

# 20 YEARS AFTER VEERAPPAN: A FOREST TRIES TO HEAL

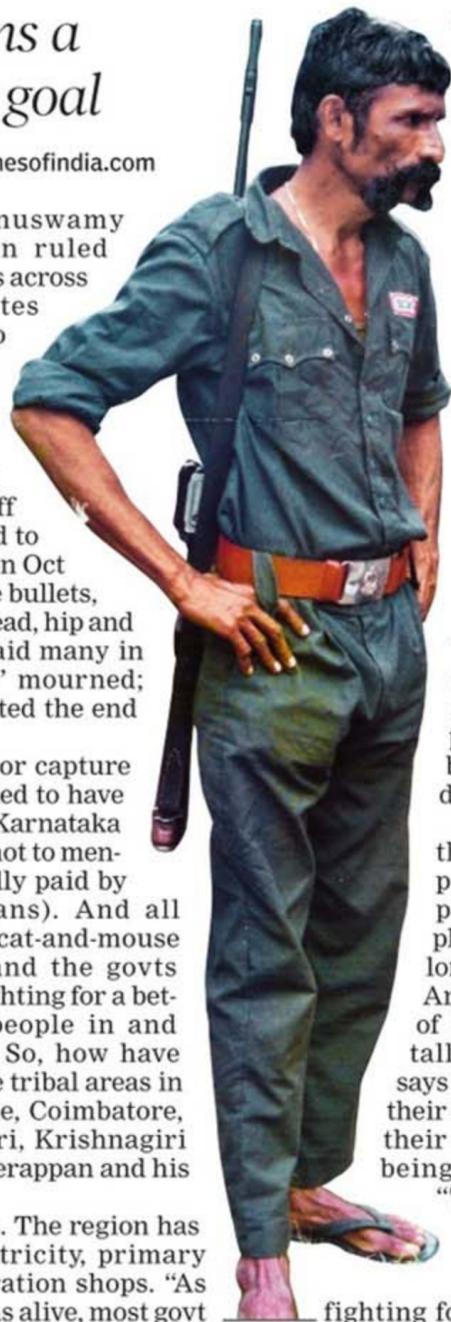
*Tribal areas in TN see new roads and reduced police brutality, yet residents struggle to reclaim land as developers take over. True rehabilitation too remains a distant goal*

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**K**oose Munuswamy Veerappan ruled the jungles across three states for close to three decades, killing more than a thousand elephants, felling tens of thousands of sandalwood trees and finishing off just anyone who tried to stop him. And then, on Oct 18, 2004, he took three bullets, one each on the forehead, hip and rib. Media reports said many in 'Veerappan villages' mourned; many others celebrated the end of the brigand.

The battle to kill or capture Veerappan is estimated to have cost Tamil Nadu and Karnataka more than ₹100 crore (not to mention ransoms allegedly paid by govts and politicians). And all through the deadly cat-and-mouse game, Veerappan and the govts claimed they were fighting for a better tomorrow for people in and around the forests. So, how have things changed in the tribal areas in the districts of Erode, Coimbatore, Nilgiris, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri and Salem, where Veerappan and his gang once ruled?

First the positives. The region has now got roads, electricity, primary health centres and ration shops. "As long as Veerappan was alive, most govt



officials didn't have the guts to enter these areas. Since his death, the state has been bringing tribals into mainstream, however small the efforts are," says P Sivasubramaniam, the first Tamil journalist who met Veerappan in the early 1990s.

The second positive is a reduction in police atrocities. S Balamurugan, advocate and a member of People's Union of Civil Liberties whose book 'Sholagar Dhoti' documents police brutality during the Veerappan hunt, says almost all the people arrested in the Veerappan case have either been acquitted or have died in prison.

A third positive is that the govt is giving pattas to at least some people who were displaced by the two-decade-long hunt for Veerappan. Arputharaj, coordinator of Karnataka State Martalli Tamil Association, says people who returned to their lands hoping to rebuild their lives find themselves being called encroachers.

"This is because when people left their villages, they didn't have pattas. We are now

fighting for pattas and in some



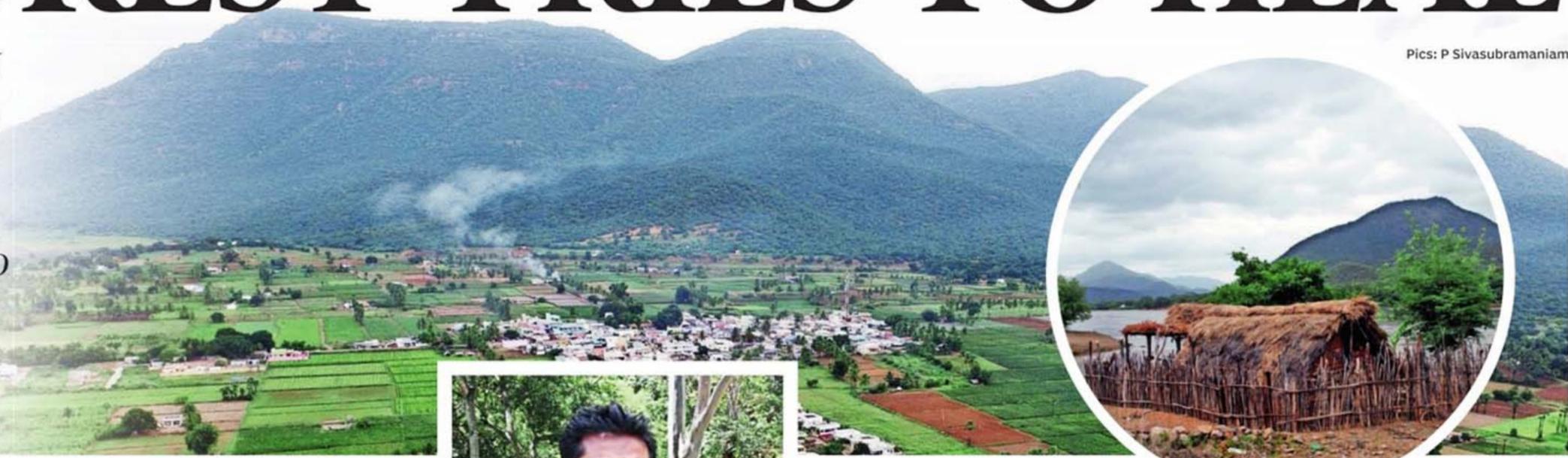
**“Youth are falling prey to social media narratives. If there is no education drive, another Veerappan can rise in these forests**

**Anburaj** | Former associate of Veerappan

places the govt has indeed given them," he says.

Now, for the not-so-good changes since Veerappan was shot dead. Realtors have replaced the tribals who moved out of their homes, after being caught between Veerappan and police. Resorts have mushroomed without any regulation in the forests, says Sivasubramaniam.

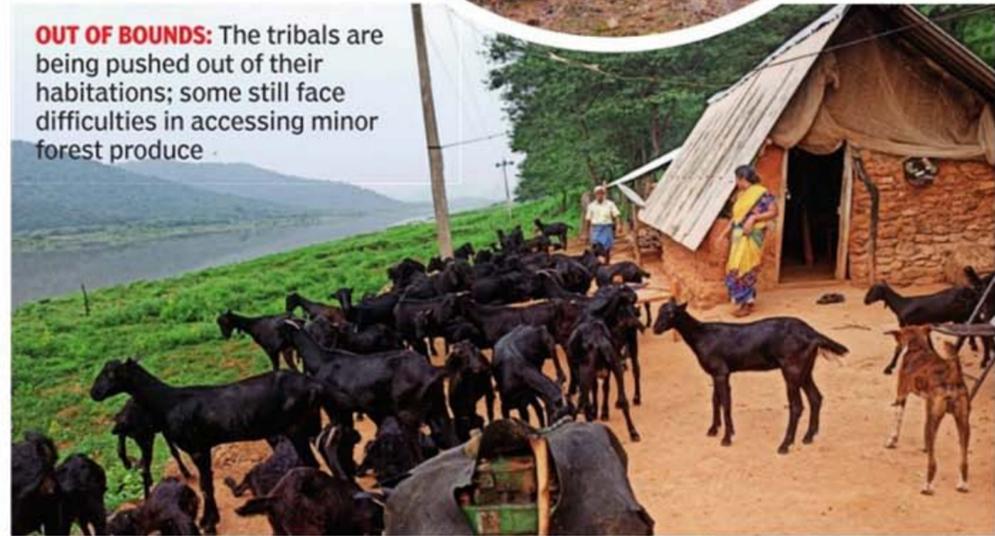
Tribal activist V P Gunasekaran too says the tribals are being pushed out of their traditional habitations. "People from the mainland after buying lands here cultivate cash crops such as plantain, tomato instead of millets. These cash crops consume a lot of water from the hills, which affects both people and wildlife," he says. Even 18 years after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), tribals are still facing difficulties in accessing minor forest produce like honey. "So, young and old have moved to places such as Val parai and



Pics: P Sivasubramaniam



**OUT OF BOUNDS:** The tribals are being pushed out of their habitations; some still face difficulties in accessing minor forest produce



Munnar to work as labourers on tea estates," says Gunasekaran. He wants a separate tribal development department instead of the portfolio being attached to the adi dravidar department. "Only then can tribals get at least priority group ration cards. Our counterparts in Karnataka are well taken care of. They even get eggs and ghee as rations," he adds.

Karnataka has also created a new wildlife sanctuary, Malai Mahadeshwara, and launched a jungle safari in Cauvery wildlife sanctuary to woo tourists and create jobs for tribals. No such measures have been taken in the Tamil Nadu part of the forests that Veerappan ruled over, says Sivasubramaniam. But tribals in Tamil Nadu are unhappy with the forest department for another reason.

"When Veerappan was alive, we used to take our cattle inside the forests for grazing. Then there were no restrictions. But now forest officials have started to fine us. Because of such restrictions we end up selling our cattle,"

says Govindan of Dharmapuri, who used to have more than 150 head of cattle. He now has just 20 to 30. However, Gunasekaran says that in places where forest officials have a humanitarian approach and are aware of the FRA, tribals get a better deal.

What about the younger generation? How does it see Veerappan? Anburaj, a former associate of Veerappan who spent 18 years in prison and now works with tribals in Anthiyur block of Erode district, says some caste and fringe political groups eulogise the forest brigand to reap political mileage. "Youth are falling prey to social media narratives. Unless they undergo proper education, another Veerappan can rise in these forests," says Anburaj. He wants a separate education system for tribals, alleging that the govt-run residential schools in tribal hamlets are ineffective as most teachers don't want to work there.

For now, it appears rehabilitation of the victims of the Veerappan saga will not be complete even in another 20 years.

# A slice of countryside

## Rural tourism is getting popular across the world

REWATI KARAN

**RURALTOURISM IS** a chance for travellers to immerse themselves in the beauty of the countryside and revel in the slowness of life, which was especially realised during the pandemic. The consumer trend in slow-living is ever-growing as visible on social media platforms like YouTube. According to media reports, the views of videos with 'slow living' in the title have seen an at least four times increase. People are hooked on videos related to slow living, and listening to atmospheric music, mindful and serene living.

With immense potential to boost the local economy, rural tourism is getting a big push from international organisations like the United Nations and countries worldwide. As part of the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) came up with the "Best Tourism Villages by UN Tourism" initiative, introduced in 2021, seeking to transform tourism into a catalyst for rural prosperity and well-being. For that, it aims to not just value and preserve rural villages, their landscapes, cultural diversity, and knowledge systems, but also advance innovative strategies aligned with the SDGs.



Bishnoi village in Rajasthan is home to endangered Great Indian Bustard

### UN push for village tourism

To make tourism a positive force for transformation, rural development and community wellbeing, UN Tourism launched the 'Best Tourism Villages by UN Tourism' initiative. Even as winners of this year are awaited, in 2023, among several countries of the world, Dhordo, a small village located in the Kutch district of Gujarat was declared the best tourism village by UNWTO. It was featured among 54 villages from different parts of the world, including four from China. Under this initiative, the UN recognises outstanding rural tourism destinations with accredited cultural and natural assets, a commitment to preserv-

ing community-based values, and to innovation and sustainability across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Second, under its upgrade programme, it supports villages on their journey to meet recognition criteria, helping in areas identified as gaps during evaluation and builds village network to create a space for exchanging experiences, good practices, learning, and opportunities among its members. This is open to contributions of experts, and public and private sector engagement in the promotion of tourism as a driver for rural development. According to the UN, currently, at least 190 villages are part of this network.

# As 7 cubs deal with tick infestation, Kuno officials wait & watch

ANAND MOHAN J  
BHOPAL, OCTOBER 19

WILDLIFE OFFICIALS at Kuno National Park are keeping a close watch on seven cheetah cubs who have a tick infestation, especially since they “have no prior experience of anaesthetising them in the open forest” and apprehend that the mothers will abandon the cubs following medical intervention, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

The cubs were born to female cheetahs Asha and Gamini.

Four cubs born to Jwala too had undergone treatment with



The cubs were born to female cheetahs Asha and Gamini. *File*

an anti-tick medication, which helped with the problem. However, applying the same treatment to Asha's three cubs, aged over eight months, and

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

## • 7 cubs deal with tick infestation

Gamini's four cubs, aged around six months, poses unique challenges. According to the park's management, the cubs' “young age, combined with their location in expansive soft-release bomas, makes the tranquilisation process risky and complicated”.

A letter by Kuno director Uttam Sharma, dated September 18, also details how the case of these seven cubs is different from that of nine-month-old cub Mukhi. “Mukhi was anaesthetised for treatment at around 9 months of age, but this procedure was carried out in a small space within the quarantine boma, where the cub had limited room for movement. Additionally, this cub had been under the care of Kuno management since the age of 2 months, making the anaesthesia process easier,” it states. These current cubs, on the other hand, are roaming freely in areas of 50-100 hectares.

The letter was addressed to the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and the Chief Wildlife Warden.

Reuniting tranquilised cubs with their mothers is also a concern, as previous attempts have seen mothers reject their cubs after separation, as was the case with Mukhi last year.

“To anaesthetise the cubs, they will need to be darted from a distance. This process will be challenging if their mothers are nearby. Kuno management currently lacks experience regarding the behavior of the mothers and cubs after darting,” the letter states.

Park officials also flagged “uncertainties in tracking the cubs after darting” given the tall grass and waterlogged terrain.

The lack of radio collars on the cubs also complicates efforts to monitor their movement. “Currently, the SRB (soft release

boma) area is filled with tall grass, and due to the rain, pits and small streams are filled with water. This makes it extremely difficult to locate the cub after darting, and if they are not found in time, it could pose a significant threat to their lives,” the letter reads.

Sharma, when contacted, told *The Indian Express*, “The tick infestation is not dangerous yet. Last time three cheetahs died during the monsoon season, but in the case of the cubs, we don't feel the need to medically intervene. Only when the need arises will we intervene.”

Wildlife activist Ajay Dubey, who recently sent a complaint to the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change apprising them about the development, said there is “a need for international expertise in dealing with the tick infestation as Kuno officials have claimed they are not experienced in handling this delicate issue”.

On the issue of expertise, Sharma said, “These are new challenges and we will gain expertise as we tackle these problems.”

The monsoon season has historically seen heightened risk of tick outbreaks. In 2023, ticks were a contributing factor in the deaths of three cheetahs. This year, in preparation for the rainy season, the veterinary team administered Bravecto, a potent anti-ectoparasitic medication, to all the cheetahs at Kuno. Depending on each cheetah's condition, the “medicine was either given orally or delivered via darting,” officials said. This proactive treatment aimed to combat parasites that thrive in the warm, humid conditions of the monsoon.

Though a plan is in place to administer treatment to the cubs, the tranquilisation process has not yet been executed due to the challenges mentioned above.

Hyderabad, 20 October 2024

# DON'T PANIC, IT'S NOT LEOPARD

HYDERABAD

THE animal spotted near the Miyapur Metro Rail station in Hyderabad was not a leopard but a jungle cat, forest officials said on Saturday.

After analysing the pugmarks, the forest officials concluded that it was not a leopard. Vijayanand Rao, Divisional Forest Officer, Shamshabad, told media persons that there was no need for people to panic. "The pugmarks are only 3.5 to 4 centimeters. A leopard's pugmark will be a minimum of 7 centimetres," he said.

Since there is a green belt near the Metro station, the forest officials believe the jungle cat may have returned after being briefly sighted in the open. "People need not panic. There is no chance of a leopard coming to the area even in the future," he said.

Two teams of 10 forest officials assisted by the police



● The animal spotted near Metro station was a jungle cat, say forest officials

started the search operation late Friday after a suspected leopard was sighted behind the Metro Station in the Miyapur area in Kukatpally.

As a precautionary measure, authorities had alerted people living in the areas close to be cautious. A short video clip of the animal walking on a pile of sand along a bushy patch was circulated on social media. The forest officials say that since the person zoomed in on the animal while taking the video, it looked like a leopard.

Day and night, and what lies in between separating the two, is always a bit of a blur in a cloud forest. As our guide used to say, out here, the sun isn't always in charge. A morning may begin with a clean and dyed sky; deeply clear, with just a few shredded clouds floating like scraps from a fight long lost and forgotten, the only hint being that the coming day will be bright and sparkling. Yet, a few hours before noon, from the lush valley below that one can see stretching endlessly across miles, clouds will creep up, their cottony tops white and snowy, rising insidiously up the forested slopes, moving into the mountains as if it is shivering with cold and needs to be crushed tightly in a warm and comforting embrace.

It's in such cloud forests that Nature always conspires to hide the Red panda. The Red panda is probably the cutest animal in the world — and when you finally get to see it, it's like a fox on fire, flaming red, almost incongruous in this backdrop of grey and green, yet always hidden than it should be in a shroud of mist and fog and unknown mystery. Not many have seen it in the wild and the cloud forest has mostly kept its secret well; it gives it up only with much prying and coaxing, and when it does, that moment does take your breath away. We are in Singalila National Park, almost at the very northern edge of West Bengal, right up against the border with Nepal. Tenuous as it is, the Red panda still maintains a bit of a stronghold here. Always tinged with the promise of more rain that is still to come, Singalila is tough terrain, quite a distance away from civilisation. Looking down from above, this beautiful landscape is ringed by the mighty Eastern Himalaya, with Mt Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, towering above all like the true massif that it is, yet gently laid out in eternal repose, the perfect outline of a sleeping Buddha in the sky. The Himalayas are breathtakingly gorgeous and mystical; to have

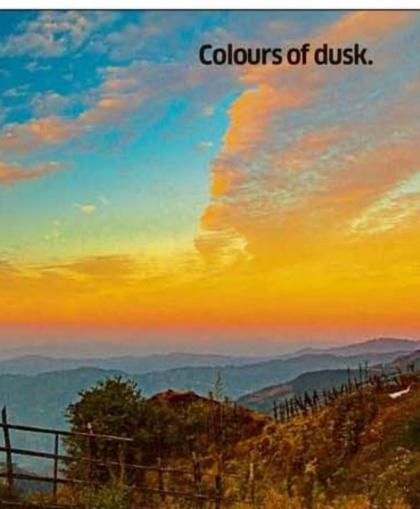


The Himalayas are breathtakingly gorgeous and mystical.



A baby Red panda.

not seen them is to have missed something. As the day breaks, the trackers associated with the homestay where we



Colours of dusk.

**Singalila and its Red pandas, or the firefoxes of the Eastern Himalayas, symbolise India's magnificent wildlife diversity. The Red panda is the cutest animal in the world — and when you finally get to see it, it's like a fox on fire, flaming red, almost incongruous in this backdrop of grey and green, writes Nilanjan Coomar**



White-browed fulvetta. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

### How to get there?

Located at the border of West Bengal and Nepal, the base for excursions into Singalila National Park is the hill station of Darjeeling.

### When to go?

Open throughout the year, the best time for Red panda and Himalayan views is the early winter months. Spring and early summer are especially good for birding.

### What to do?

Walk and listen to nature and breathe it all in. Track the Red panda on foot, and look out for elusive birds. Enjoy the mist and cloud breathing around you, catch the sunrise over Mt Kanchenjunga and enjoy the Himalayan vistas from Sandakphu viewpoint from where you can see four of the five highest mountains in the world, including Mt Everest.

### Where to stay?

There are small lodges and rustic, basic homestays all along the route and one has to rough it out somewhat. Running and hot water is a luxury but the atmosphere and the views will make up for most of the absent creature comforts.

From being once killed for their decorative fur, the Red pandas today are looked upon as honoured guests of the village community. Many are identified individually and their life events — like births, mating and deaths — are tracked with much joy, enthusiasm and sorrow.

We take a long and winding trail down the mountain slope and for the most part what we are walking on is a little more than an animal track, not exactly for the faint-hearted. It isn't made easy when the guides mention that the trek is, in fact, easier now, because the bamboo on which the pandas forage, grows closer to the edge of the roads and has fresh leaves at this time of the year, making the treks shorter. Come summer, the pandas will retreat deeper into the forest, making finding them a tall order! After an hour, when we can finally catch our breath, we look up through the canopy — there is a cute little pair of cubs staring back in surprise at us, so exceedingly rare, exclusive and fragile at the same time. It's a priceless moment, and these cubs would turn out to be among the five different individuals that we would come across, in the time we spent at the park.

Singalila and its Red pandas are a symbolise India's magnificent wildlife diversity. It's an amazing park with rare birds like Scaly and Spotty Laughing Thrush, White-browed Fulvetta, Goldcrest, Satyr Tragopan, and Fire-Tailed Myzornis — just to name a few.

We spent days wandering in the forest, catching a sunrise on Mt Kanchenjunga one day, which will remain one of the unforgettable moments of our lifetimes.

The adventures of all that lead to finding the flaming fox can certainly fill up a book, but out here, when the last sun has set and the birds have returned home to roost, journeys turn to memories with a peace and compelling beauty that cannot be captured in words.

were put up, fanned out into the forest, teaming up with other trackers who were from the surrounding villages, all masters of the craft of tracking this elusive creature. Once they made a sighting, the teams split up, with a few remaining at the location to keep a watch on the animal, while the rest rushed back to the camp to lead the guests down the mountain trail to some vantage point from where there's a good view.

Over the years, as more tourists came into this valley, villages, especially on the Indian side of the border, saw the benefits of eco-tourism.



Scaly laughing thrush.

Spotted laughing thrush.

# Focus on India-China ties, wildlife conservation, 'one nation, one election'

SHEETAL  
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

KASAUJI, OCTOBER 19

The second day of Khushwant Singh Litfest commenced with a melodious performance by Pandit Navin Gandharv titled "The Singing Strings of the Belabahr", followed by first session on "Wild World" with MK Ranjitsinh and Gargi Rawat.

While Ranjitsinh, a former IAS officer, helped bring back cheetahs to India after 70 years, Rawat made a significant contribution to environment reporting. Their talk with Sarah Jacob focussed on the need to conserve some of the most spectacular mountain mammals.

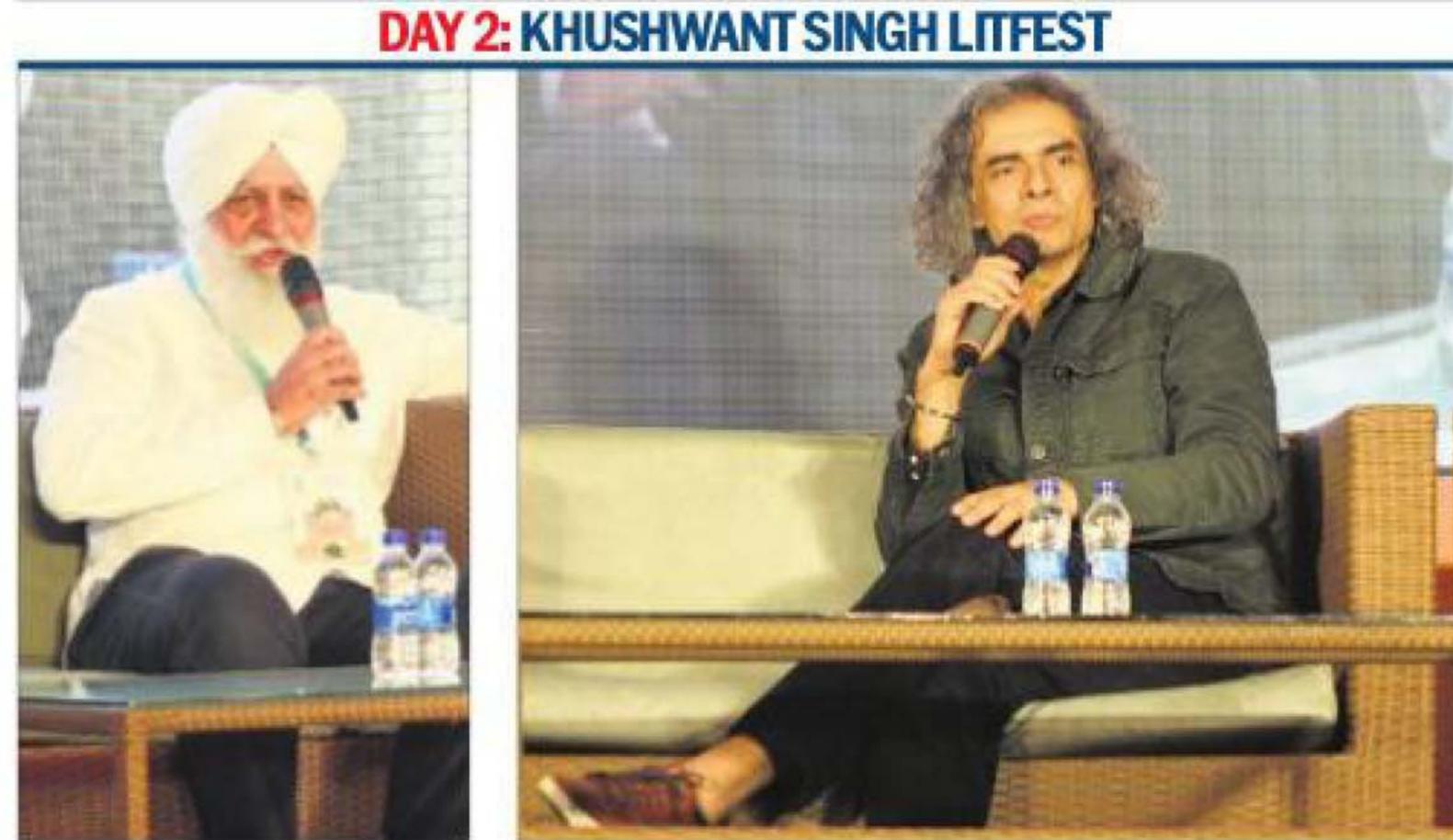
In the post-lunch sessions, experts dwelt on the inner and outer conflicts of India.

Political scientist Kanti Bajpai, journalist Ananth Krishnan and an expert on India and South Asia business and economic developments, Alex Travelli, were in conversation with Suhasini Haider. They also gave their inputs on India's relationship with China. Bajpai said both nations made mistakes that led to the phase their diplomatic relations were today.

Both countries need to mend their relationship. It's only by losing some both countries will gain something and arrive at a common ground.

In another session, "Democracy in Times of Conflict", Indian author Radha Kumar, whose work focuses on "ethnic conflict", shared her opinion on the ongoing debate of "one nation, one election",

which, she says, looks good in theory but is impossible practically. She said, "The panchayat elections and state Assembly poll can't go hand in hand." With women at the



Author Sarbpreet Singh and filmmaker Intiaz Ali speak at Khushwant Singh Litfest on Saturday. SHEETAL

centre stage, second day also saw two sessions titled "Women who Wield the World" and "Bad Girls Go Everywhere". The former highlighted the sacred poetry

of, by and for women wherein guest speakers and authors Arundhati Subramaniam and Rakshanda Jalil talked to senior journalist and poet Nirupama Dutt. For "Bad Girls Go

Everywhere", three women, Dr Meeran Borwankar, Nusrat Jafri and Dr Kalpana Sankar, who have proved their mettle in their respective fields of Indian Police Service, cinematography and nuclear physics, talked about their books. Borwankar was bombarded with questions on delayed justice. The conversation between Sankar and Borwankar kept to their personal experiences and how it helped them empower marginalised women. All three urged youngsters to come forward and be the change that India needs by taking further the dialogue on the topics discussed in the session.

The organisers also organised a waste management campaign near the venue.

**Best kept for the evening**  
In the evening, filmmaker Intiaz Ali, along with authors

Nirupama Kotru and Sathya Saran, spoke at length about "Bollywood Starry Seventies". They shared anecdotes, experiences and observations on the 70s – the decade that transformed Indian cinema.

*The Tribune* Editor-in-Chief Jyoti Malhotra moderated a session with author Sarbpreet Singh. His book, "The Rise of the Sikhs", is about the times of trouble in North India between 1706 and 1780. The session was in line with the festival theme — "Resilience and Renewal" — and also talked about faith and power. Sarbpreet shared his opinion on "Brajbhasha" used in Sikh texts and Gurmat Sangeet standing the test of time, violence and conflicted history of India during the Mughal empire. He ended the evening with a short music performance, reciting from the poetry of Sufi poet, Shah Husain.

# ‘Master plan being readied to check wild animal threat’

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**Kochi:** State govt is working to transform the forest department into a people-friendly department by protecting humans, forests, and animals with public participation, said forest minister A K Saseendran. He was inaugurating the construction of the department office complex at Edappally social forestry compound and the division office building of the Kalady Nature Study Center at the Changampuzha Cultural Center auditorium.

“In the hilly regions, the frequency of wildlife attacks and subsequent deaths has decreased over the past six months. However, each incident remains concerning. Efforts are being made to improve infrastructure within the department and related sectors. A master plan is being prepared to prevent disturbances caused by wild animals entering human habitats,” the minister said.

“The aim is to coordinate efforts with local bodies and other sectors. Plans are being developed to ensure the-



File photo

In the hilly regions, the frequency of wildlife attacks and subsequent deaths has decreased over the past six months, forest minister A K Saseendran said

re are no snakebite-related deaths by 2026. A master plan to control monkey disturbances in various parts of the state, including Mangalavanam in Kochi, will be submitted to the central govt within a month. A master plan to address the wild boar menace was submitted for the chief minister’s approval. Necessary equipment and weapons will be provided to department officials to strengthen preventive measures,” he said.

Saseendran said that the cities are facing complex environmental issues, which is concerning. “Social affo-

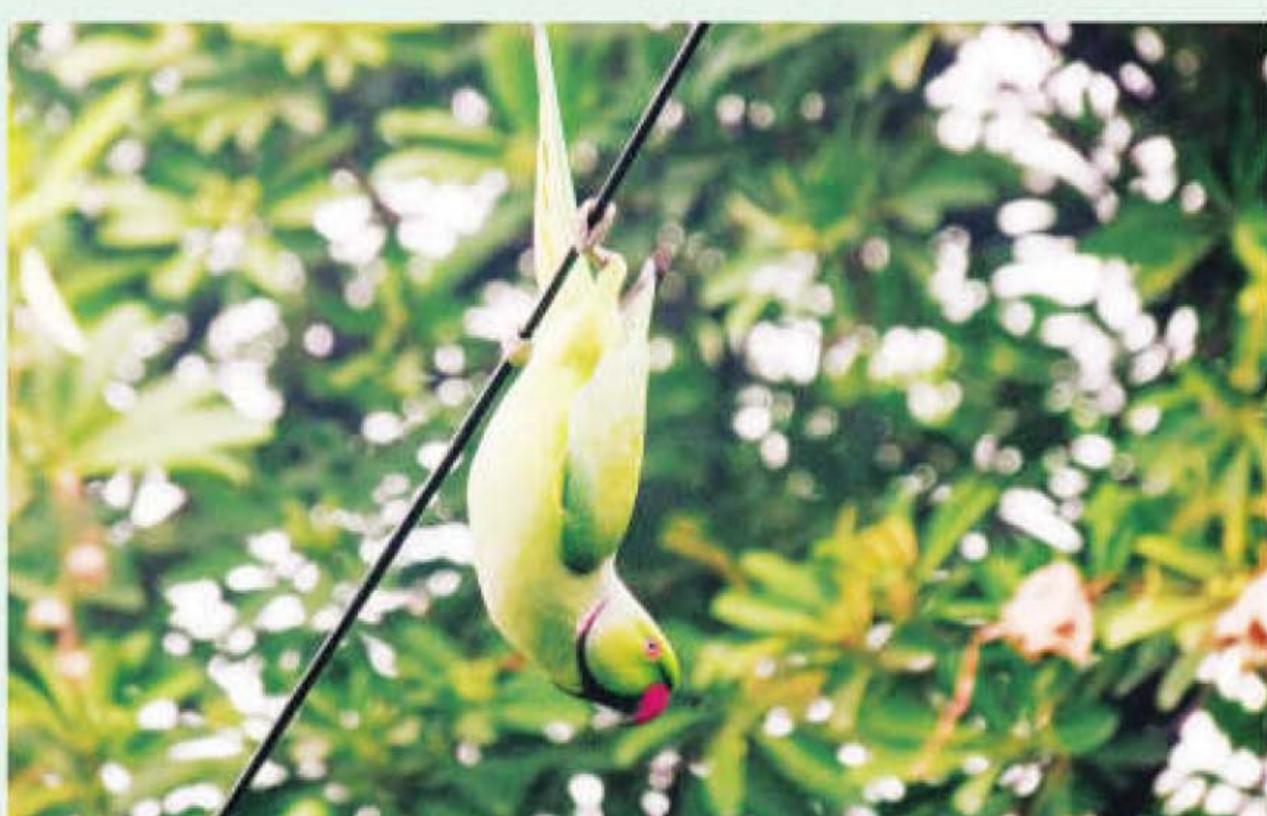
restation is the most suitable remedy in areas like Kochi, where chemical pollution occurs. Approval will be granted upon submission of a project for this purpose,” he said. Phenomena like sea intrusion result from the impact on nature’s balance. The solution to toxic waste is to plant more trees, the minister said.

He flagged off an animal rescue vehicle for the study center, funded by South Indian Bank’s CSR fund. Central region forest conservator Indu Vijayan, MLA Uma Thomas, and others attended the event.



# DOWN IN JUNGLELAND

RANJIT LAL *Author, environmentalist and bird watcher*



RANJIT LAL

## LOOSE ENDS

Parrots and parakeets are born clowns, watch them twirl upside down on telephone wires

# Monkey Business

Scientists believe that laughter and pranking strengthen bonds between animal groups

**T**ICKLE A baby chimpanzee and it will giggle uncontrollably. Rats, too, apparently just love being tickled on their tummies, squeaking high-pitched with sheer glee. If you've kept a dog, you will have been delighted by the way it seems to grin all over its face, when it's happy, tongue hanging out a mile, breathing shortly. So yes, many animals do get the giggles, but do they have a sense of humour?

Many scientists believe they do. Apart from giggling and laughing when tickled, many animals — the ones with the higher IQ — seem to have a sense of mischief and delight in playing pranks on either each other, or those of a different species. As also, doing 'fun' things. Thus, crows are known to glissade down steep ice-covered rooftops in winter, like children playing on a slide, simply because they enjoy it. Similarly, they love getting carried up on wind currents ris-

● ● ●  
Crows are known to glissade down ice-covered rooftops, like children on a slide, because they enjoy it

● ● ●  
ing in front of a mountainside and then going into what seems like kamikaze dives before pulling up at the last possible moment. The notorious keas of New Zealand love taking apart cars with their powerful bills.

Young gorillas, chimps, bonobos and orangutans will tease each other — and, sometimes, their venerable elders — by pulling hair, pinching, punching and running away. An orangutan laughed uproariously when it realised it had become the victim of a magic trick, shown to it by its keeper.

Closer home, I've watched crows (the most intelligent among birds) deliberately upset the hauteur of a peacock by repeatedly yanking at its magnificent train with every evidence of enjoyment. The peacock was not amused. Another crow once took a lift on a bus, all the way from Pragati Maidan to the Kashmere Gate inter-state bus station, hugely enjoying the ride; a distance of about 6 km. Of course, it travelled ticketless.

Parrots and parakeets are known *badmashes* and born clowns. Watch them twirl upside down on telephone wires,

just for the heck of it. They will whistle up your dogs for no good reason, or order them to come and go, much to the dog's utter confusion. Dogs, in turn, will tease you by dropping their ball near your feet then darting in and grabbing it and lunging off just as you bend down to pick it up. Dogs, in fact, have a typical 'invitation to play' posture which they use when they want a game, getting down to their elbows and whining, tail blurring.

So, yes, there's laughter, mischief-making and pranking galore in the animal kingdom. It is the juveniles which indulge in this kind of behaviour more than the adults. Scientists believe it may be to strengthen bonds between group members and also figure out hierarchy — all of which is very important when you become a serious stick-in-the mud adult. But adults, too, are not averse to playing games, often for vested interests. I've watched a big *dada* rhesus macaque play

ridiculously with a two-bit juvenile, who was naturally thrilled to bits (and still a little nervous!), though I wondered how much the mafia boss enjoyed the caper. He was doing it to inveigle favours from the juvenile's mother, a venerable grande dame — and in rhesus society it is the support and approval of the duchess that is vital if a *dada* male is to become boss of the troop. Basically, he was doing the 'kissing-the-babies' routine that our politicians do.

Of course, there are the more conventional scientists who warn that we are in danger of anthropomorphising this by assuming that (like us) the animals know that they're being funny and can make us — and each other — laugh. And, they say, most of the evidence is anecdotal. So be it. But when a crow deliberately and repeatedly tugs at a peacock's train with no tangible reward in sight — you can only conclude that he's just having the time of his life bugging the big bird and behaving like a rascal.

As for us, for decades, we've lived in a killjoy society. Now, what remains of our sense of humour has become critically endangered, preyed upon ruthlessly by that new predator in the ecosystem — 'upset sentiments'. Perhaps, stand-up comics should now be on the Red Data Book of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

**NEW-LIFE CHITLAPAKKAM LAKE ATTRACTS BIRDS**



**E. K. SANJAY | DC**  
CHENNAI, OCT. 19

The southern suburbs of Chennai, especially Tambaram, Pallavaram and Sholinganallur taluks, are endowed with bounteous natural resources, including sprawling lakes.

Among them is Chitlapakkam lake that receives rainwater from Pachamalai hillock in west Tambaram. Over the years, several improvement works have resulted in multiple benefits that include bund strengthening, regulation of outflow channels, landscaping and walking pathways.

Now that the monsoon is in full swing, the lake has started attracting birds like Eurasian coot, black-winged stilt, egret, Indian roller, Indian spot-billed duck, kingfisher, white stork, white-browed wagtail, red-vented bulbul and pelicans.

Recalling the efforts made to spruce up the lake, P. Viswanathan, activist and convener of Chitlapakkam Residents Associations' Coordination Committee, said: "What we are witnessing is a result of the sustained efforts of civic groups with support from the state government, local bodies and other agencies. For decades, the northern periphery of the lake was a dumping yard and after bio-mining, it wears an entirely new look. More needs to be done – discharge of raw sewage and effluents here and other lakes need to be stopped. For this, the Tambaram Corporation has to initiate work for implementing underground drainage in the areas left out and the village panchayats recently merged with the Corporation."



# *Newly introduced safari in MM Hills a hit among tourists*

**BOSKY KHANNA** @ Bengaluru

THE safari introduced in MM Hills by the Karnataka Forest Department has become a big hit among tourists, not just from the state but also from neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

The safari was introduced last year by the forest department in the TG Palya range of Male Mahadeshwara Hills Wildlife Sanctuary adjoining

Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve. The area also adjoins the newly declared Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu. The safari route is 18 km long.

The safari has become a hit and is drawing tourists, even as the Karnataka forest department has shelved the proposal of pursuing with the Union Government to declare MM Hills and Kudremukh as tiger

reserves. MM Hills was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 2013, and an action management plan for improving ecotourism was finalised in 2019.

Trials were on till October 2023, after which permission for additional trials was given for six months. Till now, over 10,000 people have visited the safari.

“As there is no option for sa-

fari in Sathyamangalam, visitors from there also come here. Though no agreement has been signed, the officials in Tamil Nadu have been informed of the safari in MM Hills. The declaration of the tiger reserve in Tamil Nadu is helping us,” said a senior Karnataka forest department official.

Deputy Conservator of Forests, MM Hills, Dr Santosh Kumar G, said there are homestays in Sathyaman-

galam where tourists stay and come for safaris to MM Hills. Visitors to Kollegal and the Tibetan settlement also come to MM Hills.

There are a total of three safari vehicles plying on the stretch, making four trips daily. In the coming days, the Karnataka forest department is also working on constructing a guesthouse near Uduthore Dam for visitors.

MM Hills is home to a healthy wildlife population, and tourists have recorded sightings of spotted deer, sambars, dholes, elephants, leopards, and tigers. The area is free of human habitation; hence, sightings are natural. Since the safari route is new, the animal sightings are natural and are gradually increasing, Kumar added.

# Passage migrant bird spotted in T.N.

**Wilson Thomas**

COIMBATORE

A Rufous-tailed rock thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) that was spotted in Kanniyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary recently is the latest addition to the checklist of birds in Tamil Nadu.

As per birding platform eBird, a female Rufous-tailed rock thrush spotted and photographed by Vinod Sadhasivan, founder of Kanniyakumari Nature Foundation, is the first record of the bird in Tamil Nadu.

“It was an accidental sighting when we were engaged in invasive plant removal works in Kaliyal forest rangei. A lot of grasshoppers were moving around as invasive plants were being removed. A female Rufous-tailed rock thrush was feeding on them. It disappeared after eating a few of them,” Mr. Sadhasivan said.

The spotting of the rare bird and its photograph were uploaded on eBird platform, where an entry was made after verification. The bird has been spotted a few times in Kerala and largely on north-western parts of India during migration.



The female Rufous-tailed rock thrush that was spotted in Kanniyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary on Wednesday.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

According to Mr. Sadhasivan, the Rufous-tailed rock thrush breeds in Southern Europe across Central Asia to Northern China. It migrates to Africa during the non-breeding season.

Coimbatore-based birder K. Selvaganesh said the individual spotted in Kanniyakumari could be a passage migrant to Africa. It is believed to have made a brief halt during a long flight or possibly due to rain.

Mr. Sadhasiva added that spotting of two other birds, namely Persian shearwater (*Puffinus persicus*) and Willow warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), in Kanniyakumari recently, were also the first sightings of the birds in Tamil Nadu.

# The many facets of Chukar partridge, a Himalayan gem

**PARTH JOSHI**

**S**UMMERS in Ladakh can be deceptively sultry, as I discovered one afternoon going back and forth along the Markha river looking for birds. There weren't many rewards for my toils, except dehydration from the thin air and lack of shade. A pall of dejection hung over the evening, till the time a slow, delicate movement around the bend caught a corner of the eye. It was a Chukar partridge, a plump, medium-sized bird that is much venerated in popular culture and lore.

The Chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*) is native to the arid mountainous regions of West and Central Asia, and the western and trans-Himalayan regions. In India, it can be found in high-altitude regions of Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The striking plumage makes it easy to spot in the field — black and white stripes run across a brownish upper body and creamy belly, the bright red beak and legs adding to the contrast.

Ground-dwelling birds that are adept at navigating the rocky and rugged landscapes of their habitat, Chukars have short, rounded wings which make them strong flyers.

They typically prefer to run swiftly to escape predators. Their diet primarily consists of seeds, grains and small insects.

Chukars play a vital role in the ecosystem by contributing to seed dispersal, promoting plant growth in otherwise barren areas. Their feeding habits also help control insect populations, indirectly benefiting agricultural activities. Additionally, as prey for larger predators such as eagles, hawks, and foxes, Chukars are an important part of the food chain in their mountainous habitats where resources for survival are scarce.

Their most discerning characteristic is their cultural symbolism, particularly in India. A representation of the bird gazing longingly towards the moon, yearning for it, is used to symbolise unattainable love, a metaphor for desiring something one can never possess. This imagery is found in poems, songs and paintings in many cultures across North India, from popular tales of unrequited love to the relentless pursuit of the unattainable divine in Sufism.

The mythical bird *Chakora* in Hindu mythology is believed to be based on the Chukar, and also considered the etymological origin of the name. This fact is often debated though, with some theories posit-



PHOTO BY THE WRITER

ing the name's origin to Persian or Urdu, as the partridge holds symbolic meanings across several West and Central Asian cultures, where it is idolised as a symbol of beauty and resilience.

Since ancient times, the Chukar partridge has been prized as game, hunted for both meat and sport. Archaeological findings from the Byzantine era have revealed ornaments made from its bones, and visual depictions are also seen in church mosaics. It was widely introduced in parts of Europe, America and Australasia for this purpose in the late 19th and early 20th century.

While the Chukar partridge is currently listed as a species of "Least Concern" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, its population is declining in several regions. Despite its adaptability, the bird faces several threats in the wild.

Habitat loss is one of the most pressing challenges, as human population expands, and infrastructure projects encroach into previously undisturbed areas. Road construction, agricultural expansion, and tourism development in high-altitude areas lead to habitat degradation and fragmentation, limiting the availability of foraging grounds and nesting sites.

Hunting is another significant threat. While it has been a traditional practice in many regions, over-hunting and the illegal capture of wild populations for commercial breeding are serious concerns. In some areas, hunting has reduced local populations to dangerously low levels. Although laws exist to regulate hunting, enforcement is often weak, owing to the remoteness of the regions the birds inhabit.

Climate change poses a more long-term threat, as the Chukar's high-altitude barren habitat is especially vulnerable to changing

weather patterns. Rising temperatures, altered precipitation and changing vegetation can all impact the bird's ability to find food and nesting sites. As glaciers melt and water sources become scarcer, both wildlife and human populations face increased competition for dwindling resources, placing indirect pressure on the species.

Efforts to conserve the Chukar must focus on protecting and restoring natural habitats. This includes regulating grazing, preventing habitat fragmentation and ensuring that infrastructure development projects consider their impact on local wildlife. Involving youth and local communities in birdwatching and eco-tourism initiatives could provide alternative sources of income and create incentives to protect wildlife.

The next morning, as we hiked out of the village, I finally saw the bird strike its quintessential pose, standing on a hillock and calling out into the sky, perhaps not a believer in the lunar lore as it was the middle of the afternoon with no moon in sight. A testament to nature's resilience, the Chukar reminds us that even in the harshest of environments, hope and beauty can endure.

— *The writer is a climate expert and outdoor enthusiast*

TREND SUGGESTS PREDATOR AND ECOSYSTEM ARE HEALTHY

# Tiger cub sightings up in Sunderbans

DEBRAJ MITRA

Calcutta: The frequency of tiger cub sightings by tourists in the Sunderbans has gone up, said foresters.

Their internal surveys, too, point to a similar trend. The increased sightings suggest the apex predator and the ecosystem it lords over both are healthy.

Seeing a tiger in the Sunderbans is more precious than a similar experience in any other forest. This is primarily because the harsh terrain of the world's largest mangrove tiger habitat makes it inaccessible on foot for tourists.

The only way to tour the Sunderbans is on tourist boats. Each boat is usually manned by an "eco-guide", who is linked to a Joint Forest Management Committee.

Every time a tiger is seen from a tourist boat, the sighting is regis-



This image of a tigress with her cubs was captured by a trap camera in the Sunderbans. Picture courtesy: Sundarban Tiger Reserve

tered with the forest department by the guide.

"On October 10, a mother and a cub were seen in Sajnekhali. In the first week of October, two separate cubs were seen without the mother. The two spots are around 5km apart. Last year, in October, a mother and two cubs were seen from another boat," said an official of the

Sundarban Tiger Reserve.

There is a flurry of posts on social media about cub sightings.

"Sundarban, there is nothing like you," says a post on October 6 last year. It is accompanied with pictures of "a tiger mother with two cubs from the mysterious mangroves".

Another, made on Saturday, shows another cub rising from the

water. "The rise of the future king," says the caption.

Justin Jones, deputy field director, Sundarban Tiger Reserve, linked more cub sightings to a rise in the tiger population.

"The tiger-sighting frequency used to be very low in the Sunderbans in comparison to any other tiger reserve. The cub-sighting frequency was even lower. But that is increasing because of a rise in the tiger population.

"In the Sunderbans, the tigers breed between late November and end-January. The movement of tigers peaks in the run-up to the mating season. Males move across territories in search of partners. Females move within their territories. October is the time when the maximum number of sightings happen," said Jones.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 ►

## Tiger cub sightings up in Sunderbans

► FROM PAGE 6

The last quadrennial national tiger census had its report — Status of Tigers: Co-Predators and Prey in India, 2022 — published in 2023. Prepared by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), the report estimated 101 tigers in the Sunderbans. The number was 88 in the 2018 count.

The report estimated that the tiger density in the Indian part of the Sunderbans had reached 4.27 per 100sq km. The mangrove forest's estimated carrying capacity is 4.68 tigers per 100sq km, the report said.

More than one expert has said the tiger count in the Sunderbans is nearing its saturation point.

Rajendra Jakhar, the field director of STR, said it is a "premature" assumption.

"How much a particular habitat can take in can be found out as the number grows. It is not an exact science, like mathematics. With reduction in human interference and a rise in the prey base, the carrying capacity of a habitat goes up. It can accommodate more. It is unfair to put



This image of a tigress with her cubs was captured by a trap camera in the Sunderbans.

Picture courtesy: Sundarban Tiger Reserve

a number and say this is the limit," he said.

"Because of the harsh terrain, large areas of the Sunderbans are free of human habitation. Our policies and protection measures have also helped in reduction of human interference. The tiger population is healthy and growing," he said.

The frequency of the sightings of deer fawns has also gone up in the Sunderbans. "There is a stable prey base of deer, wild boar and other animals," Jakhar said.

Besides the quadrennial national census, the state forest department conducts an annual tiger count. As part of that study, trap cameras were placed in the forests of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve and Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR), which covers the forests of the South 24-Parganas forest division.

The cameras were in place from late November 2023 to early January 2024.

"We had around 20 photographs of tiger mothers with one or more cubs, the highest

in recent years," said a source in the forest department.

Twenty pictures do not mean at least 20 cubs. One cub may have been captured multiple times.

Shiladitya Chaudhury, wildlife enthusiast and photographer who has been visiting the Sunderbans for almost three decades now, acknowledged that the frequency of cub sightings has gone up.

"It is a very healthy sign. It shows that the tiger is thriving in the Sunderbans," he said.

Chaudhury also said that the nature of tourism in the Sunderbans has evolved.

"Earlier, there was hardly any organised tourism. Fishermen and other residents would take tourists out on a boat. That has changed. Now, there is an organised tourism sector in the Sunderbans. The guides have been well-trained by the forest department. They know the islands where the probability to see a tiger is more than other islands. The tigers are also gradually growing used to tourist boats," he said.

ENVIRONMENT

CHEETAH

# IN A SPOT OF TROUBLE

**TWO YEARS AFTER AFRICAN CHEETAHS WERE BROUGHT TO KUNO NATIONAL PARK IN MADHYA PRADESH, THE GOVERNMENT CALLS THE PROJECT A SUCCESS. CONSERVATIONISTS ARE NOT SO SURE**

By JUMANA SHAH & RAHUL NORONHA



**FINDING GROUND** A file photo of a South African cheetah in an enclosure at Palpur, Kuno National Park, released on Feb. 18, 2023

**T**wo years ago, on September 17, the sight of Indian Air Force helicopters touching down at Palpur in Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park, ferrying eight cheetahs from Namibia in the final leg of their journey, had filled Indians with a sense of pride. The world took note of this science-backed transcontinental relocation, part of an ambitious project to reintroduce the large cats to the wild in India.

On the second anniversary of this momentous event, Union minister of environment, forest and climate change Bhupender Yadav declared the project a "success" on September 17, 2024. Something that prompted wildlife biologists and conservationists to come down heavily on the government and the Cheetah Project Steering Committee (CPSC) of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) for patting themselves on the back in-

stead of acknowledging that the spate of deaths (see *Tragic Obituaries*) and the fact that none of the 24 survivors—12 adults and 12 cubs—roam the wild have actually derailed the project. Pawan, the last cheetah to have most recently roamed the wild for about eight months, died in August. The NTCA has now announced that two South African cheetahs, Vayu and Agni, will be released into the wild by the end of this month.

The deaths of the eight adult cheetahs were not caused by factors mentioned as the potential causes of mortality in the Cheetah Action Plan (CAP), according to experts. "Free-ranging cheetahs died due to negligence in their monitoring. Reasons included an infection around the neck due to radio-collaring, the wrong choice of specimens for mating, and diseases contracted in enclosures and cages. None of the cheetahs died in conflicts with leopards, which had been cited as a major threat, nor from poaching. These losses were avoidable," says Dr M.K. Ranjitsinh, eminent wildlife expert and former head of the SC-appointed expert committee.

However, as per CAP, a 50 per cent survival rate of the imported

# TRAGIC OBITUARIES

OF THE TOTAL 37 CHEETAHS, KUNO HAS LOST EIGHT ADULTS AND FIVE CUBS IN LESS THAN TWO YEARS

## Sasha (Namibia)

**Cause of Death** Renal failure  
(Mar. 27, 2023)

## Uday (South Africa)

**Cause of Death** Cardio-pulmonary failure  
(Apr. 23, 2023)

## Daksha (South Africa)

**Cause of Death** Injuries sustained after violent interaction with male cheetahs  
(May 9, 2023)

## Three Cubs (Born in India to Namibian cheetah, Siyaya)

**Cause of Death** Dehydration  
(First one on May 23, and the rest two on May 25, 2023)

## Tejas (South Africa)

**Cause of Death** Injuries on neck leading to septicemia  
(Jul. 11, 2023)

## Suraj (South Africa)

**Cause of Death** Injuries on neck leading to septicemia  
(Jul. 14, 2023)

## Tbilisi (Namibia)

**Cause of Death** Injuries on neck leading to septicemia  
(Aug. 2, 2023)

## Shaurya (Namibia)

**Cause of Death** Found weak and died during treatment  
(Jan. 16, 2024)

## Cub (Born in India to South African Gamini)

**Cause of Death** Weakness; found dead next to mother  
(Jun. 5, 2024)

## Cub (Born to Gamini)

**Cause of Death** Injury on vertebral column  
(Aug. 5, 2024)

## Pawan (Namibia)

**Cause of Death** Suspected drowning  
(Aug. 17, 2024)



# THE CHEETAH'S INDIAN RUN



ALAMY

- **1947** The last recorded cheetah hunt is reported from the princely state of Korea in modern-day Chhattisgarh. Three cheetahs were shot by the then-ruler Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo
- **1952** The cheetah is declared extinct in India, making it the only large mammal to be officially declared extinct in independent India so far

→ **2009** Kuno Palpur and Nauradehi in MP and Shahgarh in Rajasthan are identified as potential cheetah introduction sites. Cheetah experts from across the world meet in Gajner, Rajasthan, to deliberate on introducing the African cheetah in India. A task force is constituted under Project Cheetah

→ **2008** A proposal is submitted to the Union government to bring in cheetahs from Africa

→ **1972** India considers introducing Asiatic cheetahs from Iran. The project falls through after the Shah of Iran is deposed

→ **2012** The Supreme Court stays the Cheetah Introduction Project while hearing a petition on the translocation of Asiatic lions from Gir to Kuno Palpur

→ **2013** The apex court quashes the introduction plan, terming it arbitrary and illegal

→ **2019** NTCA files an application in the SC seeking clarification of the 2013 order

→ **Jan. 2020** The apex court clears the project

→ **2021** Feasibility studies are carried out again in MP and Rajasthan for the introduction of the cheetah in the immediate future

large cats after one year qualifies as success. And since 12 of the 20 adult cheetahs and 12 of the 17 cubs born on Indian soil have survived, the government counts the project as an achievement. “The project has seen unprecedented success in the birth of cubs in comparison to similar projects in other countries,” Yadav tells INDIA TODAY. “These are wild animals, and the initial years of any reintroduction/conservation translocation project will undergo ebbs as well as flows before stabilising. It is a process of continuous learning, understanding and adapting, not only for the project but also for the cheetahs.”

**R**ajesh Gopal, chairman of the high-level CPSC set up in 2023 to manage the project, echoes the Union minister's thoughts. “The last two years have been eventful, but these are teething troubles,” he says. In another marker of the project's ‘success’, “The annual progress report on bringing back the cheetah to India”, released by the MP forest department recently, claims that the cheetahs have successfully managed to coexist with endemic large carnivores (such as leop-

ards) during the limited time that some of them roamed the wild.

Bengaluru-based wildlife biologist and conservation scientist Ravi Chellam's overriding concern is the continued captivity of the African cheetahs, which violates Namibian regulations that render a cheetah kept in captivity for longer than 90 days unfit for release in the wild. “Their fitness and ability to hunt and survive diminishes. If the period of captivity exceeds 90 days, the cats must either be euthanised or remain permanently captive,” he says. “The average home range of an adult female cheetah is 750 sq. km while the average size of the enclosure (boma), where they have been kept for most of the past two years, is less than 1 sq. km. Chital are released in the bomas for ‘hunting’ by the cheetahs and their diet is supplemented by buffalo meat.” Chellam also highlights that at least two of the Namibian cheetahs and the surviving 12 cubs, the youngest of which is about six months old, have never ranged in the wild.

The minister, however, claims it is factually incorrect to say that all cheetahs were in fencing for the past two years. “The cheetahs were intermittently

free-ranging. They were brought back into the enclosures for specific health reasons and veterinary treatment. The enclosures are large natural forested areas with wild prey which the cheetahs hunt themselves like in the wild,” he says. The cubs are growing in this environment and, in some cases, accompany the mothers on their hunts, he adds. “The transition into free-ranging conditions after a few months when the cubs are older is likely to be a smooth one but, in the wild, one can never really be sure. One cub, who was abandoned by the mother, has been successfully hand-reared and is learning to hunt in the wild. With the help of cheetah experts, the cub will be rehabilitated into the wild,” Yadav says.

“Wilding,” says Y.V. Jhala, former dean of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and principal scientist of the Cheetah Project (2009–2023), “is going to be a long process. We need to be persistent and continue to supplement to allow establishment of free-ranging cheetahs. Mortalities may also occur, and one should not be scared of it.” Jhala has called the NTCA's recent decision to release two cheetahs into the wild “very good news”.

**Oct. 2022** A nine-member Cheetah Task Force is announced to make decisions about cheetahs' management

**Sept. 2022** The first lot of eight cheetahs arrives at Kuno Palpur from Namibia. An MoU is to be signed with South Africa to get more cheetahs

**Jul. 2022** India and Namibia sign a memorandum of understanding for bringing in cheetahs from that country



**Nov. 2022** In a staggered manner, all eight cheetahs are moved from quarantine to a larger, game-stocked enclosure

**Jan. 2023** Female Sasha shows signs of renal distress, brought back in quarantine for treatment



**Feb. 2023** Twelve cheetahs, seven male and five female, come to KNP from South Africa

**Aug. 2024** In the 13th and latest casualty, Pawan from Namibia dies due to suspected drowning

**Aug. 2023** All 14 cheetahs are brought back to the enclosures where they are kept presently pending release after the monsoons

**May 2023** Environment ministry announces setting up of an 11-member Cheetah Project Steering Committee—over and above the Cheetah Task Force announced in October 2022

**Mar. 2023** Two Namibian cheetahs are released into the wild. Sasha dies, marking the first casualty among Namibian cheetahs. Four cubs are born to Siyaya at the park

## MP FOREST DEPT'S ANNUAL REPORT FLAGS A HUGE DEFICIT OF PREY IN KUNO. IT CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE PREY AUGMENTATION. AT LEAST 1,500 CHITAL NEED TO BE BROUGHT IN

### HOW TO PREVENT THE CAT-ASTROPHE

So, after two years of multiple failed attempts to release the cheetahs into the wild, will this be a turning point? What more needs to be done? "As a first step towards metapopulation management through a large landscape approach, including the landscapes of Kuno and Gandhi Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and possibly Uttar Pradesh, an interstate cheetah conservation complex is being developed. Here, the forested area spans ~17,000 sq. km with a potential cheetah habitat of ~10,000 sq. km," Yadav says. According to him, there are other potential sites such as Nauradehi (MP) and Banni grasslands (Kutch, Gujarat) etc. "The CAP recommends metapopulation management with three to five sites for long-term persistence of cheetahs in India. Eventually, more po-

tential sites in central and southern India will also be assessed," he says.

In the first phase at Gandhi Sagar, a maximum of four to five cheetahs are likely to be released, providing them an opportunity to establish a breeding population. In Banni, the minister says, "raising enclosures, quarantine boma, veterinary facility and related infrastructure are under progress. Once complete, the steering committee will examine proposals to bring cheetahs for conservation breeding." The earlier plan was to treat the population in Kuno as the source population to translocate a few cheetahs to Gandhi Sagar and Banni, but it seems to have been abandoned. As Gopal indicates, the two new sites will have cheetahs likely to be imported from Kenya and South Africa. "Negotiations are going on with Kenya. The draft MoU to be signed has already been

approved by the MoEFCC," says Yadav. Though no timeline has been specified, sources say the third batch could be imported before the end of this year.

Kenyan and South African cheetahs belong to two different subspecies. Gopal says introducing a cheetah subspecies from a northern hemisphere country (Kenya) is desirable for genetic vigour as the cheetah has passed through an "evolutionary bottleneck". However, Jhala says that both cannot be used for introduction in the same region. "It is against the IUCN guidelines.... This will compromise the Indian commitment to global cheetah conservation efforts." Gopal doesn't think so. "They may mate in the future...no issues...uterus size etc. are similar with minor variations owing to geographical isolation," he says.

Biologists have also flagged the concern that Gandhi Sagar and Banni are small fenced enclosures akin to safari parks. Chellam says it is not in keeping with the CAP's original aims and India's conservation ethos of having free-range cheetahs performing their ecological role. Jhala says that fencing was only meant for quarantine purposes and soft release, lasting a couple of months. Gopal too says

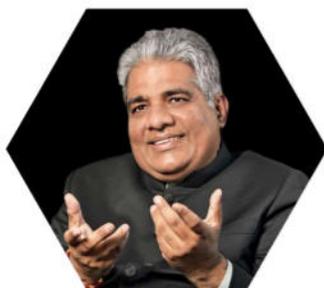
that fencing is a temporary measure but says it could last up to five years, until the species settles down. To which experts argue that since cheetahs are short-lived carnivores, a five-year period in a fenced area amounts to life imprisonment.

The decline of the prey base in Kuno is another matter of concern, as the MP forest department's own report observes. It shows that chital density has reduced from 23.43 animals per sq. km in 2021 to 17.5 in 2024. The prey base was one of the main reasons Kuno was chosen over other sites. "There is a huge deficit of prey in Kuno," the report states. "Prey augmentation has to be carried out immediately. At least 1,500 chital have to be brought to increase ungulate prey base."

## CONSERVATIONISTS VS POLITICIANS

The frequent deaths of the large cats not only kicked up a storm of concern over maintaining the population but also an unsavoury war of words between the biologists and government officials anchoring the project, as well as politicians. Among the criticisms was that the mortalities could have been avoided if international experts had been consulted as India's expertise on cheetahs is limited. A monitoring committee appointed by the Supreme Court in 2020 to guide the NTCA was abruptly dissolved in March 2023. This was speculated to be a reaction to the criticism aired by several experts following the deaths of six cheetahs, including three cubs, in about 80 days. The CPSC did not include veterans such as Ranjitsinh and Jhala who had prepared the detailed CAP. "Soon after the cheetahs arrived, our committee began working and would hold regular meetings. A few months later, I learnt through media reports that a Cheetah Task Force had been constituted, but we continued working. In March, the Union government informed the Supreme Court that the expert committee was not needed," says Ranjitsinh.

International experts such as Adrian Tordiffe, one of the foremost cheetah experts, and Vincent van der Merwe, manager, Cheetah Metapopulation Project, were retained as consultants. However,



**BHUPENDER YADAV**

*Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change*

🏡 **The project has seen unprecedented success in births of cubs in comparison to similar projects in other countries... initial years of any reintroduction/conservation translocation projects will undergo ebbs as well as flows before stabilising**

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**The cheetahs were intermittently free ranging. They were brought back into the enclosures for specific health reasons and veterinary treatment. The enclosures are large natural forested areas with wild prey which the cheetahs hunt themselves, like in the wild**

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**As a first step towards metapopulation management through a large landscape approach, including the landscapes of Kuno and Gandhi Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and possibly Uttar Pradesh, an interstate cheetah conservation complex is being developed** 🏡

in July 2023, four international experts, including Tordiffe and van der Merwe, wrote to the apex court that they were not being consulted and that this was affecting conservation efforts.

In August 2024, the MP forest department's refusal to share records of the cheetah project under the Right to Information Act, citing potential harm to the country's sovereignty and integrity, elicited further concerns from the biologist community about the project's management.

There is inter-state politics too. Among the second homes being considered for cheetahs was Mukundara Hills in Rajasthan. The WII had selected it as the best breeding site, due to its 82 sq. km fenced area and adequate prey base. The MP government had asked the Centre to consider shifting some cheetahs there, but the latter did not consider it. Reports suggested that the Congress government in power in Rajasthan at the time was the reason for this reluctance, while some said a Rajasthan politician was not too keen to share Mukundara Hills—envisaged originally as a home for tigers—with the imported spotted cats. Thus, Gandhi Sagar's 64 sq. km was fenced at a steep cost of Rs 17 crore and an entire village, Karnpura, was relocated. Yet, officials now confirm that some leopards have entered the enclosure through the water route (one side of the boundary is a reservoir), which may remain a source of threat for the cheetahs.

Meanwhile, Palpur's hopes to be a cheetah tourist destination lie dashed, as the success of the cheetah conservation project itself is moot. "Room occupancy at my resort is down to 10-15 per cent, which I manage because I am located on the highway. Two other resorts that opened in 2022 have shut down," says Jinesh Jain, owner of Jungle Resort Kuno. Forest authorities opened safaris last year but the area where the cheetahs are housed is not open for visitors. "Earlier when there were no cheetahs, we had guests coming in to see other wildlife. This helped us get business. Now that business is lost too," adds Jain. The revival of that economy will need a better cheetah action plan. ■