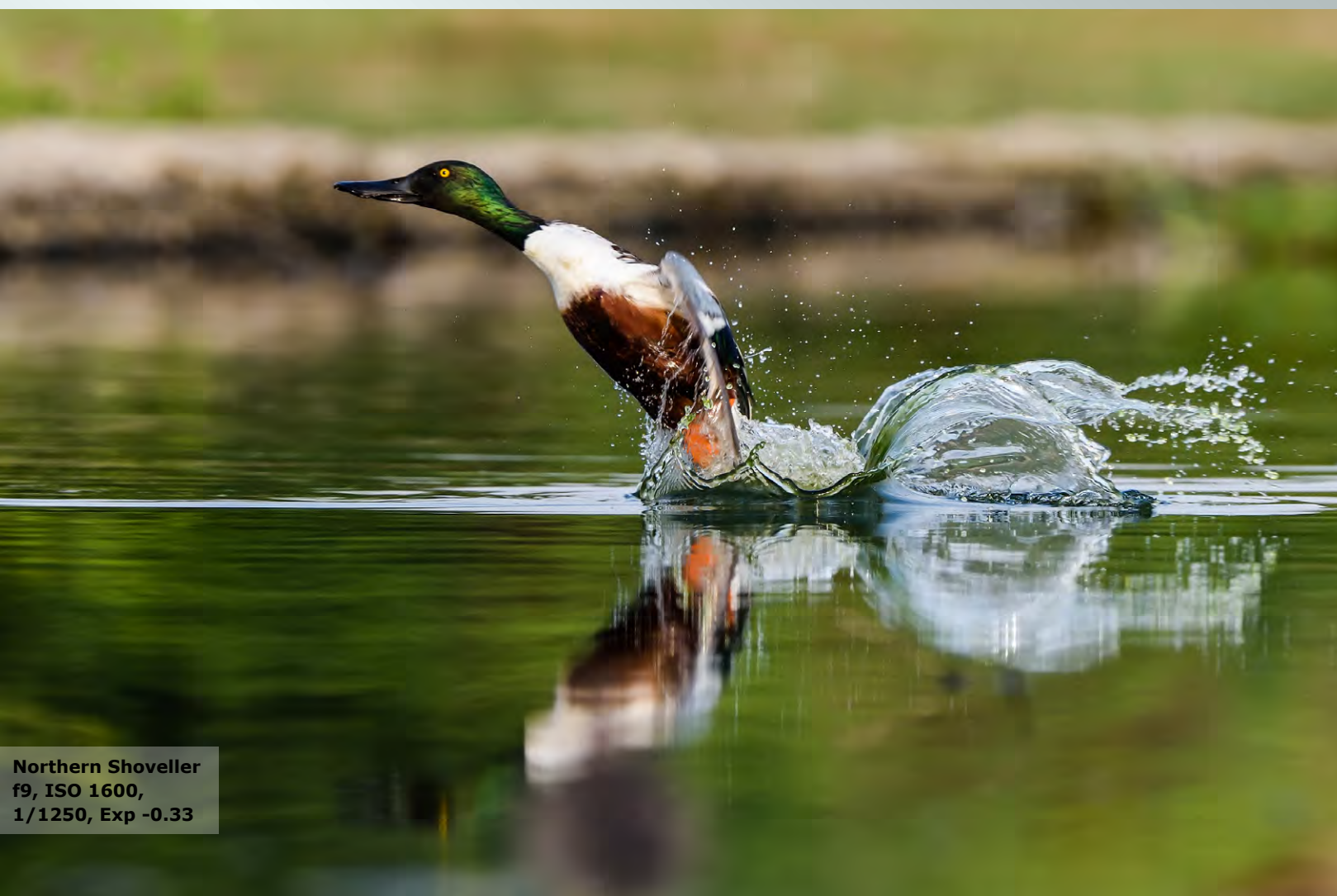
Imagine you are awestruck by an exceptional photograph by a legendary bird photographer. What would be your first reaction?

Would you delve yourself in that beauty or would you ask what settings did he use?

As a viewer, our natural instinct is to appreciate the art. A photograph that evokes any emotion would always triumph over a technically superior photograph that lacks emotion.

When you look at the photograph below, what's your first reaction? Think about it.

If you cannot appreciate this photograph and only care about what equipment and settings have I used, then I have to sadly admit that you have lost the sense of appreciation. It's sad, but it's the truth. Don't you agree?



Northern Shoveller  
f9, ISO 1600,  
1/1250, Exp -0.33



Black-winged Stilts  
f8, ISO 1600,  
1/4000, Exp -0.33

My mantra...make your life simple. The whole reason I write articles in my blog ([www.naturephotographsimplified.com](http://www.naturephotographsimplified.com)) or conduct workshops is to make my readers, or participants' life simple.

Reduce the number of changeable settings to one or two. Say, for instance, try the following settings:

- Aperture Priority mode.
- RAW mode.
- Auto White Balance.
- Evaluative metering (or spot metering if you know what you are doing).
- Zone focusing system (9-point or 21-point zone).
- AF-C/AI-Servo.
- Continuous High Speed(CH) setting.
- Auto ISO if you have min. shutter speed settings. Or else, try to use ISO 400 or 800 depending on the sensor's capability.

The bottom line is; keep as few variables as

possible. Remember, no non-photographer, who constitute the majority of your customer, cares about what settings did you use. All that a viewer/buyer/customer/etc. cares is if your bird photograph means anything to him/her. That's it.

It's all about inducing an emotion in the viewer, my friend.

Does your photograph make them feel something – sad, happy, terrible, etc.? Then your job is done.

### 2. Use Exposure Compensation

I have seen many bird photographers unaware of exposure compensation function. It's quite under-utilized because of the golden saying "I can fix it in the post." Can you?

My suggestion to you is, don't depend on the post-processing stage to fix your imperfections. Post-processing should be



Curlews  
f13, ISO 640,  
1/1250, Exp -0.67

part of your image making process. It should never be used as an after-thought.

Getting the perfect exposure in the field is the key to your success. Strive harder to get the right exposure. Because the science of photography – camera, lens, aperture, shutter speed, ISO, etc. – is all doing nothing but one thing – the Exposure. Exposure is the key. If you expose the scene good enough, then everything else will fall into place.

Whatever exposure the TTL (Through The Lens) light meter suggests you is not always perfect. TTL depends on 18% grey concept. Based on the metering mode you use, you will get different results.

What's important for you is to make sure the exposure is not too dark (underexposed) or too bright (overexposed). Getting the optimal exposure requires you to constantly compensate for the loss of light (underexposure) or excessive light (over exposure).

In digital cameras, it's quite simple to know

whether you need to compensate for the exposure or not. The histogram is your friend.

Always... Always check the histogram before you call it quits. Don't ever move to the next bird or place in the excitement before you are 100% sure that you got the right exposure.

Here's what you should always do:

1. Take a photograph.
2. Check the histogram.
3. Compensate the exposure if necessary.
4. Take another photograph.
5. Repeat steps 2 to 4 until you get the proper exposure.

Let me give you a simple explanation of a proper exposure:

"A proper exposure is when your

scene is represented as it is in reality. You should be able to recognize the subject, its tonalities, colors, etc. in a truthful manner."

As a photographer, you need not have to stick to getting the proper exposure always. You could try for the creative exposures like silhouettes, high-key, low-key, etc. But for the majority of your photographs, you need to try to get the optimal exposure.

Sometimes, right exposure might mean underexposing the scene drastically! Sun disk becomes the major compositional element in this silhouette to click.

Read your manual or watch a YouTube video to understand how to do exposure compensation. Don't be lazy.



Little tern  
f8, ISO 500,  
1/2000, Exp 0

### 3. Give Highest Importance to Light

The biggest crisis in today's photographic world is that light takes the backstage.

Light seems to be cared only for one reason in bird photography – to get good enough shutter speed. WHAT AN INSULT!

The moment you understand the above statement thoroughly, you will see a drastic improvement in your photographs. Believe me. It did improve my photography in leaps and bounds.

point to see the light. See how it is bathing the bird in question. Is it really conveying your idea? Do you want to portray the beauty of the bird? Or, the beauty of the surroundings? Or, the shape? Or, the light and its quality?

If you are clear about your vision, then you will know the value of light. You will be able to see the light. Studying the light and its staggering capability to transform a scene will leave you spellbound.



Lesser Flamingo  
f6.3, ISO 2500,  
1/640, Exp -1

It's the light, my friend. In fact, PHOTOGRAPHY IS ALL ABOUT LIGHT.

The light transforms an ordinary scene into a breathtaking scene. Light has that potential. An ordinary looking bird can be portrayed in an extraordinary way with the right usage of light.

When you are out in the field, make it a

TRY IT...You'll know it. Will you?

### 4. Compose in the Field

The Composition is yet another important topic that is slaughtered in the broad daylight.

The reason for not composing in the field is silly, "I will do it in the post." Come on.



Intermediate Egret  
f8, ISO 400,  
1/1250, Exp -1

Because you are a bird photographer doesn't mean you would always give the same old reason of limited reach. It's usually not the prime reason. The prime reason for bad composition is we are lazy.

You have to trash the laziness in its face and get to work. Stress yourself to get the composition

in the field. You should do it without fail for bird portraits, birds in their habitat, etc. when birds are not moving much.

If you compose in the field, you will have much greater opportunities to produce impressive results. You would stun yourself with photographs that otherwise you would



Sandhill cranes  
f2.8, ISO 200,  
1/320, Exp 0



Indian Pea fowl  
f4, ISO 3200,  
1/400, Exp +0.33

have missed. Just a small change in framing, positioning, or point of view can make a remarkable change in the resulting photograph.

If everything has to be done in the post-processing stage, our world would have to be full of photoshoppers, not photographers. Strive to be a photographer.

Push yourself hard to make different compositions in the field. Never assume that you are done with a bird. Try harder and you'll evolve as a better photographer. I always say...frustrate yourself to death, only then the real photography begins.

I am still not frustrated photographing mighty egrets. Even today I find myself shooting egrets almost relentlessly. I think I am able to make better photographs as the days are passing.

### 5. Learn to Pre-visualize

Pre-visualization is a concept introduced by the legendary photographer Ansel Adams.

Pre-visualization works extremely well with

landscape photography as you would be able to repeat the composition, in a broad sense. Once you are happy with the composition, you can visualize the scene when the light is spectacular. When the light is perfect, you can expect to make your vision a reality.

The pre-visualization technique might not be very easy to execute in bird photography as things change constantly. In fact, there's nothing constant about bird photography.

The key to making pre-visualization is to visit the same place as often as you could. The more often you visit, the more you can visualize. You have to visualize the possibilities to make wonderful photographs. There'll be lot of ifs and buts like:

- What if the bird doesn't come to this spot at the right time?
- What if the bird doesn't turn its head?
- What if the bird doesn't land this way?
- What if the bird flies off just when the light is spectacular?

And the list may go on...

However, you got to stick with these

uncertainties. These uncertainties are what make bird photography as challenging as it is.

But, imagine if you could pull off a pre-visualized shot, wouldn't it be phenomenal? Wouldn't you feel the sense of utter satisfaction?

That's exactly what you should work on.

### Conclusion

Remember what I said in the beginning of this article: "Better equipment, better reach, and sharper image don't make you a better bird photographer."

What is really needed is a radical shift in your thought process. I say "Think Like A Pro," in fact I have written a 276 page eBook "Bird Photography Simplified – A Virtual Masterclass" which is all about how to think like a pro and be the one.

If you want to improve your photography by leaps and bounds, start thinking in terms of light and composition. Follow the above 5 bird photography tips which are a sure-fire way to improve your photography.

Good luck and happy clicking.

Think Photography. Think Simple.

Prathap is a professional nature photographer and blogger from India. He is the founder of [Nature Photography Simplified](#) blog. He shares the best professional tips and techniques in his trademark style of simplicity. His

articles and photographs are best known for their simplicity and uniqueness among his readers and other professionals. He is the author of [6 photography eBooks](#). His FREE eBook [Bird Photography – 10 Mistakes and Solutions](#) has been instrumental in helping well over 8000 photographers. He regularly conducts [online and offline photography workshops](#).

Visit Prathap's portfolio website to check his best nature photographs.

Connect with Prathap on [Facebook](#), [500px](#), [YouTube](#), [Google+](#), [Twitter](#).



Spot billed pelican  
f8, ISO 800,  
1/1250, Exp -1

Prized Catch

# Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush

Dilipsinh Chudasama





The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxitilis*) has breeding grounds in Baluchistan and parts of Himalayas including Ladakh. As a **scarce passage migrant**, it is recorded in the Kutch region of Gujarat State of India en route its winter migration to sub Saharan Africa. It is most easily identified by its characteristic rusty or reddish-brown tail feathers, for which it is named. This is a medium-sized but stocky thrush and around 17–20 cms in length. The summer male is unmistakable, with a blue-grey head, orange underparts and outer

tail feathers, dark brown wings and white back. Females and immatures are much less striking, with dark brown scaly upperparts, and paler brown scaly underparts. The outer tail feathers are reddish, like the male. Wintering birds are dark scaly brown with pale chestnut underparts. This species was recorded on 29th September, 2015 near the village Karaghogha of Mundra Taluka in Kutch, Gujarat, India, [GPS Location Details, longitude : 22°57'1.99"N, latitude : 69°41'14.72"E]. This bird was mainly seen in areas dominated by small and flat

## The habitat



**Dilipsinh  
Chudasama**



branches, shrubs and small thorny trees. Grey and scaly upperparts with rufous tinge on rump and long wings reaching more than half the length of the tail confirm it as a first winter male of this species which was probably on its autumn passage. It stayed in the said area for a week and moved on. It has been previously recorded three times in Kutch, Ladakh and Kerala [Ref Oriental bird images data base]



# A Journey to the Arctic

Mohan Thomas



Sighting and photographing a Polar Bear has always been a dream of mine so when the opportunity presented itself I decided to try my luck around the Svalbard islands.

Svalbard is a Norwegian archipelago formerly known by its Dutch name Spitsbergen. Situated midway between continental Norway and the North Pole, it is the Northernmost place in the world and is a breeding ground for many sea birds, Polar Bears, Reindeers, Arctic Foxes and other marine mammals.

The journey to Svalbard was by no means a short one, pit stops had to be made in route via Dubai, Stockholm, Oslo and finally Longyearbyen. On reaching there, we spent

a day shopping for necessary clothing and requisites for the 10 day long expedition in the Arctic region. The following day we boarded our ship the M S Origo and set sail with our fingers crossed in hope of sighting the elusive bears.

The Polar Bear is a carnivorous bear whose native range lies largely within the Arctic Circle, encompassing the Arctic Ocean as far as Newfoundland island, its surrounding seas and land masses. An adult male weighs around 350-700kg while a female is half that size. It has many body characteristics adapted for cold temperatures, moving across snow and the icy cold waters where it goes hunting for seals which make up most of its diet.





The first day of our expedition passed by without any significant sightings other than the beautiful landscapes of the Arctic which were awe inspiring at times. The following day while on deck our guide who kept scanning the horizons with his binoculars announced with a sudden burst of excitement that he had spotted a few bears ahead. In a hurried frenzy we ran about getting our gear ready as the ship drew closer to the bears. With our equipment set and breaths withdrawn we watched as a mother and two cubs paced about on floating ice at quite a distance. It was indeed a thrilling experience as a life long dream of mine had finally come to pass.

As the expedition continued we saw several glaciers thawing which always



served as a constant reminder of how far global warming has grown. As we watched the ice break off and fall into the waters below one could not help

but wonder how much longer will these beautiful glaciers last without which the fate of the Polar Bears look grim.

The IUCN lists the Polar Bear as a vulnerable species, citing sea ice losses from climate change as the single biggest threat to Polar Bear survival. Polar Bears rely on the sea ice to hunt, travel, breed, and sometimes to den. Today, the primary conservation concern for polar bears is the habitat loss and reduced access to their primary prey due to climate change. Other challenges include increased commercial activities, pollution, disease, inadequate habitat protection (of denning and seasonal resting areas), and the potential for overharvest in smaller or declining sub-populations.





The subsequent days we were fortunate to spot a variety of birds that flock towards the Arctic region. Some of these like the Arctic Terns and the Puffins were stunning to behold. We also were lucky enough to spot Walruses, Bearded Seals, Reindeers and whales.



# LEOPARD CAT



**Text and images by  
Mohan Thomas**

We also saw around 10 Polar Bears, many of which were seen swimming along the waters and atop rocky hills where they were raiding bird nests. The trip was filled with unique sights like this.

The Arctic truly is a majestic place, from its jaw dropping landscapes to the beautiful animals and birds that live in it, it encompasses everything that a photographer and a nature lover in general should visit. Given a chance I would definitely go to this wondrous place again.

#### **References:**

- 1] <http://www.polarbearsinternational.org/>
- 2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polar\\_bear](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polar_bear)



**GANESH JAYARAMAN**



**Walrus**



**L**eopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) is the most common small cat after the Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*), which can be instantly recognised by its longer, leaner appearance and long legs. At one glance, it can look like a miniature leopard. They are usually hard to see and photograph in the wild. Leopard Cats are extremely versatile and is arboreal by nature. They are also comfortable in water.

24th Jan 2016, for me is an unforgettable day in the wild! That is the day I saw the Leopard Cat sitting out in open, basking in the morning sun amidst the mangroves in Bhitarkanika. We were in the boat looking to photograph the kingfishers and this sighting came out of nowhere when our guide called out and showed us the Leopard Cat. Needless to say it was indeed a fantastic morning. Leopard Cats are the most widely distributed Asian small cats. They are carnivorous, feeding on a variety of small prey including mammals, lizards, amphibians, birds and insects. In most parts of their range, small rodents such as rats and mice form the major part of their diet, which is often supplemented with grass, eggs, poultry, and aquatic prey. They are active hunters, dispatching their prey with a rapid pounce and bite.



#### **Ganesh Jayaraman**

**Ganesh comes from Chennai, India; he holds a Master degree in Computer Applications and works in Health Care and Life Sciences domain. Since 2008, Ganesh has been an active birdwatcher and conservationist and a very passionate bird photographer. More of his photographs are available at [facebook.com/ganesh.jayaraman.9](https://www.facebook.com/ganesh.jayaraman.9)**

**Leopard Cat**



**Jeevadhara Kumar is from Mysore, Karnataka**



# BONDING WITH BANDHAVGARH

**Sandeep Dutta fell in love with Bandhavgarh after his visit to this Tigerland in 2003. He made myriad trips here in the subsequent years. Here he chronicles his experiences, his undying passion for this forest and the majestic inhabitant, The Royal Bengal Tiger.**



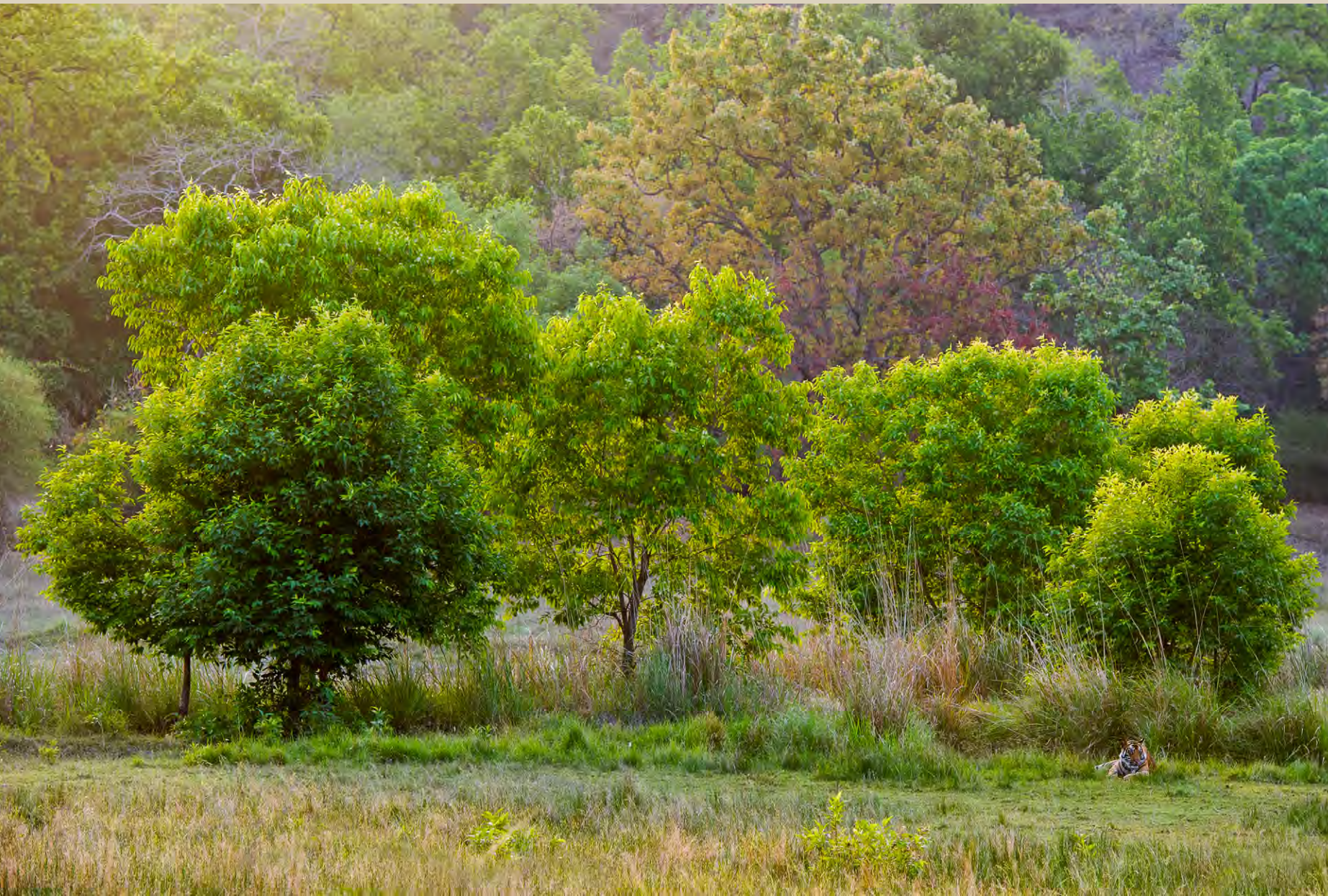
**SANDEEP DUTTA**

Proclaimed as the tiger capital of the world, Bandhavgarh is a dream destination for all wildlife photographers who desire to make some images of the big cat - Royal Bengal Tiger. Tiger density is high here, second only to Kaziranga and sightings here are pretty frequent. There are many reasons but primarily there are no Elephant or Gaur to disturb the Tiger (though Gaurs were re-introduced a few years ago). Tigers here are tracked by forest department elephants from an early age and most of them get used to man, though there are some individuals who are very shy. Tigers here love to walk on the soft sand roads and many a times are found sitting or sleeping on the road.

Bandhavgarh also has a rich history and mythology dating back to Ramayana. It is believed that Lord Rama gifted this fort to his brother Laxmana to

keep an eye over Sri Lanka and hence the name Bandhavgarh (brother's fort). Many dynasties ruled here and is also the erstwhile game reserve of the Maharajas of Rewa. The fort is a safe haven for tiger to litter cubs and is home to many species of birds. The first White Tiger was captured here in 1951.

Home to some very famous tigers in India, Sita and Charger are the most common names one would hear while researching about Bandhavgarh and all tigers in the park today are considered to be of the same lineage. There are many videos and documentaries on this pair but the most famous tiger from Bandhavgarh is B2, son of another famous tigress, Mohini. Charger died in the year 2000 and my sojourn to Bandhavgarh began in 2003 when B2 was in his prime. I was lucky to see him in my first trip and there is no looking back from there.



The raw wilderness of my early years at Bandhavgarh was simply mesmerizing and I made a few quick trips in the first few months. I remember Mr Rajvardhan (a famous conservationist and hotelier) told me this on my second trip, "Sandeep, you are now hooked on to this forest". I sure was, and then my series of regular visits to Bandhavgarh started. Most of the times it was a phone call from my guide or driver which prompted the trip but any excuse to get there was executed to perfection. My family has been there multiple times with me and they have enjoyed being there each and every time.

Bandhavgarh has been a perfect spot for me to learn. It has taught me patience, observation and behavior. Behavior of not only tiger but also about its various

inhabitants such as bears, birds, antelopes, gaurs and primates.

What makes this forest a photographer's delight is the varied landscape, numerous water bodies, mountains, old caves, vast grasslands and an imposing fort. Since this forest is visited by photographers from around the globe, one needs to find ways of getting creative in capturing and presenting his or her work. Knowing tiger behavior is very imperative in capturing the right moment. Some old and experienced guides here can make out if you got or missed the shot by just hearing your camera shutter. I have personally experienced it once when after the safari the guides from other vehicles came to look at my picture, upon casually asking why, they said our guys missed the shot as the shutter was not sounding at the right moments.



Bandhavgarh has three zones and different route in every zone. The routes are planned in such a way that tiger sighting is easy, especially around the water holes in summer. Knowing tiger behavior and patience is the key. This helps you decide the placement of vehicle and shooting angles as you are not alone, there are many other vehicles and photographers. Information on sighting comes from locals and guides and is critical in deciding which gate to choose for the next drive. I remember in 2011, Sukhi Patiha's 1st litter was sighted regularly around Charkwah water hole which is an hour's drive from Magdhi gate at Bhadrashila. My driver suggested we try spot booking at Gohri gate which is just 15 minutes away from the spot. The gate was far and we reached there after an hour long drive on broken bumpy roads but the end result was sweet. We got to the spot first, had an

exclusive 45 minutes with the tiger family before any other vehicle showed up. The street smartness and on the spot decision making helped us get some exclusive frames of Sukhi Patiha mother and her two grown up boys.

I have had some great experiences and moments in this park which is etched in my memory forever. It has been a wonderful journey through these years - Bamera with first battle scars when he picked up fight with Bokah, tiger drinking water at Rajbehra, B2 at Ghoda Damon, bumping into Bhagoda, Banbei with kill, Rajbehra female as a cub years ago and her growing up through the years or Sukhi Patiha's 3rd litter playing in water and doing a ramp walk few days later, Mirchaini in her cave and Bamera walking behind my jeep for a few kilometers. These are memories as if it happened only yesterday.



**INDELIBLY ETCHED MEMORIES**



The other thing that is also critical to my mind is focus. We must stay focussed on what we want to see and here is one of the many examples. We once heard that Mukunda male is seen near Mahaman water tank and I never had pictures of this shy male. While there were a lot of sighting of Mirchaini and Sukhi Patiha family, we decided to stay focused on this male. We did not find him for the next four safari drives and kept hearing stories from others over dinner about the sightings in other areas. We did not move away from our plan and decided to take a chance for the next two safaris. And it surely paid off - We stopped at Mahaman dam as usual and after all the other safari vehicles moved on, this guy came out and sat right in the middle of the road; as if he was waiting for the rush to get over and here we were, with the most handsome male exclusively for the next one hour. He sat for a while, walked gracefully, scent marked a tree, got down to Mahaman tank and gulped down a truck load of water.





**ELEGANCE  
PERSONIFIED**





Talking about equipment, you surely need a good telephoto or tele zoom to cover a wide range apart from a creative eye. Nikkor 200-400 has been my stable companion in the few initial years and later it changed to a combination of multiple lenses from 600mm to 70-200. A good wide angle for capturing the landscape is also recommended. Though I have carried tripod in every safari drive, I believe a monopod is more useful and recommended unless you have the entire vehicle for yourself. Carrying a bean bag is a must as it comes in handy many a times. Being prepared and being ready are the other two imperatives. Never get into situations where you realise the battery is still in the charger or the memory card is missing from your camera slot. I always re-organise the equipment and place them in the bag before going to bed. Probably the most challenging subject for cameras is wildlife. Whether it is digital or film, tigers or flycatchers, the quest

for the perfect shot is endless. It is not like photographing a building, wedding or landscape where the subject matter is more obliging or pliable and on field correction is always an option - the building will not go away or you could ask the bride to pose for you again.

Sighting in wild is often of an endangered species, an elusive cat or a rare action and there are "no retakes" in the wild. The challenge is to ensure you are ready for the moment as it arrives and you need to be technically correct, pick the right combination of body lens or be at the right zoom level, what focus system to use etc. should be clear in your mind. Trust me - If you miss the moment, you will regret it all your life.

However the pursuit of this precious image is what makes it such fun and so much rewarding. The thrill is in making the image and feeling happy that you made most of the opportunity.



# SHELTERED!!!



**Image by Subrata Mukherjee**

**This soothing image where the Asian Paradise flycatcher is very comfortably nestled in a bed of leaves depicts the harmony that exist in nature.**



Even while walking a fine balancing line between his corporate duties and his passion for nature and photography, Sandeep Dutta has managed to establish himself in both fields. For the last decade or so, Sandeep has also been immersed in photography as a serious life journey. Wildlife photography in particular has been a central theme. Over the years, Sandeep has bagged various awards in wildlife photography as well as recognition in magazines, bird journals and publishing houses. Sandeep also loves traveling and has explored wild areas across the Indian sub continent, right from the mighty Himalayas to the tiger havens in south and central India and the beautiful forests of Sri Lanka.





# From our Facebook Group



**Mahendra N**



**Subhash Nair**

**Pachyderm Power**



**Manoharan**



**Shibu P Nair**

# Little Rann of Kutch

## A Dream Wildlife Destination

Falguna Shah



Lesser Flamingo



Little Rann of Kutch should be on the must do list of all adventure and wildlife travellers, a birder's or a bird photographer's dream. Their itinerary will be incomplete without a trip – of course in winter – to the wonderland known as Little Rann of Kutch – the place in Gujarat which is purely magic.

Long back when I was visiting Little Rann of Kutch first time, I asked myself a question. Is this really the place that holds the numerous species of raptors, endemic species and powerful, graceful Indian Wild Ass? An unbounded stretch of plain and barren landscape at first look and it takes a while to adjust to the environment and when you start to think that you may not see a sparrow, there you go with some of the most wonderful wildlife species found in India. It is different from any wildlife sanctuary in India. A safari here is a

different experience than a jungle safari. It's a magic of nature. Yes there is life here. A flat barren stretch of land as far as eye could see looks deceptively empty but it is teeming with the most extraordinary variety of wildlife species – mainly raptors – a main attraction for wildlife safaris. It is an absolute wildlife gem.

This is a birdwatchers' paradise, attracting bird lovers from across the world. The secret lies in its unique geographical location. The flat lands with very little vegetation is a renowned destination for avid birders, naturalists and photographers. One gets a chance to observe and photograph different species of birds – resident, migrant and passage migrants and also a good number of mammals. The mudflat desert along with the salt marshes, small water bodies, and mirages are a really interesting sight.

It is one of a kind of a landscape, having a

very rich biodiversity and is ecologically a very important area for wildlife. A never seen place on the earth where you can explore unbelievable things and get unforgettable experiences. It is a geographically unique landscape that was once connected to the Arabian Sea. Over the centuries, silting has created an extensive saline mudflat. So this seasonal salty marshland located in Gujarat in western India is known as Little Rann of Kutch. The terrain is a mix of parched arid soil, salt flats and acacia forest interspersed with water bodies. The vast saline mud flats measure about 30,000 sqm. The Little Rann of Kutch is not at all that little. The area at the head of the Gulf of Kutch measuring about 5,000 sqm is called the Little Rann of Kutch and rest of the area is called Greater Rann of Kutch. Monsoon changes the scape of Rann. During the rains, vast featureless, plain salty land is flooded

with water and it seems like a sea. This feature of the Rann is unique in the world. It is characterised by desert throughout the year and watery ecosystem after monsoon. A number of sandy salt free areas of higher ground lie above the flood level known as "Bets"(Island). They are elevated isolated patches of land with less salinity which support some vegetation and provide wet season refuge for wildlife. The vegetation consists of grasses and dry, thorny scrub. The main tree in the area is the exotic *Prosopis juliflora*. Seedpods from this tree provide year round food for the Indian Wild Ass - a horse like animal endemic to the Rann. Another source of water and food during summer are succulent plants with water laden leaves having a distinct saline taste that is palatable to the trained taste buds of indigenous species here. The birds flock with oneness that is hard to see.



Summers are very hot and during monsoon it is flooded. I am restless to go back once winter sets in again, hoping to see many species which are missed. For avid birders, winter is the season to look forward to. It is easily reachable from Ahmedabad, around two hours of drive, on very good motorable roads. The first time you enter the Rann you are left completely at awe. There are no roads in Rann, you just have to make your own road in the vast barren mudflats. There is often no visible landmark as you race across the dusty flats in search of life. Once you are deep inside the desert it is very difficult to find the way back. It looks the same from all directions. Without a guide one is sure to get lost. It is one of the most remarkable and unique landscapes in the world. Temperature here is extreme, with hot afternoons and cold mornings as well as evenings. So one must have adequate protection.

The sanctuary has three main access points. Wetlands in Range Bajana is the best place to see migratory birds which are close to it.



**Pelicans**

On a drive through the Rann, you are greeted with Isabelline Shrikes and wheatears.

Further you go and Common Cranes become a very common sight. We could see them everywhere. The sanctuary provides an important feeding, breeding and roosting habitat for a large number of birds, due to its strategic location on bird migration route.

The huge open lands with water cover patches are typical traits of Kutch deserts, and these water patches have a lot of pink spots in them which are nothing else but beautiful

Lesser Flamingoes, the dominant bird in this area. The water seems to be painted with a dash of pink when flamingoes go about their ritual of group feeding, whereas the Greater Flamingoes can be found more towards upstream. Along with flamingoes you may find all types of water birds mainly waders, ducks, cranes, gulls, pelicans and terns. These water birds are active throughout the day.

**Greater Hoopoe Lark**



**A mixed flock of water birds**



The Rann – a magnet for raptors, is visited by numerous species which includes eagles, falcons, buzzards, kestrels, vultures, merlins, various species of harriers and some rare species like Amur Falcon, Saker Falcon and Red-naped Shaheen. Also rarities like Macqueen's Bustard, Sociable Lapwing, Greater Hoopoe Lark, and Stoliczka's Bushchat have been recorded at Rann. Water birds are easy to spot in the wetland while on "Bets" you have to be skilled and your

guide proves very handy. Some resident birds like Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Indian Courser are common and easy to find. Sandgrouse are slow flyers and ground birds. Their art of camouflage is their best weapon for defence. An untrained eye can hardly see them on the ground and it's only when they take off in a phurr right next to you, you realise you missed seeing something.



**Mcqueen's Bustard**

The patterns and colour are so beautiful on them that you can't just stop admiring them, while the wheatears and larks are difficult to identify. Others like Cream-coloured Courser and Greater Hoopoe Lark are rare birds and you will need more time if you want to spot them.

Towards the end of August and early September, Indian Bushlark can still be heard singing and passage migrants start to arrive. Birds like European Roller, Spotted Flycatcher may be common in Europe, Middle East but in India they appear for a very short time. The "Bets" of the Rann probably are the best place in India to photograph the Short-eared Owl. This bird roosts during the daytime in the shadow of *Prosopis juliflora*. The Short-eared Owl is so well camouflaged that

**Sociable Lapwing**



**Short-eared Owl**

only well trained eyes of spotters could pick it up from a distance. The most important bird that attracts bird watchers into the Rann is the Macqueen's Bustard. They winter here in small numbers. Sometimes you explore

the whole area but no luck with Macqueen's Bustard. This grassland is an important wintering ground for one of the world's most enigmatic birds, the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing.



Red-naped Shaheen

Red-naped Shaheen



The "Bets" on saline mudflats are very good for raptors, and falcons are key species of Rann. On a drive through Rann, you come across the majestic Eastern Imperial Eagle and the hulk of a Steppe Eagle. The speed king Peregrine Falcon might welcome you with its amazing acrobatic skills and if luck has its way you might see a hunt by this powerful raptor. Most of the time it is huge success at the end of all safaris. Though we have to face chilly winds and extreme

cold in the early morning, great efforts are always paid off. I did manage to capture superb images of most talked about species of Little Rann of Kutch - the Red-naped Shaheen. Excitement, joy, thrill were the emotions when I saw this beautiful raptor for the first time. It is recently split from the Peregrine Falcon as a separate species. Every time I come back and my bird list grow from larks to bustards, to falcons to eagles, and to kestrels...The list goes on.



Peregrine Falcon



Mammals are not to be ignored. The elusive and shy Desert Fox and if lucky the highly endangered Indian Wolf also might show themselves. The Rann is a vast salt marsh with its iconic inhabitant the Indian Wild Ass, galloping across in healthy numbers. They are quite curious of their visitors and stand around happily till you approach them when they thunder across. Indian Wild Ass has a very unique quality having resistance to very high temperature and low temperature as well. Besides wildlife the mesmerising landscape of the Little Rann of Kutch offers innumerable opportunities to experiment with your creativity, scape shots and time lapses.

All over Gujarat the large water bodies are used for irrigation. These water tanks are wintering grounds for thousands of water birds. The water is fresh and differs from the saline water of the Rann. Naya Talav between Dasada and Patdi is the largest fresh water in this area. It was built in British era and its water is used to irrigate

fields of cotton and castor oil which are the main cash crop of this district. It is the best place for birding. Thousands of water birds winter in this water tank and grasslands around is good for raptors – mainly large eagles. The land which is not covered by water turns into vast grass land, which attracts Indian Wild Asses, Blue Bulls and various grassland birds like Greylag Geese, Common Cranes and Demoiselles Cranes. The sunrise and sunset are those fascinating moments when the golden light reflects upon the enduring wetlands, resulting in lighting up the entire horizon and what a mesmerizing sight – a sight beyond belief. Those sunset pictures are like landscape painting using incredible hues from renowned artists. Once I saw a mighty Peregrine Falcon and a Himalayan Vulture in evening light and gave me best pictures with the setting sun. Making great silhouettes against the sublime light of the setting sun is possible throughout here.



**Indian Fox**



**Indian Wild Ass**



Steppe Eagle



Eastern Imperial Eagle

### Himalayan Vulture



The Little Rann of Kutch is a wonder of the world and needs protection. Fact is that, it is the habitat for many of them that is actually under threat. Once there is insufficient habitat left, we will lose such species. More than merely sighting birds or mammals, it teaches us intricate interconnection and interdependency of all the creatures in the desert and instilling in us a strong respect and love for the nature that even to this day after so many visits and still counting makes me visit this heavenly place over and over again. My visit to Little Rann of Kutch is always filled with exciting moments. From getting many exciting lifers to witnessing some breathtaking actions and life's wonders, it is a dream destination for me. Every time

I set out on a safari into Rann, I am full of excitement and anticipation. The golden glow of the morning light add the magical touch to Rann.

Such a huge diversity that your eyes and mind will be filled with beautiful images and so will your camera be. No picture, no words can capture the full experience and beauty of Little Rann of Kutch. There is only one way to get the full LRK story - go there. The view - the wide expanse of absolute nothingness as far as you can see, a landscape that's devoid of shrubs and bushes, let alone trees, the blueness of the skies and the quietness in air - these are what makes the Little Rann of Kutch a must visit spot.

**Falguna Shah** masters in portrait, landscape and nature photography. But it is the wildlife which churns out the best in her. She has spent some splendid days of her life meeting her winged friends in the Lesser Rann of Kutch. In her own words "I am still a beginner in this field and always feel that every new day on the field teaches me something new." She is from Ahmedabad, Gujarat.





# RED CROSSBILL



**R**ed Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) is a resident of the Himalayas. This bird is characterized by the mandibles crossing at their tips, hence the name. Using its crossed mandibles very effectively, the Crossbill is able to efficiently separate the scales of conifer cones and extract the seeds on which it feeds. Adult males tend to be red or orange in colour, and females green or yellow, but there can be a lot of variation. Usually it is found in flocks and do not migrate.

**Sourav Mondal is from Kolkata, India**

# HIDE PHOTOGRAPHY

Text By Prasanna AV  
Images by Satisha Sarakki

Hide photography is accepted as a professional, comfortable and sustainable type of bird photography worldwide. Satisha Sarakki is one of the pioneers of this movement in India.



White-rumped Munias

The aim of hide photography is to permit the photographer to be in close proximity to the birds without alarming or troubling them, and thereby obtain good photographs of the species in natural conditions. A hide will provide the birds with food, water and aesthetically designed normal perches for them to rest. Good light conditions and a pleasing background complete the design. A good setup will enable the occupying photographer to take a large number of photos, without apparently affecting the bird's behaviour, and to observe and photographically document natural behaviour in natural or near-natural surroundings.





**Oriental Whiteeye**



**White-cheeked Barbet**

In India there have generally been a lot of negative vibes regarding this aspect. But it is being accepted and on its way to popularity. Lot of photographers are actually visiting these hides and are liking the experience. It certainly can never replace the thrill of creating an image of the bird in the wild. But it sure does provide opportunities to create some good images. Many newbies and amateur photographers can actually hone their skills in these circumstances. The setup forms a readymade tutorial site where you can tweak your settings and try out all sorts of permutations and combinations. Exposure correction in the field which feels like a rocket science in the wild can be learnt too. Photographers can try out their new gears to see how they work. In a nutshell it can be great learning centre. A lot of hides are being created all over India and the practice is accepted totally now.

Birds wouldn't come to the hide if they felt threatened. Would they? Birds do take their own sweet time in recognising whether a particular hide setup is to their liking or not. But once they become used to the area they are bound to visit the place regularly like a clockwork. It is as if some sort of communication exists between birds as not only the members of same species visit but surprise visitors abound too.

Satisha Sarakki is a well known name among Indian bird photographers. He is also one of the pioneers of the concept of hide photography in India. Satisha from childhood had a lot of affinity toward birds and animals. Initially he used to provide food and water to the birds simply as a measure of care and concern. As gradually he ventured into bird photography he realised that this simple manoeuvre could provide him with a unique set of circumstances to get some beautiful bird images.



Jungle Bushquail



Jerdon's Leafbird

Common Rosefinch



Coppersmith Barbets



He set up his first hide in the outskirts of Bangalore in the 2010-11 season and has not looked back since. He faced a lot of hurdles in the initial phase as lot of people thought it to be unethical. He had many adversaries too. But one visit to his hide does dispel one's doubts completely and one is sure to visit the place again. Anybody who meets him can instantly relate to his intense love towards the birds. His attitude towards the feathered visitors to his hide is that of a teacher who loves his pupils. He cares for them deeply and he is very happy about providing the birds with an amiable atmosphere.

A very strict code of ethics is observed in the hide. Talking is totally prohibited and mobile phones are kept on silent. Actually in his hide in a day with a good activity, a photographer would be so busy shooting,

it is very difficult to keep track of time and memory cards filled. On an average eighteen to twenty species frequent his hide. These include Oriental White-eye, Jerdon's Leafbird, Jungle Bushquail, Red-whiskered, Red-vented and White-browed Bulbuls, Coppersmith and White-cheeked Barbets, White-breasted Waterhen, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, Flameback Woodpecker, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Yellow-billed and Yellow-eyed Babblers, Asian Koel, White-breasted Waterhen and White-rumped Munias. Infrequent visitors include Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Golden Oriole, Barred Buttonquail etc. Rare visitors recorded so far are Rufous Woodpecker, Blue-faced Malkoha, Blue-capped Rock Thrush, Common Rosefinch, Red-collared Dove and Blue-bearded Bee-eater. Each day actually heralds new possibilities and new sightings.



**Indian Pitta**



**Golden Oriole**



**Thick-billed Flowerpeckers**



Grey-bellied Cuckoo



Painted Spurfowl

Satisha has set up 10-12 hides in various other places. Masinagudi in Tamilnadu and Daroji in Karnataka are two of the finest examples. His knowledge about the birds, their behaviour, water and food habits is legendary. He is a true conservationist at heart. In summer particularly where there is an intense paucity of water, providing water and food can aid a lot of these birds. Hide photography allows one to observe in minute detail the birds, their behaviour and actions which is very difficult in the wild. Rightly used it can be a very good tool for any bird photographer.



**Satisha Sarakki**  
lives in  
**Bangalore**  
**India.**



Rufous Woodpecker

# From our Facebook Group



This Spot-winged Tit is a resident of Himalayas and is considered conspecific with the Coal Tit



**Mousam Ray**



The Common Merganser is a large duck which winters in North India and is also known as Goosander



**Solomon Sampath Kumar**

The image is aptly named "the Dragonslayer" where this Eurasian Hobby is trying to catch a Dragonfly



**Kane Lew**

A jungle babbler is feeding a Common Hawk Cuckoo chick displaying a great example of brood parasitism.



**Koushik Kundu**





# Mystical Forests of Wayanad

Amit Rai Chowdhury



Photo Courtesy: Vishwas Somashekar

**W**ayanad is a beautiful hill station located at the summit of the Deccan plateau in the north-eastern part of Kerala. It is the only district that borders both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Parts of the Western Ghats run through it. Not many people know that it is also a global biodiversity hotspot.

Last year in July, I got the opportunity to visit this amazing place. It was a weekend trip organized by the SoulScope team of Suhas and Nitin. After an overnight journey from Bangalore we reached our camp - the Green Mountain resorts situated at Kalpetta, the headquarters of Wayanad. As we got off the bus we were mesmerized by the beauty of the place - lush green forests all around, fresh mountain air, birds merrily chirping high up in the canopy and the sun slowly rising enveloping us with its warm glow.

As we gathered for tea we came across our first sighting, the gorgeous Atlas Moth (*Attacus atlas*). It is one of the largest moths in the world in terms of total wing surface area. Sadly it had hurt its wing and was resting against the wall.

After tea we set off on the trail. It being the monsoon months, a light drizzle had set in. Luckily we were well prepared and soon the rain subsided. Monsoons are the best time for macro photography but the worst time for leeches, and the place was teeming with them. We had to be careful and keep checking ourselves from time to time.

Soon we chanced upon another lifer, the Red Snail (*Indrella ampulla*). This species is endemic to the Western



**Red Snail**

Ghats and is easily seen during the monsoons. Their typical diet is the fungi that grow on logs. I had never seen a snail this big or this colorful. It was a sight to behold this beautiful snail slowly crawling over the log.

We had hardly walked a few steps when Suhas shouted "Snake!". And there it was, a gorgeous Green Vine Snake (*Ahaetulla nasuta*) wrapped around a branch. This snake is green in color and resembles a vine so well that it is very difficult to spot amongst the leaves. It is mildly venomous and feeds mainly on frogs and lizards. Normally it has a slender green body, but when threatened it flattens its body to show a black and white scale marking. It also opens its mouth as a sign of aggression to ward off any predators. It was peacefully resting on the branch but when we started photographing



**Green Vine Snake**

it from all angles it got agitated and gave me this beautiful shot.

The rest of the morning was spent shooting other macro subjects. It was soon time for lunch and we returned to the resort. After a sumptuous meal we set off on a jeep to visit a location that affords spectacular views of the mountains. A half hour ride over bumpy terrain was well worth the view once we reached.

While others got busy capturing the landscape my eyes were glued to the ground trying to find other macro subjects. Shortly, Nitin sighted a rare and endangered species of toad endemic to the Western Ghats, the Malabar Torrent Toad (*Ghatophryne ornate*). It was a superb find indeed.



Malabar Torrent Toad



Malabar Torrent Toad

We didn't spot anything much post that except for a Red Snail and a Robber Fly (Asilidae) feasting on its kill. These flies are also known as Assassin Flies. They are aggressive predators and feed mainly on other insects. Their name stems from their behavior - they wait in ambush and catch their prey in flight.

ever elusive king of the jungle rather than enjoying the plethora of other wildlife that can be seen on the way. The once barren land on the periphery of forests have given way to hotels and shops buzzing with human activity. Such things sadly foster tourism rather than conservation.

After an early dinner we set out on the

Robber Fly



The sun was setting and it was time to head back to camp. Tea was soon ready, and over a cup of steaming tea and pakoras we had a long discussion on tiger conservation and whether tiger safaris were a boon or a bane. Though safaris create awareness about wildlife they do more harm than good to the environment. All those jeeps zigzagging across the forest cause a lot of pollution and disturb the animals. Everyone seems to be focused only on spotting the

night trail. We walked along a pond close to camp. It was abuzz with activity and we could hear lots of frogs croaking. We soon came across the Winged Gliding Frog (*Rhacophorus lateralis*). This is considered an endangered species and is found primarily in two small areas of the Western Ghats, in and around Wayanad and Coorg. We were very fortunate to spot this species. They are among the most beautiful frogs I have ever seen.



Winged Gliding Frog



Winged Gliding Frog



Winged Gliding Frog

Next we came across another frog species called the Confusing Green Bush Frog (*Raorchestes chromasynchysi*). This is found only in the Western Ghats around Kerala and Karnataka.

If you have been to forests in the night you would have heard the shrill chirping of Cicadas. They are a type of insects that live underground as nymphs for most of their lives. Their circulatory system is open, which means that blood flows freely around the body saturating the organs while supplying them with nutrients. Over time they get darker and darker in color

and develop a hard outer shell. They finally moult, or shed their hard exoskeleton, and emerge as adults. The male cicadas have a noisemaker called a "tymbal" on each side of the abdomen. They contract their internal muscles drawing the tymbals inwards thereby producing a click. On relaxing the muscles the tymbals return to their original position producing another click. The abdomen is largely hollow and acts like a sound box. All together it produces a series of rapid clicking sounds which is very audible from far away. We were lucky to spot this Cicada in the process of moulting.



Confusing Green Bush Frog

# FOREST OWLET

## Molting Cicada



It was quite late by the time we packed up for the night. All of us had leech bites and were exhausted, but what an evening that was! Wayanad is an amazing place. We saw so many new species, got some awesome photos, and made wonderful friends. I eagerly look forward to going back there soon.



The critically endangered Forest Owlet (*Athene blewitti*) has an extremely small and fragmented population in central India, in the states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The protected Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra is the species' stronghold, with over 100 individuals having been recorded there by 2005.

Previously feared extinct, this species was rediscovered in 1997 in the state of Maharashtra, 113 years after the last confirmed record. Unlike most of its nocturnal relatives, this owlet is diurnal, hunting lizards, birds and rodents in daylight hours. Whilst surveys continue to discover more individuals, habitat fragmentation caused by the continued loss of deciduous forest is likely to result in a further decline in this species.

The numbers are currently estimated at 70-400 individuals. It is likely to be declining

as a result of loss of its deciduous forest habitat. Although surveys continue to discover more individuals, these factors lead to its present IUCN red list classification as Critically Endangered.

Conservation measures include urgent habitat protection, engagement with community to halt cattle grazing, grass cutting, firewood collecting and forest fires in Forest Owlet territory. Awareness-raising activities and encouragement of alternative livelihoods including ecotourism.

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Yuvraj Patil is from Pune, Maharashtra.



Amit Rai Chowdhury is an IIM graduate currently residing in Bangalore, India.



## Natural History

# ANGRY HUNGRY MIGHTY BIRDS

*Images by Sudhir Garg*

*Text by Rhucha Kulkarni*

**G**o back in time and you are sure to come across mentions of this strikingly beautiful and vain bird of the wetlands in traditional Indian folklore. The village of the 'Mir Shikars' or the traditional bird hunters of Bihar sung stories of its capture and defeat by strong young men on the cusp of marriage. The story goes that custom required a young man eligible for marriage to capture one of these doughty birds as a display of his strength and valor to the bride's family. And yet the practice seems to have been banned in the 1920s after a man got killed by this formidable opponent. Such tales speak volumes of the ferocity of our gutsy feathered friend, the Black-necked Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*).

### **Understanding the Feeding Adaptation of the Black-necked Stork**

A typical wading bird with feeding adaptations for shallow water in the form of long neck and bill, this bird is a carnivore that requires about a kilo of meat for sustenance. Various methods for securing prey have been noted - (1) Visual Scanning (both while walking in water and standing still) (2) Probing (also called tactile search) (3) Sorting through vegetation obtained from water etc. Cases of kleptoparasitism, i.e. stealing foods from other birds in the water have also been observed, making it a highly opportunistic and ruthless predator when it comes to feeding habits.

The diet varies across fish, amphibians, reptiles, small animals such as rodents as well as birds, making the Black-necked Stork a generalist carnivore. In short, the feeding habits of this mighty stork make it a formidable enemy for a majority of water and wetland inhabitants that are not comparable in size. This is thanks to its ferocious demeanour armed with the right paraphernalia (stout and sharp beak) and keen eyesight.



### **A game of life and death unfolds**

It comes as no surprise that our fellow birder, Mr. Sudhir Garg had the privilege of witnessing one of the most thrilling action sequence - the show of strength and size of one of these hungry-angry birds during his visit to Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. What's more, an unusual feat of savagery unfolded before his eyes (and of course his lens) as a Battle of Birds ensued between the magnificent BNS and a Eurasian Coot. Here is how an unusual prey was brought to its resting grave by an even more unusual predator in a mighty act of valour.

The Eurasian Coot had strayed, far into the shallows; too far for comfort. It was sheer need for food that drove him to the perilous edges, to the waters frequented by the tall and powerful stork. He, with the keen eye for prey landed with a flutter and a glint in the eye of an upcoming meal. Little

did the Eurasian Coot know that his destiny was doomed.

The fluttering form landed and as the Black-necked Stork's shadow cast a pallid gloom over his small form, danger loomed large, right in its face, yet he had awakened a split second too late. An attempt to flee was made, as he set into a frenetic run.

Just as his tiny wings could launch him to aerial safety, the stork exercised his accuracy and was upon the coot in no time. Trapped in a grip of death by the stork's mighty claws, the coot could do nothing but stare at the face of death.

It was a face-off between the big and small, between the predator and the prey. A fleeting moment of confrontation was captured as the coot and the BNS seemed to engage in a last-minute dialogue - a dialogue of life and death. Was the poor coot pleading for his life? Was he negotiating a deal? Only time would tell.



The run-in between the predator and prey did not seem to last long. For the striking stork was unrelenting, pricking and piercing the coot with its monstrous beak. Meal was on his mind. He nabbed the coot by the neck, oblivious to the

small bird's cries. After all, he had a tummy to fill. Fatal wounds were delivered bit by bit. What followed was a carnage; a visual drama of life and death. A drama that lasted a mere few minutes. The stork deftly utilized its natural



weapons to sap out the life from the coot. While on one hand a life had been forsaken, the remnants would fuel another life. We watched in awe at the scene that unfolded as the last blows were delivered and the stork

triumphantly held the coot's carcass in its majestic beak. For it was not a meal for one but a romantic dinner for two. The female partner flew down as her mate had made arrangements for a feast; albeit a different one.





The male made his offering to the lady of this life - a freshly hunted Eurasian Coot at her foot. Thoroughly checked and presented on the platter of sand, we witnessed a demo of 'sharing is caring'.

As we looked on in awe, the female seemed to be mighty pleased with this feat of killing. Today's feast would be of an unusual fare. She picked on the prey and enjoyed an initial bite while the male dutifully looked on. Now was that a mighty fine display of 'care and concern', so we thought!

Within minutes more than half of the coot was devoured. This was indeed a mighty angry and hungry couple of Black-necked Storks! While the male frolicked about, the female enjoyed her share of the fresh meal. Indeed, this unusual hunting opportunity had fuelled not one, but two lives.

We stared transfixed, as the female BNS let out a shrill cry of delight! With a tummy full of fresh catch and a caring partner in crime, she had made the perfect choice of mate. After all, Black-necked Storks are known to breed with the same mate for number of years, possibly for life. Fending for food is one of the displays of caring for the family and her mate had proved his mettle for this time.

As we were about to wrap up the wonderful session, the pair seemed to engage in some causal tete-a-tete. After all it was a momentous and unusual occasion for the duo. An occasion that found its root in the unceremonious killing of a fellow feathered being.

As the sun started to make its presence felt, my inner being was burning with a different feeling being privy to this act of malice - a Eurasian Coot hunted in cold blood by a Black-necked Stork. As the shrill pleading cries of the coot rang in my ears, the last scene of a successful happy meal replayed in my eyes. I could not say what was right and what was wrong. One thing was loud and clear. This was the wild - Raw, Cold, Calculative. It was the cycle that ran round the clock - the unrelenting processes going on day in and day out in tandem with all its puppets. A tempo that dictated the unstoppable rhythm of Mother Nature.

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**Sudhir Garg, based at Jaipur, Rajasthan is a stock exchange member by profession and a nature and bird photographer by passion. When he started few years ago not many bird watchers and photographers were active in the Jaipur region. Since then he has found substantial ornithological wealth in the region along with some good numbers of migratory birds. Recently having tripped a two week tour of Andaman & Nicobar Islands including Great Nicobar, he is the founder admin at Facebook bird photography forum "Birding Frnds" having around 28000 national as well as international members.**



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# EURASIAN OTTER

**ARPAN SAHA**

Otters have fascinated me from a long time. With their unique anatomical features such as, duck-like webbed feet, ability to hold their breath underwater, sharp claws and a thick layer of water-repellent fur, these mammals are excellent hunters underwater. They are both experts in chasing fish (which is their staple diet) in water, as well as collecting crabs, shellfish, molluscs, clams, and other invertebrates from riverbed (they are experts in opening clams, shellfish etc.). River Otters like to spend most of their time on land; though they live beside water, they only enter it mainly to hunt or travel to avoid their furs from getting waterlogged.

One of the remarkable River Otter species is the Eurasian Otter. These otters are brown coloured above and cream coloured below. Their eyes are placed high on the head so that they can see even when the rest of the body is below water. Their bones are heavier, which help them to reduce buoyancy. Their fur consists of two layers, a thick waterproof outer one and a warm inner one. The Eurasian Otters also have a keen sense of sight, smell and hearing. Their sensitive whiskers around snout help them to detect prey. They are exceptionally good swimmers and fish catchers.

In my recent trip, Eurasian Otter was the key species in my wish-list(On my previous 7 days tour, I couldn't spot any otters there.). This time, I succeeded in spotting them. On my tour's second day evening, at Western range, I was sitting by

the river at the watchtower(you are allowed to get down from vehicle at that point), disappointed for not getting clear shots of the Pallas' Fish Eagle, though the bird was at close range. Suddenly, just below me, a pair of Eurasian Otters popped up, looking at me with much curiosity! For a few seconds, I was completely stunned, being caught off-guard, by one of my dream species at such a close range. After about 3 seconds, when I regained my senses, they have already vanished below the water. After a while, they emerged at a distance and I managed to get some record shots this time. I spent the rest of my safari's time with the pair, hunting and playing, though they were much far from me. Though I was utterly disappointed to miss the close-up (a decent shot could be taken even with a mobile camera from that distance!), yet I was satisfied that I got at least some record shots of such a magnificent species that was on my wish-list for years.

Next morning, I planned my trip in Eastern range(I've always felt that it is the best range for both birds and mammals). Soon after entering, we spotted a Eurasian Otter swimming towards a small island in the river! Though the otter was at a great distance, yet it was a wonderful experience to see the otter getting on the island and running on the island. At one point, it stood on its two legs to get a clear view of its surroundings. Soon, another otter joined and both of them started playing on the island. After a while, both of them disappeared in the water together.





After a couple of hours (got some close-ups of birds and mammals within that time), suddenly we spotted a family of more than 10 Eurasian Otters together eating fish at opposite bank of the river! I was overjoyed with such a sighting. Within a few minutes, they finished their meal and climbed the (opposite) bank. Soon the whole group started to dry themselves and started preening. The younger members have started running joyfully and were playing with each other. After a while, after the senior members finished preening, they dived in the water again, one after another, thus creating a waterslide on the river bank. The pups started sliding into the water using the waterslide; some of them climbed on the bank and slid again and again just for fun! It was simply hilarious! The senior members finished cleaning themselves in the water at that time, and then took control over the situation, gathering all the members and started hunting/fishing in the mid river.

Suddenly, like a miracle, the whole group turned and started swimming, while hunting, towards us. We were overjoyed. But, unlike us, a Darter sitting very close to us was

gradually getting angry to see the group of fish killing machines arrive at its favourite fishing spot. After watching for a minute of the sheer devastation of the fishes by the otters, it couldn't control itself and jumped in the water to protect its territory against these intruders. But within a few seconds, the darter was easily defeated by the otters and it came back to its previous spot beside us and sat there grumpily, possibly cursing the otters in its mind.

When people see an otter, the first things that come to their minds are things like cute and cuddly; but what they generally miss out is that beneath the adorable cuddly exterior with fluffy whiskers, lurks a fearsome predator. It was a great experience to watch these otters hunt in groups from such a close range. The whole pack was busy in hunting, diving in the water and coming out with a fish almost every time.

They were very vocal; it looked like they were giving each other instructions as well as inspiration for fishing. (Note, though I used the term 'fishing', the more appropriate term would be 'fish-hunting'; when we think



of fishing, cormorants and kingfishers comes to mind, but here teeth and claws are involved, it was absolute massacre of fishes.). But we noticed that though the otters are catching so many fishes, but they were not eating them; they were accumulating them in different spaces. A small sub-group was keeping their collections just below our jeep where a tree had fallen in the water creating a small pond-like body within the river. The injured fishes couldn't escape in the main river with their punctured swim bladder along with many of their vital organs damaged.

After this successful hunt, the sub-group of three arrived at the spot where their pile of treasure was kept, relaxed comfortably on the fallen tree and started their meal. They easily picked up one fish after another, recently dead or still alive, and ate them with expertise, holding the fish with their two hands, leaving nothing but the heads and the spinal bones. Soon, a pair of Greater Coucals arrived and perched beside the otters waiting patiently for the

leftovers. After a few moments, calls of otters started again from all around, and we observed that our three otters hurriedly finishing their last few remaining fishes. After finishing their meal, they jumped into the water and cleaned themselves of fish and started grooming. Other otters were also visible again all around in the water, grooming. Soon the pack gathered together and swam away and the coucals started their royal feast with the leftovers.

It was absolutely mesmerizing to watch one of my dream species from such a close range and witness their full hunt and finishing of meal. I'll cherish this memory throughout my life, not just for seeing a group of adorable cuddly creatures, but for witnessing their great and joyful social lives and their terrific under-water pack hunting skills.

**Arpan Saha lives in Agartala, India**



**A Funnel Web Spider venturing out of home**



© Soumendra Mukhopadhyay

# Trek to the Top of Africa

Each and every person in this world has passion, hobbies and likings. I also like sports, listening to music, photography and trekking. Trekking helps me remain closer to nature and helps me visit beautiful

4,877 metres (16,001 ft) from its base to 5,895 metres (19,341 ft) above sea level. The first recorded ascent to the summit of the mountain was by Hans Meyer and Ludwig Purtscheller in 1889. The mountain is a part of



destinations, simultaneously helping me to pursue my hobby of photography to a great extent.

I had done the trek of Valley of Flowers and Hemkund Sahib, Dayara Bugyal in Uttarakhand, Shaur Kundi Lake in Himachal Pradesh and Nilgiri Trek in Ooty. In Sept 2014 I had done trek of Cho La Pass, Everest Base Camp, and Kala Patthar in Nepal and reached up to the height of almost 5700 mtrs. Seeds of Mt. Kilimanjaro trek were sown during EBC trek.

Mount Kilimanjaro with its three volcanic cones, "Kibo", "Mawenzi", and "Shira", is a dormant volcano in Tanzania. It is the highest mountain in Africa, and rises approximately

the Kilimanjaro National Park and is a major climbing destination. The mountain has been the subject of many scientific studies because of its shrinking glaciers. Uhuru Peak is the highest summit on Kibo's crater rim.

"Kilimanjaro" meant either "mountain of greatness" or "mountain of caravans". Under the later meaning, "Kilima" meant "mountain" and "Jaro" possibly meant "caravans". It also means "the shining mountain" or "the white mountain."

There are seven official trekking routes by which to ascend and descend Mount Kilimanjaro: Lemosho, Machame, Marangu, Mweka, Rongai, Shira, and Umbwe. Of all the routes, Machame is considered the most

scenic, albeit steeper route.

So, ultimately after completing all the necessary procedures and preparation. I was about to embark on one of my lifetime dreams - to fly to Kilimanjaro airport via Mumbai and Adis Ababa and climb to the roof of Africa. As we flew into Kilimanjaro airport, I saw my first sighting of the enormous mountain I was going to be climbing the next day. I had butterflies in my stomach, but was also excited to be on this challenging adventure.

I met my group that evening over dinner and we all chatted about our adventure the next day. Everyone was stressing about fitting their luggage in the 15 kilo allowance we were allowed for the porters to carry, so we had an early night and went about our packing.

**FIRST DAY: MACHAME GATE (1,800mtrs) TO MACHAME CAMP (3,000mtrs).**

Trekking time 5 to 7 hours, distance approximately 9 kms

Breakfast was at 7am and our briefing at 8am. We met our head guide MacLoud and assistant guides and they went through the next 7 days with us. We were climbing the Machame Route for 7 nights/7days. As MacLoud was briefing us, the climb became a reality - we listened to how far we would walk each day and the altitude we would be climbing to. We got all our luggage and jumped onto our transfer to drive an hour to the Machame Gate. The drive was relaxing and full of life. We drove through different villages and watched how the locals went about their business.



## Mt Kilimanjaro is situated in Tanzania in Africa

Once at the park gate, the chaos began - there were quite a few other groups climbing and so there were lots of other porters and guides preparing to climb. We sat around for at least three hours whilst waiting for our team to get the acceptance to go ahead and climb.

That day we would climb 6-7 hours through the lush tropical rainforest and get to see the magnificent tree ferns and the pretty Kilimanjaro Impatiens Flower while we climbed. The climb was of a gradual ascent and followed the ridge up the mountain. The climb became steep and narrow and we were all very happy once we arrived at Machame Huts at around 3000 meters. The group was tired from the hike, but happy to have made it through the first day. We experienced changing atmosphere during the trek. When we started, it was hot and sunny, but after 2 hours it became foggy and cold, with poor visibility. Suddenly heavy rain showers came so we had to change our layers accordingly.

The biggest worry for all of us was the altitude and whether it was going to affect us. There was no way of knowing this until it happened, but we were all trying to consciously prepare our bodies. To do this, we drank between 5-6 litres of water a day. We also put the slowest person in our group at the front and this meant that we all walked "pole, pole" which means "slow, slow."

**SECOND DAY: MACHAME CAMP(3,000 mtrs ) TO SHIRA HUT CAMP (3,845 mtrs) Trekking time approximately 7 hours. Distance approximately 7 kms.**

Day two was our ascent to Shira Hut at 3,845 meters and this hike would take us approximately 7 hours. We followed the ridge from the day before. We then entered the Heather zone which meant we saw beautiful lichens in different bright colours and amazing views of Mount Meru. The hike was steep but steady and we continued with our slow and steady pace as a team to ensure we made it to our next camp. During the trek, the clouds moved in and the temperature dropped so we dressed warmer.

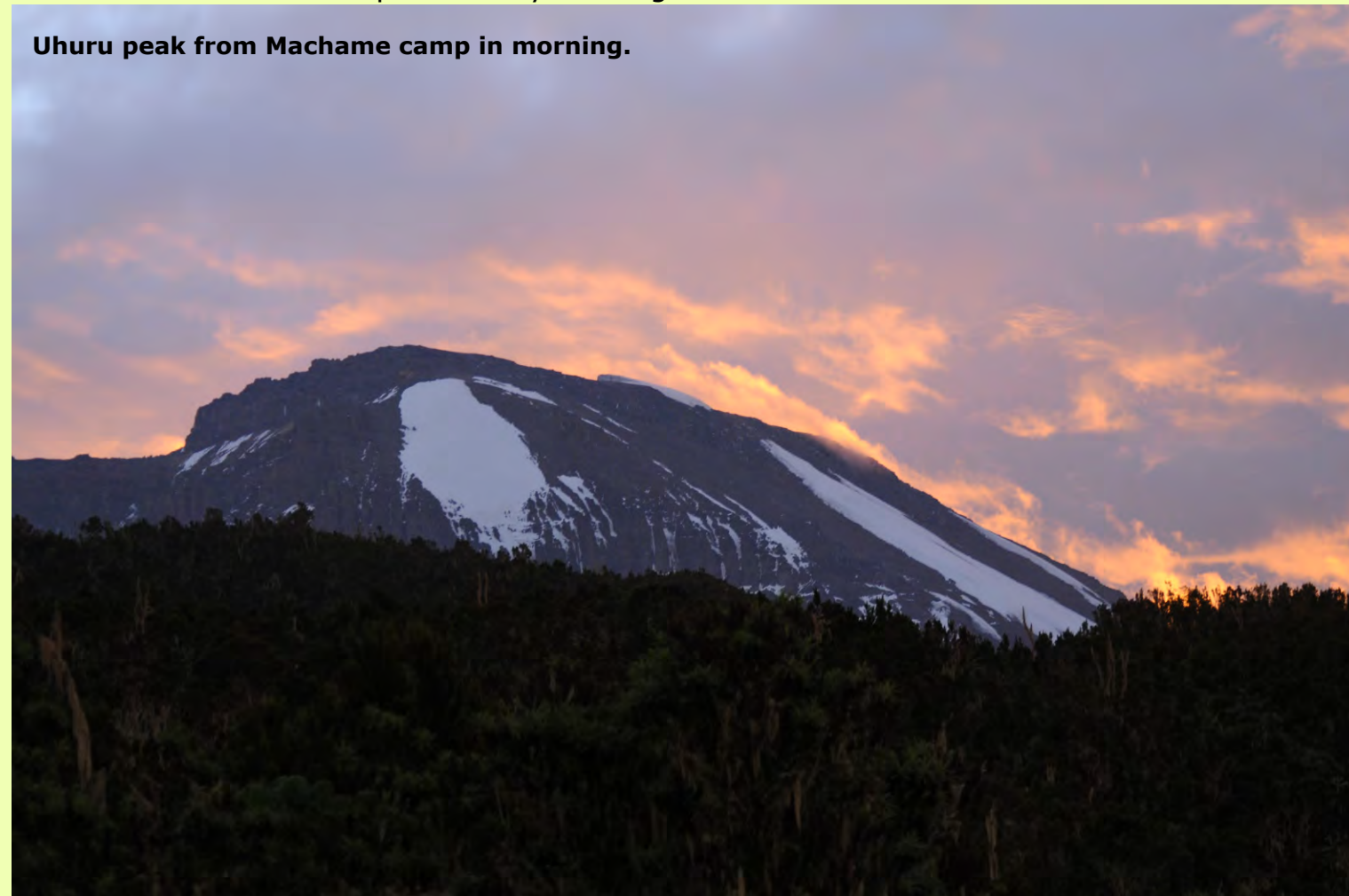
Shira camp site was very open and exposed so we felt very cold. We had lunch in the dining tent. After lunch few of us went for a leisurely walk to Shira caves and captured some nice clicks of Shira peak. Every evening

we had early dinner between 7 to 7.30 pm. After dinner our chief guide used to give us briefing-about next day's trek. We used to prepare our next day backpack and tried to sleep as much possible on sleeping mats and sleeping bags.

**THIRD DAY: SHIRA CAMP(3,845 mtrs) TO MOIR CAMP(3,960 mtrs): Trekking time 4 hours. Distance approximately 8kms.**

After daily morning rituals and breakfast, we used to get together for daily prayers and national anthem, before starting each day's trek. It greatly helps in trekking by creating an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood. On that day we could not gain much height as we had to walk through rocks in very windy and foggy atmosphere. Slowly we reached at Moir Camp around lunch time. After lunch we rested for an hour and then our co guide took us for acclimatization trek and we climbed for

**Uhuru peak from Machame camp in morning.**



**Shira Peak**

another 250 to 300 mtrs on nearby hills. We witnessed some awesome views of millions and millions years old hills and rocks created from lava. Had an early dinner and briefing for the next day. We had 30 to 45 minutes of post dinner entertainment programme. Some of us sang songs, some played mouth organs, some said jokes.

**FOURTH DAY: MOIR CAMP(3,960 mtrs) TO BARRANCO CAMP(3,960 mtrs) Trekking time 8 hours and distance approximately 10kms.**

Day four was going to be a very long day, which was going to test our perseverance. We walked for 8 hours, starting at 4,000 meters and climbing to 4,600 meters to Lava Tower, dropping back down to 3,900 meters at Barranco Camp. The scenery that day changed and we were walking in a lunar

landscape with enormous lava rocks making you feel like you are in space. The weather was very changeable and I wore my thermals as we had been told it could get quite cold the higher we climbed. At the start of the hike I was warm, but once we got over a hill the clouds came in and light rain poured so we all quickly changed into our waterproofs. The higher we climbed, I could definitely feel the air becoming thinner and it was a little hard to breathe. It felt like you had been sprinting hard and your chest felt a little tighter, nothing too scary! Once at Lava Tower, it was downhill from there and we descended to 3,950 - the walk was a photographers paradise! There were waterfalls and giant Lobelias and different shrubs. The famous Barranco Wall was ahead of us and this was tomorrow's challenge!

Lava Tower



### FIFTH DAY: BARRANCO CAMP (3,960 mtrs) TO KARANGA CAMP (4,035 mtrs)

Trekking time 5hrs approximately and distance 6kms approximately.

Day four, I had a sound sleep. Ever since I took this adventure I felt incredibly rejuvenated. I walked around the camp looking for a little signal to talk to my family members, relatives and friends. The temperature must have seriously dropped overnight as the ground was frozen and our tents had ice on them. As we had an excellent view of the mountain, many photos were taken before breakfast! Other climbers had already left to start the climb and when looking at the wall, you could just see tiny colourful dots all over.

The Barranco Wall is a steep rocky ridge which looks like a sheer rock face but, lucky for us, there was a pathway that meanders up it. We all followed each other in our usual single file line taking in the breath-taking scenery and my favourite flower - the Protea. We crossed

over streams and jumped over pebble stones, before we started our ascent up the wall using our hands and feet to get us up. The climb was challenging, but our guides were brilliant and we all made it to the top!

Once at the top, the views were extra special and we even saw a small mouse but soon the cloud coverage moved in and we all got very cold. We had an hour of nice time after climbing Barranco Wall. We had done ample photography of nature. We started to move quickly as we wanted to keep warm and the descent into the Karanaga Valley provided us with more beautiful scenery. The walk took us around 5 hours and we climbed to 4,200 and ended up sleeping at Karanaga Camp which is 4,000 meters. Once in camp, we all went for an afternoon sleep. In the evening we saw a beautiful sunset. Sun was setting behind Mt. Meru. Captured beautiful and colorful sky. The night was really very cold with strong wind blowing.

Dangerous Barranco Wall



Lobelia



Protea







Mawenzie peak, clicked from Barafu.



### **SIXTH DAY: KARANGA CAMP(4,035 mtrs) TO BARAFU CAMP(4,650 mtrs)**

**Trekking time 5 hours and distance 6 kms**

We would be climbing from 4,000 meters to 4,600 meters. The trek that day was short but we left Karanga camp site and headed for Barafu Camp which was our base camp. It was a steep ascent out of the valley and the weather was cold and wet. We all followed in our line, walking extremely slowly and I concentrated on drinking lots of water. The atmosphere was eerie as there was much cloud and visibility was limited, the scenery was alpine and stark and there were tons of shale rock. As we climbed over rocks and jumped over large pieces of ice, I looked up and saw the Barafu camp nestled on the top of the mountain. Even though that day was a shorter day, we all worked together as a team to encourage each other to get to the top - fatigue hit a couple of the team members and again we were at higher altitude and things took a lot longer.

### **SUMMIT NIGHT: BARAFU(4,650 mtrs) TO STELLA POINT (5,700 mtrs) AND UHURU PEAK(5,895 mtrs)**

Once in camp, we freshened up and ate our dinner early so we could go and try to sleep for a few hours before being woken up for our summit trek. I walked into the mess tent to find the rest of the team eating biscuits and sipping tea - I had never seen the team so quiet and the atmosphere so tense. Everyone was nervous and this was because we didn't know what to expect. We got into our line and started our long walk to the summit at 11.45pm. We had chosen full moon night for the summit. Visibility was good and all you could see were small headlights going up the mountain in a zigzag line. The night was very, very cold and wind was blowing at the speed of more than 40 kms, every step needed concentration, again the guides were exceptional. The first section was a serious climb over rocks. The ground glistened like little diamonds and was ever pretty. The first scramble must have taken us an hour or so and then we got into a rhythm and I have to say, I



enjoyed every minute. My feet did get extremely cold but the rest of me was fine - that could have been the six layers I had on top and three layers I had on the bottom.

The climb to Stella Point took roughly 6 hours and I saw the most beautiful sun rise - it was an amazing feeling to be above the clouds. As it started to dawn, the spirit of the team became stronger and it felt like everyone had a new burst of energy. The most difficult part for me was getting to Stella Point and every step did take more energy because now you are getting to 5,700 meters in altitude and I did become more breathless. Once I reached Stella Point I felt a rush of emotion come over me - to think I had come this far and I was feeling okay was an amazing feeling. We then continued our last 100 meters ascent to the summit! This last hour took in such amazing sights - large glaciers and again the most beautiful view

of Mount Meru. Once I reached the Uhuru sign and we had our photos taken, I could not quite believe that I had fulfilled one of my goals in life. It's hard to explain, but you feel a great sense of achievement and satisfaction. It is not all about summiting - it is the 7 day journey which tests your mental and physical strength and to take in such different scenery and views for me was out of this world.

**SEVENTH DAY:  
UHURU PEAK  
(5,895 mtrs)  
TO BARAFU TO  
MILLENNIUM  
CAMP (3,600  
mtrs)**

After taking few photographs at the summit, we had to return back early as the atmosphere was very cold. We started our

descent to Barafu camp. Descent was also very tough on knee. It was slippery due to dust and gravel. We had lunch at Barafu, packed our bags and left for millennium camp. As we went downward there was no breathing problem and we quickly reached the camp.

**EIGHTH DAY: MILLENNIUM CAMP  
(3,600 mtrs) TO MWEKA GATE  
(1,680 mtrs)**

Trekking time 4 hours and distance approximately 10kms.

After daily routine, breakfast, prayer, national anthem, for the last time we all got together. Had group photo, photos with new friends, our guides and porters. We also sang and danced with guides and porters on Kilimanjaro Song.

The descent was pleasant through deep rain forests. There were magnificent flowers and trees, chirping of birds and beautiful landscapes. We reached Mweka gate, signed in the register and were given a certificate of completion of the trek, "a prized possession". We left for our hotel in Moshi by Bus. By the time I walked out of Kilimanjaro National Park, I had summited the tallest freestanding mountain in the



The target achieved.

world. I had traveled 50 miles and climbed 19,300 feet. I learnt a lot, not just about what the human body and strength of spirit can accomplish, but what I specifically can handle and achieve. I had never pushed myself so far and it has made all the difference off the mountain. I will always feel intensely proud of my summit moment. I'll always have that sense of pride when I'm feeling lousy or unmotivated. It's an unparalleled experience and I highly recommend it to anyone who is game and able to afford the trek. I have been back for almost 3 weeks now and am still trying to come back to reality and my mind cannot, but stop thinking of this truly amazing experience.

**Dr. Hemen Shah is from Bhuj in Gujarat state.**

**By profession he is a Consultant Physician and practicing since 1989.**

**He is a multifaceted person with various hobbies which include Trekking, Photography, Sports, Wildlife and Music.**



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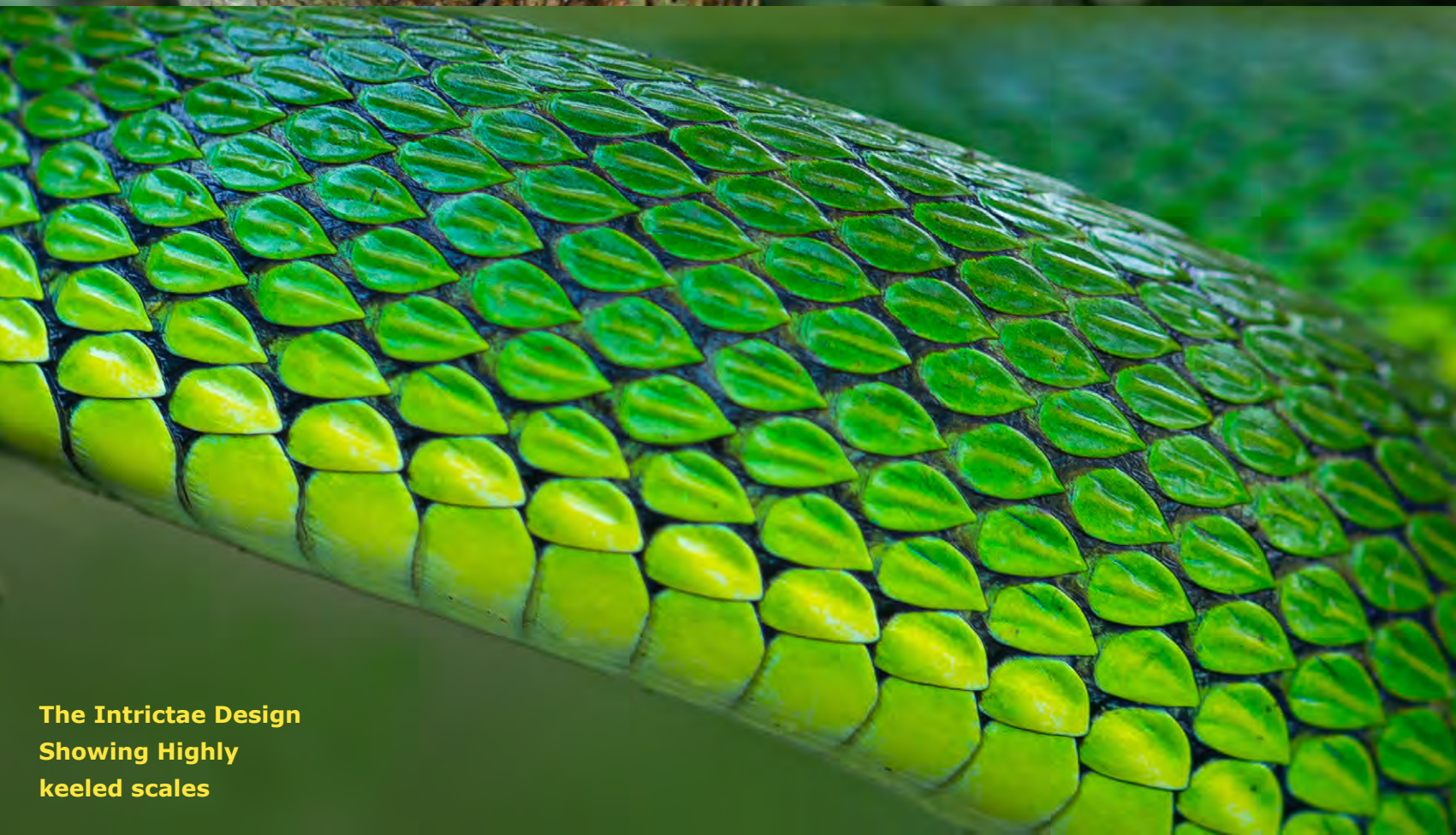
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# Red-tailed Bamboo Pit Viper



Sunil Sachi



**The Intricate Design  
Showing Highly  
keeled scales**

**R**ed-tailed Bamboo Pit Viper [*Trimeresurus erythrurus*] is also known as the Spot-tailed Pit Viper, and has been recorded in almost all of the north-eastern states of India. The southernmost area where it is recorded is the Sunderbans in West Bengal. It is also found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand. It belongs to the viperidae family and the venom is hemotoxic. It looks like all other green coloured pit vipers of South-East Asia and not easily identifiable to species level. Superficially this species can be differentiated with other green pit vipers by checking the presence of highly keeled scales on the temporal region of the head.

It is a medium bodied snake with a prehensile and a short tail which ends with a pointed tip. The tail is marked with brown or dark brown spots. Males are smaller than females in length. Females can grow to a maximum of about 1.05 metres. Head is sub triangular shaped and distinct from narrow neck. Eyes are medium in size with vertically elliptical pupils. Body is somewhat slender and is covered with highly keeled scales. Upper body color is green or yellowish-green with interscale color being black. A fine white line starts from posterior of the eyes and runs along the last dorsal row till the base of tail. Females usually have no such stripe, and if present is very indistinct in form.

**Upclose  
and  
Personal**



All Images by Sunil Sachi  
and were shot in Mizoram,  
India

# Indian Leopard

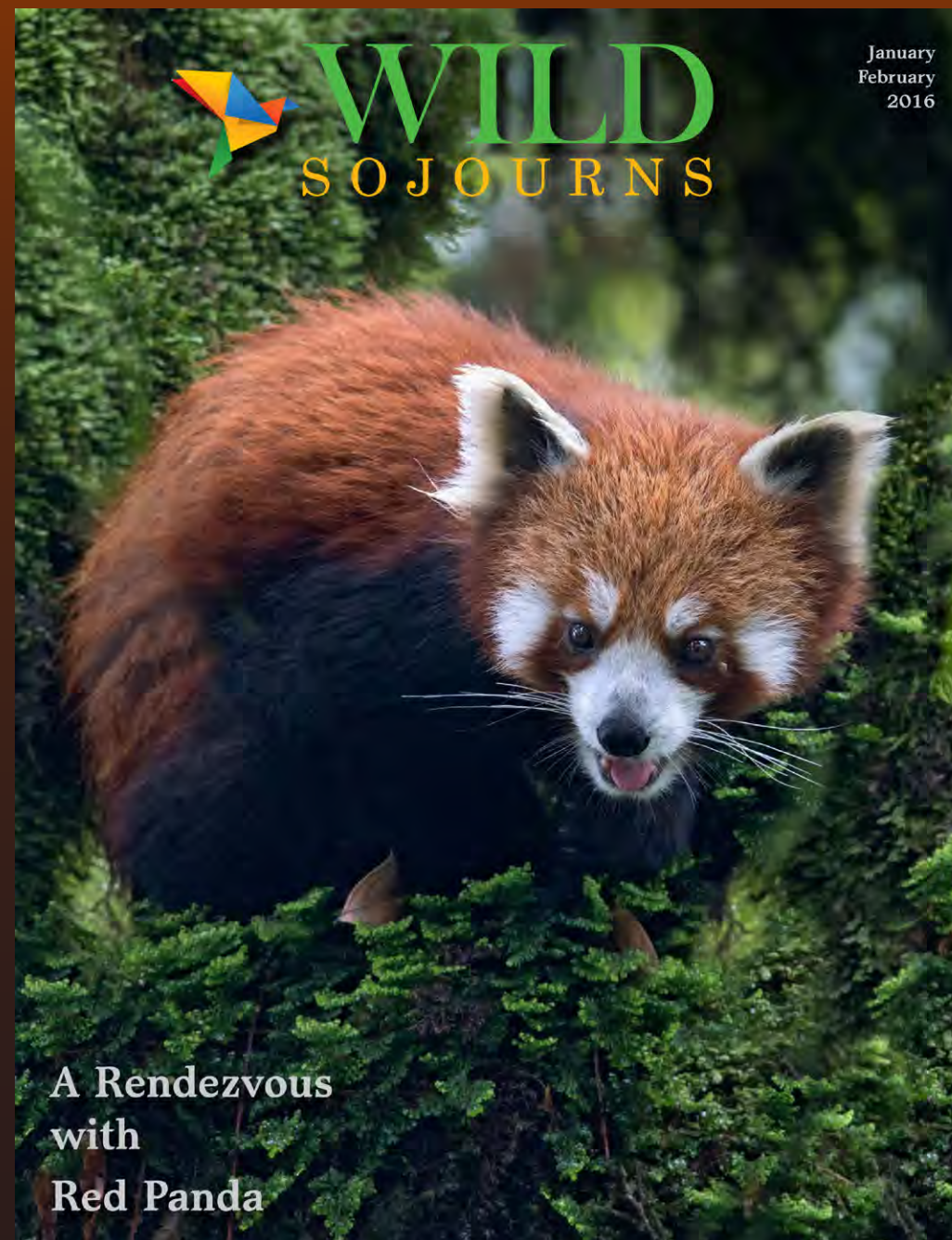
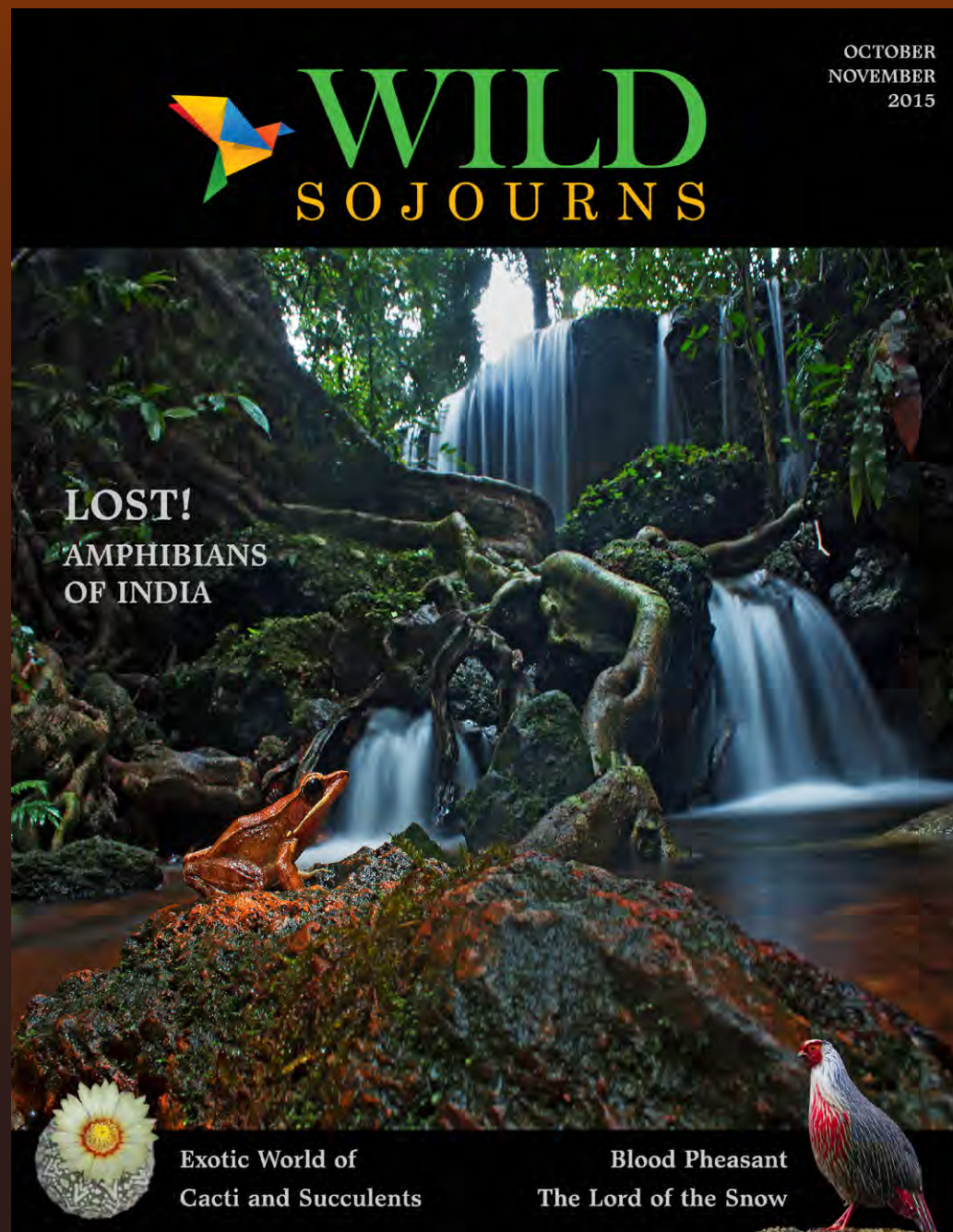
The Indian Leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*) is a subspecies widely distributed on the Indian subcontinent. It is one of the five big cats found in India, apart from Asiatic lion, Bengal Tiger, Snow Leopard and Clouded Leopard.

In 2008, the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) classified leopards as Near Threatened, stating that they may soon qualify for the Vulnerable status due to loss of habitat and fragmentation, heavy poaching for the illegal trade of skins and body parts in Asia, and persecution due to conflict situations. They are becoming increasingly rare outside protected areas. The trend of the population is decreasing.



**Arun SK**  
is from Bellary,  
Karnataka

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