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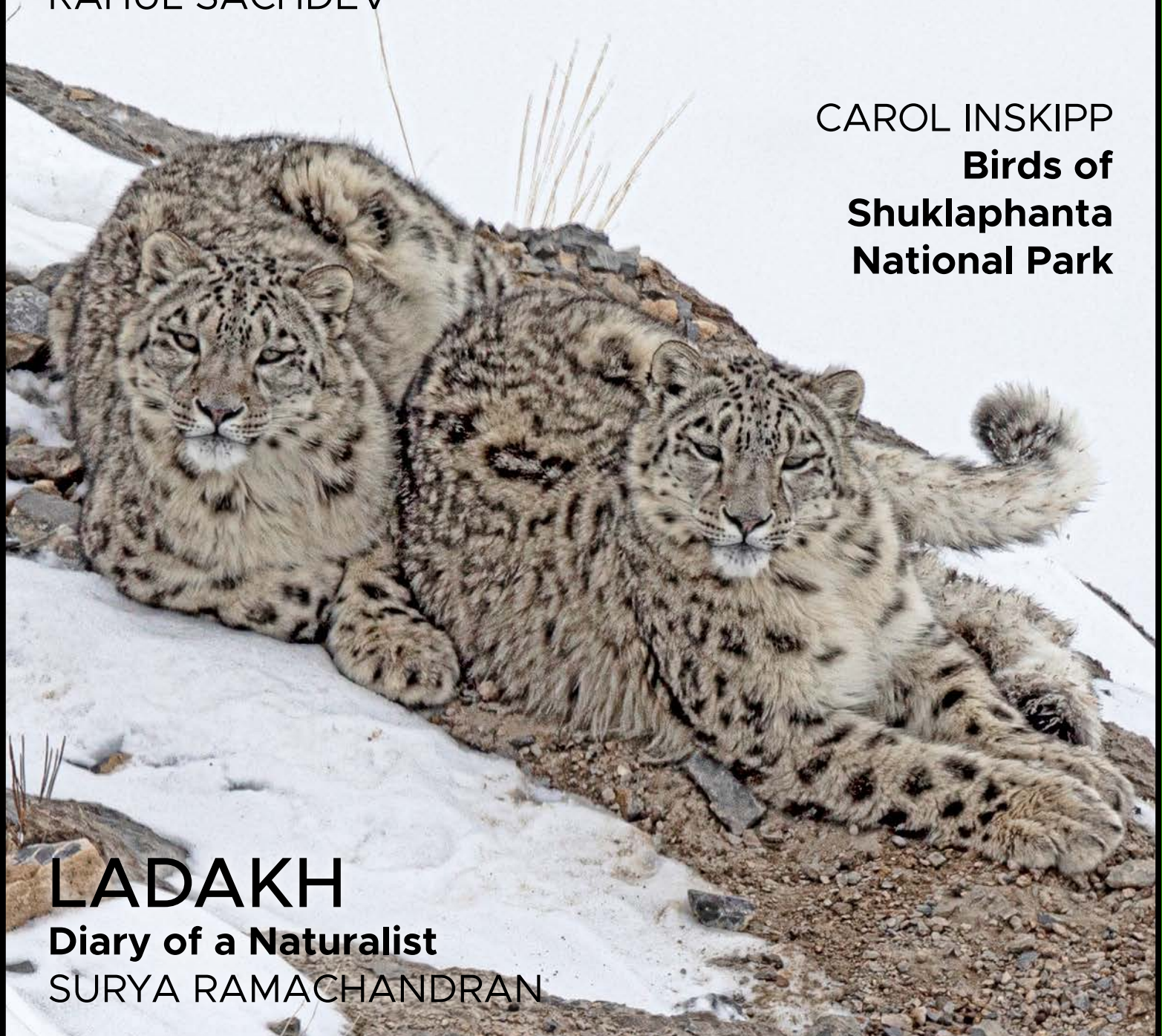
SOJOURNS

Nov-Dec
2020

Steps to Get Creative

RAHUL SACHDEV

CAROL INSKIPP
**Birds of
Shuklaphanta
National Park**



LADAKH

Diary of a Naturalist

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© Azam Danish

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© Megh Roy Choudhury

Warm greetings to all. We are back after a very long hiatus! We have faced a lot of hurdles and adversities in the intervening time. The magazine suffered regrettably as a consequence. But the irrepressible desire to enrich ourselves as well as our fellow wildlife enthusiasts has culminated in this new issue. We sincerely hope to persevere in our fullest capacity in the future. Wild Sojourns Magazine aims to initiate and promulgate awareness about the rich nature we are bestowed with. This is a non-profit venture whose only aim is to propagate knowledge. We thank all the friends, well wishers, authors, contributors and readers from the bottom of our hearts.

We are at war! We are fighting against an invisible enemy in the form of a global pandemic, which has inevitably affected all walks of life. This crisis has also had a profound effect on nature and wildlife. While the world is crawling back to normalcy, after being devastated by disease, lockdown and economic meltdown, nature seems to be retrieving her territory. Wild animals are wandering near urban cityscapes stepping beyond the comforts of their forested homes. There is a strong focus on global wildlife trade, which is showing a decline, albeit temporarily. Wildlife Tourism, which is a huge industry on its own, too has felt the impact of this pandemic. As the “new normal” protocols are being addressed and restrictions are being lifted we need to introspect. God willing, current circumstances will allow us to reconsider our lifestyle and our relationship with nature and make the requisite changes that are absolutely essential.



Megh Roy Choudhury
Editor in Chief

Cover Story

SURYA RAMACHANDRAN

The Land beyond The HIMALAYAS

Diary of a Naturalist in Ladakh

“While Surya has grown intimately acquainted with Ladakh over the last four years, what he has shared here are those initial experiences he had in the first four months of his stay there – a time of many firsts, a time of humbling introspection and a true exploration. Images of the vibrant wildlife in Ladakh have been given throughout the article to represent the rich biodiversity of the region.”



© Surya Ramachandran

"Map of Ladakh to help orient oneself with the rest of the article. It features the Indus Valley and Leh town sandwiched between the Zaskar and Ladakh mountain ranges, the Nubra/Shyok Valley further north between the Ladakh and the Karakoram ranges. The high Changthang Plateau lies to the east with its vast open landscapes, large lakes and marshes. The other big cities include Kargil and Dras, lying to the west of Central Ladakh, located between the Zaskar and the Karakoram ranges".



Laboured breath, sharp intakes of icy wind and the warmth of cheerful mountain folk are the three constants while exploring high altitude trans-Himalayan scape of Ladakh. That was the case on 6th of July 2017, save for one vital, perspective-shifting difference – I was watching my first Snow Leopard – correction – first six Snow Leopards in the mountains around Ulley, a small settlement in Central Ladakh. Two mothers with two sub-adult cubs each, were resting on opposite ridges. My friends and field companions, Tsewang Norbu and Gyalpo Khingru and I were ecstatic. This was everything I had imagined wildlife viewing in Ladakh to be, all those years ago when I dreamed of Ladakh while living in a tropical coastal city. It's pertinent to mention that I had already spent three months walking through these valleys and ridges alone, in search of these cats, with no results. I had spent close to eight years as a naturalist in the Western Ghats and the tiger landscapes of Central India and this, perhaps, had led to an overdeveloped sense of confidence in my tracking abilities. Nothing had quite prepared me for this whole new world I was in. Those initial

months in Ladakh served as quite the reality check that I probably needed and ensured that I started from scratch.

Marshes of Ladakh



© Surya Ramachandran

ARRIVAL

It was my first time in Ladakh. I had left behind an exciting life in Central India in search of greater heights (literally). My assignment - team

up with the Snow Leopard Lodge and figure out possibilities for wildlife viewing in the non-winter months, focused on large carnivores like Snow Leopards, Brown Bears, Wolves, small cats and several others. I was given the freedom to explore and go in search of these incredible beasts – an exercise that was a reward in itself. It was perfect. I arrived in Ladakh prepped with one month's worth of knowledge garnered from essential readings on Ladakh - The Field Guide to Ladakhi Wildlife by Otto Pfister, Crossroads of High Asia by Janet Rizvi and some Peter Hopkirk history lessons. It was an early morning flight and I dozed off despite my excitement. I was woken up by the captain's landing announcement and found myself staring out the window of that aircraft, stark new land that was going to be my home and office. I was received by David Sonam, Managing Trustee at the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), who grew to be my friend, mentor and father figure for the months and years that followed. I spent the first few days acclimatising, which is absolutely vital for anyone arriving into Ladakh – and was packed off to Ulley once I was cleared for travel by David.



© Surya Ramachandran

Summer pastures in Ladakh

FIRST EXPLORATION IN THE MOUNTAINS

Ulley is a tiny hamlet made up of just six houses, nestled in the Ladakh Range to the north of the river Indus. It's about two to three hours driving distance from Leh. Ulley is where the road ends and beyond it lie the high summer pastures of the Yak and Dzo. The Snow Leopard Lodge, originally a homestay owned by one of Ladakh's top Snow Leopard trackers, Tsewang Norbu became my home. It was designed to facilitate the promotion of conservation tourism as a means to preserve Snow Leopards and their ecosystem, by putting tourism revenue directly into the local community.

This is fantastic Ibex country with herds constantly in view on the slopes facing the hamlet. There are few sights more evocative than a magnificently horned male Ibex standing vigil on impossibly narrow outcropping, thousands of feet over a plunging cliff. Apart from the high numbers of Snow Leopards, the area was also known for healthy populations of Ibexes, Urials, Wolves, Himalayan Foxes, Bearded Vultures, Golden Eagles, other raptors and trans-

Himalayan endemics.

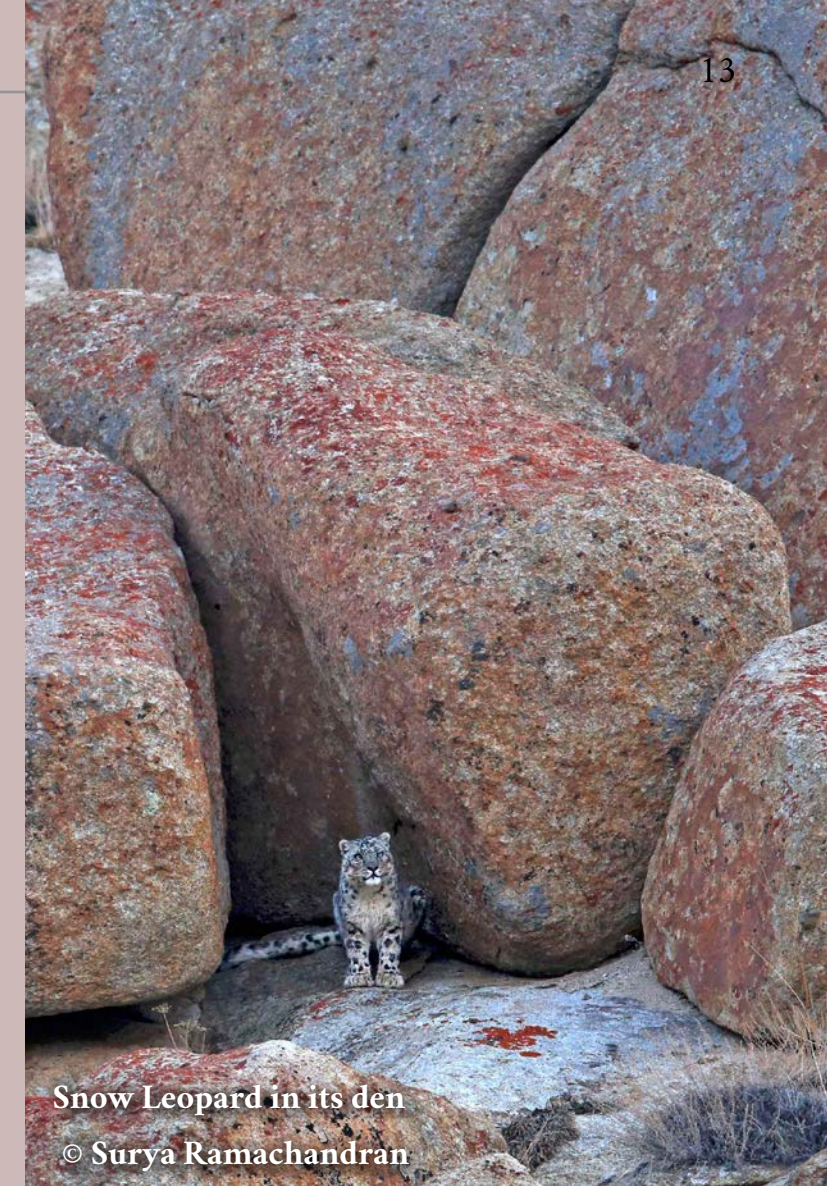
While waiting for a formal orientation to the landscape, I took my first walk around the village. Magpies were omnipresent - on wires, rooftops, Hippophae shrubs, on the ground foraging around cattle pens and occasionally on the mountainsides.



Team of spotters at Ulley

© Surya Ramachandran

Noisy flocks of Chukar, a small beautifully patterned Partridge, peppered the landscape all the way between Leh and Ulley occupying scree and rock slopes and homestead yards. Robin- and Brown Accentors and Twites foraged on the ground and among houses in the morning, and then melted back into the mountains. Rock Buntings, a summer breeding migrant, preferred the rocky slopes dotted with minimal vegetation. Sizeable flocks of finches were often seen as they flew over. Species were easily told by the distinct wing patterns, shape, size and call. The more elusive ones were the Great Rosefinches, only outdone by the extremely beautiful, but ever skulking White-browed Tit Warbler who tended to be active among the dense thickets. I discovered the Rosefinches soon enough, but it took a few hours to locate a Tit-Warbler. Incidentally, the first one I saw was thanks to a passing Feral Cat, who flushed it on to the top of a bush. Most birds restricted themselves to the ground, the slopes, the Hippophae, Wild Rose and Myricaria shrubs and were seldom seen among the planted groves of Poplars and Willows. Bird numbers in the mountains were generally low, making each bird I saw a special well-earned lifer.



Snow Leopard in its den

© Surya Ramachandran

Once Norbu handed me the route maps I began the longer walks. It was unfortunate that he couldn't join me because he had farming duties to attend to. I can't say if it was the altitude or my initial disorientation compounded by difficult terrain in those early days, but every rock or inexplicable shape on the mountain-side magically transformed into a Snow Leopard in my eyes. Perhaps it was my deep yearning to see one that made me see them everywhere. Something that no one really speaks about when describing the experience of wildlife spotting in these parts is the perception of distance. When scanning a mountain slope, how big a cat am I looking for? When refocusing my binoculars higher up the slope, how much further am I actually moving along the depth of field and consequently, how much smaller will the cat appear in this new belt?

Himalayan Red Fox



Red Fox is known as "Watse" in Ladakhi language. Red fox is the most widely distributed wild canid in the world. In India, there are three subspecies of Red Fox. Two of these, "*Vulpes vulpes montana*" and "*Vulpes vulpes griffithii*" are found in the Himalayas and trans-Himalayan region of India. Other species is the Desert Fox.



© Surya Ramachandran

I realised that this was a personal phenomenon, which no one could help me with. I would be able to train my sense of perception only with time and regular wildlife viewing effort. And I am so glad, I had to figure this entire thing out for myself, because this initial grounding laid the

foundation of my ability to work and guide in this Martian landscape. I walked every single day, over long and short distances into the mountains, valleys and high pastures. Ibexes were the first mammals I was able to decode. Soon I was able to spot herds, know when they descended to the brook for water and where they spent the nights. The herds were mostly females and some young. The males restricted themselves to the higher slopes above the pastures and descended during winter, in time to rut in December. The rocky banks of the

glacial stream that ran down the main valley was always the most productive walk. Dippers, both Brown and White-throated, were always around. Large flocks of Fork-tailed Swifts and Eurasian Crag Martins nested in the eroded mud slopes above the stream.

Himalayan Ibex



© Arindam Bhattacharya

Himalayan Marmot



© Mousam Ray

Large-eared Pika

The spring water areas, like the main catchment area of the stream, were a good spot to look for the Solitary Snipe, a species that preferred these warmer, calmer waters to the flow of the glacial melt. The boulder covered slopes above the catchment spring was home to a large nesting flock of Snow Pigeons and a few Hill Pigeons. This was the only time of year I saw Snow Pigeons in great numbers. The birds disappeared in the autumn and winter months, except for a few stragglers that teamed up with the Hill Pigeons.

The grassy slopes along the streams and the high pastures were fantastic Marmot and Pika country. The former hibernates in deep burrows through winter and resurfaces to actively re-engage in spring. The latter, the Large-eared Pika is well adapted to handle the harsh winters, thanks to its intricate tunnels. It is known in specific chambers and defecate in others to create a natural warm spot.



© Surya Ramachandran

Golden Eagle





© Arindam Bhattacharya

Four things kept me returning to the high pastures. One was the beautiful Tso Ralpa, easily the most stunning blue lake in the region, besides which I spent many happy hours alone tucking into sandwiches and coffee. The second was the incredible butterfly diversity in the floral beds of the pastures. This is where endemics like the Ladakh Clouded Yellow, Dull Green Underwing and the dainty Apollos could be spotted. The third was the denning of Tibetan Wolves (or Himalayan Wolves) at the edge of the pastures. This was their usual spot, discovered by the intrepid Norbu a few years earlier. It was a nondescript burrow on a sandy slope, given away by the sentry wolf sitting next to it. It became a weekly ritual to walk up to the pastures, sit at a vantage and watch the newest pack members. The adults would return two or three times a day with meat, likely some poor farmer's sheep lifted from the surrounding villages, which they regurgitated for the little ones. In years gone by, wolves, especially wolf dens, once discovered, were not spared by the locals as this was the time they caused maximum damage to livestock.

Tibetan Wolf

© Saurabh Sawant

Argali
(Mountain Sheep)

© Surya Ramachandran

They need to bring back food for the grown up pups every day, which could at times result in a farmer losing his entire flock of sheep in a short span. The pups spent a large chunk of the day by themselves in the vicinity of the den. Every Golden Eagle flyby or the arrival of a curious fox would make the pups dart back into the den. This experience of witnessing wildlife languidly over long periods, especially a charismatic large carnivore, was deeply satisfying and vastly different from previous encounters cut short by safari timings or dictated by guest interests and the will of the forest department, which was the system of operation in our tiger parks. The fourth and most compelling reason was a piece of information shared with me by David Sonam, Dr. Namgyal of the SLC-IT and Tsewang Norbu. They said the Snow Leopards preferred the slopes around these pasture belts, seeking fat Marmots out as their main summer prey. The larger male Ibexes which traversed these slopes could also attract these cats. But despite my efforts, following the marmots and the ibex, I never found the ghost cats.

Snow Leopard



© Surya Ramachandran

Tso Ralpa





© Surya Ramachandran

Snow Leopard with Ibex kill



© Surya Ramachandran

I rerouted my walks and camera traps to the valleys, to trails where Snow Leopards were regularly seen in the winter. My assumption, backed by Norbu's agreement, was that like Tigers and Leopards, these cats are territorial and that it was highly unlikely that they'd abandon their regular scent marking spots even on valley floors. I saw my first track on day one in Spango Valley, enroute to a rock face that the cats used to rub their cheek glands and spray their scent. It was nothing like the deep imprinted large cat tracks seen in Kanha or Satpura that I was accustomed to. This was an insipid shallow depression in the loose shale, made a little more obvious by the size and stride length. It had taken me a month to find this track and it felt like I had struck gold. The tracks of the cat led straight to the rock that Norbu had indicated to me. Signs of old Snow Leopard scat and scrape signs were all over, along with evidence of past camera trap placements. Some scrapes looked darker than others and on the rock I found a few strands of grey hair, possibly from when they rubbed their cheek glands. Such intimate examination of the ways of the Snow Leopard, the ghost cat that had rightfully earned its mythical status, was beyond thrilling. I set up my traps, scanned the steep slopes and returned to camp.

The next morning, I couldn't help, but run back to that spot to check the traps. Ideally, a trap should be left undisturbed for at least a week. But I was exploring for the joy of it, and not as a researcher attempting to collect accurate scientific data. By the time we entered the valley we had already seen two herds of Ibex, a few Himalayan Snowcocks, a Northern Goshawk, a fox and a Mountain Weasel. Then Norbu stopped to examine a track in the ground.

He asked me if this is where I saw tracks the

previous day. It wasn't. This was a slightly larger pad and looked far cleaner and fresh! We followed it all the way to the camera trap. We had our cat. My first Snow Leopard, albeit on camera trap. We fired up our laptops, set up the cards and went through the clips. And there she was, a beautiful female Snow Leopard, marking the very same spot on the rock, her tail high up in the air, vibrating as she sprayed her scent. It was a thirty second clip which ended with her walking towards the camera. The last clip began with her tail leaving the frame, followed by two smaller fur balls entering the frame, her cubs. I couldn't believe what I had missed by fifteen



Don coming out of its den

© Surya Ramachandran

minutes. They tried to mimic their mother's scent marking postures and then scrambled off-camera, following her as she familiarised them with the trails she had walked all her life. I found an interesting mix of emotions that took over me at that moment. I was overjoyed by the sight on camera, frustrated that I hadn't spotted them the previous evening and a part of me suddenly wanted a break from this. We set up the cameras again in different spots and returned to the lodge. After a few weeks of this routine, walking more valleys, capturing close to 9 different cats on camera traps and still seeing none, I decided to take that break.

The “Ghost of the Mountains”

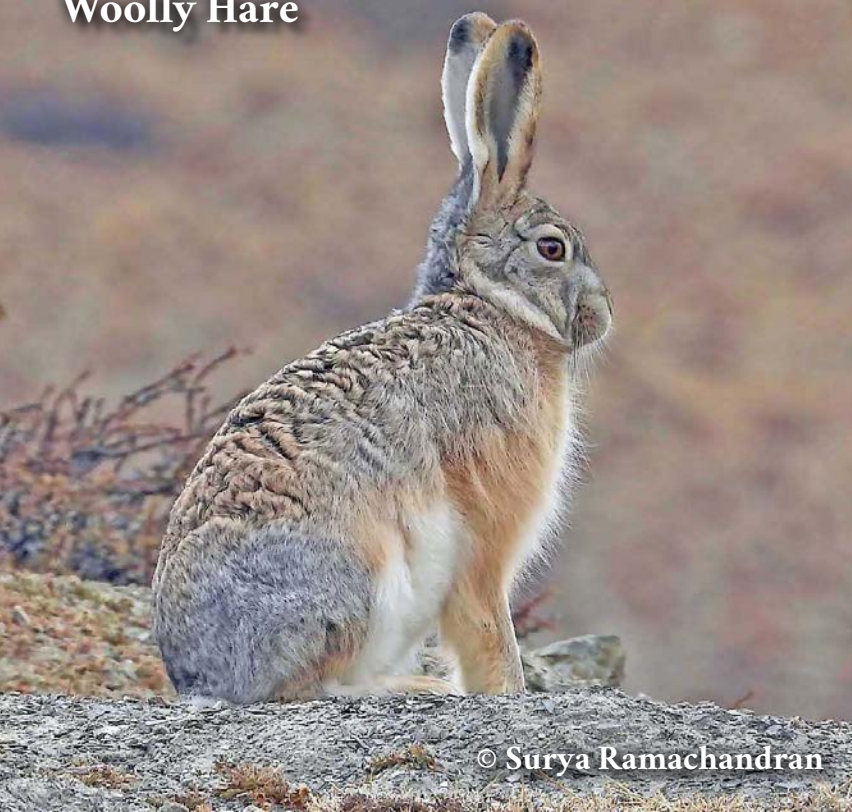




Himalan Blue Sheep male

© Sudipta Chakraborty

Woolly Hare



© Surya Ramachandran

Himalan Blue sheep female



EXPLORING OTHER LANDSCAPES

A few days of having my fill of civilization discovering local eateries like Tibetan Kitchen, Bon Appetit and Lamayuru, I was ready to head back into the mountains. On the advice of David and other friends at the SLC-IT, I hired a bike, secured my permits and entered the Rumbak area of Hemis National Park. I parked my bike at Zingchen village and walked the trail to Hursing. The trail carried on further to Rumbak and Yurutse. After climbing the slopes around Ulley, this walk was effortless. Here I saw my first herds of Bharal, the most abundant wild sheep of the high Himalayas in India and Nepal. Ungulate distributions are very unique in these mountains. Habitat did play a part, but it had more to do with segregation of food sources between the species, response to danger and the splits between the ranges. Bharals were seldom seen in the Ulley area but were quite common in the northern slopes of the Ladakh range. In Rumbak, I was traversing the Stok Range of the Zaskar Mountains, an area dominated by Bharals with a

few Urials near the Indus river.

I had lunch at a village home in Rumbak, the place where Dr. Chundawat studied these big cats and also the place where the late Richen Wangchuk, the charismatic Founding Director of the SLC-IT, set up the community-oriented inclusive conservation tourism model that we are familiar with today. I carried on further towards Yurutse and Gandha La, known to be one of the best places to observe the Indian race of the rare Eurasian Lynx. The abundance of Woolly Hares in this landscape was a clear indicator of the presence of this stocky small-medium cat. My luck with Snow Leopards in Ladakh seemed to extend to Lynxes too and I had to make do with a few tracks and old carcasses of hares. I returned to Zingchen via a two hour walk and rode back to Leh as the sun set over the beautiful pastel hued landscape. Every time I watched the sun set after another long and tiring day, I recounted how lucky I was to be doing all this, in this remote wildscape, which diminished, for the moment, the frustration around absconding cats.

© Sudipta Chakraborty

Tibetan Partridge

© Surya Ramachandran



Chukar Partridge

© Shivayogi Kanthi



Tibetan Sandgrouse

© Surya Ramachandran



Tibetan Sandgrouse

© Dr. Nagraj Chindanur



In the next few weeks, I teamed up with Stanzin and explored other regions of Ladakh. We started off by driving into the Changthang landscape, crossing the high pass of Taglang La where we would come across Tibetan Snowcocks, the more beautifully patterned cousins of the Himalayan Snowcocks I saw at Ulley.

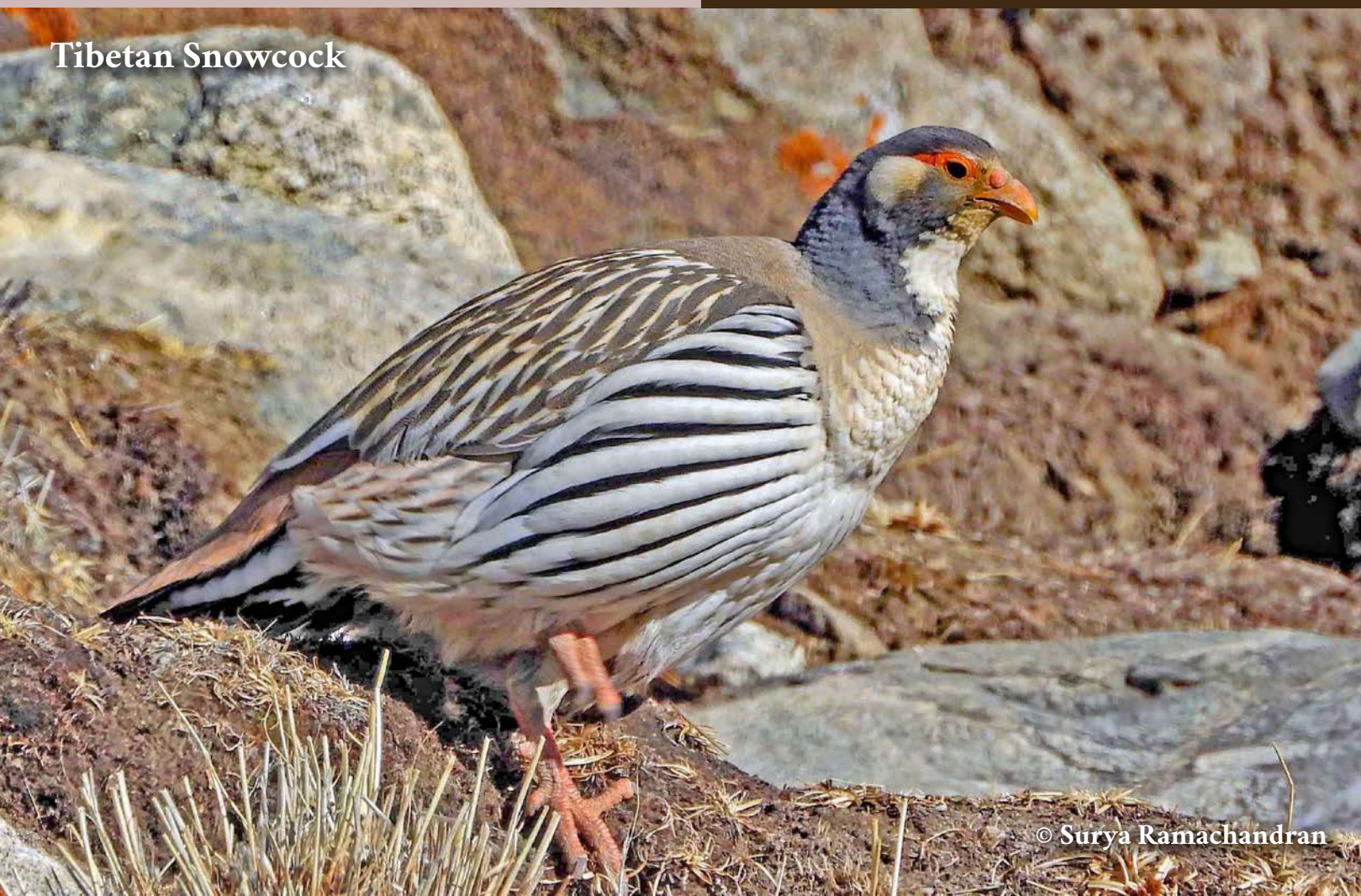
Crossing landscape barriers like Taglang La or even the Indus valley was significant for many reasons. Ladakh supports a fascinating mix of species that have migrated into the area, traversing through valleys over the years. The examples of this mix are everywhere, from the four species of Pikas, the Woolly and Cape(Desert) Hares, the four species of wild sheep and goat, the wild yaks, the Tibetan Antelopes and gazelles, the Himalayan and Long-tailed Marmot, bears, the two snowcocks and many partridges, the cats and even the floral composition of the landscape, something Ladakh showcased in myriad colours

in the summer months. It is fascinating to take a cross country drive through Ladakh from Dras to Hanle and see this species drift with one's own eyes.

The Himalayan Snowcock is a large grey partridge-like bird, 55–74 cm in length. The white throat and sides of the head are bordered by chestnut moustachial stripe and a dark broad chestnut band stretching from the eye over the ear, expanding into the collar. The upper parts are grey, with feathers of the rump and the wings are bordered with rufous.

The Tibetan Snowcock is smaller than Himalayan Snowcock, this species has a grey head and neck with a white patch behind the eye and above the dark cheek. Chin, throat and breast are white, with two grey bands on the breast.

Tibetan Snowcock



© Surya Ramachandran

Himalayan Snowcock

© Subharanjan Sen



On this journey through the Changthang region (literally translated as the Western extension of Tibet), a high plateau averaging around 4500m asl., we encountered many such landscapes that have influenced this mix of species. Marshes and valleys like those at Tsokar and Tso Moriri were teeming with life. The mix of fresh and brackish water and the grassy loose-soiled banks supported a vast diversity of breeding birds and animals. The Voles, small rodents that dig up the soil and feed on vegetative matter, formed the basis and support system for this high diversity, both as an abundant prey base and as a habitat creator. Pairs of Black-necked Cranes nested on mounds throughout the marsh, while Bar-headed Geese and Ruddy Shelducks grazed among the banks alongside Sandplovers, Tibetan Sandgrouses and Marmots. The deeper waters were infested with large flocks of Pochards, diving ducks and Grebes. Saker Falcons, Upland Buzzards, Eurasian Eagle Owls, Kestrels, Hobbies, Little Owls and Ravens also breed here, attracted

by the plentiful prey. Specialist ground feeding birds like the Hume's Groundpecker, Blanford's Snowfinch and the Mongolian Finch can be seen feeding among the banks and further up on the scree slopes. Tibetan Partridges, those beautiful reddish brown chicken-sized birds, breed in the high slopes around these marshes, and are best seen in winter when they descend to low valleys. The slopes were dotted with Pashmina Goats herded by their Changpa owners from pasture to pasture, competing with the Kiang or the Tibetan Wild Ass that depend heavily on these pastures. Wolves, Himalayan Foxes and even the Tibetan Sand Fox can be seen here regularly, moving among the marshes and pastures. The fresh water lakes and the stream inlets bring the Argali and the Bharal down once a day for a drink. The slopes around Tsokar and Yayatso are great spots to observe the Argali in their element. Apart from these areas, smaller populations exist around Gandha La in the National Park, Daath and other valleys of Changthang.



Snow Pigeon

© Suyog Ghodke

Ladakh, dotted with some of the World's most unique and spectacular wetlands, also holds the distinction of being the only known breeding ground of Black-necked Crane (*Grus nigricollis*) in India. Most of these wetlands are of glacial origin and remain frozen from December to March.



Black-necked Crane

© Shivayogi Kanthi

Birds of Ladakh

Home to some of the most unique avifauna, more than 300 species have been recorded in Ladakh. The unique habitat is an important breeding and feeding ground for birds during the short and dry summer months. It also serves as an important staging ground for birds while they are crossing the mighty Himalayan range during the spring and winter migrations.

On the basis of the time of occurrence, four bird groups have been identified in Ladakh (Pfister 2004). They are:

Resident birds – This group comprises species adapted to high altitudes. They breed in summer primarily at very high elevations and retreat to the lower valley bottoms during the harsh winter months.

Summer visiting birds – Arriving in huge numbers from the South Asian plains and the Tibetan plateau, these birds use the high-altitude steppes, wetlands, meadows and fields as breeding ground during April and May. As winter arrives, they return to their warmer wintering areas.

Wintering birds – October marks the arrival of the smallest group of birds from northern breeding grounds. They are known to return to their breeding ground in the months of April-May.

Migrant birds – This group is considered to be the largest and most diverse of all four. These birds can be observed for a short period of time in the region during the spring and autumn migrations. Migratory birds frequent the central and eastern regions of Ladakh more than the western region.

Ref : http://awsassets.wwfindia.org/downloads/field_guide_birds_of_ladakh.pdf

Tibetan Lark



© Surya Ramachandran

Red-throated Pipit



© Surya Ramachandran

Mongolian Finch



© Surya Ramachandran

Lammergeier aka Bearded Vulture

Hanle was another interesting marsh further south-east from Tsokar and accessed by following the Indus upstream to the border. We encountered a Lammergeier here. This is one of the most prevalent raptors in Ladakh. It can be sighted at Hanle, Chushul, Tsokar, Puga, Lungparma, Nyoma, Loma, Suru and Zanskar.

This high plateau and marsh habitat supports an interesting mix of species including the Pallas's Cat, an odd looking small cat that takes refuge in the rocky hillocks around the marsh. Tibetan Lark, a large-billed stout bird, is restricted to the areas around this marsh as per current records. Tibetan Gazelle, a population that numbers around fifty animals, roam the higher windy plateaus, especially the one at Kalaktal. Stanzin's keen eye and insights clearly made all the difference every time we spotted a wild being.

The journey through Chanthang, encompassing Tsokar, Daath, Pholong, Tso Moriri, Hanle, Saga and Pangong Tso opened my eyes to the geological diversity of this landscape and the distribution of species. We even squeezed in time to explore the "Tsoks" or the thick scrub jungles that dot the floor of Nubra Valley, another stronghold of the Lynx. We came across Cape Hare, Nubra Pikas and many species of birds including Tit-warblers, Scrub Warblers, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, Blue Throats, Wagtails and others that prefer to breed among the scrub-marsh habitat mix that is found here.



© Bhupinder Randhawa

Exploring Western Ladakh was another story altogether, with the landscape turning greener, wetter and overall more familiar to someone like me whose roots lay in Central and South India. The lifestyles and cultural mix of people too was very different here. We drove down the Indus Valley to Kargil and Dras, spotting our first Eurasian Otter among the blue waters enroute. We teamed up with our friends at Roots Ladakh - Muzammil, Tafazzul, Nissar, KJ and explored the magical Suru Valley. This was a birder's heaven with Tibetan Blackbirds, Goldfinches, Redstarts and Finches all over the green valley floor. We came across our first Long-tailed Marmots here and interestingly, totally by surprise, our first Himalayan Brown Bear. This was a large male of a species that is considered to be the largest land carnivore on the subcontinent. Conflict with the bears was omnipresent here, especially in the summer and autumn months, the times when bears emerge from and return

back to hibernation. A local forest guard, Ahmed Ali, directed us to a village near Dras with some of the highest reports of bears in the area. We decided to spend a few days here, talk to villagers to understand ground realities and also walk around the hill slopes in search of bears. We saw plenty, including cubs and large adults and were able to glean insights on the plants they feed on during the day and the houses that they raided at night. The bears were smarter than any other animal I had come across. They were able to seek out food storages and even work the bricks one by one to stealthily approach their prize. They occasionally took goats and even donkeys owned by the villagers. Overall, the area needed someone to intervene and talk to the villagers and maybe set up something similar to what SLC-IT setup in Central Ladakh and even the Rangdum areas of Zaskar. The team at Roots did take this up passionately after the visit and the process is slowly taking shape.

Himalayan Brown Bear



The blue Indus



© Surya Ramachandran

A Kiang scape (Tibetan Wild Ass)



© Surya Ramachandran

Ladakh Pika



© Surya Ramachandran

BACK TO ULLEY

I returned to Ulley after a month of travelling, to find a greener village and valley. The rose bushes had bright red rose hips dangling from their tips, a juicy supplement which almost every animal, including wolves, leopards and birds take to willingly, through summer and autumn. A defining difference on this visit was that Norbu was free from his farming responsibilities. Gyalpo, a friend of David's, also came along to

drop me at the lodge.

We ate lunch, caught up on my adventures with Stanzin and decided to go and retrieve the camera traps. The traps had clicked over 7 different cats on multiple occasions in the last month. Snow Leopard tourism, restricted to the winter months, at least in Ladakh, seemed a strange thought to me. They were everywhere! But the truth was, I had still not seen any cat in Ladakh.

That same evening, Norbu decided to join me as I scanned the range from the front yard of his house. I honestly didn't expect much after the results of my long sojourn in the previous months. But to my surprise, within seconds I heard Norbu utter the magic word "Shan!". I almost pushed him off the scope in my excitement. I was looking at a part of a ridge to the east of the village, a high pass called Lungmoche. The familiar shape of the pass was broken up by two pairs of ears. And Norbu had picked that out! No wonder I never found a cat on my own. While I was staring at the cubs, the mother stepped out from behind a rock. It was perfect. While I reveled at that moment, Norbu uttered the magic word again. He had found another family, on a higher ridge, with just his binoculars. Four months of nothing, and now here I was with six cats. I watched them walk the ridges till sundown, silhouetted against the waning brightness of the evening sky and ended my day celebrating with the entire team that made my stay and this evening possible.

That evening I knew I was hooked! I guess I had been, from the day I had landed in Leh. It has now been four years of working with David, Norbu, Stanzin, Gyalpo and the team. Four cold winters, warm summers and short rainy spells in between. Many cats were seen, including a few Lynxes and Pallas's Cats. In this time the team and I have come a long way in understanding this stark wilderness and the Snow Leopards that thrive within. But it's those initial four months, those testing but wonder-infused days and those first awe-filled journeys that I look back on, whenever I am asked to talk about Ladakh.

Surya Ramachandran is academically an engineer from Chennai. After his college days he decided to head into the wilds of Central India as a naturalist, spending time in Satpura, Kanha and Kuno Palpur and in due course authoring the Photographic Guide to Central Indian Wildlife. The last four years of his life has been spent in the mountains of the trans-Himalaya of India exploring possibilities to work with the community in setting up snow leopard and brown bear tracking operations. His core interests lie in understanding microhabitats and stories of ecological relationships of the places he visits. He is widely travelled in the subcontinent, with the personal focus areas being the cold deserts of Ladakh, the deserts of Western India and the Western Ghats. He is currently completing a comprehensive wildlife guide for the South Indian states.



The Magnificent Seven!

Cheetah mother Siligi with her 7 cubs.
Masai Mara, Kenya.



This "Once in a lifetime image" by Sumesh Sankarathodi secured the "Editors Grand Prize" in the "Portraits with a difference in wildlife" competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

Sumesh Sankarathodi



Pittas

of

Borneo

There are a total of 32 species of Pittas occurring worldwide and 10 of them can be found in the island of Borneo. 3 of them are endemic to the region. Blue-headed Pitta, Blue-banded Pitta and Black-and-crimson Pitta.



Mohit Ghatak

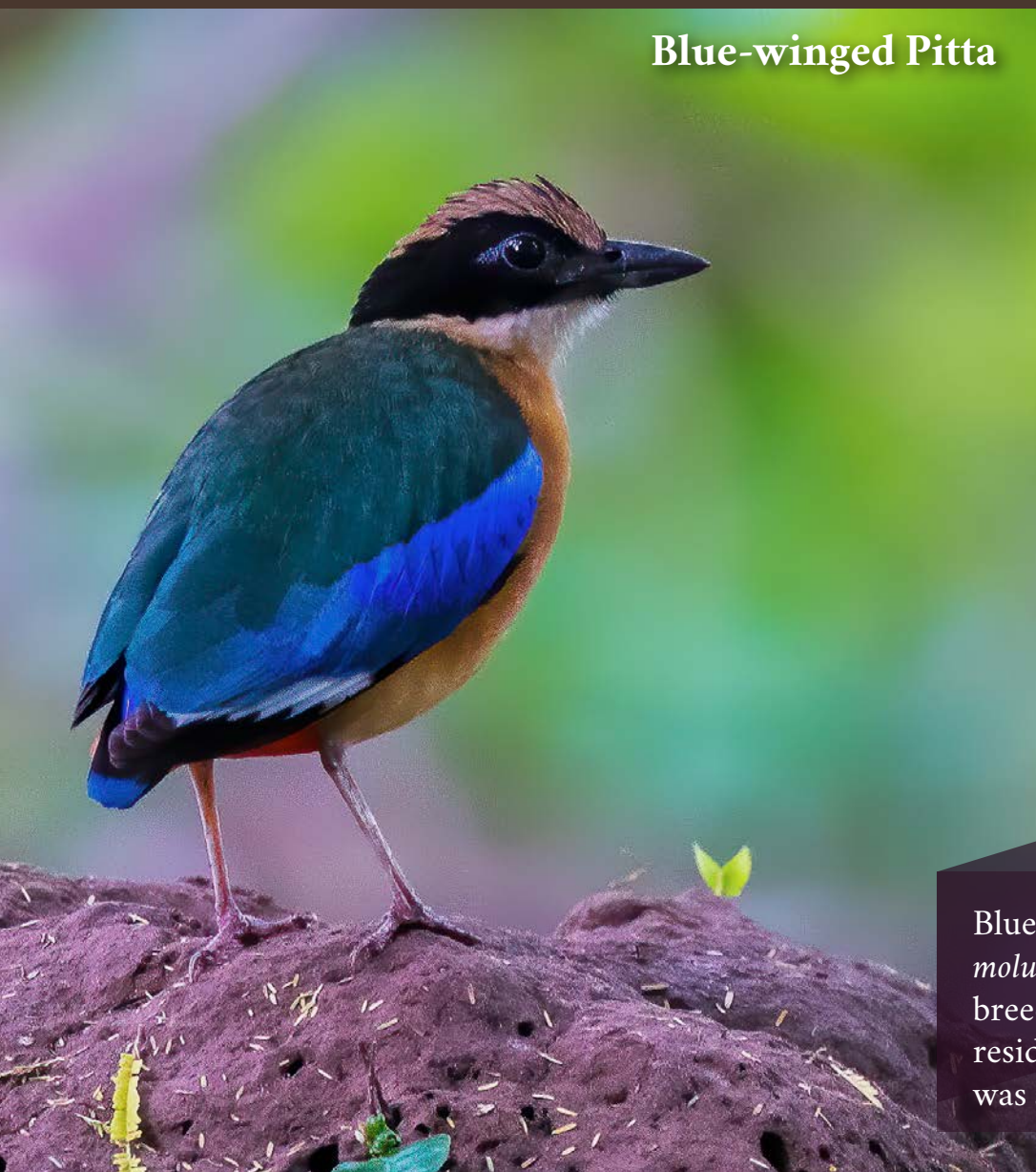
What are the shyest and most beautiful birds on the rainforest floor? No contest, they are the Pittas. They are gorgeous, with their bright colours, patterns and arcs sweeping over their eyes. Pittas are small to medium-sized, terrestrial birds. They are usually plump, having longish legs with a short tail. The head is characteristically large. They are very colourful, extremely shy and not very co-operative to photographers. They run over leaf litters and feed on the invertebrates on the forest floor.

My first encounter with a Pitta was in Vietnam, a migratory Blue-winged Pitta. It was a fleeting view after a lot of hot pursuit. I was hooked and believe me, it was love at first sight!!! Richly colourful and yet highly elusive, they are my favourites.



Black-and-crimson Pitta (*Erythropitta ussheri*) is endemic to the island of Borneo. Also known as the Black-headed Pitta, Black-crowned Pitta, Black-and-scarlet Pitta or Black-crowned Garnet Pitta, it is a brilliantly coloured, ground-dwelling Pitta. Earlier grouped with Garnet Pitta, it has been separated as a full species now. Endemic to the very place, it is a locally common resident in the lowlands. It has been classified as a "Near Threatened" species due to gradual decline in numbers.

Blue-winged Pitta



Blue-winged Pitta (*Pitta moluccensis*) – Uncommon non-breeding visitor and possible resident throughout. This image was shot in Thailand.



Black & Crimson Pitta

The island of Borneo lies at the edge of South-East Asian region next to Wallacea (the interchange zone) with the Australasian region. It is divided in three countries – Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. In Malaysia, two states – Sabah and Sarawak are parts of Borneo. The climate is moist tropical with the equator going almost through the middle of the island. The main forest types in Borneo are mangroves, coastal woods, lowland dipterocarp forest, montane and hill forest.



It is the primary and secondary lowland dipterocarp forest that is the habitat for most of the species of Pittas in Borneo. However, the Blue-winged Pitta is reported in the mangroves, while the Mangrove Pitta depends entirely on the mangroves and the endemic Blue-banded Pitta resides in the primary and secondary hills and lower montane forest.

I have made several trips to the various parts of peninsular Malaysia as well as to the fabled Danum Valley and was lucky enough to see all the three endemic

Pittas of Borneo, including a sleeping Black-and-crimson Pitta in the middle of the night, cuddled up like a bright black and crimson ball.

Danum Valley is Malaysia's wildest, most untouched jungle paradise. The 130 million years old dipterocarp forest sits far from civilisation with exceptional biodiversity. The nearest town is Lahad Datu and it's another two to three hours driving along logging roads from there.

Of special mention would be one of the trips to see the Blue-banded Pitta and the Blue-headed Pitta. The Blue-banded Pitta was spotted in a secondary forest near Lahad Datu. It was a small hide in a steep slope, I had clawed my way up the sticky slope, clambering into the tiny hide somehow. I spent the whole day, playing the call occasionally, but to no avail. I prayed and waited for the Pitta to show up and had absolutely no luck. Late afternoon, I made the decision to drive down to Danum Valley, as there was news of the Blue-headed Pitta showing up. It was a 3 hours drive along forest roads and I reached early in the evening. I had a night safari and the most exciting sighting was a sleeping Black-and-crimson Pitta, apart from an one-eyed Sunda Scops-Owl.



Image courtesy: <http://ontheworldmap.com/indonesia/islands/borneo/borneo-tourist-map.jpg>



Blue-banded Pitta

Blue-banded Pitta

The next morning started very early and I was in the jungle just as the first rays of light filtered through the canopy. As I took my position behind a log, the wait started. The best part of trying to see and photograph a Pitta is the wait, filled with the excitement. Pittas have the ability to flit through the jungle floor without leaving a trace and there it was, a beautiful female Blue-headed pitta, hidden partially behind the logs. The next few hours were extremely rewarding, with very good views of the male and female Blue-headed Pitta, as well as a sub-adult Black-and-crimson Pitta. With a very productive morning, I decided to drive back to Lahad Datu to make another attempt to see the Blue-banded Pitta before I take a late evening flight back to Singapore. I only had 3 hours before I had to leave for my flight. A short steep climb and I was back in the hide, waiting for the Blue-banded Pitta.



Blue-banded Pitta (*Erythropitta arquata*) is another endemic and distinctively coloured Pitta found in the hill and submontane forests of Borneo. It has bright red underparts, dull tan-orange face, dull blue-green back, and the characteristic glittering silver-blue "necklace". It prefers patches of forest with some disturbance, especially bamboo groves and fallen trees. It is a shy, elusive and a poorly understood species. Time passed and my hopes started to evaporate, not in this trip. And then, all of a sudden, the unmistakable red and blue ball appeared out of nowhere. The scarlet crown, breast and belly with a breast-band in cobalt and the face washed in orange shade, a breath-taking sight. The Blue-banded Pitta.



Both sexes have dark wings marked with a white streak. This species prefers the lowland forest of Borneo, along the tributaries of the Kinabatangan River and Danum Valley. Their numbers are dwindling rapidly because of habitat destruction. It is a very shy and elusive bird. It is an incredibly tough bird to sight and photograph, as it hugs and scurries along the forest floor.

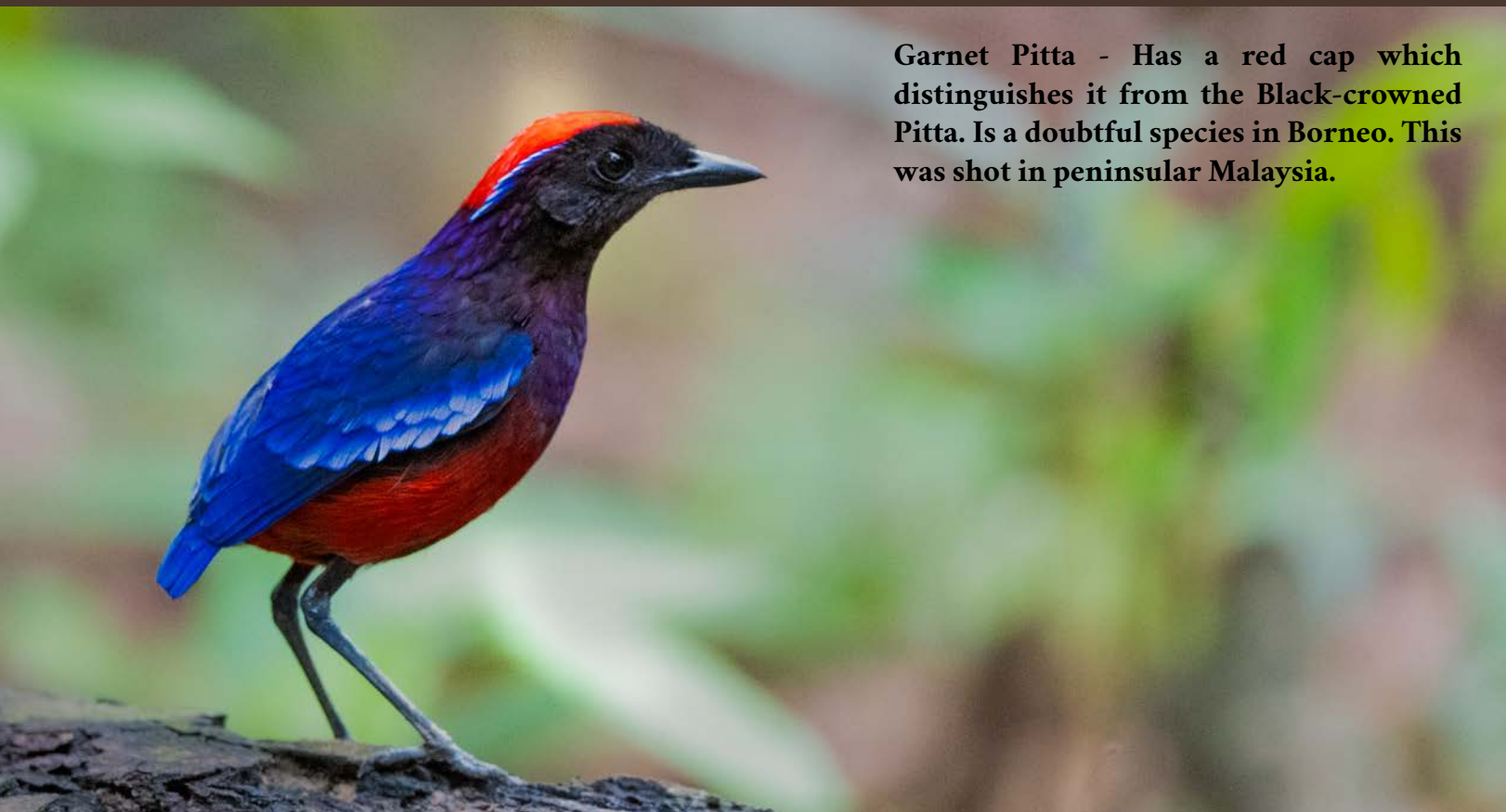
Blue-Headed Pitta (*Hydrornis baudii*) is a tiny and resplendent Pitta, an endemic resident in Borneo. The male has a glowing electric-blue crown which shines through even in the gloom of the forest floor. It has dark blue underparts, bright white throat, and cinnamon-brown back. The female has a warm cinnamon head and paler brown underparts.

Blue-headed Pitta male & female





Garnet Pitta - Has a red cap which distinguishes it from the Black-crowned Pitta. Is a doubtful species in Borneo. This was shot in peninsular Malaysia.



Fairy Pitta - Rare non-breeding visitor (October to March), this was shot in Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam.

Many of my trips have not been successful the first time, some have been washed away in rains. But I cherish all the trips, the early morning hike into the jungle, the smell of the jungle waking up all the senses, the excitement, the sense of being completely alive and finally the grand prize of seeing and photographing the shyest and most beautiful of the birds in the rainforests.





Giant Pitta
© Liew KK



Mangrove Pitta

Hooded Pitta – Sub-species *Mulleri* – Head and throat all black, uncommon resident.

Banded Pitta – Endemic sub-species *Schwaneri*, locally uncommon, resident.

Giant Pitta – Endemic sub-species *Hosei* – extremely uncommon resident and very elusive.

Mangrove Pitta - Seen in Mangroves, Many times difficult to distinguish from blue-winged pitta



Mohit Ghatak

Is an engineer and a post graduate in management and works as a regional business leader in a global software firm. Travel and twitching are what he enjoys when he gets a chance. The obsessive art of chasing rare birds that one has not seen before, is where his passion lies. He does believe that Pittas are the most beautiful creatures on the face of the earth. His aim is to photograph all the 32 species of pittas in the world. Roti Canai and riverside food stalls are what he craves for. He has a loving wife, a grown up son, a little daughter and lives in Singapore these days.

Hooded Pitta



Banded Pitta
© Liew KK



Season of LOVE



Sandip Guha

This image won the 1st Prize in the photography competition conducted by Wild Sojourns Magazine's Facebook group.

The Perfect Pose



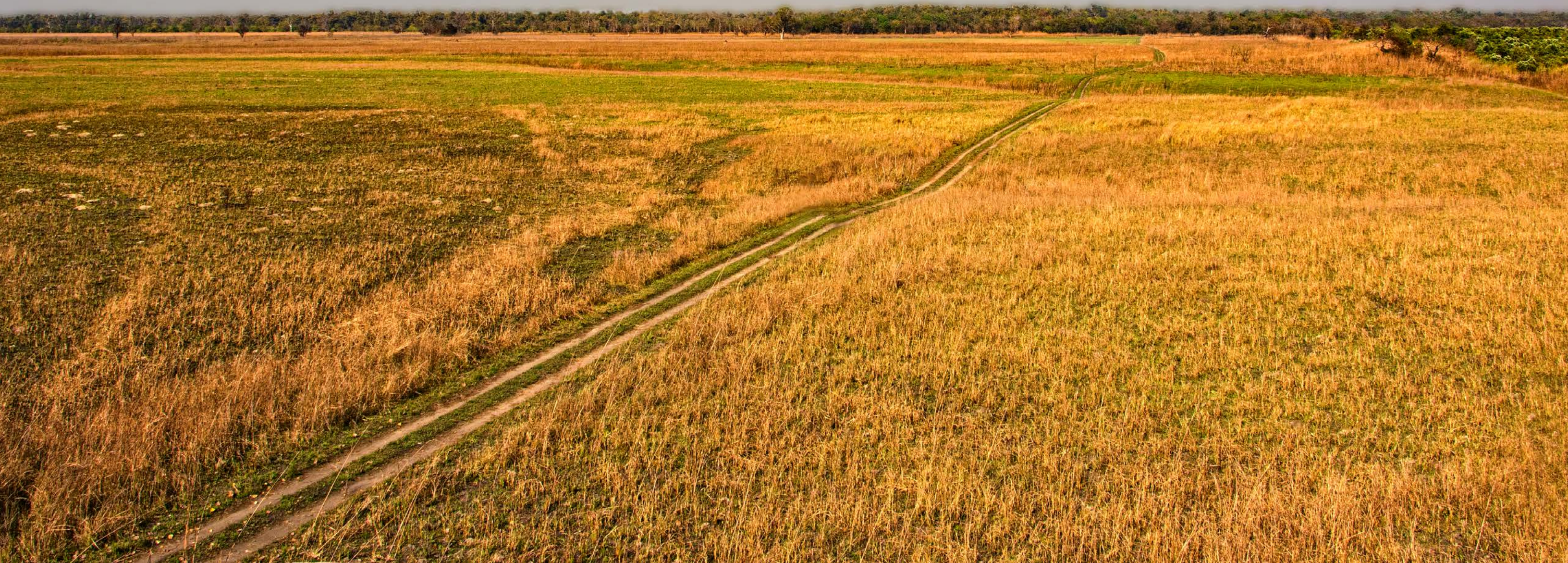
Soham Chakraborty

“Special Mention Award” in the “Portraits with a difference in wildlife” competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

Birds of *Shuklaphanta* National Park

By **Carol Inskipp**

Images by **Sagar Giri**



Shuklaphanta National Park is internationally famous for its lowland grasslands which cover over a quarter of its area. These grasslands support as many as seven globally threatened bird species, including the iconic Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*),

a critically endangered bustard. Forests that are important for wildlife, extend over 60 per cent of the park, as well as a wide range of

wetlands which are home to a great diversity of plants and animals. The park is named after its main "phanta" or grassland, Shuklaphanta.

Over 450 bird species have been recorded in Shuklaphanta to date and more are being found every year.

The National Park lies in the south-western corner of Nepal and is bordered on three sides by India. It is connected to the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve in the south, to Dudhwa National Park towards the south-east through the Laljhadi forest corridor and to Nandhaur Wildlife Sanctuary towards the north-west via the Boom-Bhramadev forest corridor and the Mahakhali River (known as Sarada in India). Most of the park lies in the Gangetic floodplain, although it extends up to 1300m in the Himalayan foothills (the Siwaliks) to the north.

Historically, the park was a hunting ground for the Nepalese Royal Family and their guests and in 1969, it was decreed a Royal Hunting Forest. In 1976, it was designated as the Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve and extended to its present size of 305 km² in 1994. The area of 243.5 km² surrounding the reserve was declared as the buffer zone in 2004, to support the development needs of local communities. In 2017, Shuklaphanta's protected area status was changed to a National Park.

Shuklaphanta National Park is one of Nepal's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). This is an area recognised as being globally important for the conservation of bird populations by BirdLife International, based on internationally agreed criteria. Currently, there are over 12,000 IBAs worldwide. One of the main reasons Shuklaphanta National Park qualifies as an IBA is because it supports significant populations of 24 globally threatened bird species.



Amongst the grassland birds at risk, Shuklaphanta holds one of Nepal's two largest populations of Bengal Florican, amongst the rarest of the world's bustards. Bengal Florican is a shy and reclusive species, most easily seen in March and April, when the male performs a most spectacular courtship display. With wing-clapping audible up to at least 1 km, it leaps 2-3 m into the air, puffing out its

glossy black head, neck and body feathers and curving down its pure white wings. As it glides back down, it seems to bounce in mid-air like a black-and-white beach ball, rising a little and then dropping at an angle again. The female is much harder to find, being cryptically coloured and streaked with brown to match the striations of grass where it nests. The Bengal Florican requires a mix of short and long

grasses. *Imperata cylindrica* is its favoured short grass where it feeds, mainly during early mornings and evenings. At other times of the day, it retreats into long grasses which are essential cover for this elusive bird. During our survey, we found 14-15 birds including 11 adult males at Shuklaphanta. Assuming the sex ratio is equal, the 1982 population in the park was about 22 birds. When I visited

Shuklaphanta in 2020, I heard that there were only thought to be 8 males. Very sadly, the Bengal Florican has not only declined at Shuklaphanta, but almost throughout their range. Lesser Florican (*Sypheotides indicus*) - Endangered, is a very rare summer visitor that is only found in South Asia, but has not been recorded in the park for a long time.

Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*) Photo taken by Bed Bahadur Khadka. A rare and globally Critically Endangered species of bustard. It is very difficult to see except when the male performs his dramatic courtship display.



White-throated/Hodgson's Bushchat (*Saxicola insignis*) Photo taken by Sagar Giri. Shuklaphanta National Park is a regular wintering and passage migrant site for this bushchat. It is uncommon in the park where it can be seen on the main grassland perched on the top of grass stems.



The park is Nepal's most important locality for White-throated/Hodgson's Bushchat (*Saxicola insignis*) and the country's only regular site for the species. This globally Vulnerable species breeds very locally in the mountains of Mongolia and adjacent parts of Russia and winters in the terai of India and Nepal. Numbers are declining in Shuklaphanta and throughout its range; the major threat appears to be rapid and extensive loss and changes of grasslands in the species' wintering grounds. Shuklaphanta is one of only two Nepal sites where the globally Vulnerable Swamp Francolin (*Francolinus gularis*) occurs. This francolin is a fairly common resident in tall wet grasslands in the park, though it is more often heard than seen. It is the largest francolin in the Indian subcontinent. Nowadays, it is only found in India and Nepal; formerly it also occurred in Bangladesh.

Asian Woollyneck (*Ciconia episcopus*)
A globally Vulnerable stork, frequently recorded and resident in the park.



© Dr Prasanna AV



Swamp Francolin (*Francolinus gularis*) Photo taken by Sagar Giri. This francolin or partridge is only found in lowland grasslands in northern India and Nepal. It can be told from other partridges in the region by its large size and long legs.

Another winter visitor to the grasslands is the Critically Endangered **Yellow-breasted Bunting (*Emberiza aureola*)** which was once one of Eurasia's most abundant bird species. It has declined by 90 per cent since 1980, mainly because of trapping for food in China where millions were killed and sold on the black market.

Yellow-breasted Bunting male in breeding plumage



© Upamanyu Chakraborty



Lesser Adjutant(*Leptoptilos javanicus*) is a fairly common breeding resident in Shuklaphanta National Park and a globally Vulnerable stork. Photo taken by Sagar Giri.



Bristled Grassbird(*Chaetornis striata*)
© Harshit Sharma

The park is an important breeding site for Finn's Weaver (*Ploceus megarhynchus*), another globally threatened grassland species and the only place in Nepal where it has been found nesting. Finn's Weaver is confined to the terai of northern India and Nepal and is at risk because of the loss and deterioration of grasslands, mainly as a result of their being converted to agriculture and overgrazed by domestic livestock.

Bristled Grassbird (*Chaetornis striata*) is another grassland bird, that is endemic to the Indian subcontinent, where it is found locally in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Nepal it is mainly a summer visitor and is fairly common in Shuklaphanta. When breeding, males perform a song flight and also sing from conspicuous perches, such as the top of tall grass stems. At other times Bristled Grassbird usually skulks in dense grassland and so is difficult to spot.



Finn's Weaver(*Ploceus megarhynchus*)
© Rajesh Panwar



Jerdon's Babbler(*Chrysomma altirostre*)
© Subhadra Devi

The other globally threatened grassland species in Shuklaphanta is Jerdon's Babbler (*Chrysomma altirostre*). It is a rare, secretive resident of tall wet grassland and reedbeds, and hardly seen except when the male climbs to the top of a tall reed to sing in the breeding season. *C. a. griseigularis* subspecies is the one found in Nepal.

Jerdon's Bushchat(*Saxicola jerdoni*) Photo taken by Sagar Giri. Jerdon's Bushchat is an uncommon breeding resident in the park. It is a grassland species and prefers tall wet grassland.



Slender-billed Vulture(*Gyps tenuirostris*)

Photo taken by Sagar Giri. This rare vulture is a breeding resident in the park where it often joins flocks of White-rumped Vulture(*Gyps bengalensis*) and other vultures.



Red-headed Vulture(*Sarcogyps calvus*)

Photo taken by Sagar Giri. This globally Critically Endangered species is a resident in Shuklaphanta National Park and is quite frequently seen soaring over the grasslands and forests.

As well as grassland birds, Shuklaphanta supports 16 other species at risk globally. These include four vultures: Red-headed Vulture(*Sarcogyps calvus*), White-rumped Vulture(*Gyps bengalensis*) and Slender-billed Vulture(*Gyps tenuirostris*) - all Critically Endangered and Egyptian Vulture(*Neophron percnopterus*) - Endangered. There are 5 globally threatened eagle species, 4 of which are winter visitors: Steppe Eagle(*Aquila nipalensis*) - Endangered, Tawny Eagle(*Aquila rapax*), Greater Spotted Eagle(*Clanga clanga*), Pallas's Fish-eagle(*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*) - all Vulnerable and the resident Indian Spotted Eagle(*Clanga hastata*) - Vulnerable. Great Slaty Woodpecker (*Mulleripicus pulverulentus*) -

Vulnerable, is the world's largest woodpecker known to exist today. It is dependent on tall mature trees where it forages in small family parties which can be easily located by their distinctive hinnying cackles. Great Hornbill [*Buceros bicornis*]- vulnerable, is a very uncommon resident in Shuklaphanta and also has specific habitat requirements. It requires large stretches of forest with big fruiting trees especially of figs on which it feeds. Five wetland birds are globally threatened: Blackbellied Tern(*Sterna acuticauda*) - Endangered, Common Pochard(*Aythya ferina*), Lesser Adjutant(*Leptoptilos javanicus*) and Asian Woollyneck(*Ciconia episcopus*) - all Vulnerable. I count myself very lucky to

have visited Shuklaphanta three times. My first visit was in early May 1982 with my husband Tim. We were carrying out the first national population survey of Bengal Florican with the support of Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. We took a small plane from Kathmandu and arrived at the bumpy grass field airstrip of Mahendranagar, a small town close to Shuklaphanta. Shyam Bajimaya, the young warden warmly greeted us and did all he could to help us during our survey. We stayed in a bare concrete building at Singhpur, the former reserve headquarters. Shyam kindly lent us a bed, table and two chairs though there was no kitchen or bathroom. Singhpur was one and a half hours walk from the main phanta. Apart from a few times when Shyam gave us a lift in his jeep, the only way we could get around the reserve was by walking and this undoubtedly limited our observations, especially as each morning it soon became very hot. However, on the phanta there was a tall machan and from here we had a clear view across the huge grassland and had wonderful views of Bengal Floricans. We spent one night here, which was most uncomfortable, but very well worth it for the views we had from dawn of the activities of six males and two females together.

Our second visit was in April 2001 when we stayed at Silent Safari tented camp owned by the late Colonel Hikmat Bisht. I well-remembered Colonel Bisht from our previous visit 19 years before as one very hot afternoon, he and his family called on us at Singhpur and gave us each an ice-cold coke! Staying at Silent Safari was luxurious compared to our spartan living conditions on our last visit. We also had the use of a jeep to take us birding wherever we wanted and had a wonderful time. The camp, which has been closed for a number of years, was situated right in the park under trees and by a small river, a beautiful spot. One highlight of this visit



Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*) Photo taken by Sagar Giri. This parakeet is globally Near Threatened because of loss of its forest habitat, persecution and trapping. However, it is a fairly common breeding resident in the park.

was our finding a much-wanted species for us, Jerdon's Babbler, two of which we saw twice in flight in the tall, wet grasslands by the lake Rani Tal. Another less welcome highlight took place one evening when two wild Asian Elephants tried to enter the camp which caused great excitement. Our camp staff frightened them off with difficulty by loud shouting and brandishing a large burning branch. After that, Tim and I had a broken night's sleep with repeated noisy spells outside and large shadows passing our tent. In the morning we heard that two rhinos had also tried to come into the camp. Later, we found out that the elephants were not invading our space, we had taken over theirs as the camp was situated at the very spot where elephants have traditionally come to the river to drink.

In early March 2020, after another 19 years, I was honoured to be invited to stay at Shuklaphanta again by an old friend, the park warden, Laxman Poudyal. This time, I reached there by road, with another old friend, Tikaram Giri, who was my guide for a two-week Nepal lowland birding trip. We were so lucky to be able to stay in the park headquarters and to have the company of park ranger Yam Bahadur Rawat and Devraj Joshi, who is an experienced field worker for the National Trust for Nature Conservation, on all our outings. During our stay we had great birding and saw almost all of the grassland bird species, including three adult males of both White-throated Bushchat and Jerdon's Bushchat (*Saxicola jerdoni*). Every day we watched flocks of

River Lapwing (*Vanellus duvaucelii*) This lapwing is frequently seen on shingle river banks in the park. It is a globally Near Threatened species. Photo taken by Sagar Giri.





© Mohit Ghatak

vultures, including on one occasion 34 vultures together: a Red-headed, 3 White-rumped, one Slender-billed, 28 Himalayan (*Gyps himalayensis*) and four Cinereous (*Aegypius monachus*). However, this was a much smaller number than the flock of 79 vultures (58 White-rumped, 13 Slender-billed and 12 Himalayan) that Tim and I had seen at Shuklaphanta in April 2001.

Other highlights included two firsts for Shuklaphanta. A Lager Falcon *Falco jugger*, a large, very rare falcon in Nepal, which we watched in flight for a few minutes. The other first was a Wood Snipe (*Gallinago nemoricola*) which we flushed from a marsh on the main phanta's edge. It is a globally Vulnerable species, which breeds in the subalpine zone of the Himalayas. This snipe is difficult to find in the nonbreeding season when some birds descend to lower altitudes and others migrate to peninsula India. Another memorable sighting was a flock of 20 Finn's Weavers feeding on the ground at the elephant stables, apparently a regular site for this bird.

Shuklaphanta is famous for its mammals too. The main phanta holds the largest herd of the globally threatened Swamp Deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii*) in the world! The park is also home to numerous mammal species including Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Common Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Greater Indian One-horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*), Fishing Cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) and Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*).

My three Shuklaphanta visits have been so different from each other and I count all as some of my most enjoyable and

Swamp Deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii*)

© Sagar Giri

Greater Spotted Eagle (*Clanga clanga*)
Photo taken by Sagar Giri. An uncommon winter visitor to Shuklaphanta National Park. It has a wide breeding range from northern Europe eastwards across Eurasia.

Grey-headed Fish-eagle (*Ichthyophaga ichhyaetus*) A globally Near Threatened bird of prey. It is a fairly common breeding resident in the park where it is mainly seen near small lakes and rivers.



productive birdwatching trips to Nepal. I will make sure I do not wait another 19 years before returning and go back there soon! I highly recommend birders and other wildlife watchers to visit, especially from November to April.

Carol Inskipp lives in Weardale, North Pennines, UK and has a special interest in Nepal birds and their conservation. She has visited the country 20 times since 1977. Carol is the author of many books on Nepal's birds and their conservation, some co-authored with her husband Tim including A guide to the birds of Nepal (1985) which detailed the distribution of the country's birds for the first time. More recently she has often co-authored with Dr Hem Sagar Baral from Nepal including: National Red List of Nepal's Birds (2016), Important Bird Areas of Nepal (2005) and also Birds of Nepal: a field guide (2016) co-authored with Tim, Hem and Richard Grimmett.



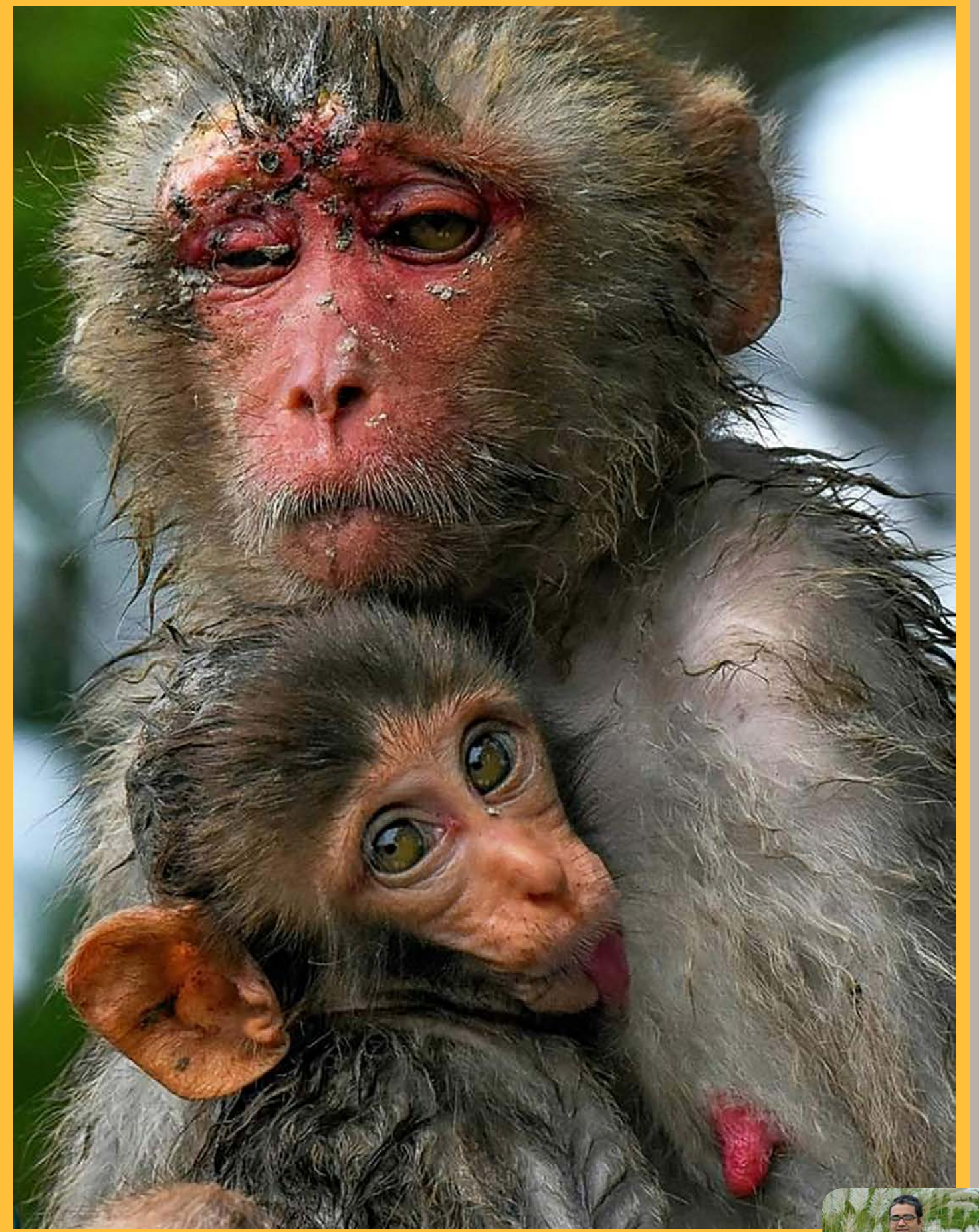
Sagar Giri is an award winning wildlife photographer from Chitwan, Nepal. He is the founder and Administrator at We Shoot with Love - WSL and founder at i click for conservation. He is an avid wild life lover and believes firmly in creating Conservation Awareness through his photography.

He has covered most of the wild in Nepal. He is inspired by his father who himself is a conservationist and has embraced this field since the last seven years.



Dharmesh Padhiyar

This image by Dharmesh Padhiyar secured the "Critics Special Award" in the "Portraits with a difference in wildlife" competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.



Sounak Dutta

This image by Sounak Dutta secured the "Thought Provoking Image" in the "Portraits with a difference in wildlife" competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

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Rain Quail © Sandipan Ghosh



Munnar

A new
destination
for Herping

Pygmy Skipper
© Sebinster Francis

Sebinster Francis
Daniel Raju
Text by Rosy Rao

Monsoon is a time that many people look out for; for its pleasant ambience and earthy scents. While many want to stay home cosy, there are a group of people who get excited to go out and explore. With rain, comes the joy of hearing the croakers in abundance and the fun of herping can be experienced better. The challenge of exploring the dark during rain comes with the love for these tiny creatures that call out to us - to know them, study them and cherish their beauty. Monsoon surely becomes the tourist season for such nature lovers and herpers, while everyone else stays back at home. However, the love for herping can get us exploring right from our localities to a faraway destination in search of various species. Destinations in South India like Agumbe, Matheran, Valparai, Coorg, Sirsi, etc. have been popular among naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts for reptiles and amphibians. Compared to which, Munnar has remained a distant choice when it comes to herpetology and macro photography.



Large-scaled Pit Viper
© Sebinster Francis

Anaimalai Salea

“Salea anamallayana” or Anaimalai Spiny Lizard is a reptile of Least Concern found in montane shola and grasslands of Kerala.

Purple-red Earth Snake

“Teretrurus sanguineus” is a species of non-venomous shieldtail snake, endemic to Southern India. Found in Nyayamakad (Western Ghats of the Kerala Munnar Hills at 2,200m).

Anaimalais Salea
© Sebinster Francis

This hill station set on the Western Ghats has been otherwise popular for its beautiful tea plantations and misty mountains. But who would think that this charming land can offer more than leisure? It remained unexplored for a long time for nature enthusiasts, until renowned researchers and photographers brought in a wave of interest among locals. Right from the hotels they stayed in, to the local guides and drivers who took them around, everyone got to learn the importance of tiny creatures around Munnar. It was amusing to know how rich this tea land was for reasons beyond its landscape and known wildlife. Windermere Estates, for instance, has been an open ground for researchers to meet naturalists and guides from Munnar. This not only gave a new trend in tourism, but also gave an idea to show the diversity of Munnar as a herping destination.

Talking of Munnar as a small town in itself, it allows great diversity within its 10 km radius whether it is the altitude that ranges from 800m to 2695m or its diverse terrain that ranges from grasslands to shola forest to plantations (tea, coffee, cardamom). Such diversity within this limited radius of land has blessed Munnar with a wide range of species too. Several unknown species of 'Shieldtails' are being found in Munnar, which has shown this land from a different perspective. It is believed to be a treasure trove for many such critical amphibians and reptiles. Munnar has also been a successful location for spotting the Caecilians, which are very challenging to photograph and observe. These limbless amphibians are surely an exciting experience when spotted. Another endemic species is the Annamalai Salea, a type of spiny lizard.



Purple-red Earth Snake
© Sebinster Francis



Resplendent Bush Frog

“Raorchestes resplendens” is a species of frog belonging to the family Rhacophoridae, endemic to the high altitude region around the south Indian peak of Anaimudi. It is a Critically Endangered species.

The critically endangered **Resplendent Bush Frog**(Raorchestes resplendens) is endemic to the high altitude grasslands of Munnar (between 2300 to 2600m above sea level). On the other hand, we

get species like **Anil's Bush Frog**(Raorchestes anili), **Wayanad Bush Frog**(Pseudophilautus wynaadensis), which are found around 800m to 1200m, all within Munnar. It is even more interesting to see how the **Malabar Gliding Frog**(Rhacophorus malabaricus) is found below 1200m, while its replica - the **false Malabar Gliding Frog**(Rhacophorus pseudomalabaricus) sits above 1200m and is Critically Endangered.

Kodaikanal Bush Frog

“Raorchestes dubois” is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae. One of the stunning grassland species of bush frogs, endemic to the grasslands of Western Ghats, usually found near Kodaikanal in Dindigul district in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. Its habitats include roadside vegetation and gardens.



© Sebinster Francis



Anil's Bush Frog

“Raorchestes anili” is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae. It is only found in Western Ghats.

Ghatixalus magnus
© Daniel Raju



Ghatixalus frogs

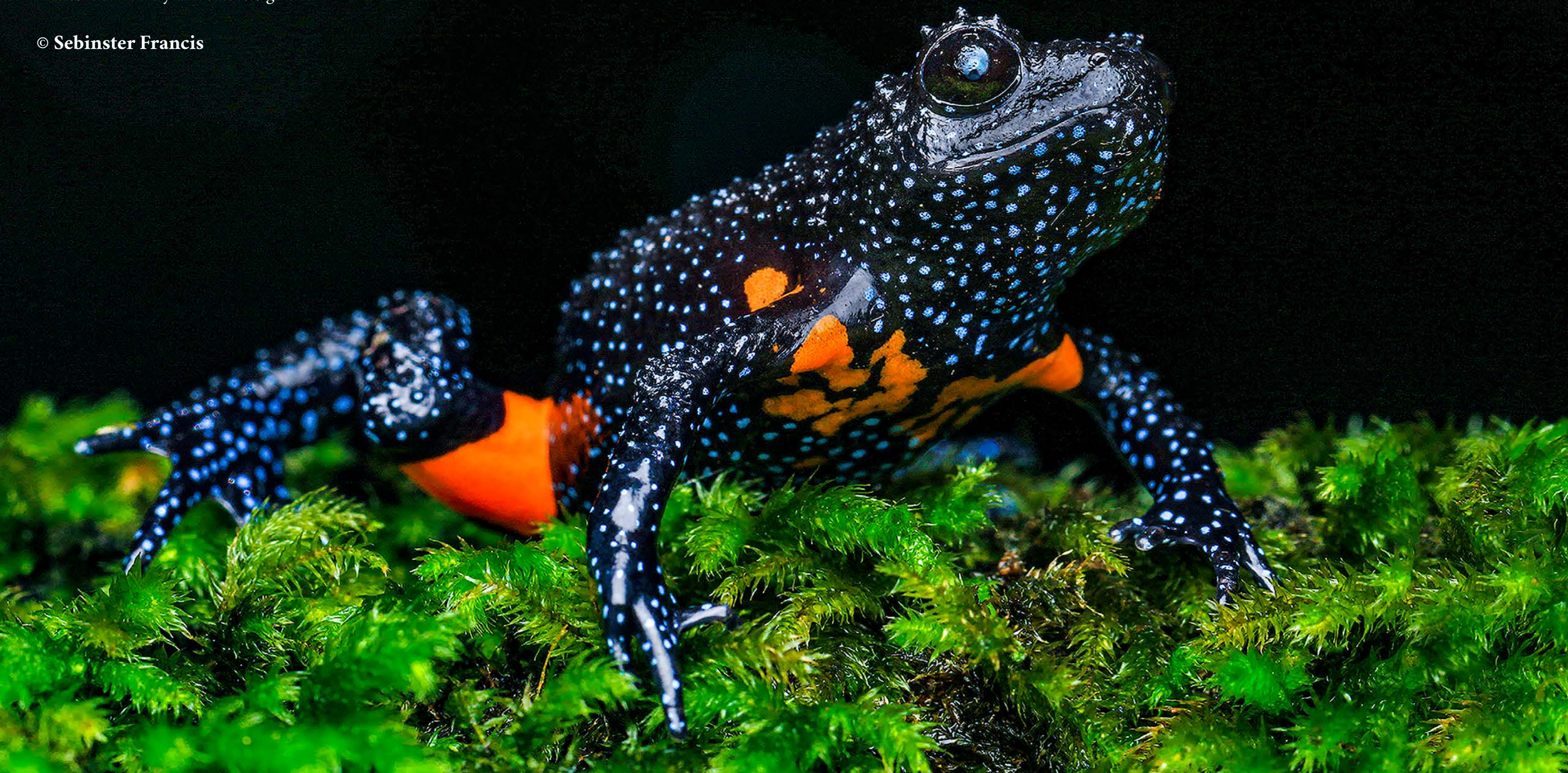
Ghatixalus is a genus of frogs in the family Rhacophoridae, endemic to Western Ghats. This exclusively shola forest species genus is distributed only in the high elevations of Nilgiris and Anaimalai-Palnis, only above 1600m asl. Most of the sightings were near streams and streamside, often on bare ground, grass clumps on ground or rocks nearby. Although belonging to a rather arboreal frog family, these frogs are terrestrial animals. There are three species only. *Ghatixalus asterops*, *Ghatixalus magnus* and *Ghatixalus variabilis*.

Ghatixalus asterops
© Daniel Raju

Galaxy Frog

Melanobatrachus indicus, is the Holy Grail in herping!!! Endangered in IUCN red list, it is an EDGE [Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered] species. It is also listed in the top 100 robust priority vertebrates in the world. A brilliant black body, tiny blue spots and an orange underbelly makes this one of the most beautiful frogs ever known. It lacks a vocal sac which makes it extremely difficult to sight.

© Sebinster Francis



Jayaram's Bush Frog

"*Raorchestes jayarami*" is a species of frog from the subfamily Rhacophoridae, found in Valparai in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu in India.



© Sebinster Francis

Beddome's Bush Frog

"*Raorchestes beddomii*", also known as **Beddome's Bubble-nest Frog**, is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae. It is endemic to southern Western Ghats of southwestern India in Kerala (Athirimalai and Munnar) and Tamil Nadu (Kannikatti). They are Near Threatened and have a very small area of distribution.



© Daniel Raju

Beautiful Dancing Frog

"*Micrixalus adonis*" is a newly described species of frog in the family Micrixalidae. It is endemic to the Western Ghats in southern India, restricted to areas between the Palghat Gap and Shencottah Gap. The common name **Beautiful Dancing Frog** has been proposed for this species, in reference to its vividly rich colouration.



© Sebinster Francis

Ponmudi Bush Frog

"*Raorchestes ponmudi*" is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae. It is endemic to the Western Ghats and is a Critically Endangered species. It was first described from Ponmudi Hills after which the species is named.



© Daniel Raju

Munnar is also a major location for the much sought-after **Large-scaled Pit Viper**(*Trimeresurus macrolepis*), which demands keen observance to be spotted. The lush greeneries of Munnar is the perfect abode for it to be camouflaged.



Large-scaled Pit Viper
© Daniel Raju

Anaimalai Flying Frog

"*Rhacophorus pseudomalabaricus*" also known as **false Malabar Gliding Frog** is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae, endemic to the Anaimalai Hills of Tamil Nadu and Kerala states of India. It is a type of "flying frog" which can descend aerially, but at angles sharper than 45°.

© Sebinster Francis



This is what Munnar has to offer - a wide variety of species, some of which may demand an adrenaline rush as you trek up a hill to find them, while some may be found right in the backyard of a place you are staying in. It has proved that its tourism is not just leisure and its wildlife does not confine to Elephants, Nilgiri Tahrs, Bisons and Big Cats. Herping enthusiasts

especially have a lot to cheer for. Munnar, nestled amidst the lush green Western Ghats, is home to many endemics. It is even more dynamic with the range of amphibians and reptiles, among which most are critically endangered. More and more new species are being discovered and a visit to this treasure trove is a must for any wildlife lover.

Green-eyed Bush Frog

"*Raorchestes chlorosomma*" only occurs in disturbed sholas, a type of high-altitude evergreen forests which are found only in the southern portion of the Western Ghats of Kerala. It is a Critically Endangered species.



Griet Bush Frog

"*Raorchestes griet*" is a species of frog in the family Rhacophoridae. It is endemic to the Western Ghats south of the Palghat Gap in Kerala and Tamil Nadu states of India.

© Daniel Raju



© Sebinster Francis

Bamboo Pit Viper [*Trimeresurus gramineus*]

The first live specimen photographed from Kerala.

Sebin never knew this species was this rare in Kerala when he got the opportunity to photograph it. Researchers have dead specimens collected from Chinnar and the ID which was not validated, laid in dispute. He is very happy to be part of this moment by clicking this image from Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary.



© Sebinster Francis

Malabar Pit Viper [*Trimeresurus malabaricus*]

Another endemic beauty from Western Ghats. This amazing morph of Malabar Pit Viper was photographed in the lower altitudes of Munnar by Sebinster.

Munnar is a paradise offering two different pit vipers at two different altitudes.



© Sebinster Francis

Daniel V Raju

A passionate photographer and traveller. He is currently working as a naturalist in Windermere Retreats, Munnar, India.

**Sebinster Francis**

Sebinster Francis, often referred to as Sebin, hails from the small town of Munnar, known for its amazing landscape, nature, wildlife and tea plantations. He is the Managing Director of Route49adventures, an adventure, travel and photography tours company based in Munnar. He is a naturalist and a licensed Tourism Guide. Sebinster's association with the Kerala Forest Department, gives him opportunities to travel to isolated and unique locations within India. He uses his photographs from these explorations to spread awareness about nature and wildlife protection. He has an avid fascination for herping. He also has an extra special interest in elephants and their preservation and treatment.

Head on!

This image by Kundan Chaudhary secured the “Special Mention” in the “Portraits with a difference in wildlife” competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.



Kundan Chaudhary

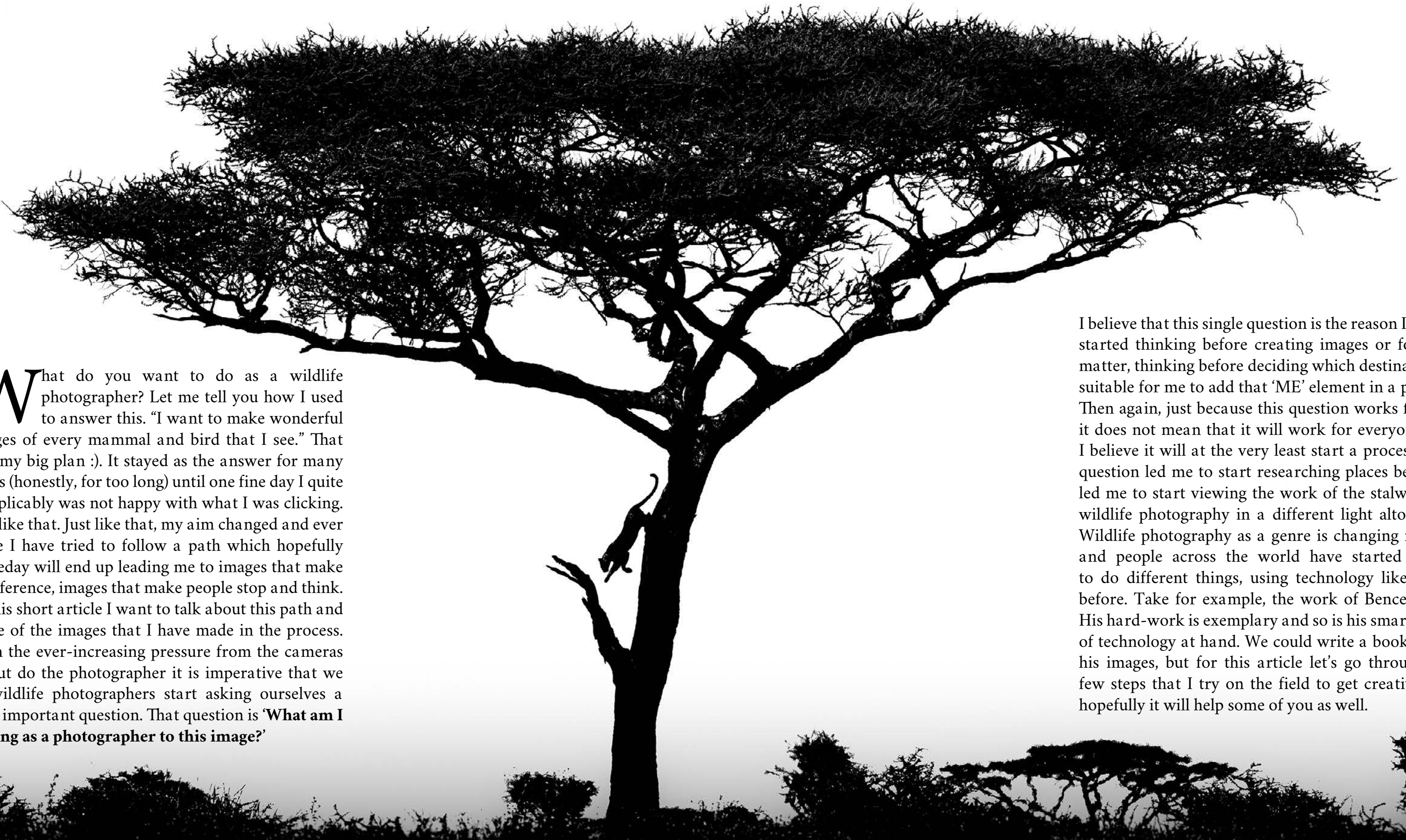


STEPS TO GET **CREATIVE**

FROM TAKING IMAGES TO MAKING IMAGES



RAHUL SACHDEV

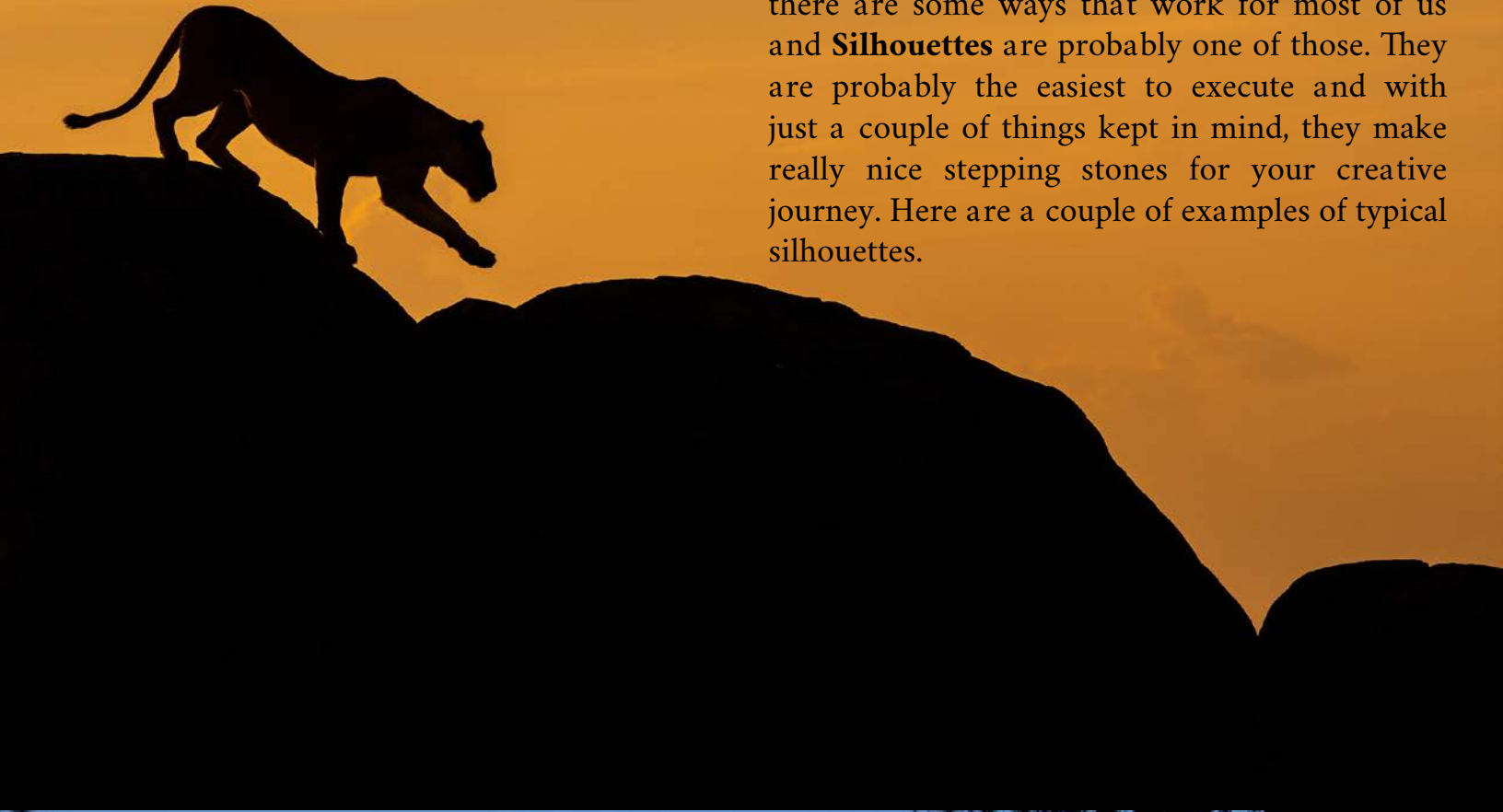


What do you want to do as a wildlife photographer? Let me tell you how I used to answer this. “I want to make wonderful images of every mammal and bird that I see.” That was my big plan :). It stayed as the answer for many years (honestly, for too long) until one fine day I quite inexplicably was not happy with what I was clicking. Just like that. Just like that, my aim changed and ever since I have tried to follow a path which hopefully someday will end up leading me to images that make a difference, images that make people stop and think. In this short article I want to talk about this path and some of the images that I have made in the process. With the ever-increasing pressure from the cameras to out do the photographer it is imperative that we as wildlife photographers start asking ourselves a very important question. That question is **‘What am I adding as a photographer to this image?’**

I believe that this single question is the reason I finally started thinking before creating images or for that matter, thinking before deciding which destination is suitable for me to add that ‘ME’ element in a picture. Then again, just because this question works for me, it does not mean that it will work for everyone, but I believe it will at the very least start a process. This question led me to start researching places better, it led me to start viewing the work of the stalwarts in wildlife photography in a different light altogether. Wildlife photography as a genre is changing rapidly and people across the world have started trying to do different things, using technology like never before. Take for example, the work of Bence Mate. His hard-work is exemplary and so is his smart usage of technology at hand. We could write a book about his images, but for this article let’s go through the few steps that I try on the field to get creative and hopefully it will help some of you as well.

Step 1 - Silhouettes

Although Creativity can't really be set in rules, there are some ways that work for most of us and **Silhouettes** are probably one of those. They are probably the easiest to execute and with just a couple of things kept in mind, they make really nice stepping stones for your creative journey. Here are a couple of examples of typical silhouettes.



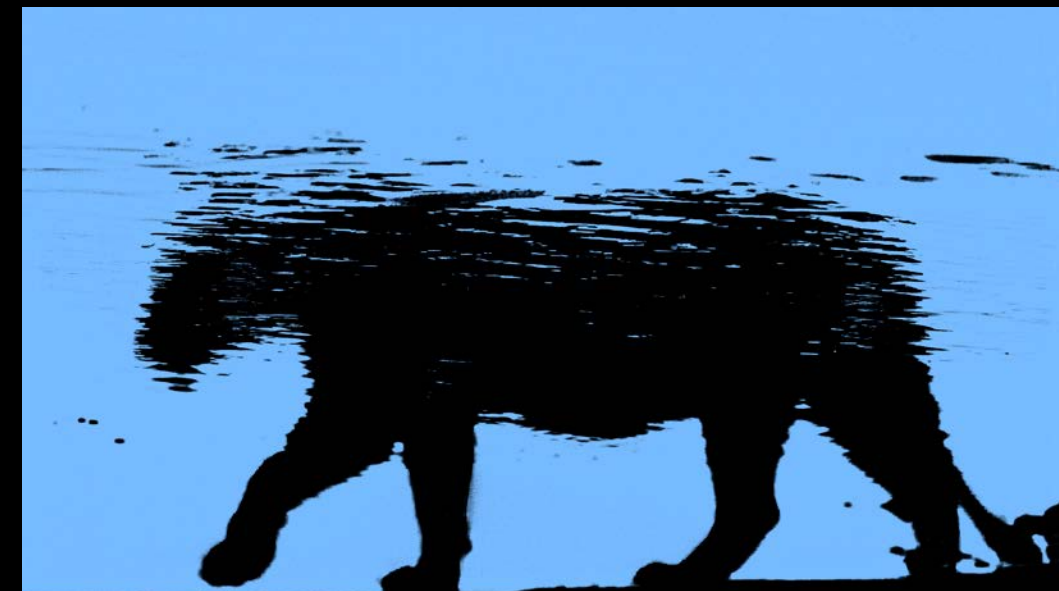
From a creative stand point these work fine. What you need to do to take the next step is to start looking beyond the quintessential silhouettes. For instance, ask yourself these questions

- why do all silhouettes have to be orange?
- why do all silhouettes have to be taken at

sunrise/sunset

• why do all silhouettes need to have sky as the background?

These are the kind of questions that would make you start thinking, and that's when you will start experimenting with things.

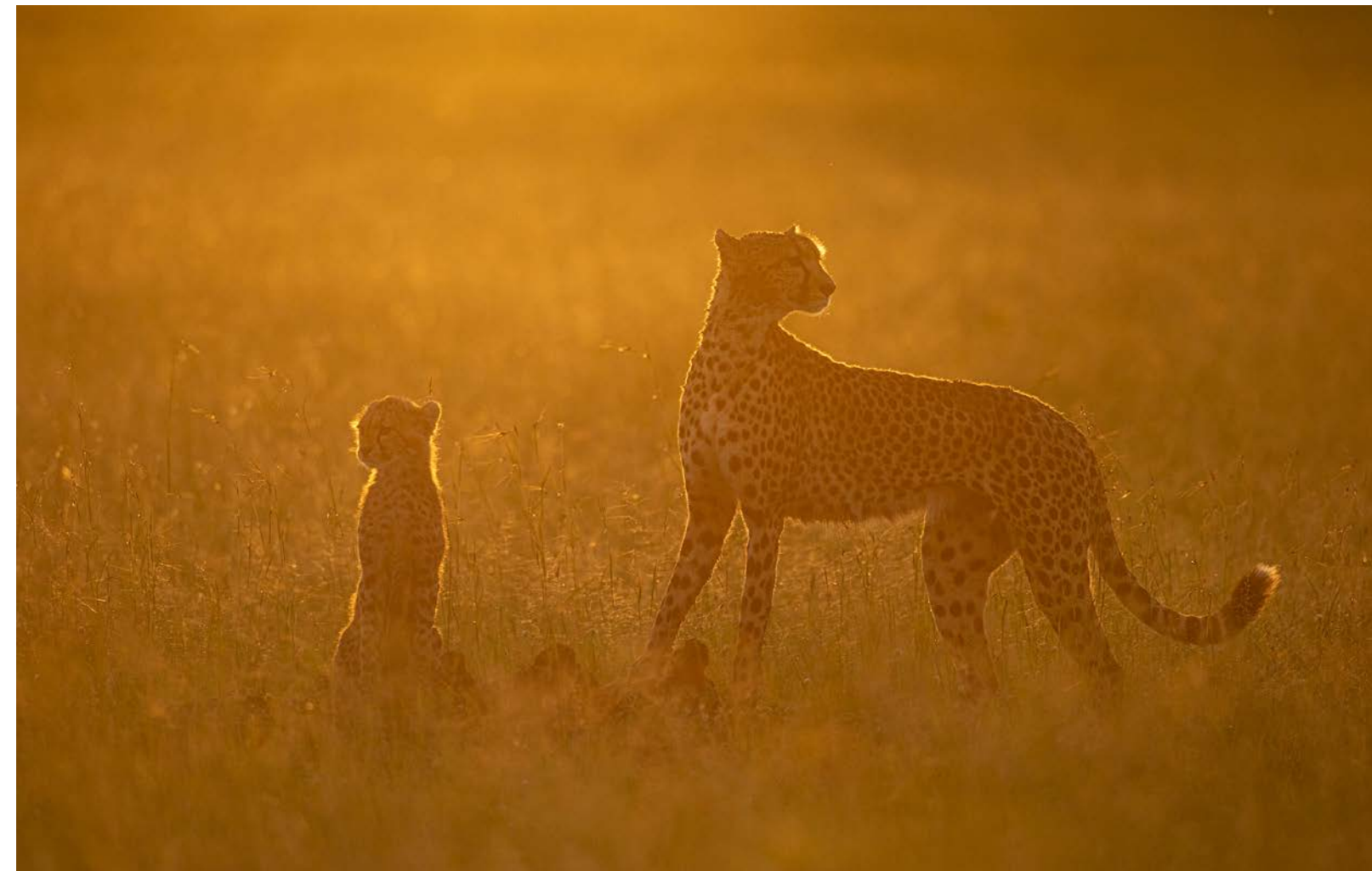


Following examples are not orange, they are not taken at sunrise/sunset and not all of them have sky as the background. Remember, you only need a significantly brighter background. In the image with the reflection of the lion, water played its part very well.

Step 2 - Rim-Lit

The next step to creativity is to try the second most common thing, **Rim-lit**. Execution-wise very similar to Silhouettes, the difference lies in the positioning. You need to have a background which is dark and does not have light falling on it directly. That and of-course a subject with the a lot of fur (generally). An elephant is never a good subject for rim-lit photography. Rim-lit images need strong backlight and unless you see a rim-lit with your naked eye, you wouldn't be able to capture it in the camera. Just like in Silhouettes, there are some text-book rim-lit images, like the two that you see below.

You could either be happy with these or aim at something slightly more artistic like the ones below. The key here is to start telling a story with your images, even when you are trying out creative usage of light. The bottom line should always be about telling a story.





Step 3 - Research Place and Images

I call this one Research, and it is probably the most important and overlooked of them all. The thing is, silhouettes and rim-lit images will also be left to chance without proper research, and without proper research it will be impossible to read the place well enough to start thinking beyond the obvious. Here is an example of what can be done with proper research. Take a look at the images of the Indian Skimmer below, both taken at the same place, roughly about the same time, just apart by 7 years.

When I earlier used to go to Chambal my aim

used to be to get sharp images of birds in flight. Now when I go there, my aim is to utilize light the best I can and to make dramatic frames. My earlier visits to Chambal/ Dholpur gave me the knowledge that if I go against the light with the skimmers in the evening, there is a possibility of dark backgrounds and if a skimmer does fly in the correct direction, I might get some light coming through its wings to make an interesting frame. To be honest, the light through the beak wasn't part of my visualization. It was a bonus that nature gave me.



Please note, I could have mentioned Research as the first step, but without being ready with the right tools to execute (like understanding of exposure compensation) it wouldn't make a huge difference.



1

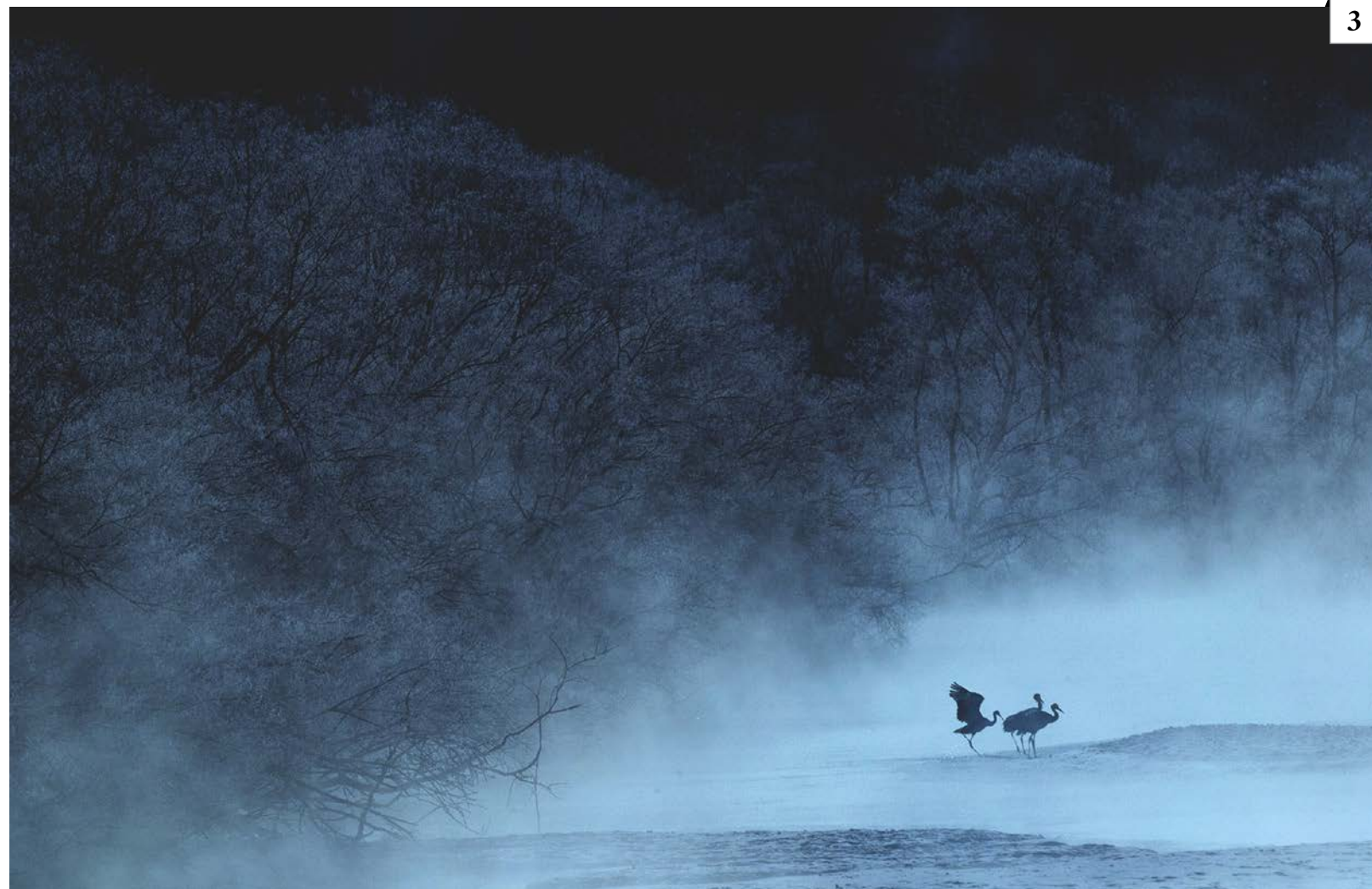
Step 4 - Less is more

The next step I believe would be to start exploring a key concept of compositions, called minimalism using negative space. Minimalism is a fabulous way to arrest a viewer's attention and draw it to the subject and just the subject. Negative space essentially can be explained as the space around your subject. Here are a couple of examples using Minimalism and negative space.

Images 2 & 3



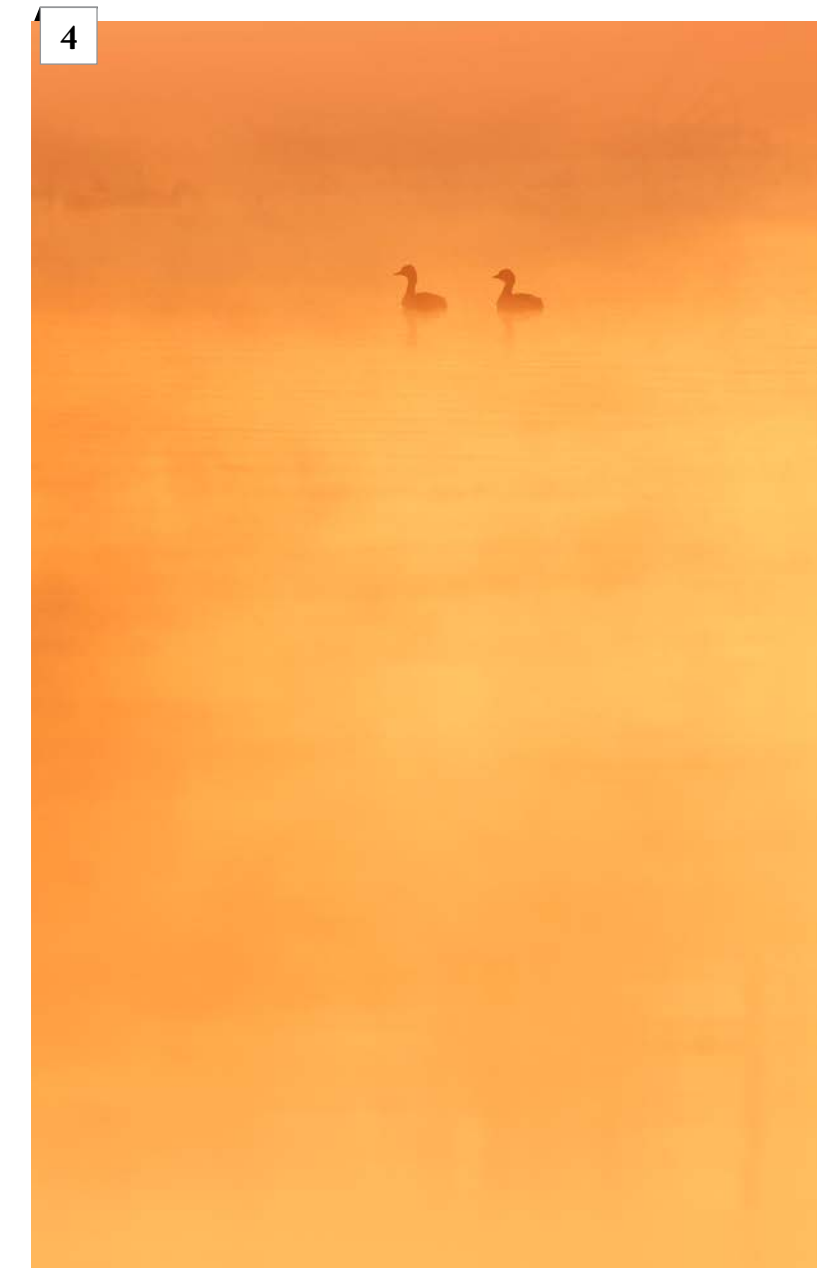
2



3

This style will be a particularly strong technique in your arsenal. Practice it often, and you will see that it is a very satisfying style as well. The key driving point about this style for me is that, this style makes me think. It makes me think hard about why anything should be part of my frame. It makes me think if and how can I eliminate unnecessary elements from the frame. Here are another two examples, this time in a portrait mode and the emptiness gives a sense of depth and mood to the frames.

Images 1 & 4



4



Step 5 - Motion Blur

Use Speed to your advantage. I should probably re-phrase the statement to Use Blur to your advantage. Just like Silhouette and Rim-Lit there is the conventional or straight approach to it and there is a slightly different approach/view as well. In wildlife photography, we mostly start with freezing action and trying to achieve shutter speeds that are as fast as possible to capture moments. Capture-worthy moments don't happen every day in front of your cameras so inevitably you would be drawn towards adding some dramatic element to your frame and slow-shutter speed images are an easy way to achieve that. This technique is not as dependent on perfect light as the others so is a kind of trick that can be used in less than ideal light conditions as well.



Here are a couple of typical examples. As seen in the images above, they do have an appeal but just like Silhouettes, they've started becoming too common and that's where the next technique comes in. In this case we are not aiming at having the subject sharp. That is not the aim anymore. What we are looking for is to give the sense of motion by moving the camera, and not necessarily in alignment with the movement of the subject.

Take a look at a couple of images above to get a feel of this. It is a technique that will probably have a very low hit rate but when it works, it works well.



Step 6 - Black and White When

I started researching places and images made by people in those places, I often used to come across black and white frames and they always had that charm/appeal. Black and white to me helps in connecting with the raw emotion of the moment. Devoid of distraction and devoid of complexities. Black and White inherently seems simple and that's where it connects most I believe. Well, there are tonnes of ways of achieving/ converting to black and white images but what's most important is to realize and envision what will look good in black and white. It takes some amount of hit and try but, as a guideline, images with strong shadows work well with black and white. That does not mean that flat images won't work at all but let's start with the earlier



and then you can work your way towards what you like. As it is with all art, there is no one fits all kind of image. What works for me, might not work for you and its ok. Take a look at the following couple of images.

Please note that I never click directly in monochrome, I do that in post-processing and I suggest the same route for most.

**Step 7 - OverExposed**

One of the ways that I some times like to use to achieve this is over-exposure. It's a very underused tool in my opinion and one that can really add value to your portfolio. Take a look at the examples below.

Without the over-exposure for the elephants, the

dusty feel would've not stood out in the frame and would've probably been just a drab frame without any separation between the leader of the herd and the others. Similarly, for the swan that's coming out as a leader, the overexposure has accentuated the effect of the rising steam and given a sort of ethereal feel to this frame.



Step 8 - Side Lit

Now that you have the exposure compensation controlled, the research done right and black and whites out of the way let us look at one more way in which you can use the morning/evening light to take your creative journey ahead. Side Lit images. Quite often this approach is not thought of and probably so because it isn't the most obvious/easiest use of light. Side Lit images would be those where the Source of Light, the Subject and the camera make a right-angled triangle with the Subject at the vertex of the right angle. The tough bit with side lit images is the anticipation which is why this step comes after the Research. For example take a look at the leopard image.

I shot this one as the leopard came out of the bushes with the sun to its left. The bushes were still in the dark and some good amount of under-exposure rendered them really dark. If I had kept it to 0EV the background would have come out better lit thus rendering this image almost useless. So anticipating that the leopard coming



out of the bush might have a side-lit effect and being ready with the exposure compensation was imperative in this case.



Rahul Sachdev

Canon EOS Maestro

Insta : @rahulphotography

web : www.rahulsachdev.net

Now most people who click side-lit images go with this textbook dark background image like you just saw and I believe they work very well indeed. Having said that, you should always keep your eye open for such catchy light situations irrespective of whether the background goes dark or not. Take a look at the next image. It's with a background which is as important as the subject and yet the image works because of the side-lit elephant.

Conclusion

The Side-Lit images were the last step of our creative journey for this time. These 8 steps I believe will serve as a good foundation for you to start your journey into creativity. What I have done is just listed down some easy ways to help you on this journey. I would love to hear from you on where this journey leads you. In my next article in this series, we will look at some more steps to help us in the journey towards making images.



A Tale of **Two Heads!**

This breathtaking image of a Lion carrying Thomson's Gazelle head by Devendra Deshmukh won a "Highly Appreciated Award" in the "Action in Wildlife Photography" competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.



Devendra Deshmukh



Wings of a Butterfly

Alok Kar



ECLOSION

It is the act of emerging from the pupal case or hatching from the egg. This beautiful phenomenon in a resplendent Red-spot Jezebel was photographed by Alok Kar in Pundibari, West Bengal.



On a sunny morning of mid June, as usual, I was on my way towards the greens to capture something new through my lenses. I never knew it would turn out to be one of my lucky days to capture the magical phenomenon of eclosion. Often during my walk, several Red-spot Jezebel butterflies pass by, flapping their amazingly bright yellow and red coloured wings, and then, every time, I looked for their down line younger stages in the host plants. My long awaited desire was finally answered on that wonderfully bright sunny morning. It was mesmerizing to witness the entire.

Red-spot Jezebel is a holometabolous insect belonging to genus *Delias* and is widely distributed in Asia and Southeast Asia. The caterpillar's body starts shortening from the last day of the 5th instar, the feeding is put to halt and it finally becomes immobile backspace required. The pupal stage emerges

from its chrysalis as an adult butterfly. For many insects, the emergence of the adult (eclosion) is under circadian regulation and eclosion hormone which is a neuropeptide and plays an important role in controlling ecdysis phenomenon. Eclosion hormones, along with others, are pumped into the hemolymph and aids in completing the emergence process. It is quite a precise concatenated sequence of events, occurring at definite time. If observed minutely, the eyes and legs can be seen beneath the hard surface. Hormones released during the process soften the chrysalis and the butterfly then pushes through its legs. The eyes and proboscis are also exposed removing the triangular piece covering it and then, finally, the butterfly crawls out from the chrysalis, exposing the abdomen and wings hanging upside down. The unfolding of wings though, varies among species, it mainly follows three basic steps. First, resilin triggers the unfolding.



**I am out
finally!!!!**

Resilin is an elastomeric protein found in many insects and other arthropods. It provides soft rubber-elasticity to mechanically activate organs and tissue. The insect often flaps to fully open the wings and then, finally, the inflation of the veins happen. The new ones are inflated, hardened, pigmented and are ready to fly. In during the emergence from the chrysalis, meconium is excreted from the body, where a small amount it stays and gets hardened in the wing veins, increasing its rigidity. The time taken for a butterfly's wings to completely dry varies from 30 minutes to 2 hours which again depends on the size of the wings. For butterflies, wings signify power, warning, courage and at the same time, depict the amazingly beautiful creation of nature.

LOCATION: PUNDIBARI ; COOCH BEHAR;
WEST BENGAL; INDIA

CAMERA: CANON EOS 7D, 70D, 1100D WITH
VARIOUS LENSES & FILTERS.

Alok Kar is a wildlife photographer,
who hails from Cooch Behar, India.



Alok Kar

Run for **Life!**

This breathtaking image by Rupayan Datta won the Grand Prize in the “Action in wildlife photography” competition conducted by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

Rupayan Datta
Grand Prize Winner



Winners in the competition “Action in Wildlife Photography”



**Mudit
Bhatnagar**



Special Mention



Highly Appreciated



**Suketu
Purohit**



**Debjyoti
Sarkar**



Highly Appreciated



Special Mention



**Nilanjan
Goswami**

ASIAN DOWITCHER

Prized Catch





© Rajdeepsinh Jadeja

I was at ease on the morning of December 31, 2018, with a large mug of coffee over the desktop around 10AM, checking out the mails. It had been a hectic week at the year-end as Gururaj Moorching and Rofikul Islam were in Jamnagar to complete their Big Years. I received a picture on my WhatsApp and a call followed immediately. It was from Rajdeepsinh Jadeja. He was with Bishnoi K. N, and had called to confirm the ID of the bird. And I could not believe my eyes. He had found a big rarity. It was an Asian Dowitcher (*Limnodromus semipalmatus*). In flat 15 minutes, I was at the site. I was viewing my lifer from a favorable distance, that too, on the last day of the year, making it more memorable!

Asian Dowitcher is an elegant wader, a bit capricious to identify at one go. For sure, it needs a second view to distinguish correctly, even for an experienced birder. We observed this specimen constantly feeding in very shallow waters of an abandoned salt pan. The salt pan consisted of a fine layer of algae on the moist mud on its southern side and a pool of shallow water in the rest of the part, probably providing this wader an ideal habitat to forage.

The bird was very deliberate in feeding. It was probing persistently in the mud with its bill. Most of the time, it foraged by wading through the waters which were tarsus high, sometimes though, it foraged in slightly deeper waters about the height of its tibia. It also preferred to come walking on the algae covered moist mud to feed. Here, the complete profile of the species was visible.



© Yashodhan Bhatia



Precisely described as 'Snipe-billed Godwit' in *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan, Vol 2* (Ali S. and Dillon Ripley S.), it shows a marked similarity to snipes with a long, bold supercilium, dark loreal line and an almost similar forehead structure which leads to a relatively long bill. The bill is straight, dark and single colored of constant width, but slightly swollen at the tip (which is visible only in close-ups). The anterior view of the crown on the forehead forms an obvious grey-brown 'V' between the eye-strips. Legs are longer and toes are dark grey-black with black, slightly long nails. The face, neck and the breast are slightly streaked or mottled grey-brown with a white belly. Flanks are also barred grey-brown. Feathers on upperparts and wing coverts are darker grey-brown containing dark brown shaft and a contrasting, neat, pale border on feather fringes.

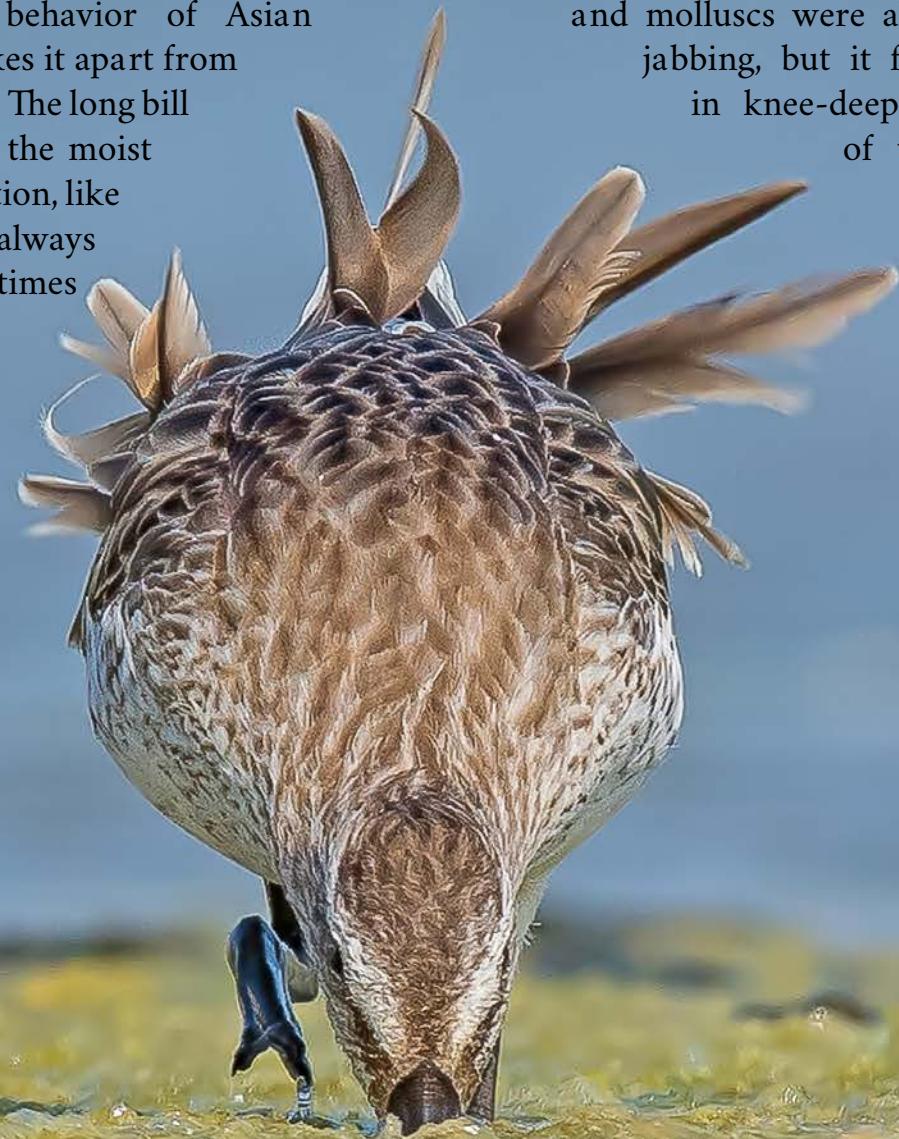


© Yashodhan Bhatia

Almost like the Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) in jizz and size, the Asian Dowitcher is easily confused with the former in non-breeding plumage. Here, it was with a group of Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*) and was clearly smaller in size. The difference was apparent through binoculars and scopes. It mixed freely with Black-tailed Godwits while feeding or roosting.

The typical feeding behavior of Asian Dowitcher is what makes it apart from similar looking waders. The long bill is used for probing in the moist mud in fast vertical motion, like a sewing machine. It always feeds by poking; sometimes

the bill is penetrated deep into the mud, just up to the nostrils and withdrawn a few seconds later with a worm or a crustacean. Feeding is almost continuous, usually in knee-deep waters and also on exposed mud. Scurryly, it covers more ground than godwits while foraging. It seems to feed mainly on marine worms by pulling them out of the moist mud. Small crustaceans and molluscs were also consumed by jabbing, but it foraged for them in knee-deep waters. In one of the photographs, we were able to capture it with a small fish.



© Rajdeepsinh Jadeja



© Rajdeepsinh Jadeja

Rather alone, the Asian Dowitcher was more comfortable roosting near or between the groups of godwits.



© Yashodhan Bhatia

© Yashodhan Bhatia



© Rajdeepsinh Jadeja

A water level which was touching its tibia was ideal for it to roost. It also tended by bathing or preening in between its sleep. An occasional stretch exposed the under-wings and axillaries, which were white with almost no markings. It looks most gorgeous when it stands upright and stretches the neck to scan the situations and the surroundings. Although generally silent while feeding, it gives a soft flight call when flying. The take off was sudden like snipes and godwits, when alarmed. Once, I was able to photograph a Asian Dowitcher along with a fling of Curlew Sandpipers (*Rynchops albicollis*), while it was landing. This displayed the tail with twelve feathers, each bearing dark grey bars, almost even as the white ones. The rump showed streaks of grey-brown. Interestingly, I came through a text in *100 Birds and How They Got Their Names* by Diana Wells, where she writes that the name Dowitcher comes either from Deuschers (doi-cher) or Deutsch (doi-ch), because Germans and Dutch Americans used to eat them as delicacies! We found this individual in a salt pan at Bedi Port, 4 kms outside Jamnagar town. Out of the three dowitchers the world over, Short-billed Dowitcher and Long-billed Dowitcher are Nearctic species and the Asian Dowitcher is the

only species which migrates along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, wintering between tropical and equatorial regions. It is interesting to learn, however, that this Asian Dowitcher has reached Jamnagar in western Gujarat which lies in the Central Asian Flyway. This can be a case of a rare vagrant. In this region, previously it has been recorded at Pirotan Island and Narara Beyt in Marine National Park (Gulf of Kutch) and also at Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, Jamnagar. These were glimpses, probably, as the bird was identified, but was not approachable. So, we don't have good photographs from this area. This one being very near to the road has endured human presence. It is a very good find and sighting all in all.



© Yashodhan Bhatia

Being very close to the town, the area is easily accessible. The bird is spotted just off the main road, so it is not apprehensive and is very much used to human presence. It is being watched from dawn to dusk by some or the other birders and photographers every day, since it has been found. We now wish and very much hope that it stays here safely and leaves for a Subarctic summer destination to breed, only after acquiring the breeding colors.

Yashodhan Bhatia is an award winning conservation photographer. An entrepreneur and businessman from Jamnagar, he considers himself fortunate by living there and thus, grasp the opportunity to spend much time in the wilds, be it the sea shores, coastal belts or salt pans. He has been pursuing wildlife photography with special emphasis on avi-fauna. This westernmost coast of India has been his prime geographic area of interest in bird photography. He firmly believes that simply documenting the species is not enough; more or less the pictures should look like an art which can stimulate the viewers and bring them closer to conservation.

His contribution in conservation photography has led him to achieve various national and international awards along with the prestigious Asia First Prize by **Singapore Environment Council**, Singapore (2004), **Nature in Focus** (2016), **BirdPoty** (2019). He was also instrumental in organizing national level birding programs like **Saevus Bird-a-thon** at Jamnagar. His pictures and articles are published in **National Geographic Traveller** along with **Sanctuary Asia**, **Saevus**, **Indian Birds** and **Creative Image** magazines.

Rajdeepsinh Jadeja is working as a teacher in a Government Primary School at Jamnagar, Gujarat. He is a hardcore nature lover and doing wildlife photography across the country since 2013. His work is published in various International and National Wildlife Magazines.

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A Red Panda is perched on a tree branch, surrounded by vibrant yellow autumn leaves. The panda's fur is a mix of red and black, with a white face and chest. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with more yellow leaves and a hint of a blue sky.

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Mystic **MEGHALAYA**

A Heaven of Waterfalls



Meghalaya; “The abode of clouds” in Sanskrit...all can guess on what to expect when you step into this heavenly land.

Photography exploration in North East India, especially in Meghalaya, was on my list for a long time. After cancelling a few attempts, finally, my fellow photographer friend & I, reached Shillong one fine morning. The picturesque hilly roads and cool weather of August was enchanting.

We had a plan for spending around a week in Sohra (native people call Cherrapunjee by this name) and explore some well known and few less known places. The main attraction was obviously to capture the mammoth and gigantic waterfalls through our lenses.

As a landscape photographer, you know, timings are very critical. The weather also plays a big role of course, in any photograph. We had intimated our driver that the plan is tentative and we may need to change as per situation and may need to go out at odd hours. Zoom Car was the best alternative option for us, but going to a place for the first time, it is better to rely on a local driver.

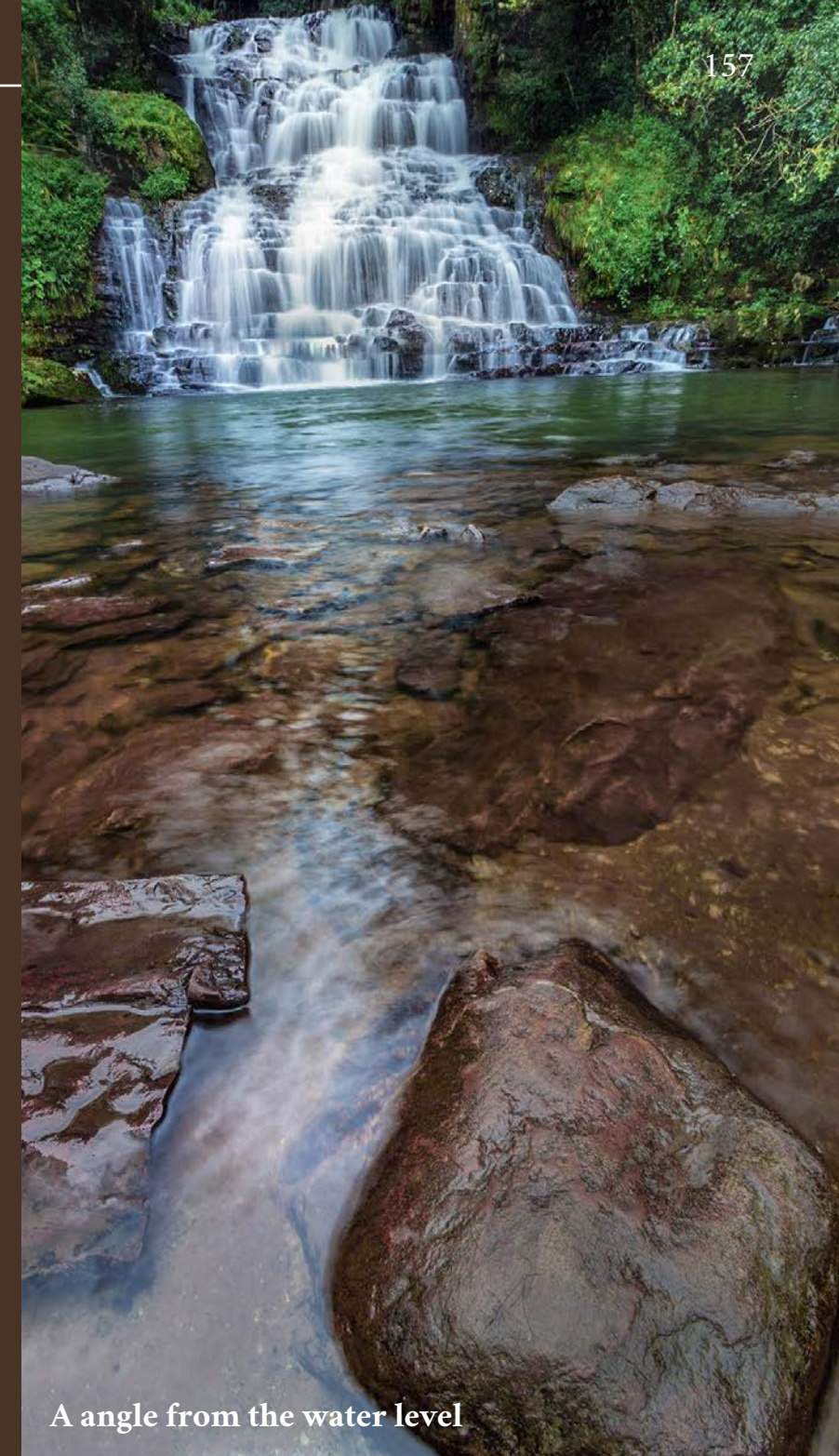


Conventional viewpoint

Our first photography destination for shooting waterfalls was the Elephant Falls. The morning light was about to come in and we left the hotel after a paltry snack. This is the only way to get the best out of crowded places. We captured a few shots bypassing the ugly safety railing. But getting something new from the defined spot may not be possible. To reach a better vantage point, we moved to the other side to final level and from the water level, took a few shots of the flow.



From the base



A angle from the water level

The sky was bland and fortunately it was not raining so we went further down. Ropes were placed before the mainstream, but we had to exclude it in the snap, thus we went low and got some better shots. As the tourists started jostling around, we left the place and thought of revisiting some other time.



1

Our next journey was to Sohra via Mawkdok Valley and crossing Wah Kaba Falls and then to Nohkalikai Falls for sunset. The view of Mawkdok Valley in the clouds and sun was mesmerizing. We stopped in between and enjoyed the sight. In between, two-three splashes of rain had already made the roads wet, but it never continued for more than 15-20 minutes. Wah Kaba gave us a view for only a few seconds and hid itself inside the cloud in no time. We waited for long and finally left the location for trying our luck on return. We reached Nohkalikai at around 4PM. The weather is mostly topsy turvy for most parts of the year in Sohra. This time the sky was full of clouds. Few other groups of people were loitering here and there.

We overheard the conversation that few were very unhappy, as they were visiting this place since the last 3 days and hard luck.

We thought of staying there as this was our first visit. And then, the magic happened. Amidst the clouds, the sun peeped and the valley was filled with rays. The view was awesome. We were ready with our tripod and camera. We were able to capture a few moments and then the clouds covered the valley again. The faint roar could be heard from the distance. We relished the mood with no words spoken. We returned to our hotel with what is called "luck on first visit", as the first day was more than what we ever expected.

Nohkalikai Falls, Meghalaya - Various Moods

- 1) **Post sunset glow for a few seconds.**
- 2) **When the sun is hidden behind the clouds.**
- 3) **When the sun peeped from the clouds.**
- 4) **The foggy mood.**



2



3



4

Next day, we got up early, but there was a heavy shower and it was full of clouds everywhere. Visibility was so poor that, after a short outing, we returned to our hotel and sat in the balcony enjoying the rain till noon. We were a bit upset about losing one morning. But when the rain stopped, we had our lunch quickly and left. The sky was blue, clean and clear. This is the magic of Meghalaya.

We had to drop plans for Kynrem Falls and we went to Dainthlen Falls via Kharmih Park. The decision was perfect, as the green rocks after the sun bathing, got more glorified. The sunset at Dainthlen is like a painting on canvas. The depth of the valley and roar of water, both combined together, made us enthralled. The sky sows a plethora of colors and the clouds were complementing it. It was unpredictable when the sun would hide behind and peep from them. The golden hour was spent with a mesmerising experience. We thought of exploring it again on the next morning. As soon as the sun had set, the cold and mist, both loomed large.



Dianthlen Falls : The cloudy sunset mood

In Meghalaya, spread across Jaintia, Khasi and Garo Hills, there are some big and small caves. Some are amongst the longest caves in the world. We thought of exploring one cave, recently opened for the public and the famous Garden Of Caves. The journey in the misty and chilling environment through road was very exciting. We saw Wah Kaba from a different angle and took a few shots. Garden Of Caves is made by humans but the purity of nature is kept intact in most areas.

We had a nice time roaming around, from one small falls to bigger falls over the place spread across approximately 2.5 hectares. The day passed by in a whisker.





Arsdad Falls



Sum Syiem Falls



Arsdad Falls



Tlai Falls



Dianthlen Falls

The stunning, mesmerising views of the Arsdad Falls can be enjoyed up close, or even from the bamboo bridges spread across the garden. We returned to hotel, so that in afternoon we can try our luck at Dainthlen or Nohkalikai again during sunset. Weather, as usual, was very unproductive and it changed suddenly. We had to stay at the hotel and got busy checking all our images and taking backups.

The next morning was fully bright. We rushed to our next location with a fresh mind. The morning sun was comforting and way forward, we stopped in between and got busy in capturing the beauty of the waterfalls. There are many waterfalls on the roadside during the monsoon which provide brilliant photographic opportunities. Many falls originate only in monsoon and hardly have water in other seasons. At times, we went even into waist deep water and were happy to grab some unique frames. As morning dawned, the return journey was very enchanting. The diffused light and cool weather helped us to have some soothing view of the beautiful place.



After lunch, we started our journey for the last destination of the day and may be, of our tour, the massive, bold and beautiful Krang Suri Falls. It is the most magical waterfall you can lay your eyes on in Jowai. Surrounded by greenery and big rocks, it is one which inspires poetic thoughts. Dropping down from a low level into a basin-like depression, it is an ideal spot for taking a cool dip. On rainy days, the water drops down gustily, creating the illusion of a mist. For ease of access, many gravelled pathways have been constructed. The falls are kept as natural as possible by discarding the use of cement and instead, using natural multi-coloured stones to align the paths. We climbed down and crossed the very slippery stones with utmost care of our expensive

gears. Got an ample opportunity to capture the beauty from different angles. There was a scope for swimming in the chilled water under the guidance of the trained local people, but for us, the photographers, it is a bane. So, we had to wait for long before it actually got out of any crowd. As the day came to an end, we spent the rest of the time sitting beside Thlumuwi Falls, a small waterfall on the way and enjoyed the sun going down. The small seasonal falls are beautiful and hardly any tourist visit there is a good option for photographers. Our journey came to an end and now it was our plan to return to Shillong. With lots of good memories and a bagful of photographs, we started our return journey.



Krang Suri in different moods



Waterfalls Photography is not that challenging if you know the right technique. Here are some tips to help get you started creating your own beautiful long exposure waterfall photography.

GEARS:

CAMERA: The camera that lets you set your shutter speed as per the requirement is important. It may be several seconds or minutes. Any DSLR, Mirrorless or Prosumer(Bridge) camera that can go fully manual and a Bulb mode present, is always a good option. A Full Frame is always preferable for High Dynamic Range and Noise performance, but in generic condition not a must have. The images taken in RAW format is my choice as it gives me the ample opportunity to control exposure in post processing

LENS: My preference is to use zoom lenses when photographing waterfalls. Both wide and telephoto lenses can be used, based on the situations and the need to compose. The zoom helps you to do the proper framing, as many a time, physical accessibility after a certain

distance is not possible. Choice of lens also has a role on frontal diameter. The threaded filters must be the same or more in diameter. The Depth Of Field setting option in many lenses helps to use it more effectively. You need to use the Aperture judiciously, so that you can get the sharpest image and not compromise on the Depth Of Field. Right now, my current go-to lenses for waterfalls are: Nikkor 16–35mm, Rokinon 14mm and 50mm

TRIPOD: Apart from lenses for long exposures, a tripod to stabilize your camera and make it hands-free is a must. The tripod head must have the stability to hold the camera and lens weight and must be sturdy and reliable. You often need to stand in a stream with the tripod legs under the water. This means you are at a greater risk of toppling the camera and lens and falling into the water too!

The head must have the option to set the camera both vertically and horizontally and must have the fixing option to make it free of movement.

ACCESSORIES :

NEUTRAL DENSITY FILTERS

Neutral Density (ND) filters allow you to block the light coming through the lens, which tricks your camera into requiring a longer exposure time. They are very helpful for getting that silky smooth look in water images, especially on a bright sunny day. Choice of ND Filter, sometimes, is tricky, as it is based on calculations, how much light got cut and you need to compensate. Some good ND calculator apps are available to do this job for you. The challenge is, if the light condition gets changed during the planned interval, it may underexpose or overexpose the image. But under exposing is always better for post recovery.

POLARIZER FILTERS

The Circular Polarizing Filters are very useful, as they allow you to reduce the reflections in the water and shiny surfaces. With proper rotation, you can reduce and virtually cut the reflection.

CABLE RELEASE/TIMER

A Cable Release is also a good investment to help you minimize camera shake from pressing the shutter. Right from the basic analogue to enhanced digital, all can work. Now-a-days DSLRs are coming with WiFi and you can use your mobile to trigger the shutter. I have the facility in my Nikon D750. In extreme cases, you can use your camera timer and after pressing it, give a few seconds to stabilize your camera systems. The main purpose is to avoid any camera shake.



EXPOSURE SETTINGS

There is no specific rule on the settings. I prefer to check the histogram in Live mode to know if the image is properly exposed with the Depth Of Field setting, keeping the aperture narrow around f/11, and change it as per need. It is also recommended to keep the ISO as low as possible using your camera's native setting. Sometimes, you need to add ND and Polarizers, both, in front of the lens. But this may create vignetting and you need

WEATHER

This is the only thing that is beyond your control, still it is best to go out on overcast days to get the exposure of the waterfall properly. On sunny days, amidst harsh light, it is difficult to control exposure, whereas a soft, diffused day will distribute the light evenly. The most preferable days are when the clouds have movement and a good texture. My preference is to include the colourful sky in waterfalls images. Sunrise and sunset are ideal times of the day to photograph waterfalls. It will add colour to the scene and the softness is also well-maintained naturally.

PRECAUTIONS

The last but not the least is to take proper precaution while shooting waterfalls. You can make a check mark of the items below for a precaution :

- Not to keep the tripod in an unstable position.
- While making movement, always keep all gears packed inside the camera bag.
- Do not rush for a spot. Wait until your steps are stable.



to step down the zoom to get rid of it. If you are using external Filter Holders, this problem will never arise, but with thread in type, it is a common issue.

If you are very close to a waterfall or the waterfall is huge, there is a chance for water droplet accumulation before your lens. This may spoil your shots. Even occasional rain drops can also do the same. A few dry fabric cloths are a must carry and an umbrella to get rid of these unprecedented things.

- Many a time, rocks are very slippery with moss and are hard to judge. Wear socks to have a good grip. Shoes and gumboots may not help you.
- Take an umbrella to have a sudden rain cover for your gear.
- Keep extra batteries, as using Live View mode will shorten your battery life.
- Avoid camera straps and make sure your Cable Release doesn't fall in water.



Soumendra Mukhopadhyay is a Telecom Engineer by profession and a wildlife photographer by passion. He experiments continuously to polish his skill sets when he is out in the field with his camera. He loves to share his knowledge of photography selflessly with people around him. His images have been appreciated and acknowledged in various online forums, articles and magazines. He is a Panel Expert for Team DCP, Mumbai. He specializes in macro and travel photography. His work generates inquisitiveness in common man about the hidden tiny beauties of nature.
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Spot-bellied Eagle Owl
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Travel professionals conducting wildlife tours in India and abroad. The company is run by 2 women entrepreneurs Mrs. Gaythri Devi & Ms.Samantha Iyanna who are wildlife photographers and jointly with an experience in the travel industry for more than 30 years. Tiger Scouts recently conducted a photography competition along with Serenity, Kanha where the Top 15 winning contestants will be taken on an all paid trip to Kanha with 6 safaris in January 2021. They intend to make this an ongoing yearly contest. The tours they

design will interest both amateurs as well as professionals with skippers accompanying the participants. They are also a member of TOF Tigers which is a collective action campaign; a global alliance to help drive nature stewardship & sustainable tourism across South Asia and beyond. You could choose from their announced tour packages or chat with them to design tailor made tours to suit your needs. To know more and to be updated on their future tours, please visit www.tigerscouts.com or get in touch with 9942310000 / 9894233943.

Coordinated Attack!

This adrenaline filled image was taken by Shivayogi Kanthi. It won the "Chinu Dattagupta Memorial Award" in the "Action in Wildlife Photography" competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.



Shivayogi Kanthi
Chinu Dattagupta Memorial
Grand Prize Winner



It is Family Time!

This beautiful image of a Tiger family by Akash Akinwar secured the “Padma Venkatadri Memorial Prize” in the “Portraits with a difference in wildlife” competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

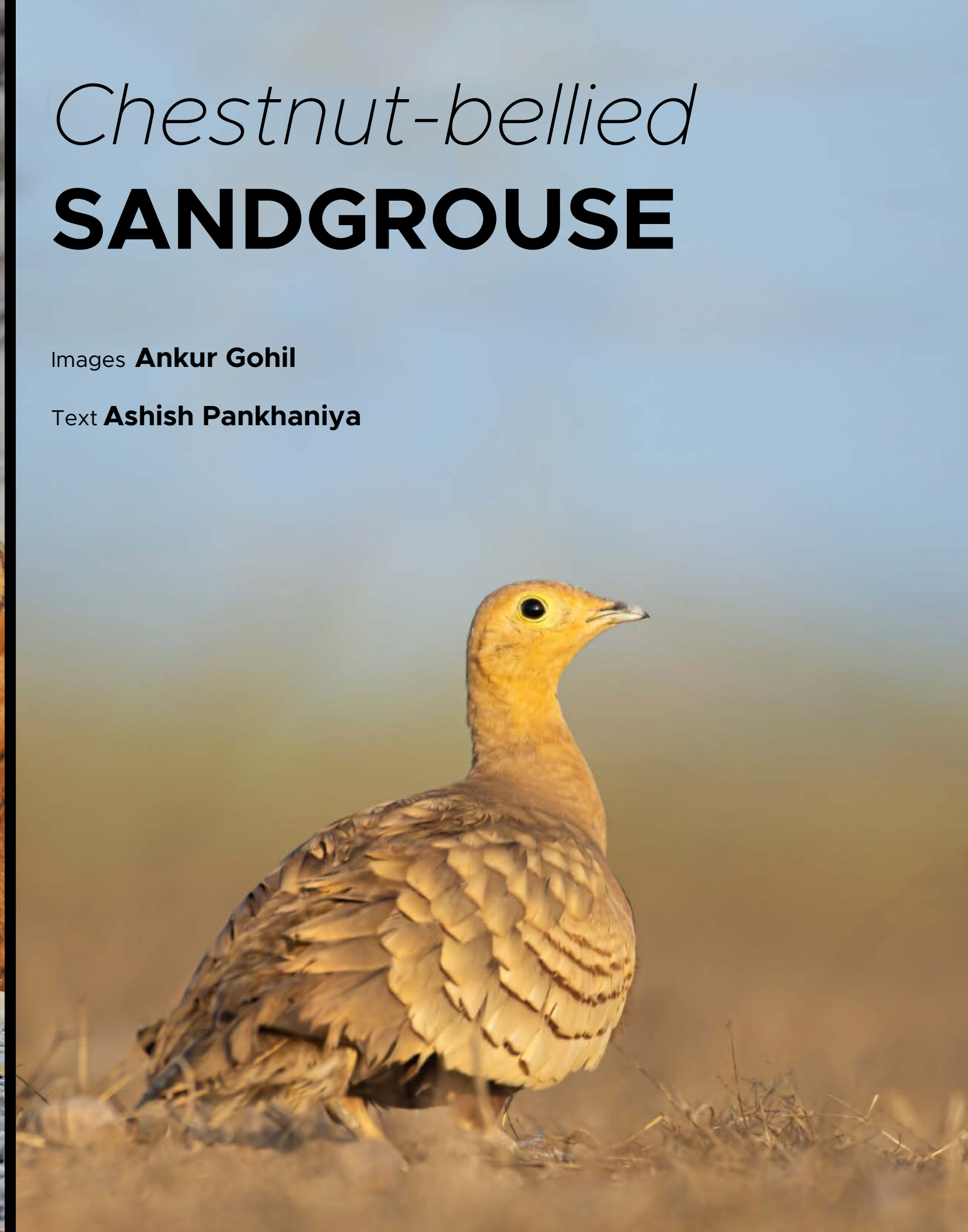


Akash Akinwar

Chestnut-bellied **SANDGROUSE**

Images **Ankur Gohil**

Text **Ashish Pankhaniya**



“You’ll have a lot more respect for a bird after you try making a nest”

goes a saying by Cynthia Lawrence.

From simple mounds on the ground to elaborately woven structures, birds’ nests are makeshift but meticulously built places to raise the young. There is an extensive variety in bird nest types and architecture as there are close to 18000 species of birds. Birds go to incredible lengths to build nests that keep their chicks safe from harm.

These amazing designs are a testament to the genius and resourcefulness of birds. Nests come in all types of size, design and types. They can be very carefully crafted and as intricate as a piece of fine ornament [Common Tailorbird] or they can be shabby with a splatter of leaves and sticks. They can be perfectly camouflaged or can be exhibitionistic like a Baya Weaver nest. Various purposes have been attributed to bird nests, including structural support for eggs or fledglings, protective seclusion from predators and parasites and as safeguard against environmental hazards.



This photo feature covers a bird of a scrub grassland habitat that lays its eggs on the ground.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse.



Jamnagar is one of the most famous sites for birding in India mainly for waders and water birds. The city and its surroundings are studded with wetlands, sea shores, beaches, dams, islands, scrubs, saltpans, and many more sites for watching birds are full of surprises. As the breeding season ushers in many birds like Sand Larks, Little Terns, Little Ringed Plovers and many more start their perennial activity of building nests. I started my journey with nature 10 years ago and am interested particularly in native birds and their behaviour. I have been working recently on a most beautiful bird, the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*). This bird is a relatively small Sandgrouse. Males are slightly larger than females in appearance. The overall plumage is light reddish brown, providing the bird with wonderful camouflage against the arid dry environment. The head and neck have an orange tinge. The underwings are dark brown. The belly region is reddish brown. The irises are black and the bare skin around the eyes is light green. The legs are short and grey in colour. The

call is a noisy and repeated “crok crok” sound and in flight emits a rhythmic three-note phrase. This species is a non-migratory, sedentary and resident bird. In Jamnagar, the population of this bird has not been quantified but the number of birds is considered to be stable.

They inhabit various natural open, dry and sparsely bushy ecosystems and sub-tropical dry grasslands. These birds are mainly dependent on seeds, grains and cereals for their feed. They require a lot of water and can fly long distances in search of water spots.

In India, the breeding season of various ground nesting birds differ from species to species. We have noticed that the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse breeds from the end of March to the starting of June. The nest is a scrape in the ground with scanty or no lining at all. Materials, if at all used, consists of sticks, feathers, dry grass and leaves. It usually contains two or three eggs. Both parents incubate the eggs. The hatching time is almost 15 to 25 days after laying the eggs.

As a regular birder, I have observed conservation

Dad with his Kids



activities in all the areas of Jamnagar through my binoculars and camera. I found many birds nesting in the same habitat but my main focus was the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. During this observation I have found 10 pairs of Sandgrouses with 25 to 30 chicks. It was then that I decided to observe their nesting behaviours and parental care. The whole observation was carried out without disturbing the nest or the birds. After spending nearly two months observing, I really wonder how nature has created such a fascinating bird. I genuinely feel proud for witnessing their activities and reproduction. In the nest, we observed the bird laid 3 eggs. Both male and female took turns to incubate them. Here, I want to share one of the interesting findings. One day I noticed that the male was incubating the eggs. One chick had hatched and the nest contained two more eggs. Suddenly the male puffed out all its feathers and started to roll around the eggs. This movement was repeated quite a number of times and after one and half hours, one more chick came out of the egg.

All the three eggs hatched and all the chicks came out well.

Unfortunately, a few days later, human disturbance started with earth moving activities for water storage. I really wonder how many nests were destroyed. But I could notice that our Sandgrouse family relocated to an adjacent place.



Ankur Gohil is a Project Officer at Geology and Mining Department in Jamnagar, Gujarat, India.

He is a very dedicated wildlife photographer and has special interest in documenting life cycles of various birds found in and around Jamnagar.

Ashish Pankhaniya is from Jamnagar, Gujarat. He is a dedicated birder and is civil engineer by profession.



Images **Ankur Gohil**
Text **Ashish Pankhaniya**



This is my **Territory!**



This awe inspiring image of Common Hoopoes fighting was taken by Anirban Dutta. It won “Highly Appreciated Award” in the “Action in wildlife photography” competition organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.

Anirban Dutta



Most Liked *Image!*

in the “Action in wildlife photography” competition
organised by Wild Sojourns Magazine.



Sriram Reddy

Decoding the ‘**Super Year**’ for *Biodiversity*

- Rituraj Phukan



United Nations Decade on Biodiversity

The year 2020 was destined to be a watershed for biodiversity conservation, with several high-level opportunities to enhance measures to prevent further deterioration of nature over the next decade. It is now universally acknowledged that anthropogenic pressures including deforestation, encroachment of wildlife habitats, intensified agriculture and acceleration of climate change have pushed nature beyond its limit. The global Coronavirus outbreak has made the conservation of our biological diversity both urgent and existential in the 'Super Year'. However, the genesis of this association goes back a couple of years.

In 2018, negotiators at the 14th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP14) adopted the Sharm El Sheikh Declaration, inviting the United Nations (UN) General Assembly to convene a 'Summit on Biodiversity' for Heads of State by 2020 for an international agreement on reversing the global destruction of nature and biodiversity loss threatening all forms of life on Earth.

The urgency of the biodiversity crisis led to talk for a transformational 'New Deal for Nature and People' by 2020, with the next UN Biodiversity

Conference originally scheduled to be held in China this October, for an effective strategy to halt the collapse of life on Earth. This year also marks the deadline for nations to agree on fresh global targets for the protection and management of forests, rivers, oceans, pollinators and other wildlife. Among other landmark decisions, COP14 also called upon the UN General Assembly to designate 2021 to 2030 as the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration.

The year 2018 was also critical for understanding current and projected global threats to biodiversity and a plethora of reports this year has only added to the concerns. The Living Planet Report 2018 was a revelation, showing that population sizes of wildlife had decreased by 60% globally between 1970 and 2014. Even more dismal is the Living Planet Report 2020 published some weeks back, which points to a catastrophic two-thirds decline of the global populations of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish in less than half a century. The flagship report from World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) includes the Living Planet Index (LPI), which shows an average 68% fall in monitored populations of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish between 1970 and 2016.



Chinstrap Penguin,
Antarctica
© Rituraj Phukan



Kailash landscape
Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand
© Gaurab Talukdar

The report also relates this unprecedented loss of biodiversity to the same environmental destruction which is contributing to the emergence of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19. The LPI, provided by the Zoological Society of London, shows that factors believed to increase the planet's vulnerability to pandemics, including land-use change and the use and trade of wildlife, were also some of the drivers for the documented decline in global vertebrate species populations.

The October 2018 Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) also highlighted the comparative biodiversity impacts of 1.5°C and 2°C or more rise in global temperatures above the preindustrial levels. For instance, at 2°C, the IPCC

projected that around 8% of vertebrates will lose at least half of their present range, which is two times the projections for a 1.5°C rise.

Similarly, 16% of plants would lose at least half their range at 2°C, again twice the projections for a 1.5°C rise. The IPCC report also predicted that insect populations losing out half their range at 2°C will be three times the 6% loss at 1.5°C. Coral reefs would decline by 70-90% with global warming of 1.5°C, whereas over 99% would be lost with 2°C.





African Elephant, Pilanesberg
© Rituraj Phukan

2020 also marks the final period for the 2011-2020 Strategic Plan on Biodiversity and its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets. Most importantly, it is a transitional phase for the start of two other pivotal biodiversity related decades. The period 2021-2030 will also be observed as the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development besides being designated as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Key events scheduled during the year included the International Union for Conservation of Nature(IUCN) World Conservation Congress, the 11th World Wilderness Congress, the UN Oceans Conference and the UN Climate Change Conference. The expectations from the 'Super Year' were therefore expectedly sky-high, with a clear road map to address the rapid loss of global biodiversity.

Oxygen levels in some tropical regions have dropped by a startling 40% in the last 50 years with an average loss of 2% globally. Across large swathes, marine animals are being increasingly deprived of oxygen, making deoxygenation the most alarming issue for marine biodiversity.

Ocean acidification is another factor associated with rapid documented declines of marine wildlife. Studies have pointed out that the world's

oceans are now 30% more acidic, on an average, than they were before the industrial revolution. Acidic water is dissolving the shells of tiny free-swimming marine snails that provide food for Pink Salmon, Mackerel and Herring, leading to a cataclysmic ecosystem collapse.

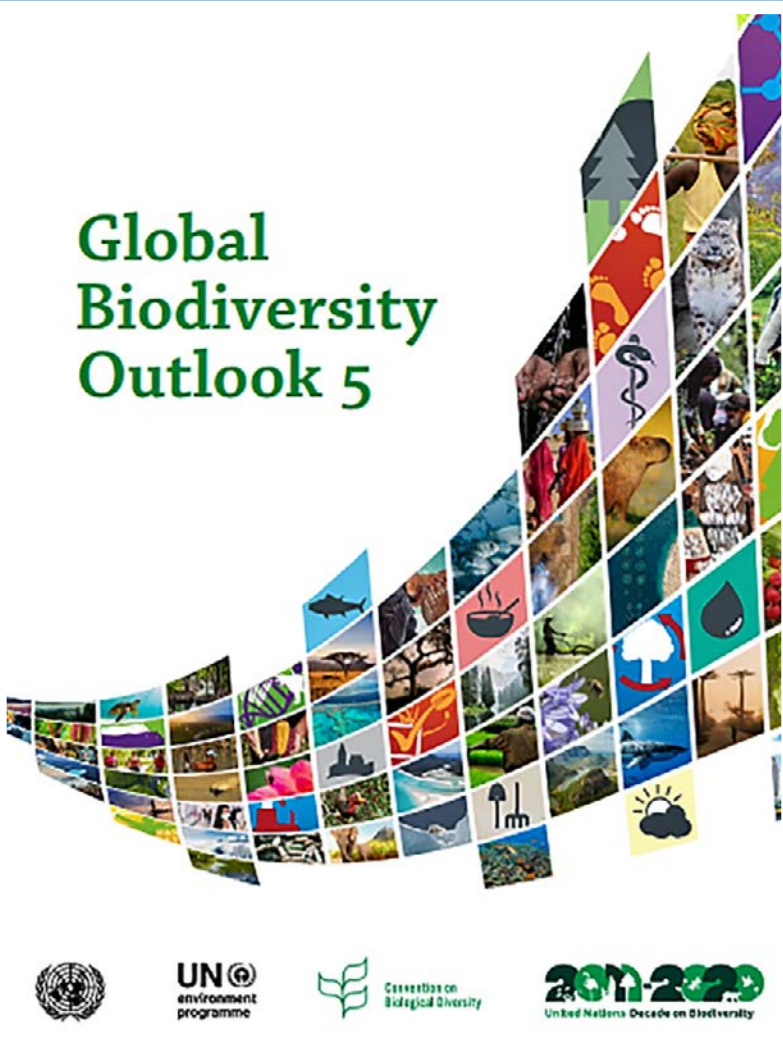
The urgency of the climate and ecological crises is manifest in the oceans of the world, leaving marine species gasping for air. It is a fact that 90% of the extra heat trapped by man-made global warming pollution goes into the oceans, with profound impacts on marine life. Global warming is making naturally occurring, low-oxygen areas larger, exacerbating coastal nutrient-driven 'dead zones' and increasing the extent of these areas.



Walrus, Svalbard
© Rituraj Phukan

Coral reefs are among the most diverse ecosystems on the planet and the past 12 years has been disastrous for the 'rainforests of the sea'. When the water is too warm, corals expel the algae called zooxanthellae living in their tissues, causing the coral to turn completely white. This is called coral bleaching and continued bleaching has caused reefs to die in many places around the world. The three mass bleaching events ever recorded, have happened since 1998, with over half of the Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest structure made by living organisms, wiped out between 2014-2017.

Global Biodiversity Outlook 5



In January this year, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) declared that we only have ten years to save the biodiversity on Earth. The 'Zero Draft of The Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework' stated that almost a third of the planet has to be protected, while pollution has to be reduced to half of current levels, to save our remaining wildlife, and all of this by the year 2030! The 'Zero Draft' was scheduled to be adopted at the CBD Conference of the Parties (COP15) at Kunming in October, now postponed till next year. The CBD recently released the Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 (GBO-5), its final report card on progress of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. Ten years back, in 2010, the international community adopted the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. The mission of the plan and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets was to halt biodiversity loss and ensure that ecosystems continued to provide essential services. None of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets will be fully met, in turn threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and undermining efforts to address climate change.

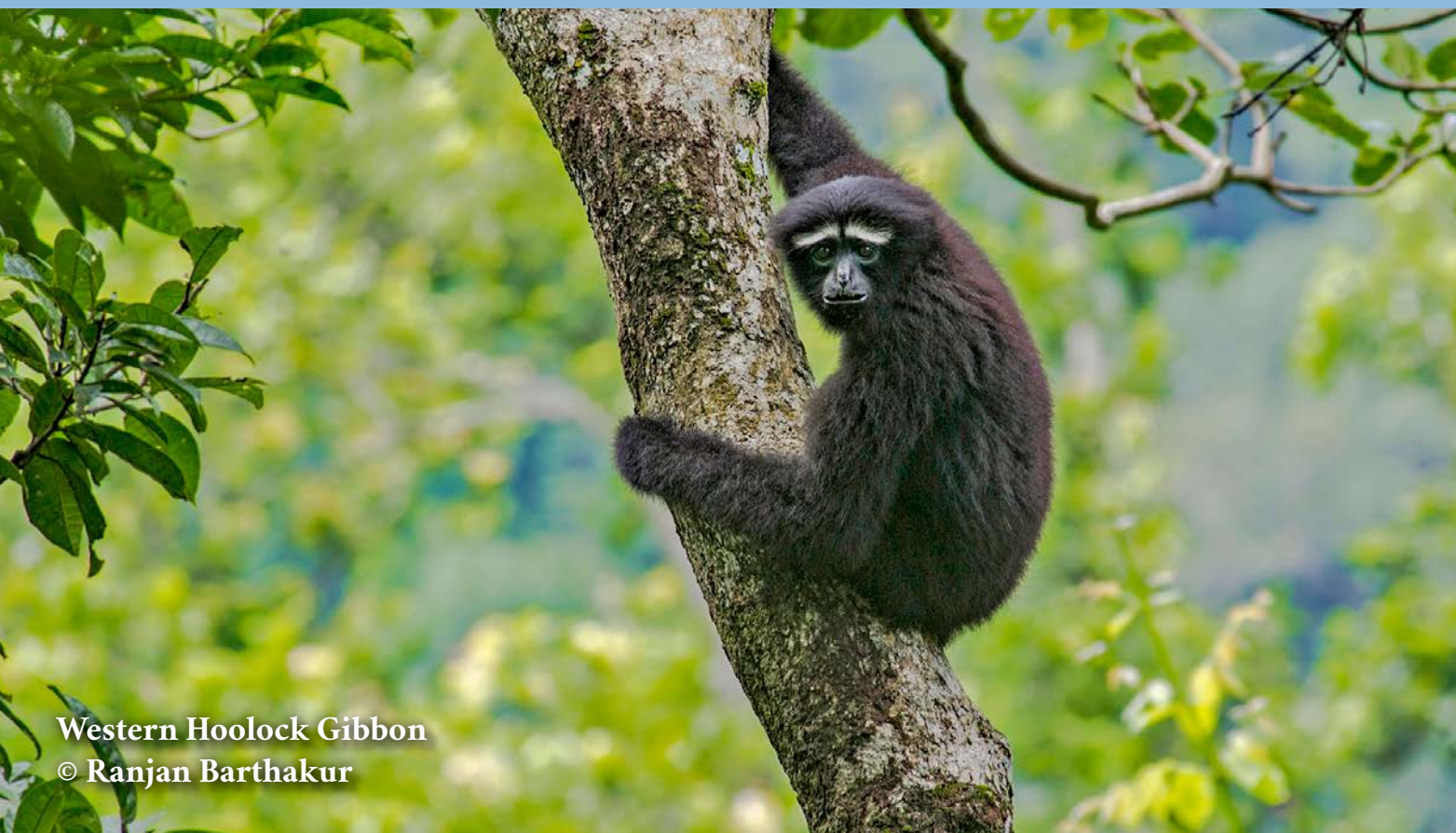
Fishing Cat
© Gaurab Talukdar

Humanity stands at a crossroads with regards to the legacy it leaves to future generations. Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate and the pressures driving this decline are intensifying. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of the relationship between people and nature and it reminds us all of the profound consequences to our own well-being and survival that can result from continued biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystems. The latest CBD report has called for urgent action to address the accelerating decline of nature and outlined eight transformative changes to ensure human wellbeing and planetary health.

As a signatory to the CBD, most nations of the world are committed to the preservation of vital habitats to stop the catastrophic loss of biodiversity in ten years, as envisaged in the 'Zero Draft'. This commitment will require creation and regeneration of new protected areas, to meet the target of protecting 30% of land and of the sea, prioritizing areas of abundant biodiversity.

"Biodiversity and the benefits it provides is fundamental to human well-being and a healthy planet", proclaimed the 'Zero Draft'. The Biodiversity Convention aims to stabilize biodiversity by the year 2030 and effect recovery of fragile ecosystems by 2050, aligned to its vision of 'living in harmony with nature'. Similar targets were set up for 2020 after COP10 in 2010, but these have failed completely!

In February, before the pandemic forced a sweeping postponement of global events, the first ever World Biodiversity Forum was held at Davos to facilitate research, including citizen science, integrate biodiversity in all assessments, policy decisions and actions affecting human well-being, integrate biodiversity solutions with climate change interventions to ensure synergies between actions on climate and biodiversity and work towards ecological integrity maintaining and restoring natural processes into biodiversity targets in a changing future. This will remain as one of the main areas of progress for the truncated year, after the postponement of other scheduled events till next year.



Western Hoolock Gibbon
© Ranjan Barthakur



King Quail, Deobali Jalah IBA, Assam,
© Ranjan Barthakur

The emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the fact that, when we destroy biodiversity, we destroy the system that supports human life. Today, it is estimated that, globally, about a billion cases of illness and millions of deaths occur every year from diseases caused by coronaviruses; and about 75% of all emerging infectious diseases in humans are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted to people by animals. Ironically, this has happened in the 'Super Year', where the increased realization of these circumstances was expectedly leading to collective, decisive action by the global leadership.

For India, the 'Super Year' might turn out to be the most damaging, with the draft Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020(EIA2020) emerging as the Sword of Damocles over India's

biological diversity. The EIA was set up in the mid-1990s as a legal framework under the Environmental Protection Act 1986, to safeguard local communities from the environmental and socio-economic impacts of projects that access and utilize natural resources and provided a platform for public consultation in development decision-making. Contrary to the spirit of the Act, the draft EIA 2020 seeks to dilute these same environmental regulations to facilitate ease of doing business in India.

Further, the Nationally Determined Contributions(NDC) made by India under the Paris Agreement includes a commitment to creation of a cumulative carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030 and India's own stated goal to bring at least 33% of

its land areas under green cover, up from the current 24.5%. India's National Forest Policy 2018 also aspires for one-third of total land area under forest and tree cover to achieve the national goal for eco-security. The EIA2020 seeks to throw open the last vestiges of our timeless natural heritage to exploitation and annihilation. Contrary to the expectations, India has sought to weaken the protection measures for India's biodiversity, instead of strengthening them.

On Earth Day, 22 April, a first of its kind guide, 'Mitigating biodiversity impacts of sports events' for organizers of international sports events was launched by the IUCN. This pioneering vision document has been prepared by the IUCN in collaboration with the International Olympic Committee(IOC). Any sports event depends on a healthy natural environment and their organizers should take concrete steps to protect it, the IUCN said in a press note. The guide offers advice to sports event organizers on how to reduce the impact on biodiversity and promote its conservation throughout all phases of event planning.

In the middle of the debate over the EIA2020, vindication of the demand for protection of India's remaining natural heritage came from the government agencies involved in preparation of the first ever climate change assessment for India. This June 2020 publication presented a grim analysis of observed changes and future projections of warming impacts including precipitation changes, temperature rise, droughts, sea level rise and extreme weather events. India's move to dilute existing environmental laws is contrary to the prevalent global narrative of

strengthening natural defenses.

The Living Planet Report 2020 includes pioneering modelling which shows that without further efforts to counteract habitat loss and degradation, global biodiversity will continue to decline. Based on a paper, 'Bending the curve of terrestrial biodiversity needs an integrated strategy', co-authored by WWF and published in Nature, the research makes it clear that stabilizing and reversing the loss of nature caused by humans' destruction of natural habitats will only be possible if bolder, more ambitious conservation efforts are embraced along with transformational changes in food production and consumption.





The GBO-5 outlines eight major transitions needed to slow, then halt nature's accelerating decline. These transitions include conservation and restoration of ecosystems, redesigning agricultural systems, sustainable food systems, aquaculture management, deploying "green infrastructure", integrated water management, sustainable climate action employing nature-based solutions, alongside a rapid phase-out of fossil fuel use, to reduce the scale and impacts of climate change, while providing positive benefits for biodiversity and other sustainable development goals and a biodiversity-inclusive approach to promote healthy ecosystems and healthy people.

As a species, humanity has overlooked the web of life and sought to destroy the very ecosystems that sustain life on earth. Therefore, nature is sending us a message. If these warnings are ignored, the future generations will face grave consequences of human folly and ignorance. Biodiversity is the foundation that supports all life on land and below water. It affects every aspect of human health, providing clean air and water, nutritious foods, scientific understanding and medicine sources, natural disease resistance and climate change mitigation. From all indications, it will not be long before the catastrophic loss of biodiversity will have severe implications on human civilization, including the collapse of food and health systems. Despite the setbacks during

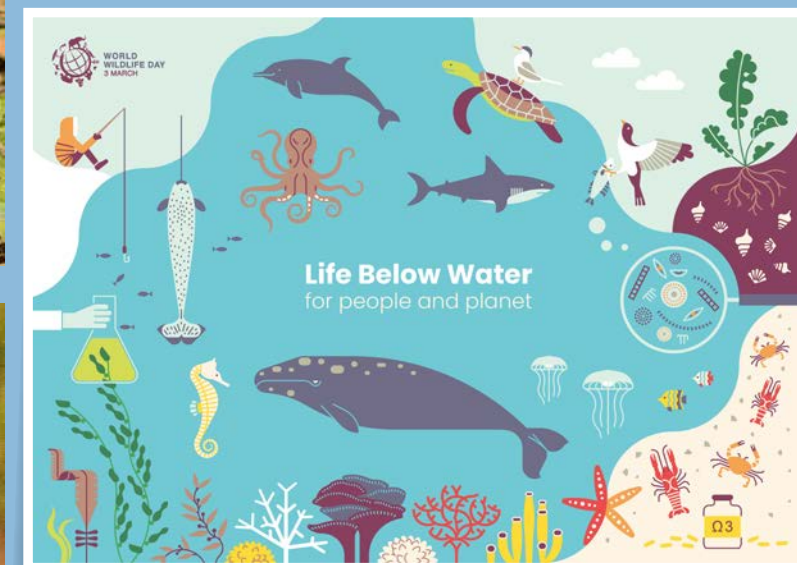


King Cobra, Kaziranga National Park
© Ranjan Barthakur



Ward's Trogon, Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary
© Rituraj Phukan

2020, the envisioned roadmap for biodiversity has already been scripted and therefore, the 'Super Year' will remain etched in the annals of human history.

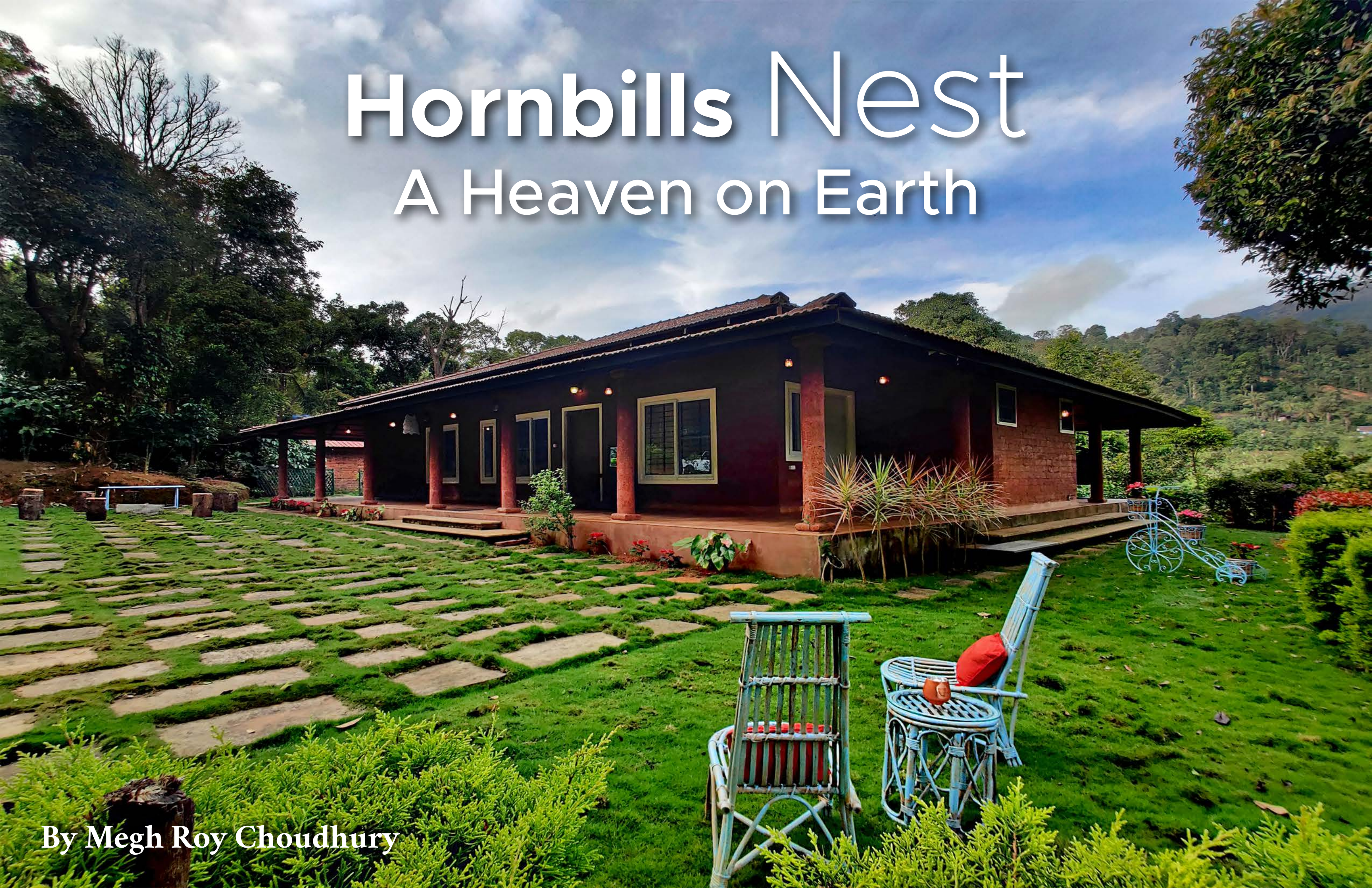


Rituraj Phukan

"Rituraj Phukan is an environmental writer with personal experience of climate change impacts in the polar regions. He is the National Coordinator for Biodiversity, The Climate Reality Project India, Secretary General of Green Guard Nature Organization & member, IUCN. He has worked extensively on the interconnected issues of global warming, water and wildlife and he has been invited to share his learnings with audiences around the world."

Hornbills Nest

A Heaven on Earth



By Megh Roy Choudhury



The Hornbills Nest, an alluring homestay at Parvati Valley Estates, a property in the Western Ghats at Muvathokulu, a place on the fringes of the Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary close to Madhapur which is about 18 kms from Madikeri on the Madikeri-Somwarpet Road in Kodagu(Coorg), India. This property is blessed to be adjoining the Bhadrakali Devarukadu Forest, named after the deity of the temple of the same name. This is how the property was named Parvati Valley Estates.

How to Reach

Hornbills Nest is accessible by road, 116 kms from Mysore [2 hrs] and 254 kms from Bangalore [4-5 hrs].

Closest airport Kannur International Airport is 115 kms.

Contact info:

Website: <https://hornbillsnest.in/>

Mail id- enquiry@hornbillsnest.in

Contact #9113687113

**A few places to visit near Hornbills Nest
Kote Betta [12 kms]**

Kote Betta is located in Madhapur, which is in between Somwarpet and Madikeri. A beautiful drive with a lovely view, nice place to trek with an ancient Lord Shiva temple at the top.

A drive to the Harangi Backwaters [31 kms]

The Harangi Reservoir is formed by a masonry dam built across the river Harangi, a tributary of the Kaveri River.

Mandalpatti [37 kms]

Overlooking the grassy knolls of Pushpagiri Forest in the Western Ghats, Mandalpatti is a spectacular and unique vantage point in Coorg, Karnataka. Huddled at an altitude of 1800m, this place mesmerises all those who visit it with some of the most gorgeous hillscapes that you have ever seen!

Abbey Falls [25kms]

Nestled within the lush greenery of the Western Ghats in Coorg is the spectacular Abbey Falls, with water cascading down from a height of 70 feet. The rugged terrain of the boulders of the waterfall is juxtaposed well by the neighbouring coffee and spice plantations, bringing new life to the aura of this mystical waterfall.

Raja Seat [23 kms]

If you are in Madikeri, the relaxing venue for the Kings of Kodagu, the view from this spot is unparalleled even today. The breathtaking

view of the sun setting into the undulated mountains is captivating.

Golden Temple (Namdroling Monastery) [33 kms]

The famous Namdroling Monastery is situated just 6 kms from the town of Kushalnagar and 35 kms from Madikeri. It belongs to the Sangha community. The temple is termed "golden" because of the golden work done on every painting. It is a typical Tibetan monastery and is presided over by a 18 metres high gold-plated idol of Lord Buddha.

Dubare Elephant Camp [34 kms]

Once an important camp of the Karnataka Forest Department, the Dubare Elephant Camp, now run by private players, is an ideal destination to learn about the various aspects of the history, ecology and biology of elephants, as well as see a large number of Asiatic Elephants stroll peacefully as they enjoy their natural habitat.





If you are looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life and relax in the lap of nature for a few days, Hornbills Nest, a quaint homestay, nestled amidst the verdant Western ghats is just the place tailor-made for you. A weekend getaway, a romantic jaunt, a birding trip or a scope to unwind oneself can all get seamlessly rolled into a single excursion here.

As a wildlife photographer and an avid travel

enthusiast, I have travelled to many places. Normally, whenever it is a wildlife trip, the facilities are quite spartan and a luxury trip more often than not is devoid of the chances of doing wildlife photography.

I was looking for a place which is a bit of both when my dearest friend, Neeta Kiran invited me to this place. We drove from Bengaluru via NH 75. The 145 kms on the highway, till we turned left at Channarayapatna, is one of the best drives I have ever had on an Indian road. The roads were in good condition throughout. The topography changed once we reached Shanivarasanthe, a small town 70 kms from Channarayapatna.

Winding rounds, lush greenery, gurgling streams and pleasant, unpolluted air made the last 40 kms a very unforgettable ride. We wound through the sprawling coffee estates and smaller country roads, and finally reached Hornbills Nest.

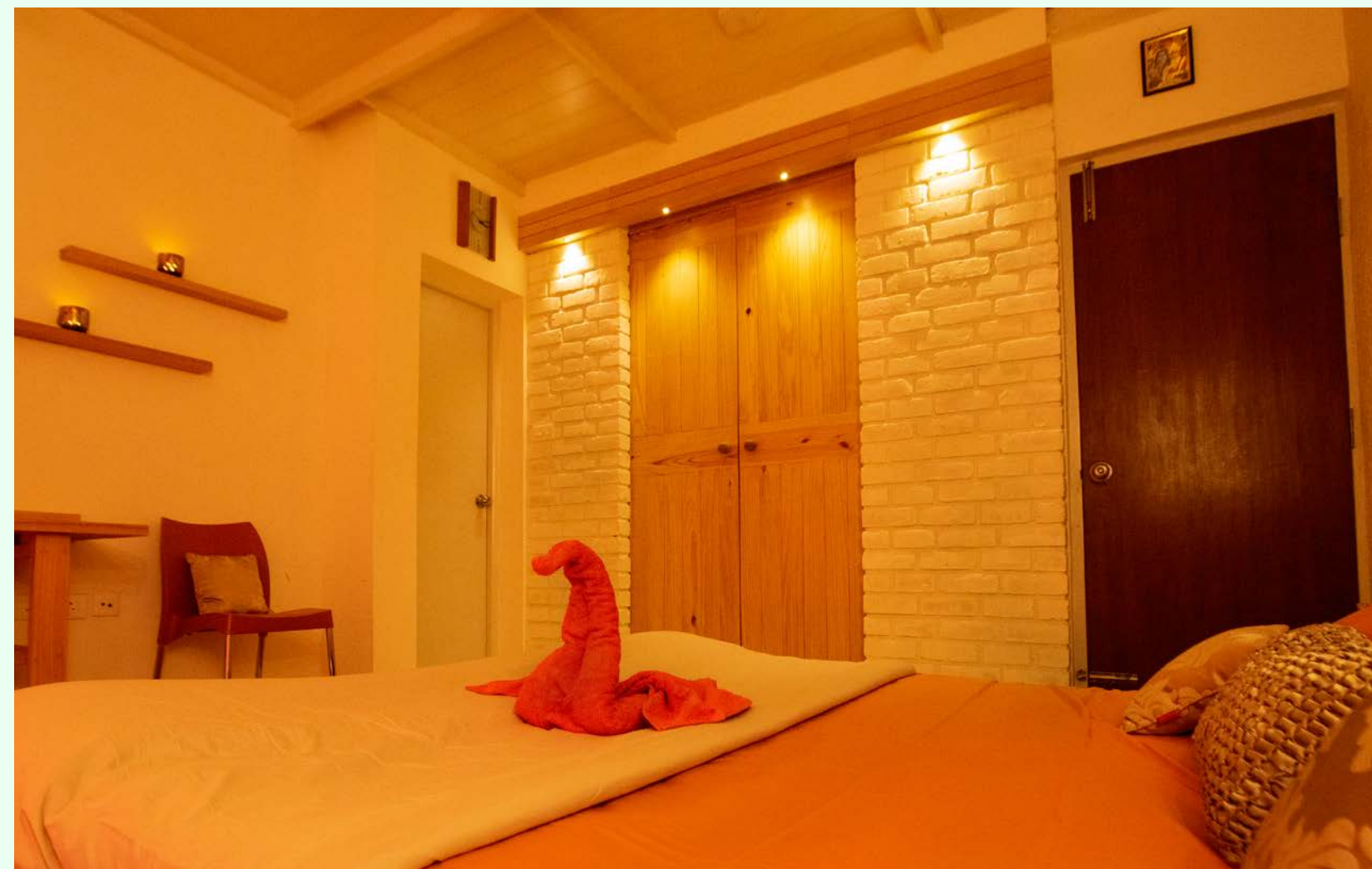


The first look of the place itself filled us with unbridled joy as the locales were just too pristine. Birds, butterflies, greenery and everything a nature lover yearns for! Coorg is almost synonymous with coffee and that's what we were greeted with. A steaming cup of coffee and a smiling face of our host Neeta were indeed a joy to behold. We checked into our room which was extremely tidy and artistically decorated. Highlight of course was the spellbinding view I got once I stepped out of the backdoor. Majestic hills with cloud cover and a forest canopy was a view to die for! It was evening already and hot snacks were served. Chirping of birds was music to the ears, as I just sat there idling and let myself destress slowly.

As night approached, we gathered around the campfire and shared our experiences with our fellow guests. Dinner was a mix of local traditional cuisine as well as the regular dishes



and was sumptuous. The best part I loved was viewing the Milky Way Galaxy while lying down on the lawn at night as the fireflies darted in and out of my vision.





Our morning alarm announcing the start of the day, unsurprisingly, was the calls of the Malabar Grey Hornbills. The owners have created an observatory[not a professional hide] where one can sit, observe and photograph birds. We were there promptly in the early morning and patiently waited for dawn to usher in good light.

There was a decent amount of bird activity there including Malabar Grey Hornbills, White-cheeked Barbets, Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Rufous Treepies, Orange Minivets, Yellow-throated Bulbuls, etc. We spent close to three hours there and got some lovely images. Malabar Grey Hornbills practically own the whole area. They swoosh in and out of the trees and are incredibly agile. They nest in the premises and this place is perfect for anybody wanting to document its life cycle.



Malabar Grey Hornbill
© Kiran Poonacha



Yellow-browed Bulbul
© Kiran Poonacha



Rufous Treepie
© Neeta Kiran

Another observatory has been created in the form of a waterhole where the images can be clicked at eye level. We encountered Black-headed Munia, Malabar Whistling Thrush, Blue-throated Blue Flycatcher, Puff-throated Babbler, Spotted Dove, Emerald Dove, Indian White-eye (formerly Oriental White-eye), etc. There are a lot of herping opportunities around too and you can see species like Malabar Pit Viper, Green Vine Snake, Coral Snake, etc.



Orange Miniver
© Kiran Poonacha

I spent the rest of the day, after a lavish breakfast, just lazing out. If you want to be closer to nature, you can walk around through the coffee estates or go for a small trek. You can also visit streams close by that are inhabited with the endangered Wayanad Mahseers. You can even pack a lunch and have a picnic.

A few of the **visitors** to
Hornbills Nest

Emerald Dove
© Kiran Poonacha



Spotted Dove
© Neeta Kiran



Lesser Flameback
© Neeta Kiran



Malabar Whistling Thrush
© Neeta Kiran



Coral Snake
© Neeta Kiran



I spent three days and two nights here and left the place in an extremely refreshed mindset. I carry in my heart the sweet memories I had here, forever. The incredible hospitality shown by Neeta and Sarah was indeed very endearing. Food was excellent throughout and was cooked to perfection. I being an ardent foodie, was ecstatic as I could taste a lot of local delicacies. Beautifully located and wonderfully looked after, this homestay gives you all you have ever craved for in a holiday.



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**Megh Roy
Choudhury**

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As nature lovers, we have always ecstatically shared stories of the valley and the surrounding hills of the Western Ghats around Hornbills Nest to all our friends and nature lovers. Now we aspire to share our place for stay so that other people can experience the same heavenly pleasure of this magical place.

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Neeta Kiran, Kiran Poonacha & Sarah



Black-throated Munia
© Megh Roy Choudhury

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