



IndiaWilds Newsletter

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Green Agenda in Politics :

The election campaign by various political parties serves as a big reality check about the importance of environmental issues to political parties and the masses in general.

The general perception is that environmental issues never appeal to people as much as issues like jobs, farming, corruption, industrialisation etc.

A large corporate was accused of getting vast swathes of land at rupees one per square meter due to favour from Gujarat Government. The owner of the corporate in question claims that the land given to it was barren land and they in turn developed it. However, no one has come out to refute the claim that it was not barren land. Perhaps it is too much to expect our traditional media to do some ground work to expose this barren land.

The corporate in question, Adani group, has been accused of blatantly destroying the mangrove ecosystem to set up its Mundra SEZ.



Mangroves destroyed at Mundra SEZ

The MoEF (Ministry of Environment and Forests) was forced to take notice and they sent a Deputy Director to do a field visit. The report of the Deputy Director of MoEF can be assessed from the MoEF site: <http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/site-visit-Mundra-OPG.pdf>



The MoEF site visit revealed that Mundra SEZ of Adani group had blatantly dumped debris and had engaged in large scale reclamation of the mangroves behind the West and North port site. “A dredging disposal pipeline has been laid in the inter tidal area carrying the dredged material to the landward side of the port to reclaim the land area on the West and North port side. This pipeline has been obstructing the tidal flow due to which the mangroves stretch on the western and northern port side have been affected and at several places they have dried up”.



Disposal pipeline laid in the inter tidal area at Mundra SEZ

The report further mentions that the Mundra SEZ of Adani Group has illegally constructed “Samundra Township” by reclaiming land from the creeks. They have also constructed a hospital within 20 metres of the creek.



Samundra Township at Mundra SEZ

Unfortunately, though this report is in public domain, our traditional media didn't think it fit to report these blatant destruction of the mangrove ecosystem and land grabbing. Perhaps mangroves is not a high profile subject for them. This ecological vandalism is perhaps acceptable in the name of development for our politicians and mainstream media.

Who is to be blamed?

The masses don't understand the impact of mangrove destruction. Not many would have ever seen or heard about mangroves. Such is the importance of environment in our education system.

The mangrove ecosystem is a life saver for many. A study conducted after the 1999 Super Cyclone in Odisha (Das, Sauda-mini et al. 2009) found that villages with wider mangroves between them and the coast experienced significantly fewer deaths than ones with narrower or no mangroves. For further details: <http://www.indiawilds.com/diary/indiawilds-newsletter-vol-5-issue-x/>



Mangroves

Our masses also need to be educated that our mangrove ecosystem helps in stopping the erosion of our coastline. They absorb excess nutrients like phosphates and nitrates and improve the water quality. The mangrove ecosystem helps in absorbing sediments and is good for fishes. That is why destruction of this mangroves will result in directly pushing the local fisherfolk into poverty. So it comes as no surprise that it is the local fishermen association by the name “Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan (MASS)” who protested against the Adani Group and brought these blatant destruction of the mangrove ecosystem to the notice of the outside world.

There are people who try to justify such environmental vandalism as they feel it is resulting in more jobs. In the name of development, we have been sacrificing large number of people. When we construct dams, we don't consider the interests of people in the downstream and leave them to doom. People displaced due to industrial activity are often pushed down to below poverty level as their home and source of income is snatched away from them. We pride ourselves as a democracy. If the Government is not just and fair in its actions and cannot protect all sections of people, then social unrest can't be far behind.

Social unrest often follows such large scale uprooting of people. No society and country can progress by trampling on the dreams and aspirations of some of its members.

In an era where climate change is hitting us hard through cyclones, heat waves, drought etc, such environmental vandalism ought to be exposed. We have to raise the level of awareness about the need to preserve our environment and wildlife. India today has about 800 million voters. However, one need not get discouraged by the 800 million number as the winning party with two thirds of the seats was achieved by a total of 17 crores or 170million votes which is about 31% of the total number of votes polled. Since the next elections is only five years away, to bring about a significant shift in perceptions about environment and wildlife one needs to only target about 90 thousand people a day. This can easily be achieved if all our conservationists, naturalists, wildlife enthusiasts and environmental activists can start spreading the message to 50 people each. Even if the total number of converts is just a quarter of it, there would be a good number of environmentally conscious members of parliaments who can make their voices heard in the parliament to protect the interests of environment and wildlife which in turn helps in saving us by providing good quality of water, air as well as saving us from the vagaries of climate change.

I hope our members can rise above political affiliations and fight for the larger goal of saving our environment and in turn making our country and planet a better place to live in than it is today.

Change of guards and fate of MoEF

The 2014 parliamentary elections brought a change in guard in the centre as the Congress led UPA Government gave way to the BJP led Government. Due to the unprecedented hype created about development during the run up to the elections, one expects a huge change in the way of overall Governance and hence a change in the way the environment and forests ministry functions.

The previous ministers for MoEF in the UPA regime had passed many controversial projects allowing opening up of biodiversity rich and environmentally fragile areas for mining, roads building and other infrastructure projects. Even then Jairam Ramesh who had controversially passed projects to handover dense forests and critical elephant corridors like the Chirya mines in Saranda forests to SAIL for mining, was kicked up and made a Cabinet minister and divested of the MoEF portfolio when he was perceived as a hindrance to even minor projects. There was an effort to curtail his successor Jayanthi Natarajan's powers by referring project clearances to a group of ministers to which she had vehemently protested. Later, during the runup to the elections, the current PM Mr Narendra Modi had targeted the previous MoEF minister Jayanthi Natarajan and had accused her of blocking projects forcing the congress party to suddenly sack her. This also resulted in strengthening the perception that project proposals were unnecessarily delayed without a clear approval or rejection making the project proponents vocal.

The UPA Government had continued to support the Sethusamudram project despite its huge environmental impact as well as questionable direct cost savings. The UPA regime had also steadfastly supported nuclear powerplants despite popular opposition to those. The activists were also branded as traitors fomenting trouble with the support of foreign powers. Along with clearances to Lavassa project, Navi Mumbai airport, trashing of Madhav Gadgil report on Western Ghats and many others, the UPA regime could never be the bench mark for environment protection. So a change of guard especially in a scenario where the previous regime was accused of non-clearance of projects - though in reality many environmentally fragile areas were opened up – brings trepidation to the hearts of many environment and wildlife supporters.

Interestingly Smt. Maneka Gandhi who has had experience of handling the MoEF as a minister in the VP Singh Government as well as Vajpayee Government, had voiced her opposition to the river linking project a couple of days before the swearing in of ministers. She said that she had opposed the river linking projects even in Vajpayee Government. However, despite her prior experience with the environment and forests ministry, she was not given charge of environment and forests and was

made the Cabinet minister in charge of Women and Child Development. Mr. Prakash Javadekar as a Minister of State has been given independent charge of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, along with independent charge of Information and Broadcasting. He also has charge of Parliamentary affairs under the overall jurisdiction of Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu. Whether the current minister for environment, forests and climate change can cope up with the additional work load of I&B and parliamentary affairs ministries and still do justice to the environment and forests ministry is yet to be seen.

Since the BJP campaign was actively supported by industries, it is expected that large infrastructure projects having a deleterious environmental footprint will also get cleared. However, except for a few unscrupulous industrialists, the rest would expect a transparent regime where clearances or rejections of large projects are expected in a time bound manner. This ensures that the project proponents either modify or abandon their business plans without incurring costly project cost over runs.

The common man would also expect that the BJP would bring in good governance as promised during the elections and that would include clean air to breathe in without falling prey to health hazards due to polluted air, clean and pure water, forests to be protected so that there is adequate rainfall as well as carbon sequestration by these forests and steps to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change.

With an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections, the BJP government can hopefully write a nice chapter in the environmental history of this country.

Temple of the Stars - An Urban Bird watching Hotspot - By Biswajit De

The '**Navagraha Temple**', a landmark of the present-day Guwahati, Assam, India is situated on the western crest of the '**Chitrachal hill**'. The Navagraha temple, its origin being shrouded in mystery, is a popular destination of thousands of pilgrims, who visit it in the hope of warding off 'evil planetary influence' every year. The Navagraha temple is an important astrological and astronomical center in the state.



The Navagraha Temple

In fact, scholars and the historians feel that it is from this temple that the ancient name of the state of Assam i.e. '**Pragjyotishapura**' originated. The word '**Prag**' means eastern region, while '**jyotisha**' means star astrology. Hence, the region is also called the '**Eastern City of Astrology**'. Today, overlooking the rapid urbanisation and the ever-growing city of Guwahati the Nabagraha Temple cradles a significant number of primate species and the Chitrachal hill has the potential to emerge as a prominent bird watching hotspot. Bird enthusiasts visiting Assam may add the Chitrachal hill to their itinerary along with the major Wild Life Sanctuaries for birdwatching as the Chitrachal hill has the potential of giving them a quick and better experience, if explored.



Welcome board to the temple

'Ahom king' was a Bird-lover?

Except for brief references in the '**Kalika Purana**' and the '**Markandeya Purana**', history is silent about the Navagraha temple. But according to folk tradition and legends, the original temple was built around 4 - 6th century A.D. The area was a major centre of astrology and was visited throughout the ages by many of its prominent exponents, including the great '**Varahamihira**', who was an Indian astronomer, mathematician, and astrologer par excellence.

Recent research by Dept. of History, Guwahati University and other scholars* has revealed that the present temple was rebuilt after it was devastated in the earthquake of 1897 A.D. The earlier temple was built by the dictates of the '**Ahom King, Rajeshwar Singha**' at around 1752 A.D. But according to popular belief, the temple is at very old with the number "1000 years" used as a means to convey its antiquity. The Shiva lingams inside the sanctum sanctorum, representing the individual planets date back to 4 - 10th century A.D. Research has further revealed that king Rajeshwar Singha was a '**bird lover**'*** himself and the main reason why he built the temple atop the Chitrachal hill was the variety of bird species that existed during that time. A watch tower overlooking the hill and the river Brahmaputra was also built during that time. The tower is no more and has been replaced by a recent construction, built by the Nabagraha Temple Committee in the year 1999.

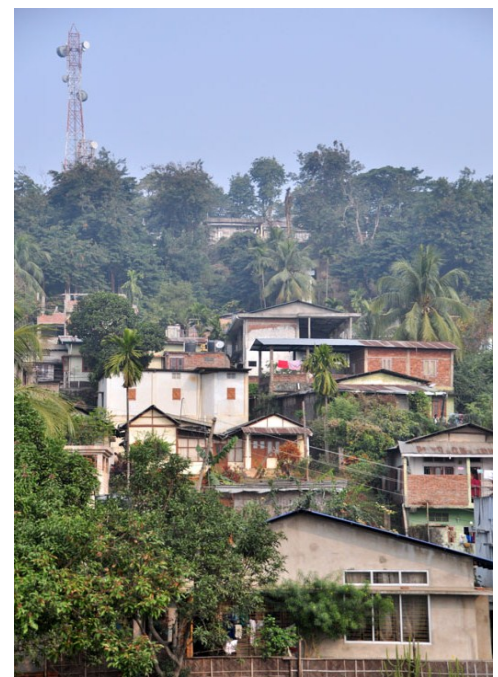
The 'Nabagraha temple' is an achievement of advanced engineering techniques used in olden days. As the name suggests, *Navagraha Temple (or the temple of the nine celestial bodies)*, is a place of worship devoted to the nine celestial bodies of the solar system, namely *Surya (the sun)*, *Chandra (the moon)*, *Buddha (mercury)*, *Mangala (mars)*, *Brihaspati (Jupiter)*, *Shukra (Venus)*, *Shani (Saturn)*, *Rahu (Dragon's head)* and finally *Ketu (Dragon's tail)*. The sanctum sanctorum of the temple consists on nine 'Shiva Lingas' covered with cloths of different colors associated with the nine planetary gods. All Nava-grahas are arranged in a circle with the respective idols (*Dhyana rupas of Nava grahas*) in front. The roof of the temple is dome like and any mantra chanted in the sanctum resonates and gives a feel as if it came from each corner of the temple. What is more interesting is a tank, that was also excavated at some distance, to provide regular and easy water for the devotees who came to pay homage to the Gods. This tank, known as the '**Silpukhuri**' (Pronounced as 'Hil-pukhuri' in Assamese language, 'Sh' being pronounced as 'H'), continues to supply water to the needy till date and is always full of water, even today. The literary Assamese meaning of Silpukhuri is a tank (*pukhuri*) made of stones (*sil*). It is said by some historians that the banks of the pond were laid with stone blocks earlier. It is also known as *Nakoniya Pukhuri* and was said to have been actually excavated in AD 1753 by king Rajeshwar Singha, to serve as a large 'bird-bath' for the variety of birds that were found during that time.

Scope of Tourism that is less explored & threats faced by the Chitrachal Hill.

Visitors to the city of Guwahati often visit the Chitrachal hill and the Nabagraha temple due to its popularity and mention in the places of interests within the city. But what the visitors do not know about is the vast variety of Avifauna that exists on this hill, much of which is under threat in the present times. Many species have vanished from the Chitrachal hills over the past years, and are continuing to do so even today; habitat loss being the main culprit.

What happened "then"?

The demand for tea boxes gave rise to the first sawmills in the then Assam Province. In 1917, attempts were made to constitute the fuel reserves and village forests of the Chitrachal hill, the latter under the management of the village authorities. The management efforts proved unsuccessful. The stoppage of import of railway sleepers during the First World War & the Second World War, led to the utilisation of local species other than 'sal' as sleepers. Though



Settlements on Chitrachal Hill

the forests atop the Chitrachal hill, rich in Sal forests, were worked under the selection-cum-improvement system, little however, was done for the improvement. Rapid felling of trees had rendered the hill devoid of its forests during that time. As the demands for the forest produce in the adjoining areas of the hill increased, over exploitation took place. Clearance of forests for shifting cultivation as settlements grew kept pace during that period, especially in the hills. As settlements grew over the years, more people came to the Chitrachal hill, and with them came the Livestock. As livestock increased in number further degradation of the forests atop the hill took place. If one delves deep the amount of damage caused by the livestock is phenomenal. Over grazing had prevented the growth of new saplings of some of the major trees that were found on the hill.

What is happening “now”?

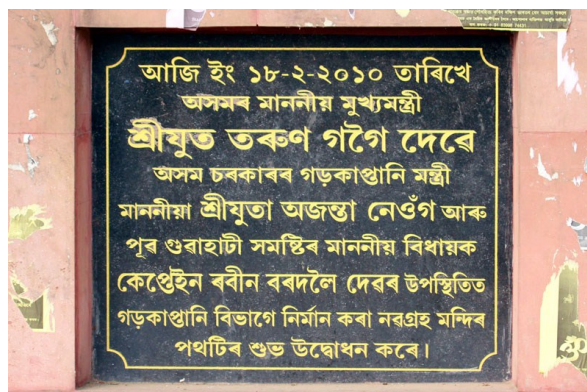
Rapid urbanisation, deforestation mainly for construction of houses, degradation of whatever little remains of the forest cover atop the hill are the present day threats. The demand for land atop the hills is ever increasing in the city of Guwahati. Clearing of the lands and cutting of trees are responsible for the deterioration of soil and vegetation leading to loss of canopy cover essential for the survival of Birds. Less trees result in the dislodging of soil particles, particularly when dry, and also during the heavy rains, paving ways to accelerated erosion.

A Tree-plantation programme was initiated by the honorable Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi on 4th June, 2000 in an attempt to bring back the vegetation atop the Chitrachal Hill. The programme succeeded in plantation of new vegetation while lacked the agenda of protecting the existing trees.



Plantation inauguration
by CM

A link road to Nabagraha temple was constructed and was inaugurated by the C.M. on 18th of February, 2010. Till then the only way to access the Chitrachal hill was ‘on foot’. Many roads have been made since 2010 atop the hill owing to the increase in settlements and demand for construction lands that give a ‘better’ view of the Brahmaputra River. The remaining varieties of Avifauna found today are struggling for their existence, due to the disturbance by the movement of vehicles to the Nabagraha temple.

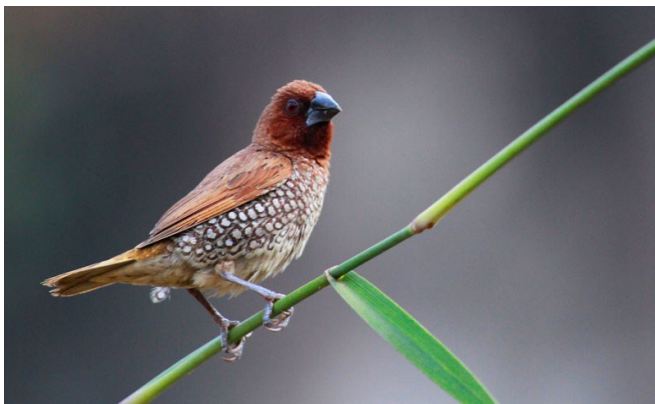
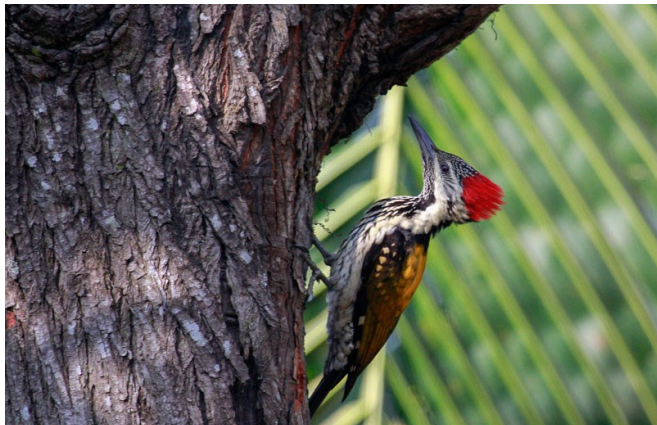


An Urban Bird watching Hotspot

In spite of the above constraints, an early morning Bird-Walk would still result in good sightings of the common urban Birds of Guwahati. An enthusiast can also be greeted by the sudden flutter of a Golden-fronted Leafbird or bedazzled with the bright feathers of the Black Hooded Oreole.

The winter survey of year 2013, conducted by Wild Roots, Guwahati resulted in the documentation of more than 50 species on the Chitrachal hill.

Some of the Birds that were spotted during the survey are – *Grey winged Blackbird, White Wagtail, Citrine Wagtail, Red Throated Flycatcher, Common Sandpiper, Black-eared Kite, Indian Pond Heron, Black-crested Bulbul, Red-vented Bulbul, White-caped Water Redstart, Black Drongo, Black-naped Blue Flycatcher, Greater Racket tailed Drongo, Black Hooded Oreole, Common Kestrel, Grey-backed Shrike, Jungle babbler, Purple sunbird, Purple-rumped sunbird, Paddyfield Pipit, Asian Koel, Great Tit, Lineated Barbet, Blue-throated Barbet, Lesser Goldenback Woodpecker, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker, Grey headed Canary Flycatcher, Oriental Magpie robin, Grey headed Myna, Oriental White-eye, Golden fronted leafbird, Yellow-browed Warbler, Scaly-breasted Munia & more.*



Various birds and mammals spotted on the Chitrachal Hill

It is imperative that urgent efforts are made to protect this birding hotspot which can help in inculcating the love for the wild in the young people of Guwahati. A holistic plan to conserve and rewild this place would go a long way in cementing this place as a birding spot in the itinerary of enthusiasts as well as ensuring a green area in the city.

*Kamrupar Buranji: written by **Dr.Surya Kumar Bhuyan, 1930**

** History of Nabagraha: Munin Kakati

Conservation News

Monal Crest Hunting: Contributed by Abhishek Jamalabad

Hunting of the Himalayan Monal has been banned in the state of Himachal Pradesh since 1982, prior to which it faced considerable pressure.

However illegal hunts still do happen, the "prize" being the crest of the male- seen here adorning the traditional cap of a local.

Strict enforcement of the law will help, however that alone is not going to save a species. Many parts where traditional hunting by tribals still takes place also happen to be regions where adequate monitoring is next to impossible for forest staff and volunteers alone (such as the Himalayas, North-east etc). The most effective way to solve the problem is to raise awareness among the people directly involved in the hunting and utilisation of the species. One such success story that I have seen first hand is the reformation of the Nyishi tribe of western Arunachal Pradesh that until recently used to hunt hornbills for ornamental use.



A man wearing a traditional cap with the crest of the Monal

Conservation News

New night frog species discovered in Western Ghats:

A new frog species where the male frog plasters eggs with mud to protect them from drying out and camouflage them from predators has been described from the Western Ghats of southern India. This is the first time such behaviour has been recorded from frogs, worldwide.

A team of scientists from Indian Institute of Science and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment have discovered a new species of frog that they have called *Nyctibatrachus kumbara*, or the Kumbara night frog. The frog is a “night frog”, belonging to the genus *Nyctibatrachus* — these are some of the most ancient frogs found in India. There are about 27 species already described, all of them endemic to the Western Ghats.

“The male frog shows such finesse when it applies mud to the eggs, we decided to call it ‘kumbara’, which means potter in Kannada,” said first author K V Gururaja.

The discovery happened over repeated expeditions to the Kathalekan area near the Jog falls in the Uttar Kanada region of Karnataka, where swamps with a special kind of vegetation — the *Myristica* swamps — are found. One of the *Myristica* species gives us the nutmeg spice. In this area, perennial streams are criss crossed by overhanging roots and small rocks, forming small habitats where frogs thrive.



During courtship, males call out to females making a distinctive “tok” sound or a “tok-tok” sound. When the female appears, the male and female stand on their hind legs and use their hands to feel the surrounding surfaces, like overhanging twigs. After mating, the female does an about turn and stands on her hands while laying her eggs.

The male then stands on his hands, gathers mud from the stream and dabs it on the eggs, packing them in place. This is the first time such a behaviour has been recorded in frogs worldwide.

“Mud covering behavior highlights the need of such intricate habitat conditions where species can survive and establish populations,” said DR Gururaja. Any changes to these habitats eventually result in local extinction of species. Such behav-

journal studies are also important to understand how behaviour in other animals evolved over time.”

Using morphological data, data from the DNA and from the call patterns of the frog, the researchers were able to identify it as a new species.

Ms. Priti, a PhD student and DR Ravikanth, scientist from Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, have carried out work using DNA to identify Kumbara night frog as a new species.

Dr. Ravikanth says “What was more surprising was the fact that a number of researchers had worked in these Myristica swamps and done several surveys (including us a number of times!) but all of us had missed this particular species. After we carried out the DNA analysis, we were really quite excited when we discovered, that *Nyctibatrachus kumbara* was genetically quite distinct from the other related *Nyctibatrachus* species. Though this species isn’t imminently at risk, there is a reason to be concerned as a lot of these swamps are under severe threat and hopefully this discovery would draw attention for conserving these unique habitats in the Western Ghats.

This discovery once again highlights the fact that the Western Ghats is not yet completely explored and a lot of its basic secrets are yet to be revealed”.

Yunnan Nuthatch, first record for India

29 Mar 2014

A flock seen and a bird photographed on 13 March 2014 at Helmet Top, Walong village, Arunachal Pradesh. Hitherto regarded as endemic to SW China.



Yunnan Nuthatch

Image Courtesy - Jainy Kuriakose

Other common names: Black-masked Nuthatch

Taxonomy: *Sitta yunnanensis* Ogilvie-Grant, 1900, near Wei Yuan, south Yunnan, China

Usually considered a member of a species group that contains also *S. whiteheadi*, *S. ledanti*, *S. krueperi*, *S. villosa* and *S. canadensis*, and all sometimes thought to form a superspecies; differs, however, from others of group in that crown of male is concolorous with upperparts. Alternatively, sometimes thought to represent a link between that group and the “*S. euro-paeasuperspecies*” (containing also *S. nagaensis*, *S. cashmirensis*, *S. castanea*, *S. cinnamoventris* and *S. neglecta*), but as yet no DNA evidence to lend support to either argument. Monotypic.

Distribution:

S China, from extreme SE Xizang (Zayu and Zhuwagen) E to S Sichuan (S from Yajiang) and S to W & C Yunnan and W Guizhou

Over 8000 turtle hatchlings released

May 23, 2014, 06.05 am IST

Chennai: In a rare and massive exercise, the Chennai wildlife team, which collected close to 10,000 Olive Ridley turtle eggs along the Marina coast, has successfully released 8,834 hatchlings in a phased manner. On the eve of World Turtle Day the foresters reviewed the hatching rate and the mortality rate of the young ones that were released into the sea between Neelangarai and Marina beach.

“After 25 years, more than 10,000 turtle eggs have been collected by the Chennai wildlife staff along the Marina coastline and close to 90 per cent of eggs have hatched and we are hopeful that these endangered species will visit the Chennai coast as adults,” said Velachery ranger S David Raj.

“The forest department had envisaged a special conservation programme since last year to protect the Olive Ridleys that nest in Chennai. The city is one of the largest nesting grounds for the marine turtles, after the Odisha coast, and we have also intensified programmes for fishermen, advising them to use turtle excluder nets”, said Geethanjali, wildlife warden, Chennai.

“In Chennai, to mark World Turtle Day, the city-based Sea Turtle Protection Force will release a rescued female Ridley turtle, Pallavi. The turtle had injured her left front flipper when it got entangled in a fishing net,” said marine conservationist Supraja Dhairni of the Tree Foundation.

Meanwhile, similar drives were conducted in other coastal districts, including Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam districts. “The turtle plays a key role in the marine environment and groups were formed in the coastal villages of Kanyakumari to collect eggs. The team spotted nests and about 950 eggs were collected and hatchlings released near the Rajakamangalam coastal village,” said S. S. Davidson, a naturalist and conservationist.

In Nagapattinam over 4,400 Olive Ridley turtles, have been let out into the sea over the past three months from a government run hatchery at Kodiakarai in the district, forest ranger Gopinathan said. Kodiakarai and Vedaranyam are areas that attract a large number of Ridleys each year during the December-March nesting season.

Equipment Discussions -

MeerCat miniature HD broadcast camera by Camera Corps

Camera Corps has announced a new speciality camera titled "The MeerCat" which fulfills the need for a very high quality miniature HD broadcast camera which can be mounted practically anywhere without being visible to other cameras or to an audience. Camera Corps belongs to the renowned Vitec Group which owns companies like OConnor, Vinten, Sachtler, Manfrotto etc...

Small size:

The MeerCat camera is 30mm x 30mm and is 93mm tall. Lens protrudes only 25mm. It comes with metal housing and NF mount lenses are available.



This camera has been designed to meet the demand from sports, reality tv and stage producers.

The imager is a high-quality third-inch MOS sensor with 1944 x 1092 effective pixels. This can be switched to deliver 1080p, 1080i or 720p video at 50, 59.94 or 60 hertz frame rate. Video is output as HD-SDI which can be converted to an optical feed using a Camera Corps optical fiber interface. Minimum illumination is 1.2 lux at f/1.4. Chroma, master black, saturation, gain, shutter, detail, white balance, gamma, speed and exposure, video format and noise reduction can all be adjusted from the remote control panel.

"The MeerCat has been trialed with outstanding success during a series of major international sports events prior to its official launch," says Camera Corps' Business Development Director, Shaun Glanville. "It is based on a new imager which delivers video with very wide dynamic range, low noise and excellent color rendition."

The MeerCat head can be attached to a quarter-inch mount for easy integration into narrow-profile locations such as a sports markers, rugby try-line posts or reality-show props, or can be discreetly located in a studio set. It can also be used as a wearable camera with a full high-definition live wireless link. Full control facilities including manual iris setting with

adjustable electronic exposure can be performed remotely using the existing range of Camera Corps joysticks and remote panels.

The MeerCat comes complete with a standard Camera Corps power supply and interface which can be positioned up to 30 metres from the camera head. Control signals can be delivered over a standard audio line, allowing the interface to be located a practically unlimited distance from the operator. Up to six MeerCat cameras can be operated from a single Camera Corps remote control panel.

Natural History -

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK: M.Krishnan: 'The King Crow'

The Sunday Statesman: 11-May-2014 (shared by Shri. Saktipada Panigrahi)

" THERE were some 30 in the grazing herd, four bull calves and two buffaloes. And once again I noticed that the KING CROWS rode the coloured beasts, not the white ones. For a moment I thought that I had confirmed a trend in the more obscure habits of these bold black birds. Then I realised how easily false conclusions can be reached in the field. It was in the same tract that, earlier in the year, I had twice observed the liking of king crows for coloured coats on their mobile perches. The cattle of this flat scrub land are stunted and black or brown, the brown varying from fawn to a rich deep chestnut, very few of them are white and these, presumably "imported" milch cows, are much larger; the chances of finding king crows on the backs of coloured cows are about five times as good as on white ones, considerably better in view of the fact that the birds like to ride low.



© Mrudul Godbole

King Crow

This latter preference is real. King Crows perch on small cows, yearling calves, buffaloes and even goats rather than on tall cattle, where, choice offers. It is mainly for the sake of the insects flushed from cover by the lumbering hooves that they go riding grazing cattle, and obviously the closer they are to the grass the surer their hunting.

It is remarkable with what certainty and speed they can take prey in the air. I have repeatedly seen a king crow take a vaulting grasshopper in mid-leap, swooping down on the quarry, snatching it up and returning to the hump of its mount in one smooth movement. But if you want to know with what acrobatic speed and ease the bird can twist and turn in the air, you should watch it chasing some fast-flying insect. The deeply forked tail and broadly triangular wings spread out into translucent brown fans as the bird brakes in the air, half-shut and black again as it dives headlong almost to the earth or shoots up obliquely on the impetus of the dive. You can actually hear the zip and rustle of the tail and pinions being flicked open and shut if you are near enough, but the bird seldom flutters its wings - the entire dizzy and complicated manoeuvre is sus-

tained by initial momentum, till the prey is plucked from the air and the king crow flies off, whirring and swinging by turns, to its perch.

Undoubtedly, the fishtail helps in this aerial acrobatics, other birds notable for their deftness of wing also depends heavily on their forked tails, kites and swallows for example. It is its speed and dexterity in twisting around in full flight that enables the king crow to attack much larger birds like hawks, kites and crows that venture too close to its nest.

The chorus of king crows heralding the dawn can be heard in the jungles as well as in rural areas where they roost close to the human settlement. Even, I, who like these birds so much, cannot say that they have musical voices (though some of their cousins do), but the chill, grey clearness preceding daybreak, their calls have an exuberant, confident cheeriness, at least to human ear. A famous set of stanzas by Vaishnavite poetess Aandaal, addressed to a girl still asleep after promising to wake the others early (so that they could be in time for the early morning worship), refers to the pre-dawn chorus of king crows.

Do you not hear the high-pitched
conversation of Harsh-voiced king crows!

Yes, there is a certain harshness in the king crow's calls, in spite of the carrying shrillness, but it is pointless analysing sounds that belong so very much to the open air in cloistered print, incongruous as it may read, it is still true that it is this very vigour and rasping vivacity in the morning voices of these birds that makes the experience of being awakened by them so pleasant.

Before roosting, the birds fly about actively and call to one another again, and the sharp double whistle can often be heard then. King crows are said to "mimic" the Shikra in this call; it is true that the Shrikes and Drongoes have imitative talent and that some of them are wonderful mimics; it is also true that this double whistle is exactly like the Shikra's call, except for the lack of tonal quality that I can indicate only by the word "querulous". But all the same I beg to differ from the experts who consider this call imitative. I think it is one of king crow's authentic calls, and that its similarity to Shikra's is purely a coincidence. Otherwise, I cannot understand why this is so frequently indulged in by king crows all over the country, just before roosting.

Incidentally, the open beaks of the king crows in the pictures donot show them calling. The afternoon sun was parchingly hot overhead when I took the photographs accompanying this article, and the birds were panting. Many birds pant in such heat and no doubt gain considerable relief thereby."

-M.Krishnan

This was first published on 30 September 1956 in The Sunday Statesman

Note: The extant article is different from the one titled 'India's King Crows' contained in the book 'Of BIRDS and BIRD-SONG' - by M.Krishnan

Natural History -

Airforce v/s Army

Contributed by Rajan Kanagasabai

The receding waters at Kabini expose a fair bit of islands across the river bed. These islands with their rich succulent grass strips are ideal breeding and nesting grounds for Terns, Pratincoles and other little birds like Wagtails. Cut off from mainland, these islands are out of reach of most predators and colonies of these birds roost on these strips, build nests, lay their eggs and raise their hatchlings.

However, there is one animal, which is not just an excellent long distance swimmer but a lover of fresh green grass. The massive elephants swim out to these islands to feast on the grass. While they are no direct threat to the birds, these huge herds inadvertently trample on hidden nests or eggs, often wiping out families of these little avians.



Brahminy Kite

However, the avians have learnt not to take this lying down. They gang up to drive out the invaders and we were privy to some awesome battles that played out last evening during the boat safari. A small herd of elephants, swimming out to one such island were feeding on the fresh grass, when a squadron of Terns, accompanied by Pratincoles began dive bombing on the elephants. Their attack was systematic. A tern would swoop down, nibbling at the ear or the head of the elephant, and fly away, another one would be seconds behind repeating the same sequence. The consistent bombardment was just too much for the elephants to handle and they beat a hasty retreat back to land.

Natural History -



Nesting Terns on the Uninhabited island

The Pratincoles nesting on the island



Approaching Jumbo herd and the beginning of the dive bombing.

Natural History -



The herd beginning to retreat from the ferocious attack of the flight squadron

The Air Force had beaten back the Army's battle tanks fair and square. We were lucky to be at the right place at the right time.

Natural History -

Cobra v/s Viper

Contributed by Jerin Dinesh

I was sitting near a rice field in my native. After few hrs I saw a snake pass near me, I thought it was a rat snake, it moved into the rice field. After 5 to 10 minutes, I heard some sounds and saw that its not a rat snake, but it was a giant Cobra coming out with a Viper in its mouth.



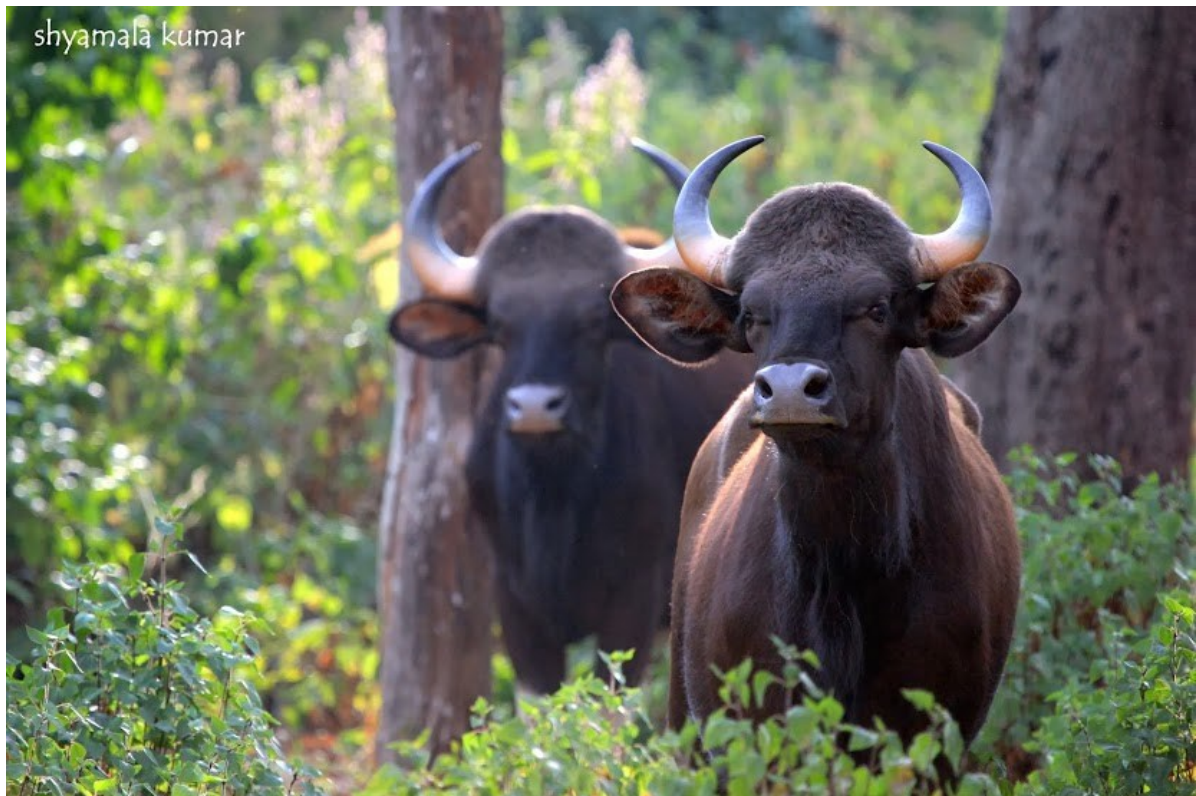
Cobra with Viper in a fight



The last tip of the tail of the viper in Cobra's mouth.

Wildlife Photography -

Gaur-I have back up! By Shyamala Kumar



Raining Elephants by Rajan Kanagasabai



Wildlife Photography -

A pair of male Indian wolves, scanning for the kill by Subhash Srivastava



Yellow throated Marten by Pralay Lahiri



Wildlife Photography -

Pelican by Jitendra Katre



Yellow-billed Blue Magpie by Abhishek Jamalabad



Wildlife Photography -

Brahminy Kite by Sucheth Lingachar



A colony of blue tail Bee-Eater By Vipin Sharma





I look forward to your inputs and support in preserving the last tracts of wilderness and wildlife left in our beautiful country. For other interesting articles and images check - <http://www.indiawilds.com/forums/>

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If you are already a member of IndiaWilds and have forgotten your user id and/or password you can mail to administrator@indiawilds.com

Regards,

Sabyasachi Patra

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