

130 Mhadei trekkers seek regularisation

VALPOI: About 130 trekkers at the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary have demanded regularisation in employment after claiming to have worked for the last 13 years with meagre wages and no security cover.

Jaipur, 4 February 2025

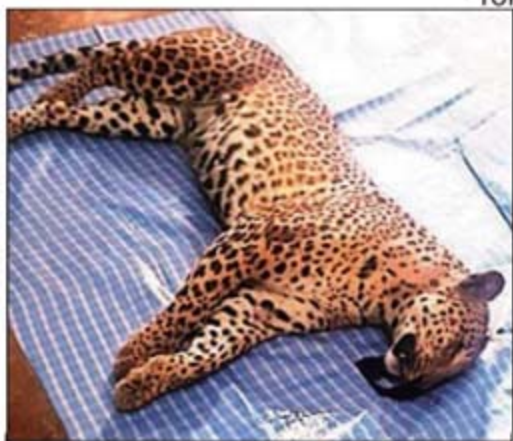
3-yr-old leopard killed in Bundi road mishap

TOI

Kota: A three-year-old female leopard was killed on the spot after an unidentified vehicle struck the big cat on NH-52 near Bundi tunnel, which is a part of buffer zone of Ramgarh Vishdhari Tiger Reserve (RVTR) in Bundi, intervening night of Sunday and Monday. Leopards are protected animals under Wildlife Protection Act.

A young female leopard perished in the road accident during the intervening Sunday-Monday nights, confirmed deputy conservator of forest (DCF), RVTR, Arvind Kumar Jha. "The animal's right limb was completely fractured, there was bleeding from nasal cavity, and her lungs and liver were crushed indicating traumatic injury after a heavy vehicle struck her," said Dr Pan-kaj Gupta, one of the members of medical board that conducted post-mortem.

The carcass was disposed of according to protocol, he added. At least four leopards have been killed in road mishaps on the national highway including two on NH-148D in recent months and 10 in the past two years.



Carcass of the female leopard

Panic in Bhilwara after leopard sighting

Bhilwara: Residents near the Bhilwara-Chittorgarh National Highway, close to Mangalpura village, were alarmed after a leopard was spotted near the Hathi Bhata Ashram early Monday morning. CCTV footage from the ashram captured the wild cat attacking a dog, prompting immediate action from the forest department. Officials set up a cage to capture the animal. TNN

All fatalities have occurred due to absence of underpass and safety walls around the forest, said Prathvi Singh Rajawat, former honorary conservator of forest. TNN



Hummingbird



Sugarbird

Bats, Birds and the Ecosystem

In this third and final article on pollinators, Saikat Kumar Basu tells you about the important role birds and bats play as pollinators.



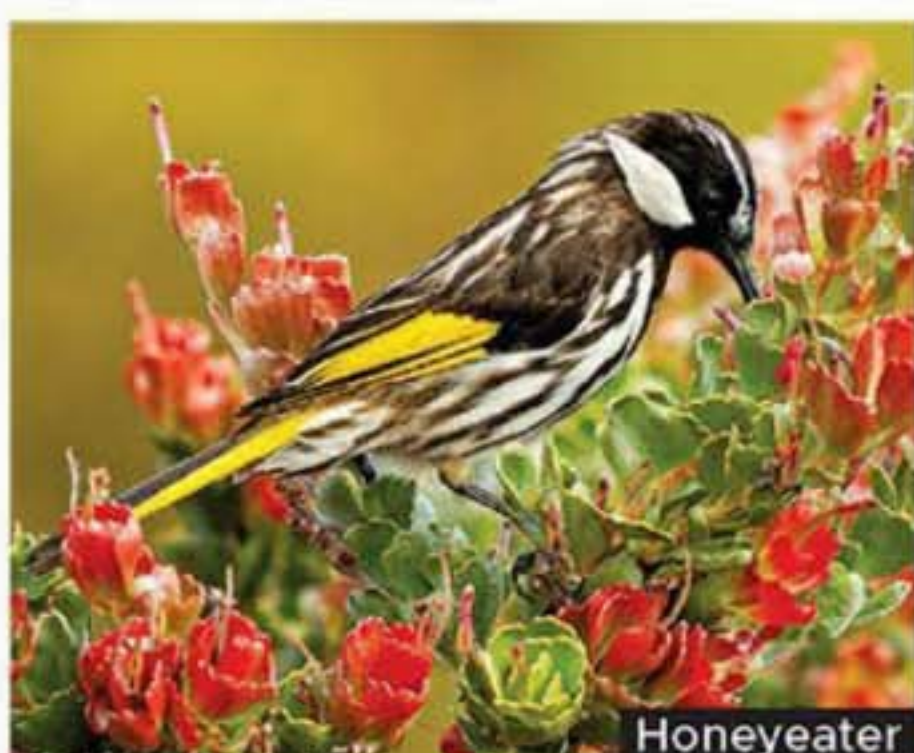
Fruit Bat

Birds and Their Role in Our Ecosystems

Birds, warm-blooded vertebrates in the class Aves, inhabit nearly every ecosystem on Earth—from forests and deserts to wetlands and coastlines—contributing essential ecological roles across these landscapes.

Birds impact plant biodiversity and ecosystems by serving as pollinators, seed dispersers and pest controllers. Species like hummingbirds and some parrots pollinate plants as they feed on nectar, while fruit-eating birds spread seeds, aiding forest regeneration and plant distribution. Insectivorous birds, such as swallows and woodpeckers, help control pest populations that could otherwise damage crops, forests and other vegetation.

Birds also contribute to nutrient cycling—their droppings (guano) enrich soil and marine environments, promoting plant growth and supporting various life forms. Positioned at different levels of the food chain—from top predators like hawks to prey for larger animals—birds help regulate populations and sustain ecosystem balance.



Honeyeater

Birds are sensitive to environmental changes and bird population declines often signal underlying ecological problems, prompting necessary conservation actions. Through their ecological roles, birds help maintain biodiversity, which in turn supports countless species, including humans.

Role of Birds in Pollination

- Birds like hummingbirds, sunbirds and honeyeaters are essential pollinators for certain plants, especially in areas with few other pollinators. These birds have evolved features, such as a long beak, to access nectar in flowers like trumpet creepers and fuchsias. Without these specialised birds, such plants would struggle to reproduce.

- Many plants rely on a network of pollinators, including birds. Declines in bird species weaken these networks and impact biodiversity. For example, in New Zealand, the extinction of birds like the bellbird has led to a decline in native plants that depend on them for pollination, harming the ecosystem's resilience.

- Habitat destruction, climate change and invasive species threaten bird populations, which in turn affects plant species that rely on them. The decline of the cape sugarbird, a key pollinator for the protea plant in South Africa, due to habitat loss disrupts the entire ecosystem.



Protea Plant

Bats and Their Role in Our Ecosystems

Bats, the only mammals capable of true flight, belong to the order Chiroptera. They can fly because of their specialised wings, which are nothing but elongated fingers covered by thin skin. With over 1,400 species worldwide, they play essential ecological roles. In tropical and desert regions, many bats pollinate over 500 night-blooming plants, including bananas, avocados and mangoes. Fruit-eating bats help regenerate forests by dispersing seeds for plants like fig and cacao, supporting biodiversity, especially in tropical forests.

Insectivorous bats play a key role in controlling insect populations, including crop pests and mosquitoes, reducing the need for pesticides and benefitting agriculture. Their nutrient-rich guano acts as a valuable fertiliser that promotes plant growth and biodiversity. As prey for predators like owls and hawks, bats support food chains and ecosystem balance. However, threats such as habitat loss, diseases such as the white-nose syndrome, and human conflicts endanger their populations, impacting the ecological services they provide.



Mouse-eared Bat

Role of Bats in Pollination

- Bats, especially fruit bats and nectar-feeding bats, play a vital role in pollinating tropical and desert plants. As they feed on nectar, bats pick up pollen on their fur and transfer it between flowers, a process called chiropterophily. This is essential for many plants, including those humans rely on, like bananas, guavas, mangoes and agaves.

- Flowers that are adapted for bat pollination are typically large, pale-coloured and strongly scented to attract bats at night. Bats transfer pollen as they feed on nectar, aided by their nocturnal habits and long tongue.

- Bat-pollinated flowers are large, durable and funnel-shaped, often emitting strong musky odours to attract bats at night. Bats' unique traits, such as their nocturnal activity and long tongue, make them effective pollinators for these plants.

- Bat-pollinated flowers produce abundant nectar, an energy-rich food source. Plant species like blue agave rely on bats like the Mexican long-tongued bat for pollination. In North American deserts, lesser long-nosed bats pollinate Saguaro cacti, promoting genetic diversity and ecosystem health, benefitting both plants and the animals that depend on them.



Brown Bat

Multiple award winner Saikat Kumar Basu is an Indian-origin Canadian agricultural scientist and environmentalist. He is currently serving as the Executive Research Director, PFS, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. He has written and edited/coedited over 35 books and is the editor and contributor to the Encyclopaedia of Earth, specialising in areas of biological and environmental sciences.



Bird census held successfully in Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary

HANS NEWS SERVICE
CHAMARAJANAGARA

THE two-day bird census at the Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary in Chamrajnagar district, aimed at gathering precise information on the increasing bird population, concluded on Sunday evening.

The census took place across 949 square kilometers of forest area encompassing seven forest ranges, including the Hanuru and Kollegal taluks. Over 500 bird watchers and ornithologists participated in this significant event. During the census, a total of 253 bird species were identified, including

notable species such as the Indian Roller, Malabar Grey Hornbill, and Nilgiri Flycatcher. The diverse ecosystem of the Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary features semi-evergreen, dry deciduous, and scrub forests, providing a suitable habitat for a variety of flora and fauna. The area is

rich in valuable tree species like teak, rosewood, sandalwood, wild fig, and others. Additionally, the sanctuary is home to various wildlife, including elephants, tigers, leopards, deer, wild boars, bears, jackals, and more. Officials from the Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary reported, "For two

consecutive days, over 500 volunteers traversed the dense forests to accurately identify and document the bird species present." The successful completion of this census highlights the growing diversity of birds in the region, marking the first such event in the sanctuary's history.

Robinage (Fortnightly)
Mumbai, 1-15 February 2025

Bird Park in Mumbai

WILDLIFE

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is set to construct a bird park covering 17,150sq mts in Nahur in Mumbai. This facility is being established to protect animal life and will feature numerous bird species such as white peafowls and black swans. The facility will comprise different areas, which will accommodate birds from different parts of the world. Its projected cost will be about ₹100 crore and it will be the first of its kind in Mumbai.



White Peacock

It will also provide visitors with knowledge about different birds and the importance of safeguarding their ecosystems.



Black Swan

Scan to learn how birds
help the ecosystem



Birdwatching event 'WINGS' set for Feb 16

Sameera Kapoor Munshi

NAVI MUMBAI

It is that time of the year to lace up your walking shoes, grab a pair of binoculars, and dive into the world of birdwatching. WINGS - Birds of India, the much-anticipated Mumbai birdwatching programme, formerly known as the Mumbai BirdRace, is set to take flight on February 16, promising an immersive day of birding, learning, and conservation discussions.

Organised as a collaboration between beginners and experts, as well as students

and institutions, this unique initiative has been nurturing future bird-watchers since 2005. Over the years, WINGS has evolved into more than just a day of birding—it has become a community-driven event where knowledge is shared, techniques are honed, and a deeper appreciation for nature is fostered.

“During the first event held in 2005, in approximately 12 hours, 277 species of birds were sighted in and around Mumbai,” recalled Sunjoy Monga, the all India coordinator who conceptualised the programme.

“Over the years, the programme, besides being a coming together of many experienced bird-watchers, has continued to attract armies of beginners to birdwatching.”

Teams of bird-watchers will spend the entire day exploring the metropolitan region, aiming to record as many bird species as possible. However, the event is not just about the numbers. It is about learning the finer points of birdwatching from seasoned experts and understanding the behavior, habitat, and conservation concerns related to different

bird species he informed.

A unique aspect of the programme is that there are no pre-determined routes or birding spots. Instead, teams are free to chart their own course and explore their favourite birding locations.

“Depending upon the sites chosen, it is recommended that at least one of the members has access to a vehicle,” said an organiser. “There will be a checklist through the eBird platform, whereby all team sighting reports/lists go in as a detailed city-venue-specific checklist for the day.”

WHAT: WINGS - Birds of India birdwatching programme (formerly Mumbai BirdRace)

WHEN: February 16

WHERE: Mumbai Metropolitan Region

FOCUS: Birdwatching, learning, conservation

FORMAT: Teams explore the region, recording bird species. No pre-set routes. eBird platform used for checklists.

COST: Free

CBI seizes leopard skins, arrests four in Haryana

NARESH BISWANI

NEW DELHI: The Central Bureau of Investigation, together with the wildlife crime control officers from the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, conducted a joint special operation targeting illegal wildlife trades in the early hours of February 3. Acting on intelligence inputs, the CBI's Wildlife Crime Unit intercepted a vehicle near Pinjore, Haryana, and seized a significant quantity of wildlife contraband, leading to the arrest of three accused on the spot. During the operation, officials recovered two leopard skins, nine leopard canines, 25 leopard claws, three leopard jaw pieces, three otter skins, and a quantity of pangolin scales. The accused, identified as Peerdas, Wazira, and Ram Dayal, were immediately taken



into custody. A fourth accused, Rohtas, was later apprehended from Kalka Railway Station.

The CBI has registered a case under Section 61(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023, read with Sections 40, 49, 49B, and 51 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, imposing severe penalties on all those involved in hunting, poaching, and illegal trade of endangered species. One of the arrested persons was earlier chargesheeted by Nepal Police in connection with wildlife crimes, indicating that the poaching network had international links.

City still stuck on cruel, ineffective glue traps

Despite ban, sticky traps that harm wildlife and pets are widely sold, experts call for humane pest control, stricter enforcement and public awareness

Iffath Fathima
iffath.fathima@timesofindia.com

TWEETS @BangaloreMirror

Despite being banned, glue traps continue to be widely manufactured and easily available. These traps, also known as sticky traps, are often marketed as a simple and effective solution for controlling rodents and insects. Typically made of a cardboard or plastic base coated with strong adhesive, they are placed in areas where pests are likely to roam. However, while they may seem like a quick fix, glue traps pose significant dangers not only to targeted pests but also to non-target animals, pets, and even humans.

Many rescuers and experts have highlighted the serious ethical and environmental concerns associated with their use, emphasising that they are neither humane nor effective.

Sara Athar, Communications and Outreach Manager, at Avian and Reptile Rehabilitation Centre said, "One of the primary concerns about glue traps is the extreme suffering they inflict on animals. When rodents or other creatures come into contact with the adhesive, they become immobilised and often struggle desperately to free themselves. This struggle can lead to broken limbs, torn skin, and other severe injuries. Animals trapped on these devices can take hours or even days to die, succumbing to exhaustion, dehydration, starvation, or stress. The process is neither quick nor humane."

Moreover, glue traps are non-selective, ensnaring any creature that comes into contact with



Glue traps ensnare birds, reptiles, amphibians & small animals

them, including birds, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. "Even household pets such as cats or dogs can accidentally get stuck in these traps, leading to painful and distressing situations that often require veterinary intervention. Glue traps can have unintended consequences for the environment. Non-target species, including endangered or protected wildlife, can become victims of these devices, disrupting local ecosystems," said Subiksha Venkatesh, Lead Rehabilitator, ARRC.

Additionally, improperly disposed traps with dead or decaying animals can attract other pests and spread disease, creating a cycle of infestation rather than resolving the problem.

While glue traps may temporarily reduce the number of visible pests, they do little to address the root cause of an infestation. Rodents, for example, are prolific breeders. Removing a few individuals from a population will not prevent

others from taking their place, especially if food and shelter remain readily available.

"Fortunately, there are humane and sustainable ways to manage pests without resorting to harmful glue traps. Prevention is the most effective strategy, starting with proper waste management by disposing of food scraps in sealed bins and keeping the surroundings clean to eliminate food sources. Sealing entry points such as cracks and holes in walls or foundations with caulk or steel wool can prevent rodents from entering. Regular cleaning, particularly in kitchens and pantries, helps remove crumbs and spills that attract pests, while decluttering eliminates potential nesting spots," said Athar.

In the last 3 years, the number of glue trap cases rescued by ARRC is 78. In 2022, 33 were rescued, 2023 over 15 and in 2024, 28 cases were rescued. In the year 2025 over two rescues have already been done.

Most of the rescues were black

How to help an animal trapped in glue trap

Avoid feeding: Do not force food or water, as it can worsen the situation.

Prevent further sticking: Use paper, corn flour, or tape to cover the exposed sticky areas of the trap.

Handle gently: Cover the animal with a cloth to reduce stress and move it to a quiet, safe space.

Seek professional help: Contact a wildlife rescue centre or animal welfare organisation for proper assistance.

Dispose responsibly: If the animal has died, safely discard the trap to prevent harm to other animals.

kites, snakes, Indian palm squirrels, shikra, jungle myna, barn owls and others.

"Storing food, including pet food, in airtight containers and securing compost bins further reduces the likelihood of infestations. If rodents do appear, humane catch-and-release traps provide a non-lethal solution, allowing safe relocation when checked frequently to prevent suffering. Additionally, encouraging natural predators like owls, shikras, kites, and snakes helps maintain ecological balance and naturally control pest populations. By adopting these ethical and effective methods, pest issues can be managed without causing unnecessary harm to animals," added Venkatesh.

Concerns raised over 'voluntary' relocation of forest dwellers

Wildlife activists say some of these programmes unjust as villagers left without livelihoods if they don't get land as part of compensation

Garima Prasher
garima.prasher@timesofindia.com

TWEETS @BangaloreMIRROR

A few months ago, individuals and representatives of environmental and conservation organisations from various cities, including Bengaluru, wrote to the National Tiger Conservation Authority, expressing concerns over the relocation of forest dwellers from critical tiger habitats and reserves.

The letter had critiqued NTCA's order to the Chief Wildlife Wardens (CWLW) of the 19 tiger range states to take up relocation of villagers from tiger reserves on a priority basis.

The organisations said that NTCA's order disregards and disrespects customary, democratic, and constitutional rights of the tribals and other forest dwellers.

Now, wildlife conservationists and activists have raised concerns regarding some of the ongoing voluntary rehabilitation programs by the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD). They say these programs should be stopped immediately as forest dwellers are being relocated without proper compensation.

Relocations in these cases, despite being termed 'voluntary' have not been so. "Some relocation programs, for instance in Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS) and Kali Tiger Reserve are being carried out unjustly, without land as part of compensation. If the forest department can compensate for relocation with land parcels in some areas, the option should be available for villagers and tribes from other reserve forests as well. Those living inside forests for generations have only one skill to earn their livelihood – agriculture. However, this source is being taken away from them when



A letter critiques NTCA's order on relocation to the Chief Wildlife Wardens of 19 tiger ranges

they do not get a piece of land after relocation," said a wildlife activist.

Notably, hundreds of families from villages inside MM Hills Wildlife Sanctuary in Chamarajanagar were relocated a few years ago with land as compensation. Similarly, villagers from Chincholi Wildlife Sanctuary were also relocated with acres of forest land.

However, the relocation program in some areas is being carried out with a payment of Rs 15 lakh to each family. Although villagers say they would have preferred the option of agricultural land.

Under the centrally sponsored scheme of Project Tiger, two options are given to people under the rehabilitation program. Under option I, a payment of Rs. 10 lakh per family is given, and relocation happens without any rehabilitation or relocation process by the Forest Department. Under option II, relo-

cation and rehabilitation are carried out by the Forest Department with certain norms, including agricultural land procurement and development, settlements of rights, homestead land and house construction, incentives, and community facilities out of the Rs 15 lakh.

Not appealing

Experts cite remarks made by some of the NTCA members on the issue in a recent meeting. As per the meeting proceedings, some of the NTCA members informed that the package for voluntary village rehabilitation may not be appealing to all communities living in core/critical tiger habitats. The member suggested that the package for voluntary village relocation should be periodically revised based on inflationary trends to make it more attractive. He mentioned that people being relocated out of forest areas

Those living in forests for generations have only one skill to earn their livelihood – agriculture, which is taken away from them

–Wildlife activist

are usually reluctant to any change which needs to be factored in while incentivising voluntary village rehabilitation through adequate capacity and skill upgradation.

Activists say that wherever land in respect of voluntary village rehabilitation is not available as per requirement; there is a need to enhance the cash package available in the existing policy. NTCA members also suggested leveraging carbon markets to further incentivise the available relocation package.

Cultural hub plan threatens rich ecology of Roerich estate

Tourism dept has proposed 32 works; ball in forest dept's court

CHIRANJEEVI KULKARNI
BENGALURU, DHNS

Amid the opposition for developing the Roerich & Devikarani Roerich Estate or Tataguni estate as a tourist spot, documents show that the government has proposed to take up 32 different works that will end up destroying the ecologically sensitive area to make it a “vibrant cultural and artistic hub” attracting tourists from around the world.

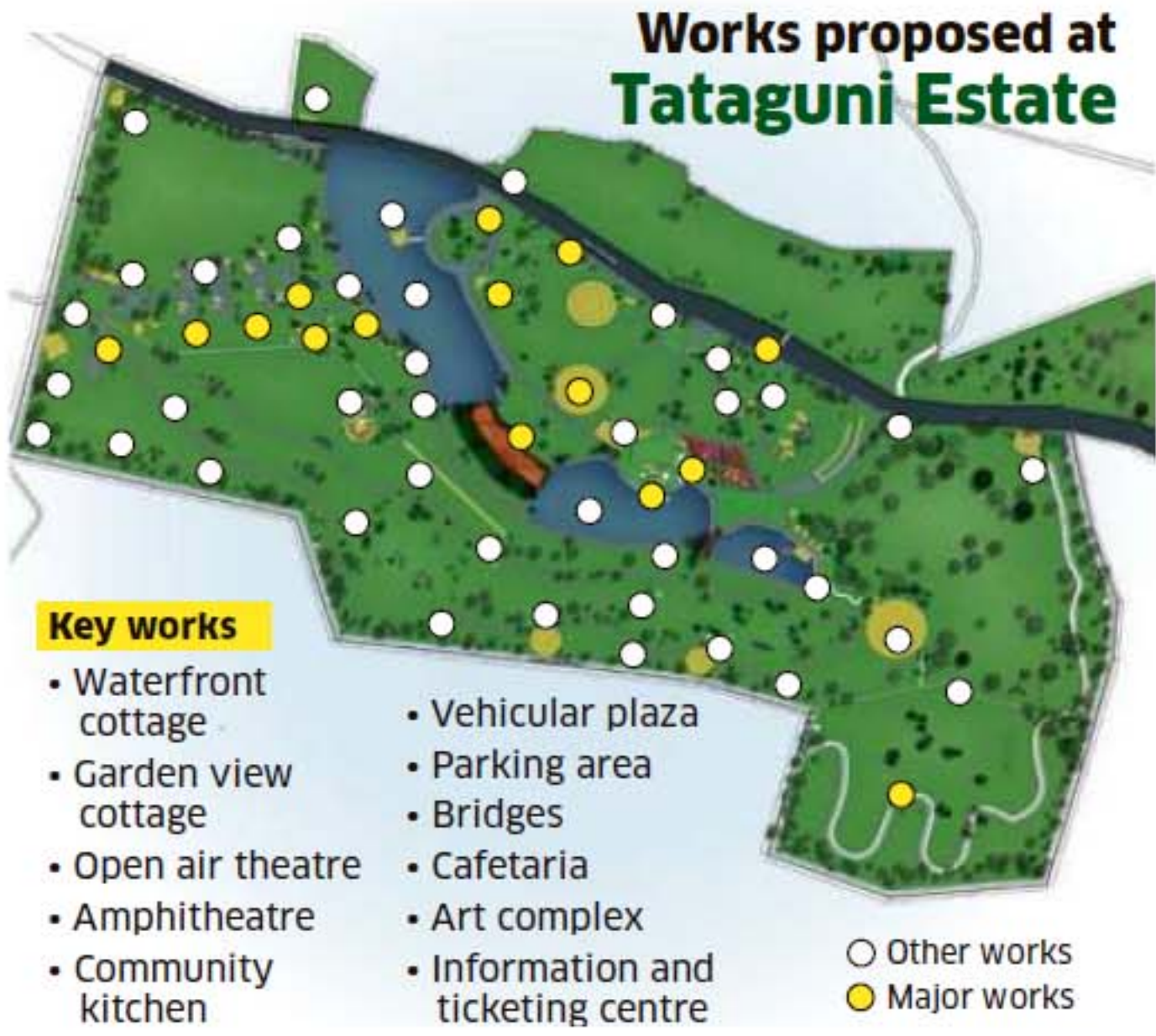
While the project has been in the news for the last few months after the Union government approved the scheme, the details of the works proposed by the department had not been made available. The Tourism Department recently finalised a management plan for the

project which spelled out the works.

As per the project management plan, submitted by the department, the 468 acres will be turned into a tourist hotspot by taking up development works that will change the land use pattern. The state government is borrowing Rs 99.17 crore as an interest-free loan to take up the project.

Entrance plaza, parking area, an additional “vehicular plaza”, cafes, amphitheatres, cottages, landscaping works, community kitchen, adventure sports arena, bicycle track, toilets, kitchen, safari loop, tents and an aviary. The carrying capacity of the newly built tourist amenities is estimated at 26,946.

In several contexts, the project prioritises visual aesthetics over ecology. For in-



stance, the project proposes to merge two lakes - Tataguni lake and Kuppareddykere - and build two bridges of 270-metre each to connect the land parcels across the newly merged water body to create “picturesque viewpoints”.

Similarly, the project involves building “vernacular cottages along the lakefront and garden cottages” that will

provide an “immersive nature experience.” The project will also make space for caravan tourism.

Back in May 2017, wildlife biologist and conservationist Sanjay Gubbi wrote to the forest department about the “first ever” documented record of smooth-coated otters for Bengaluru in the Roerich estate. “The smooth-coated otter is listed under Schedule

II of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972. They are primarily threatened by loss of habitat due to loss of wetlands,” it said.

Interestingly, the document acknowledges that the estate is home to many mammals and “has an elephant movement corridor” but believes its interventions are eco-friendly. In March 2022, an elephant died after being hit by a BMTC bus as the NHAI delayed the construction of an animal overpass on the Bengaluru-Kanakapura road.

Former chairman of the state biodiversity board Anant Hegde Ashisara said the very premise of making Roerich estate a tourist destination was misplaced. “Apart from elephants, the estate is a critical host for a diverse set of fauna and flora. I have requested the government to drop the project. I have also requested the forest department to save the forest,” he said.

An officer said that nearly half of the projects involve building some form of artificial structures, be it concrete or wooden. “Note that the

estate is a deemed forest. The project will turn it into a manicured lawn strewn with artificial structures and paths to reach them,” he said.

Replying to a similar query in 2019, the then Additional Chief Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Millo Tago had written to the state government that the estate is part of the (Savanadurga) elephant corridor and was also included in the list of deemed forests submitted to the Supreme Court. He pointed to a government order dated May 15, 2014, to state that works in deemed forests require clearance under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

When asked, Tourism Department secretary Salma K Fahim said the management plan has been submitted to the Forest Department. “If they approve, we will take up the work. Otherwise, we will drop it,” she added.

Meanwhile, Bengaluru Urban Deputy Conservator of Forests N Ravindrakumar said he has received directions from the higher ups to inspect the site and submit a report.

Eleven new Olive Ridley sea turtle nests found between Marina beach and Kovalam

Experts say this is significant because very few nests had been located so far during this nesting season, and is encouraging in the backdrop of over 1,200 turtle carcasses washing ashore since Jan.

Geetha Srimathi

CHENNAI

In a positive turn of events following a series of Olive Ridley sea turtle carcasses washing ashore on the coasts of Chennai and Chengalpattu, several new nests have been found in the past two days. Eleven new nests were discovered between Marina beach and Kovalam, which is particularly significant given that very few nests had been located till then during this nesting season.

On Sunday, two turtles came ashore at Marina beach for nesting. Manish Meena, Wildlife Warden of Chennai, who was present at the time along with Forest Department staff and volunteers from the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN), said, "This gives us hope



Sign of hope: One of the two Olive Ridley sea turtles that came ashore for nesting at Marina beach on Sunday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

that things will improve."

Since January, over 1,200 Olive Ridley carcasses were found washed ashore on the coast. The number of carcasses found has slightly decreased. Experts believe that the turtles may have accidentally got caught in trawl nets while congregating at sea.

R. Suresh Kumar, a wildlife biologist at the Wil-

dlife Institute of India, says turtles do not simply travel to nesting beaches, lay eggs, and return. Instead, they tend to congregate in specific areas, and he suggests that certain fishing practices in these aggregation zones may be a key factor behind the rise in turtle deaths this year.

"This year, certain fishing practices in turtle con-

gregation spots may be a primary reason," Mr. Suresh said, recalling his own research during his Ph.D in Odisha, where he discovered that turtles often gather at particular locations, though the exact spots remain unknown.

Turtles rescued

Further, a joint patrol by the Forest Department, Fisheries Department, Marine Police, and the Indian Coast Guard intercepted a trawler near Ennore with 16 turtles caught in its net. The trawler was located within 5 nautical miles off the shore. "Luckily, the turtles were alive," Mr. Meena said. After an inspection, the turtles were safely released, and the boat was booked under the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act, 1983, and the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Leopard found dead in Jabalpur was electrocuted; arms & bikes seized

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Jabalpur: A leopard found dead on the Jabalpur-Mandla border was electrocuted by a gang. The forest department team discovered a large number of wildlife remains and skins at the gang's hideout, which were sent to a lab for examination. Additionally, a significant number of hunting weapons and ten motorcycles were found and seized by the forest department team.

The leopard's carcass was found in the Samadhi forest land under the Pipariya forest range in Jabalpur. The paws of the leopard's hind legs were missing. Following the prescribed procedure, the leopard was cremated after a post-mortem. Forest range officer Apoorva Prakhara Sharma stated that according to the post-mortem report, the leopard died due to electrocution.

Under the guidance of CCF Kamal Arora and DFO Rishi Mishra, the forest department team raided the village of Deori under the Bijandandi police station in Mandla and found hunting weapons and cages in a house. Additionally, remains and skins of various wildlife were recovered and sent to the lab for examination.



Forest teams with the seized animal hides and arms

Leopard scare grips Tirupati

A.D. Rangarajan

TIRUPATI

A leopard has been sighted nearly 15 times in the outskirts of the city over the last three months, giving sleepless nights to the students of various educational institutions spread across the region. The big cat was last sighted last at Sri Venkateswara University, Sri Venkateswara Vedic University and Sri Venkateswara Veterinary University, all adjacent campuses dotting the Alipiri-Cherlopalli road.

The leopard is learnt to have been foraging into the region in search of dogs.

“Leopards move into human habitations only in search of food. The habitat has to be maintained clean so as to keep the area clear of stray dogs. There is no need to capture this leopard as it has not harmed

any human so far. It has avoided the places where people gather. It is only the psychological fear that has driven humans to panic,” said P. Vivek, Divisional Forest Officer of Tirupati Wildlife Management Circle.

However, in view of the animal’s frequent sightings and efforts to relocate it into the forest, the department is considering installing cages across SVU campus to capture it.

Meanwhile, a stray elephant was sighted on the Tirumala first ghat road, near 7th mile point, a few days ago. It is the second time in the last six months that a tusker has attempted to cross the ghat road. “Had it crossed over to this side, it would have been a danger for both the elephant as well as the pilgrims,” Mr. Vivek observed.

Leopard trapped in tea garden

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Jalpaiguri: A leopard that had strayed into the Nepuchapur tea estate in the Mal block of Jalpaiguri district walked into a trap laid by the state forest department on Monday morning.

Sources said over the past few days, the leopard had attacked some workers and taken away cattle and poultry from their quarters.

The forest department laid a trap with bait on the plan-

tation. On Monday morning, residents heard a leopard growling and found the animal in the cage.

Around 10am, forest department officers took the animal to the nature interpretation centre in Lataguri. Sources said it will be treated and released into the wild.

Carcass found

A leopard carcass was recovered by foresters from plantation of the Kumlai tea estate, also in Mal block, on Monday afternoon.

Lokhandwala lake choked by invasive plant, still awaiting wetland status

Birders and conservationists urge protection as aquatic weed threatens habitat

RANJEET JADHAV
ranjeet.jadhav@mid-day.com

WHILE Lokhandwala Lake—a birder's paradise with over 100 species, including migratory birds—still awaits wetland status, as demanded by wildlife and nature lovers, an aggressive aquatic plant, Ipomoea, is spreading rapidly, threatening its fragile ecosystem. This invasive species can cover large waterlogged areas, impacting birdlife and aquatic diversity. Conservationists stress that a protected status would enable controlled vegetation removal, ensuring open water availability.

On February 2, World Wetland Day was observed globally, highlighting the urgent need to protect wetlands. Environmentalists and residents of western suburbs, including members of the Lokhandwala Oshiwara Citizens Association (LOCA), have been demanding that Lokhandwala Lake be officially recognised as a wetland to secure its protection.

mid-day has consistently reported on threats to the lake. In December, a news report titled 'Debris dumping in Lokhandwala Lake: State Human Rights

Commission summons chief secretary' revealed how the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) took serious note of the ongoing negligence. Criticising the authorities, the commission stated: "It is evident that the stakeholder departments are evading their responsibilities, resulting in the issue remaining unresolved. The Chief Secretary of Maharashtra should thoroughly examine the matter."

During a recent visit, mid-day observed numerous migratory birds at Lokhandwala Lake but also noted a growing threat—the rapid spread of the invasive Ipomoea species, covering large portions of the water body.

'At around 10 acres, this lake and its surroundings, flanking the Malad Creek and just west of the Lokhandwala residential area, serve as a magnet for birdlife. Its semi-wild nature—untouched by 'beautification'—has preserved its natural dynamics'

Sunjay Monga, Naturalist, writer, and photographer

Naturalist, writer, and photographer Sunjay Monga emphasised Lokhandwala Lake's ecological significance, calling it the last of its kind in suburban Mumbai. "At around 10 acres, this lake and its surroundings, flanking the Malad Creek and just west of the Lokhandwala residential area, serve as a magnet for birdlife. Its semi-wild nature—untouched by 'beautification'—has preserved its natural dynamics, unlike many other lakes in Mumbai," Monga said.

Monga noted that around 150 bird species have been recorded at the lake, nearly half of them migratory, including several regional rarities. "Tragically, like many unprotected wetlands, Lokhandwala Lake suffers from human neglect. Despite multiple attempts to secure its conservation, no concrete action has been taken," he said. He warned that while Ipomoea has some ecological benefits, its unchecked spread could choke the lake, making controlled vegetation removal necessary.

Monga urged authorities to declare the lake a protected

area—possibly even a small bird sanctuary. "Few sites of such limited extent can boast such avian diversity. The Forest Department should step in and provide legal protection." He also called for strict penalties against those littering around the lake and demanded a ban on bird feeding near the platform adjacent to the water body.

Sumesh Lekhi, chartered accountant, lawyer & filmmaker, said. "Lokhandwala Lake is a thriving wetland habitat with around 130 bird species, over 30 of which are migratory coming from as far as Siberia. Legally, it is already classified as a wetland and CRZ1 area under the Maharashtra Remote Sensing Application Centre Map, the Wetland Atlas Map, and the CRZ Map of Maharashtra. Even the BMC has confirmed this on paper," he said.

LOCA President Dhaval Shah urged the government to take immediate action. "Lokhandwala Lake is a birding hotspot. If the spread of Ipomoea is not tackled, it could have severe ecological consequences," he said.

FEB 2

Day World
Wetland Day
is observed



Birds spotted at Lokhandwala lake. PIC COURTESY/SUNJOY MONGA

The cost of ignoring our wetlands

Without urgent conservation efforts, Mumbai's wetlands may vanish completely, leaving city exposed



BY INVITATION
Rushikesh Chavan

THE evening of July 26 2005 will forever remain imprinted in the memories of every Mumbaikar. The whole city was flooded and many lost their lives. A major factor contributing to this disaster was the loss of Mumbai's wetlands—the natural buffers that once absorbed excess floodwater. Today, Mumbai has lost 71 per cent of its wetlands, which significantly contributes to the city's vulnerability to flooding. The impact of wetland loss is not unique to Mumbai. Cities across India are facing similar challenges, including water insecurity, flooding, and the loss of essential ecosystems.

Across India, wetlands are vanishing at an alarming rate. For instance, Chennai has lost 90 per cent of its wetlands, and cities such as Vadodara, Hy-



Flamingos in the wetland areas of Navi Mumbai. PIC/ADITYA PRADHAN

derabad, and Bengaluru have also seen significant declines. In Mumbai, the rate of wetland degradation has led to increasingly severe monsoon floods in certain parts of the city.

Wetland loss has a nationwide impact, with the average annual economic cost of floods in India reaching ₹5,649 crore in 2021. These losses are not just environmental but also socio-economic, affecting millions of lives. Wetlands are a "common property resource," meaning they are freely used by many, and when overexploited, their degradation harms everyone. In Mumbai, this is compounded by the growing problem of waste dumping and untreated sewage

entering our water bodies.

I remember during one of my surveys of mangrove ecosystems along the coast of Mumbai, I encountered a startling variety of waste— from discarded syringes with needles, and clothes to an entire sofa set. On another occasion, while walking along a river, I witnessed untreated industrial effluent being dumped directly into the water. These are just a few examples of the neglect our wetlands face.

Why do we treat such a vital resource with such disregard? Wetlands provide a range of ecosystem services that are crucial for our survival. They protect the city from floods by absorbing excess water. For instance, each

acre of wetland can absorb up to 5.6 million litres of floodwater, providing a vital buffer against storm surges and floods. Yet, more than 90 per cent of India's natural disasters are water-related, and without wetlands to protect us, Mumbai is becoming increasingly vulnerable to these disasters.

Beyond their environmental benefits, wetlands also hold profound cultural significance. In Mumbai, wetlands like the vast mangrove forests along the coastline are not only crucial for maintaining ecological balance but hold a deep cultural meaning to the city. The rich biodiversity of these wetlands supports countless species, many of which are integral to local traditions and livelihoods.

Governments and private entities must prioritise and invest in wetland conservation. Ultimately, what will make the greatest difference is a genuine commitment to change, moving beyond rhetoric lip service to tangible impactful efforts.

If we can develop and imple-

ment this as part of the MMR region's development, the ever-growing Mumbai could not only contribute to MITRA's goal of 17.55 per cent growth for Maharashtra but also bring in ecological security that supports human well-being, cultural benefits, and improves satisfaction and happiness for its residents.

Our flood-prone areas could have wetlands that not only store excess water but also double as recreational areas for families and friends to gather. Further, the water can be used for public utilities, reducing pressure on our dams. Wetlands visited by flamingos can be ecologically secured and converted into tourist attractions.

There is enough research done to come up with viable solutions. A crucial step will be improvements in areas of regenerative development of infrastructure and waste management to ensure that all sewage and effluent are treated before entering water bodies. Equally important is the restoration of these wetlands by removing invasive species and reintroducing native flora and fauna.

In the realms of political economy, it is essential to prevent and minimise the diversion of wetlands for alternate purposes.

Lastly, using existing legal provisions to protect wetlands to our advantage by converting short-term, need-based development into a new regime that allows wetlands to play their role in human development is key. We must shift focus from policy to effective action.

Is this not known to the people who matter? It is! The challenge lies in addressing the pressing needs that drive short-term exploitation such as food, water, and livelihood. Equally critical is creating incentives that prioritise long-term benefits over immediate gains.

India already has some of the most well-drafted legal provisions to achieve this. There are several 'yojanas' and several lakhs of crores are pumped through them. This has limited impact on ground. The focus has to shift to mitigating the challenges in implementing the law.

This is a long-drawn battle, but the one that can and must be won. On this World Wetlands Day let us not just talk about our theme of 'Protecting wetlands for our Common Future' but protect wetlands for our common future.

Rushikesh Chavan is head of The Habitats Trust

GREENER HIGHWAY | Order came after 5-year-long legal battle

Plant 39.5k trees along highway: NGT to NHAI

Staff Reporter

NASHIK

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) to plant 39,500 indigenous trees along the Nashik-Pune Highway (Khed-Sinnar) as compensation for the 2,373 trees cut during the highway's development. The tribunal has also mandated the maintenance of these trees for the next five years, paving the way for a greener highway.

The NHAI had neglected the condition under which the licence for highway development was granted. While widening the highway, trees were cut down, but they were not replanted as required. Ganesh Borhade, a petitioner from Sangamner, filed a case in the NGT in 2020, highlighting the environmental damage caused by this violation.

Victory after five years of legal battle

Borhade's relentless five-year legal fight has finally yielded results. The tribunal strongly criticised the NHAI for breaching the terms and conditions. It was pointed out



For the conservation of wildlife as well as the protection of trees, the Forest and Wildlife Department needs to take serious note. It is also necessary for the department to ensure that the terms and conditions under which development permissions are granted are strictly followed.

— **Ganesh Borhade**
Petitioner

that, besides failing to plant trees, the authority also neglected essential measures such as underpasses, flyovers, and rainwater harvesting for wildlife safety. The tribunal has given an ultimatum to complete these works by March.

Plantation and maintenance mandate

The NGT has ordered the planting of indigenous tree



File photo

WILDLIFE SAFETY MEASURES TO BE IMPLEMENTED

A joint inspection report was submitted by the Wildlife Society, Forest Department, and NHAI regarding underpasses and flyovers for wildlife crossings. Based on this, the tribunal has ordered:

- Subway construction at Malwadi
- Flyovers at Khandarmalwadi and Kanhe Ghat
- Necessary modifications in the subways at Velhale, Chandnapuri, and Dolasane

species such as Banayan, Pipal, Kanchan, Karanja, and Neem along both sides of the highway passing through Rajgurunagar. Additionally, it

emphasised that the trees must not only be planted but also nurtured for five years, with the responsibility placed on the contractor.

HOME TO HONEY BADGER, HYENA, WOLF AND MORE

Purulia: A biodiversity hotspot

DEBRAJ MITRA

Calcutta: Rusty-spotted cat, honey badger, pangolin, hyena, wolf, leopard, black bear.

Purulia, home to all these animals and more, is emerging as a treasure trove of biodiversity in Bengal.

A cat that looks more like a kitten, covered in a fawn coat with rusty brown spots on its back and an unmarked tail, was earlier this month captured by trap cameras in Simni forest of Kotshila range of Purulia.

Wildlife experts and foresters identified the subject as a rusty-spotted cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*), among the world's smallest cats. It is the first formal documentation of the species in Bengal, they said.

In September last year, cameras had taken pictures of honey badgers (*Mellivora capensis*) in the same area, also for the first time in Bengal. Honey badger is a tenacious small carnivore with a reputation for being among the world's most fearless animals and taking on much bigger animals.

In the past five years, the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) and Indian wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) have also been captured by trap cameras more than once in Purulia. Wolves and hyenas have been documented in the forests of Jhargram, Bankura and West Burdwan as well.

Dalma elephants have been a recurring presence in the forests of the western districts of Bengal. But barring that, there was nothing much that got the limelight.

"The documentation of these species in the forests of the western districts of Bengal is breaking a stereotype — that Bengal's rich wildlife is confined to the Sunderbans and north Bengal. Forests like the Sunderbans, Jaldapara and Gorumara hog all the lime-light because they are home to the big games like tiger, elephant and the rhinoceros," said Debal Ray, the chief wildlife warden of Bengal.

Forest officers and wildlife experts said they and the locals were not unaware of the presence of these ani-

mals. But the extent of their distribution was largely anecdotal. There has hardly been any scientific documentation of their presence. Now, things are changing.

The forest department has recently done a study on the small mammals in south Bengal. The Sunderbans were not included in the project.

"The findings surprised us. We have recorded a wide variety of small mammals. There has been a huge comeback for animal diversity. The primary reason for this is the development of the quality of forests. Not only the big trees but the ground vegetation has also witnessed great improvement for the past two decades. We are now going for targeted conservation of these small mammals," Ray said.

Several NGOs working for wildlife conservation have also conducted their own surveys in these forests. The subjects ranged from wolves to hyenas to pangolins.

Many of these animals

have been traced to the forests of Purulia. Ray told this newspaper: "The habitat differentiation makes Purulia special. The forest is not monotonous in Purulia. It has rocky terrains, caves and a lot of variety. They are ideal for thriving micro-ecosystems."

The latest discovery, the rusty-spotted cat, has been hailed as "significant".

Dhriti Banerjee, director of the Calcutta-headquartered Zoological Survey of India, said "there is no previous record of the animal in Bengal".

The cat has so far been recorded from only three countries in the world — India, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

In India, they have earlier been documented in multiple states, including Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

"Weighing at 0.9 to 1.6 kilograms, this cat is the lightest in the world with a newborn kitten weighing less than a chicken egg," said Vasudha Mishra from

SPOTTED IN AND AROUND THE DISTRICT



Rusty-spotted cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)

- Usually found in hilly landscapes with dry deciduous forests and scrub lands. The cat has so far been recorded in only three countries — India, Sri Lanka and Nepal.
- In India, they have earlier been documented in multiple states, including Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.



Honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*)

- Expansive range that includes Africa, West Asia and Indian subcontinent.
- Known for their courage and fearlessness. They are known to attack larger animals and are able to persevere through pain and danger.



Indian Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*)

- Grey wolves are found across peninsular India in scrub forests, grasslands and arid areas. A bulk of the population remains outside protected land.
- A forest official said they favoured semi-arid regions and ravine-like places, where it is easier to hide their puppies.



Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*)

- The ones found here — and other places in India like Gujarat and Rajasthan — are striped hyenas, smaller and more solitary creatures than spotted hyenas of Africa.

HEAL, the NGO that had set up the cameras for a conservation programme.

The rusty-spotted cat is one of the two smallest cats in the world, the other being the black-footed cat.

With rich biodiversity comes the spectre of conflict because the forests of the western districts of Bengal are interspersed with human settlements.

Hyenas have been butchered in Purulia and West Midnapore before.

Anjan Guha, the divisional forest officer of Purulia, says the wildlife is thriving with the help of local people.

"The species are flourishing because of congenial habitat. I think Purulia has emerged as a role model in conservation with the help of locals," he said.

Guha thinks Purulia, already a popular holiday spot, has the potential to emerge as a wildlife tourism hotspot in the future.

"I will send a proposal to the higher authorities, seeking permission for safaris inside the forests," he said.

Rare Eurasian otters resurface in Kashmir Valley

Gulzar Bhat

Srinagar

Once believed to have almost vanished, Eurasian otters have resurfaced in the Kashmir Valley over the last three years. The species was recently sighted in Gurez Valley, some 123 km north of Srinagar.

A video showed otters feasting on fish in the gurgling Kishangana river, which flows through the placid Valley. Released onto the digital sphere by a Gurez resident on January 27, the footage attracted much attention of wildlife watchers.

According to experts, the video is significant as it is the first live record of the species. "It represents the first

live documentation of the species in the last 25 years," Intesar Suhail, Wildlife Warden, told *businessline*.

He said the otters had almost never been photographed in Kashmir. "The sightings have become rare in recent years with none reported outside the Gurez Valley," said the Wildlife Warden.

According to him, in the late nineties, the otters were commonly seen in rivers and streams across Kashmir.

"In 1997, I have spotted them in the back waters of famous Dal Lake," said the official. He said that since then the sightings had become very rare.

RED LIST

Eurasian otters, locally



known as *Vodur*, belong to the Mustelidae family and inhabit semi-aquatic environments. The species feed on fish and are responsible for maintaining a healthy ecosystem. Over the last three decades, the population of otters dwindled significantly. Habitat loss, use of pesticides and poaching contributed to the declining population of otters across

Jammu and Kashmir.

The International Union for conservation of Nature (IUNC) listed the Eurasian otters as near threatened on its red list in 2004 and 2008.

The official, however, said that it would not be appropriate, as recently reported by a section of press, to say that the species was extinct.

"Over the last two to three years, the otters have been sighted in Gurez Valley," he said.

In 2023, camera traps captured an otter in Gurez and the finding was published in IUNC/SSC Otter Specialist Group Bulletin by a joint team group of researchers from Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology and Aligarh Muslim University.

Rescued cub of leopard dies at Van Vihar

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bhopal: A female leopard cub, which was rescued in a critically injured condition from Samardha Range, Golbehat and brought to Van Vihar National Park for treatment on Jan 9, died at the national park on Monday. The cub was extremely weak and unable to move. The cause of death was found to be traumatic shock.

Van Vihar officials said that the deceased female leopard cub was six months old. Despite continuous treatment by Van Vihar wildlife veterinarians, the cub died.

The post-mortem of the deceased cub was conducted on Monday by a joint team of wildlife experts, including Dr Atul Gupta, Dr Hamza Nadeem Faruqui from Van Vihar National Park, and Dr Rajat Kulkarni from Wildlife SOS Van Vihar. After the post-mortem, the cub was cremated in accordance with regulations in the presence of senior officials and staff at Van Vihar National Park.

Samanatham tank: High Court initiates *suo motu* action to declare it as bird sanctuary

Registrar (Judicial) says the tank in Tirupparankundram block is a habitat to over 150 species of birds

The Hindu Bureau
MADURAI

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on Monday initiated *suo motu* proceedings to preserve Samanatham tank in Madurai district and declare it as a bird sanctuary under Section 18 of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. If declared as a bird sanctuary, the tank would be the first sanctuary to be declared so in Madurai district, the Registrar (Judicial) said.

A Division Bench of Justices G. Jayachandran and R. Poornima directed the State government to file a status report and adjourned the hearing by four weeks.

The Registrar (Judicial) said that Samanatham tank located in Tirupparankundram block was a habitat to more than 150 species of birds which included near-

ly eight threatened species such as Oriental Darter, Painted Stork, Black headed Ibis, Spot billed Pelican, Black tailed Godwit, Bar tailed Godwit, River Tern and Osprey.

These bird species have been declared as nearly threatened as per the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN-Red List). The tank was also a habitat to two vulnerable species of birds: Indian spotted Eagle and Greater spotted Eagle. The tank was presently under the control and maintenance of the Public Works Department.

Owing to the biodiversity and unique natural birds habitat, there has been an appeal to protect the waterbody by declaring it as a bird sanctuary under Section 18 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, the Registrar said.

The action was necessi-

tated in light of the fact that the waterbody was vulnerable to poaching, loss of natural habitat and easily accessible to the public which gravely threatened the natural habitat of the birds. If the waterbody was declared as a sanctuary, it would be subjected to restriction as to entry in terms of Section 27 of the Act and various other protective measures as envisaged under Chapter IV of the Act, as a protected area.

Article 48 A of the Constitution ordains that the State should endeavour to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forest and wildlife of the country. There was also a fundamental duty cast on every Citizen under Article 51 A (g) to protect and improve the natural environment and wildlife, the Registrar said.

Earlier, a public interest litigation petition was filed

before the High Court to direct the State government to declare the tank as a bird sanctuary within a time-frame. The petition was closed on the basis of the submission made by the State that proposals have been forwarded to the government after obtaining the NOC from the village panchayat and the Water Resources Organisation of the Public Works Department, the Registrar said.

As the proposal to declare the waterbody as a bird sanctuary has not seen fruitful result and having regard to the imminent need to protect the water tank and ensure the natural habitat of birds, the High Court has taken cognisance of the same and instituted the present *suo motu* writ petition seeking a direction to the State government to declare Samanatham tank as a bird sanctuary, the Registrar said.

Indian Rock Python Sightings Are On The Rise In Coimbatore, With Some Spotted Inside Homes

SNAKING OUT OF THE WOODS

Pic: R Ramesh Shankar



CAUGHT AND RELEASED:
One of the Indian rock pythons that was rescued in Coimbatore recently

From Chennai to Florida to catch pythons



Pic: Janaki Lenin

In 2017, Chennai-based herpetologist Romulus Whitaker (extreme right in pic) was consulted on California's python problem. He brought in expert snake catchers Masi and Vadivel from the Irula Snake Catchers Industrial Cooperative Society in Nemmeli. Alongside local wildlife and veterinary experts, they captured 27 invasive Burmese pythons in a month, including one 5m long and weighing more than 75kg. The US faces a major issue with invasive Burmese pythons, especially in Florida, where a python challenge was held last year to control their population. Originally from Southeast Asia, these snakes entered Florida through the pet trade. Many were abandoned, becoming predators that have destroyed native wildlife and disrupted the ecosystem

Oppili.P@timesofindia.com

Last week, Karthik woke up at his house at Sirumugai, Coimbatore district to an unsettling visitor — a 13ft long Indian rock python (*Python molurus*) coiled up in the living room. He informed wildlife officials who safely released the snake back into the wild.

A similar incident occurred at P N Palayam, Coimbatore a fortnight ago when a python attempted to swallow a spotted deer. The wildlife department and fire service personnel rushed to the scene. However, the python was unable to consume its prey and regurgitated it. The snake was subsequently caught and released into the wild.

Encounters with Indian rock pythons have become increasingly common in Coimbatore and its suburbs, says Thadagam-based farmer C R Jayaprakash. In 15 days, three Indian rock pythons have been rescued from different locations and rehabilitated in forests.

D Venkatesh, chief conservator of forests for Coimbatore circle, says there is no threat from these reptiles straying from wooded areas. "Whenever reports of python sightings are received, officials ensure their safe capture and release back into the wild," he says.

Thondamuthur, Thadagam, P N Palayam, Karamadai, Mettupalayam, and Sirumugai have all seen python rescues and releases in the recent past. Although there is little danger to humans, domesticated birds such as chickens may be at risk. Despite these increased encounters, herpetologists argue that the population

of Indian rock pythons —classified as 'near threatened' on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red list — in the region has not surged.

"Changes in land use have contributed to the rise in sightings," says Tirunelveli-based herpetologist Albert Rajendran. "Two decades ago, farmlands near forest fringes were overgrown with bushes and trees. There was no agricultural activity. These lands have since been converted into cultivated areas, with houses in one corner. Many farmland owners also rear chickens and other birds, which attract pythons."

Rajendran says that pythons have always been present in the region. "The difference now is that they are more frequently noticed due to increased human activities at forest fringes."

Rajendran says that during the flooding in Tirunelveli in the early 1990s, pythons were washed into human habitations from forest areas. "These reptiles adapted to their new surroundings and settled near human habitations."

Chennai-based herpetologist V Kalaiarasan says regions such as Thadagam, Karamadai and Anaikatty are natural python habitats. "The availability of food near human settlements encourages these reptiles to move closer and sometimes remain in the area," adds Kalai-

arasan. Human habitations also attract pythons because of the easy availability of prey. In the wild, says Rajendran, pythons must attempt to catch prey multiple times, often succeeding only one out of 10

times. After a successful hunt, they do not need to feed for the next 10 days.

Pythons are primarily nocturnal, waiting for reduced human presence before emerging to hunt. Their ability to adapt to changing environments allows them to settle down and breed near human settlements. Their home range typically spans 2sqkm, and they can travel up to 4km a day. Despite being slow movers, they establish long-term territories.

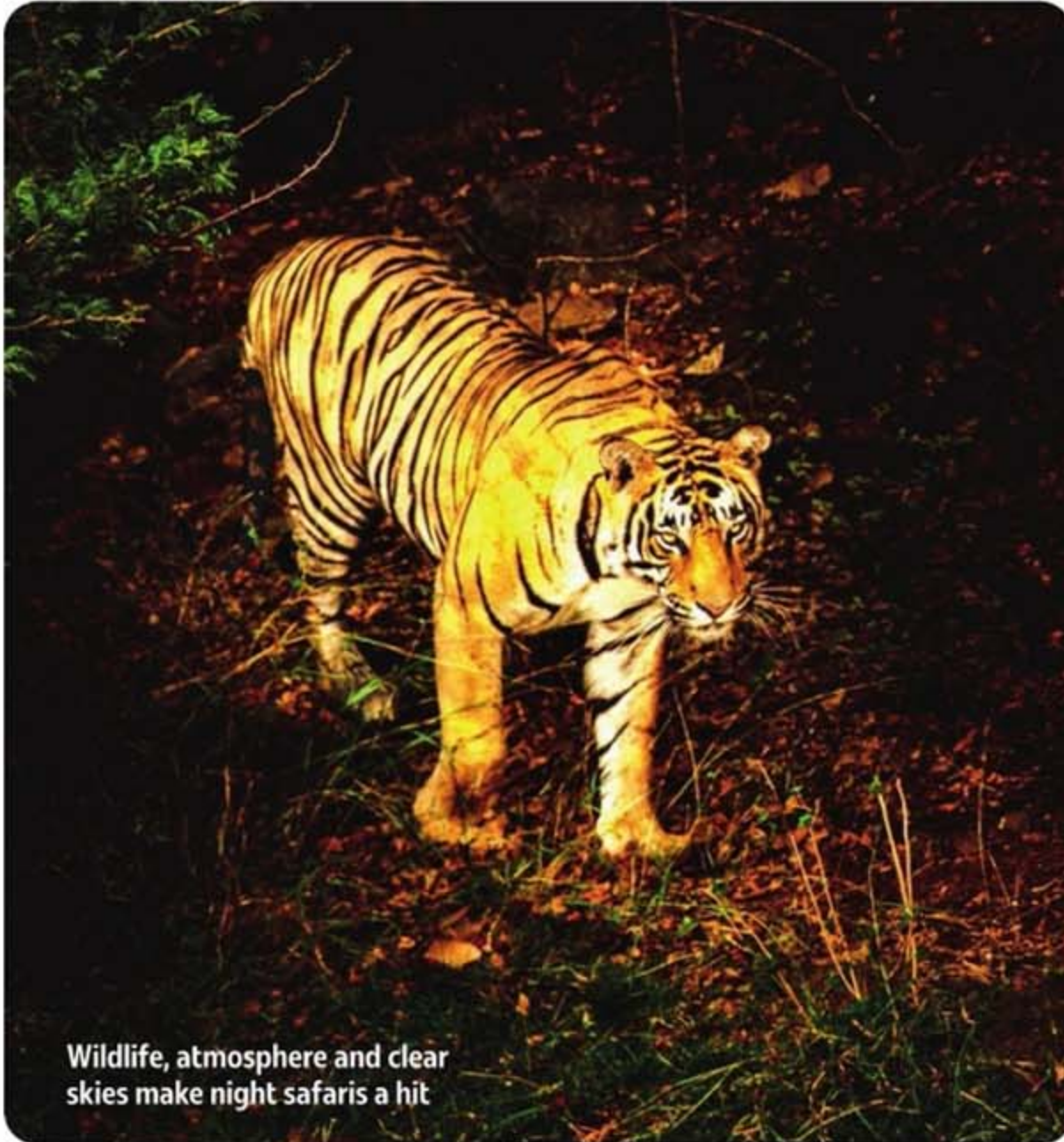
In a scientific study conducted five years ago, the Wildlife Institute of India, in collaboration with veterinarians and wildlife officials from the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, embedded radio telemetry chips in 10 wild Indian rock pythons to study their behaviour, habitat and breeding patterns. The results showed pythons travelled up to 8km before settling in specific areas.

"Human encounters with pythons will increase as more people engage in various activities such as farming near forest fringes," says Kalaiarasan. "As these interactions become more common, the need for awareness and co-existence strategies becomes essential."

Email your feedback
with name and address to
southpole.toi@timesofindia.com

Stargazing and spotting nocturnal wildlife is on travellers' bucket lists

Pics: iStock



Wildlife, atmosphere and clear skies make night safaris a hit

CONTINUED FROM **K 1**

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING A NIGHT SAFARI?

Joydeep Mondal, who runs a bespoke tour agency, says, "When I host guests for night safaris, we pause at a dry riverbed or by a lake on a full moon night, turn off the vehicle engine and lights so the visitors can absorb the sounds of the forest at night. After some time, the eyes get adjusted to the moonlight which makes it easy to see silhouettes of creatures without disturbing them." He also adds that there are more tiger and leopard sightings in buffer zones now. "If you're patient you'll also get to see highly nocturnal creatures like porcupines, rusty spotted cats, civet cats, jungle cats and sometimes even the rare honey badger. Night safaris are also perfect for stargazing enthusiasts who love to marvel at the night sky."

International night safaris

Globally, you can put destinations like the Singapore Night Safari, which includes tram rides and walking trails showcasing over 130 animal species, Sabi Sands Game Reserve in Africa where you can spot hyenas, leopards, and even pangolin, and the Alice Springs Desert Park in Australia that highlights unique desert wildlife, including bilbies and echidnas, on your list.



Things to keep in mind

- Choose licensed operators
- Dress to blend in. Avoid bright clothes
- Avoid flash photography
- Respect the rules of the forest
- Carry a refillable water bottle
- Collect wrappers and other waste in a bag
- Dispose trash in bins provided at the site

(As shared by safari operators)



I was hesitant at first, but once we started, I was hooked to the experience! If you follow the rules and don't disturb the forest and its inhabitants, you'll get to see a whole new world after dark

— Keshav Gupta, a first-time night safari visitor

Thiruvananthapuram zoo gets a new striped resident

An eight-year-old tigress captured from Wayanad has been brought to the zoo. The animal will be under quarantine for some time before being released into its assigned enclosure

Nirmal Harindran
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Thiruvananthapuram zoo got a new fanged, striped resident on Sunday.

An eight-year-old tigress that was caught by the Forest department from the Pulpally locality in Wayanad was brought to the zoo in the evening.

The officials had interrupted the free-ranging days of the predator after she caused scare among the people in the area and developed a taste for livestock. After much public furore, the Forest department captured the tigress in a cage.

Veterinarians who examined the tigress counted several injuries, possibly from territorial fights with other big cats in the 350 square kilometre area of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, which has more predators than in the 777-sq-km Periyar Tiger Reserve. On Sunday evening, animal caregivers and helpers



After a long journey: A tigress brought from Wayanad accommodated at a quarantine facility at the Thiruvananthapuram zoo on Monday. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

at the zoo unloaded the tigress from a specially prepared cage inside a truck container. A 10-member team accompanied the tigress from Wayanad.

Ajesh Mohandas, Assistant Forest Veterinary Officer from Wayanad, oversaw the operation. He told *The Hindu* on Monday that they had taken a carefully scheduled break in the journey every 40 km to

monitor the tigress's health and protect it from getting overstressed. "It took us 14 hours to reach Thiruvananthapuram," he said.

Nikesh Kiran, the zoo's veterinary surgeon, said the injury on the tigress's right fore paw was concerning. "Treating the wound may delay the tigress's release into her assigned enclosure." Dr. Ki-

ran said that the zoo's tiger handlers would begin providing the tigress with the 7-kg of meat allocated to predators from Monday night. P.S. Manjula Devi, the zoo's director-in-charge, said the tigress was on track to a speedy recovery and would soon be an attraction for visitors. The zoo authorities are also scouting for a name for the latest guest.

Weddings to schools, elusive ‘sugarcane tiger’ gives 11 UP villages anxious days

MANISH SAHU

LUCKNOW, FEBRUARY 3

MANOJ KUMAR Yadav, Rehman Khera village resident, is worried about attendance at a family wedding next month, while Shabeena Khatoon, a housewife at Meethenagar village, moves around in a group to collect firewood. Since the first week of December 2024, a “sugarcane tiger” on the prowl has meant terror in 11 villages near the state capital of Lucknow.

The tiger, which has killed 12 animals, continues to evade capture by the UP forest department. Renu Singh, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Lucknow Division, says 100 officials have been working 24/7 to capture the animal.

To determine the animal’s origin point, the department compared its photographs — focusing on its unique stripe pattern — against those of tiger’s in reserves across UP. With no match in the database, officials suspect it is a “sugarcane tiger” — a big cat that is born, inhabits and moves around in sugarcane fields more comfortably than in forests, its natural habitat.

An official says, “We believe the tiger arrived here from Lakhipur Kheri in the Terai region, nearly 200 km away. Pugmarks found here recently suggest that it may be returning home.”

UP’s Terai region spans 15 districts, extending from Saharanpur in the west to Kushinagar in the east. Nearly 70% of land in this region is under sugarcane cultivation.

A forest official says, “Sugarcane tigers grow up watching their mothers hunt in these fields, co-exist with humans and move to a different sugarcane patch during the harvest season instead of the forest since these fields are never harvested together.”

In the first week of December, there were whispers of a tiger in the fields of Karjhan village, around 20 km from Lucknow. Dismissed as “rumours”, two developments on December 12, 2024, confirm these claims: over 100 pugmarks over a 2-km stretch in the village and a dead nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*).

On December 13, a forest team set up camp at a government institute in Rehman Khera village. Though just one official has spotted the tiger so far, the team says it



A banner warning residents of one of the affected villages near Lucknow. Vishal Srivastav

is a young adult male aged around five years.

Meanwhile, over 20,000 residents in affected villages have been living under high alert since December. Besides warning banners, all residents have been told to move in groups and to avoid stepping outside from 5 pm to 7 am, says an official. For the safety of residents returning late, two teams on night duty have been ferrying them home in vehicles, says Sitanshu Pandey, Divisional Forest Officer, Lucknow.

Ravindra Prasad Yadav, pradhan, Duguli village, says residents have been told to keep their animals indoors at night.

With the department restricting the entry of outsiders, *The Indian Express* was allowed in these villages under strict supervision. For locals, the prohibitory or-

ders have revived memories of 2012 — when another tiger had entered Rehman Khera village and was captured after three months.

At the nearby Meethenagar village, residents discuss how the tiger should be caught. “If this team had followed the measures used in 2012, it would have caught the beast by now. I think they need to focus on the watering holes frequented by the tiger,” says Anshu Yadav, 28, a farmer.

Meanwhile, the forest team has been using surveillance equipment, including 32 camera traps, seven CCTV cameras and three drones, including two thermal ones, to track the tiger. Two elephants from the state’s Dudhwa National Park, a tranquilising team, police personnel and Wildlife Trust of India officials have also

been deployed for assistance.

A few locals have also been appointed as ‘Bagh Mitras’ for sharing of information with the department and the villagers. Besides this, bricks near the four massive cages set up to trap the tiger have been doused in a tiger’s urine to lure the young male. And yet, fear continues to grip the region. Even schools in these villages have been affected. Following the District Magistrate’s orders, 25 government and private schools with nearly 3,000 students have gone online.

Ramita Maurya, principal, government school, Meethenagar, says, “Only 50% of my students have been attending online classes since most don’t have access to cell phones. We have advised children to attend classes in groups to ensure no one loses out.”

WITH 13 CUBS, 'LOVABLE' DUDHWA TIGRESS IS SUPERMOM, FIERCE GUARDIAN

Kanwardeep.Singh
@timesofindia.com

A tigress in Dudhwa has rewritten the script of survival — not with brute force alone but through sheer will. Beldanda, the undisputed queen of Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakhimpur Kheri, has given birth to at least 13 cubs, surpassing Machli, the famed Ranthambore tigress who birthed 11 between 1999 and 2006 — and was feted at one point of time as “India’s most photographed big cat”. While Machli’s legacy is defined by longevity, Beldanda’s is one of struggle. She first captured the world’s attention in 2019 when she was photographed with five cubs — a rare phenomenon. Wildlife experts and park officials were stunned. But nature, indifferent, had other plans. One by one, the cubs vanished — some presumed dead, others lost to the vast wilderness. A year later, she gave birth again, this time to four cubs. It should have been a second chance. Instead, it became another test.

In 2020, a video captured in a camera trap surfaced — grainy, gut-wrenching. A male tiger, later named Thunder Male, was seen attacking her cubs. Two of them were killed, and Beldanda nuzzled up to her dead ones for hours, unwilling or unable to leave. The sight of her lingering beside her dead cubs drew global attention, a heartbreaking scene that turned her into a symbol of the wild’s brutal laws. Tourism in Kishanpur was halted, and access to the specific range was restricted to protect the remaining cubs. Two males did not survive, but the two females reached adulthood.

In 2023-24, Beldanda gave birth again — another litter of four. Three have survived to adulthood, a feat that few tigresses achieve in a world where every newborn is a target. She now has five surviving offspring: two females from her 2020 litter and three from 2024. This survival rate



Photos: Siddharth Singh

MATRIARCHS OF THE WILD

Collarwali (Pench, MP) 30 cubs spanning 8 litters from 2008 to 2019. Died in Jan 2022 at age of 16

Badi Mada (Pench, MP): 29 cubs — including Collarwali — across multiple litters. Last sighting in early 2010s. Presumed dead

Madhuri (Tadoba, Maharashtra): 19 cubs across 5 litters between 2010 and 2017. Last spotted in 2018. Presumed dead

Beldanda (Kishanpur, UP): 13 cubs across 3 litters

between 2020 and 2024. Sighted frequently. Alive

Maya (Tadoba, Maharashtra): Believed to be Madhuri’s granddaughter. 13 cubs across 5 litters between 2014 and 2023. Not sighted since Aug 2023. Presumed dead

Machli (Ranthambore, Rajasthan): 11 cubs in 5 litters between 1999 and 2006. Died in Aug 2016 at the age of 19; among oldest known wild tigresses

is notable, as in the wild, only about 2-3 cubs from a litter of 4 to 5 survive to maturity.

But Beldanda is more than just a mother. She is a spectacle, a tourist magnet. Every year, national and international tourists visit Dudhwa, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tigress who has defied odds like no other. Her reputation among guides and wildlife photographers is unmatched — she shimmers into being in open areas, unfazed by the presence of humans, displaying a confidence few wild tigers possess. Fertility alone, though,

does not tell the whole story. Beldanda’s battle has been against more than just nature — it has been against rivals, threats from male tigers, the cycle of survival itself.

Wildlife photographer Siddharth Singh, son of the late Dr Ram Lakhan Singh, former principal chief conservator of forest and founder director of Dudhwa, has followed her since she was just another young tigress trying to carve out a territory. “I first saw her in 2014 or 2015, when she was still with her mother and sister,” he told TOI. “She was named Beldanda after the Beldanda waterhole, where she was first spotted. Like Machli, she did not wait to inherit power — she chased her mother and sister away, taking control of her range. I’ve seen her display a boldness that few other tigresses have.”

But power is never permanent in the wild. Her relationship with Chaltua, the most dom-

inant male in the region until 2024, ensured her safety for a time. But now, with Thunder Male and other less dominant males attempting to kill her cubs, the danger has never been greater.

Park officials in Dudhwa acknowledge her status as an icon of survival. H Raja Mohan, field director of Dudhwa, said: “She is our star. Visitors, even from outside India, come here specifically to see her. All our guides and drivers inform new tourists about her story. She is an exceptional mother, and she possesses rare genetic traits. But we also ensure that she and her cubs are not overly disturbed by tourist vehicles.”

He added, “Beldanda currently stands alongside tigress Maya from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, who gave birth to 13 cubs across five litters (with only two surviving to adulthood).” Maya has not been sighted since Aug 2023 and is presumed dead as per data available about her from the reserve.

Former field director Lalit Verma, who oversaw key conservation efforts, said: “We ensured there were operational waterholes in her range so that she did not have to move far in search of food and water. Some areas were temporarily removed from the safari circuit to protect her cubs from disturbance.”

For those who have seen her up close, Beldanda is no ordinary tigress. Sanjay Pathak, former field director (2019-2023), said: “She is a tourist-friendly tigress. Normally, tigresses with cubs are aggressive, but she seems comfortable around tourists — sometimes, it seems as if she is showing off her cubs to visitors. Maya had similar qualities, but Beldanda is more than just a spectacle — she is a fighter. A supermom.”

Pathak recalled one of her most harrowing moments. “We saw it happen, one of her cubs getting killed. She had to protect the remaining three. She did everything possible to keep them alive. This is who she is — a protective mother who never gives up.”



Yadadri Gaur goes missing

BALU PULIPAKA | DC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 3

The gaur that was found in Atmakur mandal of Yadadri-Bhongir district on January 30 has pulled off a disappearing act, and forest department officials say they have no clue where it may have gone.

The gaur, or Indian bison, was found in Pallerla in Atmakur mandal and its presence came as a huge surprise to forest officials. The animal was found in a privately held eucalyp-

tus plantation and was believed to have strayed from its herd. While it was not known where the animal may have come from, officials had then said they were tracking it.

However, two days later, officials said the gaur, the largest bovine in the world, was nowhere to be seen and alerts were sounded in many villages where the animal was first seen but to no avail.

“We have also alerted our officials in the neighbouring districts

and will get a report if the animal is sighted again,” a department official said.

“It is quite possible that this particular gaur may have strayed from the Pakhal wildlife sanctuary, which is not too far away, around 120 km or so, and the terrain is mostly flat. Pakhal has gaurs but better tracking efforts are needed to understand these migrating paths and why they are moving into new areas,” a senior forest department admitted.

Zoos asked to review list of endangered species in India

Exercise aimed at identifying constraints to achieving conservation breeding targets

Puja Das

puja.das@livemint.com

Indian zoos have been asked to review the current list of endangered native species in the face of biodiversity loss, over-hunting and climate change.

An expert committee of the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) has recommended the review which will include identifying the constraints faced by zoos in achieving conservation breeding targets, increasing their financial assistance, future actions and adaptive management.

As many as 74 endangered species, comprising 62% mammals, 32% birds and 6% reptiles and amphibians, are housed across 43 Indian zoos.

The plans involves detailing a 10-year conservation breeding strategy, appointing species experts, and collaborations with international bodies such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

This partnership aims to bring global expertise to Indian zoos, fostering knowledge exchange and refining the criteria for species involved in conservation breeding, as per a communication reviewed by *Mint*. Conservation breeding programmes aim to help protect endangered species by breeding them in captivity, such as in zoos.

The need for these changes arises from the realisation that wildlife conservation, especially through breeding programs, must evolve alongside shifting ecological and societal challenges, an official said.

The expert committee's report stresses the importance of periodic reviews of conservation programs to ensure they remain relevant and effective in achieving national conservation goals.

The committee aims to align these efforts with the CZA's 2021-2031 vision plan, which emphasizes strengthening both in situ (on-site) and ex situ (off-site) conservation strategies.

Globally zoos are home to 15% of threatened terrestrial vertebrates.

As many as 74 endangered species, comprising 62% mammals, 32% birds and 6% reptiles and amphibians, are housed across 43 Indian zoos

Collaborative efforts between zoos, both domestically and internationally, are necessary to manage metapopulations—interconnected groups of species

across different zoos.

Studies indicate that maintaining sustainable populations of more than 250 individuals often requires collaboration among 20 or more zoos distributed across thousands of kilometres.

For an extended version, visit [livemint.com](https://www.livemint.com)

Threat to survival

Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary in Assam faces ecological challenges as railway electrification and hydrocarbon exploration endanger its fragile biodiversity

SANDIPAN TALUKDAR
JOHRAT, ASSAM

THE HOOLOCK gibbon, one of humans' closest evolutionary cousins, clings to survival in a fragile habitat in India—a 21-km wildlife sanctuary in Assam's Jorhat district named after the ape itself. Over the past century, human encroachment has steadily tightened its grip on the sanctuary, which is home to over 219 bird species, six primate species (including the world's largest troop of stump-tailed macaques) and much more. A railway track, laid in 1887, cuts through its core, while "tea gardens and human settlements" encircle its "semi-evergreen forests and evergreen patches", as described by the state's forest department website.

Remarkably, the Hoolock gibbon, India's sole ape species, has managed to endure. A 2019 census conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, recorded 125 individuals within the sanctuary. However, conservationists are sounding the alarm over two projects sanctioned in 2024: exploratory hydrocarbon mining approved just 13 km south of the sanctuary and the electrification of the railway track running through it. These projects could upend the delicate balance of the vulnerable ecosystem, jeopardising the future

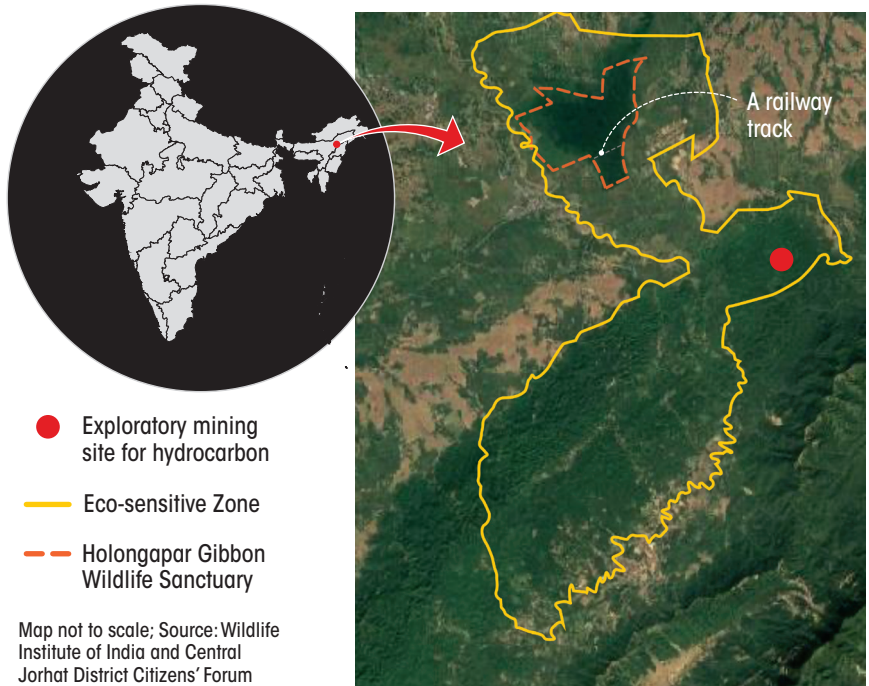
There are at least 125 Hoolock gibbons residing in the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary in Assam, according to a census conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India in 2019





Double whammy

In 2024, the National Board for Wildlife approved the Railways' plan to electrify the 1.26-km railway stretch cutting through the sanctuary, and also sanctioned exploratory hydrocarbon mining just 13 km south of it



of the primate and the other biodiversity in and around the sanctuary.

IN SEARCH OF OIL

The exploratory drilling site on the Assam-Nagaland border, while located outside the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, falls within its 265-sq-km eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) and near the Dissoi Valley Reserve Forest. Part of a project by Vedanta's subsidiary Cairn Oil & Gas to map hydrocarbon reserves in Jorhat, the site is among 35 locations identified for exploratory mining and occupies a critical elephant corridor. In August 2024, the project received approvals from Assam's principal chief conservator of forests, the chief wildlife warden, and the Forest Advisory Committee of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MOEFCC). Subsequently, the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), a

statutory body overseeing wildlife conservation, inspected the site in November 2024 and granted conditional clearance on December 21, 2024. They stated that while the site is within the ESZ, it does not encroach upon any designated elephant corridor. "Neither the Elephant Corridor Report by the Wildlife Institute of India nor the forest records with the MOEFCC classify the site as a designated elephant corridor," says Raman Sukumar, an NBWL member and honorary professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. According to Nandha Kumar, Jorhat's district forest officer, elephant movements in the nearby Dissoi Valley Reserve Forest are seasonal. "They come when the paddies are ripe for harvest. The corridor is relatively small and the drilling site is located at a distance

Guardians of Hollongapar

Exploratory hydrocarbon mining could impact one of humans' closest evolutionary cousins

Neeharika Gogoi and Narayan Sharma

A VISIT to Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary in Assam is not considered complete until one hears the loud, echoing calls of the Western hoolock gibbons (*Hoolock hoolock*), perched atop the highest branches. Their distinctive “hoo-koo hooo-kooo” calls, an integral part of the rainforest’s soundscape, captivate visitors. Globally, Western hoolock gibbons are found across eastern Bangladesh, west of the Chindwin River in northeastern Myanmar, and Northeast India. In India, their range is limited to areas south of the Brahmaputra River and east of the Dibang River. Known for their ululating calls, they are the only ape species in India and one of humanity’s closest relatives on the evolutionary ladder. The sanctuary, one of the fragmented forest habitats where they persist, covers less than 21 sq km.

Western hoolock gibbons are dimorphic, meaning adult males and females differ in both colour and size. Males, slightly larger, have black coats, while females sport light brown or golden fur. They reach sexual maturity between six and eight years of age, at which point they leave their natal groups to find mates and establish their own territories. The inter-birth interval is around two years, and typical troop sizes range from two to five individuals. They are primarily monogamous, with males and females pairing for life. Western hoolock gibbons consume fruit as their main diet but also feed on young and mature leaves and insects. As frugivores, they play a critical role in seed dispersal. Exclusively arboreal, they rely on brachiation, a unique method of forest travel involving swinging from branch to branch using their long, specially adapted forelimbs. Canopy connectivity is essential for their survival, as they rarely descend to the forest floor. When forced to the ground due to gaps in the canopy, they walk bipedally, standing upright on their hind limbs with their forelimbs raised. This makes them vulnerable to predation by dogs and other animals, as they are clumsy on the ground. Habitat fragmentation caused by tree felling disrupts canopy connectivity, restricting their movement and reducing food availability. As a result, the population size of hoolock gibbons has declined precipitously throughout their range due to habitat loss, fragmentation, and hunting. They are listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and are protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972.

Although the controversial oil exploration activities are set to take place 13 km away within the eco-sensitive zone of the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, they could still negatively impact local wildlife. Emissions from drilling can disperse pollutants over long distances, harming food sources. The tragic case of a gibbon family affected by the 2020 Baghjan blowout—a result of an oil leak at an Oil India plant—highlights the potential consequences. A pregnant female from nearby Barekuri village prematurely gave birth to a stillborn infant and died days later. The endangered Deohanh, or white-winged duck, also found in Hollongapar, depends on small forest pools that are at risk of contamination. Primates in the sanctuary already face threats from an existing railway track that divides the forest into two unequal halves. Oil exploration would exacerbate the degradation of this fragile environment.

(Neeharika Gogoi is a researcher and Narayan Sharma is an assistant professor at the Department of Environmental Biology and Wildlife Sciences, Cotton University in Guwahati, Assam)

from it. It should not harm the elephants,” says Kumar.

Environmentalists, however, oppose the project, arguing that the area has historically served as an elephant migration route since the era of the Ahom kingdom (1228-1826). “The site is undeniably part of an elephant corridor, and it was one of the reasons the ESZ was notified in 2019,” says Tridip Dutta, secretary of the Central Jorhat District Citizens’ Forum, which filed a public interest petition in the National Green Tribunal in November 2024 against the mining project and the electrification of the railway track. Dutta claims that of the 35 drilling sites, 10 are within 2 km of the ESZ boundary. “Even if the sites fall outside, their cumulative impact will be catastrophic,” he warns.

Sukumar argues that the drilling is purely exploratory, aimed at mapping hydrocarbon reserves, not commercial extraction. Additionally, the project must comply with strict conditions, such as real-time digital surveillance, minimal tree felling and pollution controls. “If there are no commercial plans, why conduct exploratory drilling in an elephant corridor?” asks Dutta.

Concerns are also being raised about the broader impact of such projects. “Deep drilling often brings contaminants like heavy metals to the surface, and improper disposal can pollute surface and groundwater sources,” says Pinaki Sengupta, former head of the material science and technology division at Jorhat’s North East Institute of Science and Technology. The noise and light pollution from round-the-clock operations would further disrupt wildlife.

When *Down To Earth* visited Aksomuwa village, one of the sites where drilling began in 2023, residents shared their anxieties. “The

company has leased our land for three years, but the compensation does not match the value of our paddy crops,” says one farmer, speaking on condition of anonymity. Flooding in 2023 exacerbated their worries, as mud and chemicals from the drilling site spilled into fields and ponds. While no immediate crop damage was reported, concerns about long-term toxicity remain. There is also resentment among the residents over the way the project was sanctioned. An elderly woman from the village says only those whose lands were acquired were consulted. “The rest of us only learnt about it after the deal between the company and the land-owners was finalised. There was no public meeting before the drilling machines were set up, and now they produce constant noise,” she adds.

ON THE TRACKS

The electrification of the Lumding-Dibrugarh section of the Northeast Frontier Railway, a 1.65-km stretch of which runs through the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, has also alarmed conservationists. The railway line, a vital link to Upper Assam, was upgraded to broad gauge in 1996-97 and sees around 40 trains daily. News of the electrification of the tracks was first confirmed in July 2024 through a Right to Information application filed by youth political groups, the Students’ Federation of India and the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI). “We first protested at Mariani railway junction (which is nearest to the sanctuary) and submitted a memorandum to the railways on July 15, 2024, calling for the withdrawal of the proposal. This was followed by protests in front of the circle office. We also brought the matter to the notice of Jorhat’s Member of Parlia-

ment,” says Prarthana Bordoloi, of DYFI. Still, on October 9, 2024, NBWL approved the project. While electrical posts have been erected, the track is yet to be energised. “For years, there have been demands to divert the railway section outside the sanctuary because it breaks the canopy cover. Instead, they are now electrifying the track,” says Pinak-

human-like partner selection process,” says Narayan Sharma, assistant professor at Cotton University, Guwahati. “They are family-centric, with each family comprising 5-6 members. Individuals choose mates from outside their families,” he adds. This behaviour underscores the need for uninterrupted canopies.

Kumud Ghosh, a resident of



Residents of Agsomuwa village in Jorhat district voice concerns over noise pollution and potential contamination of surface and groundwater sources due to exploratory drilling that began in 2023

pani Borthakur, a resident of Meleng Lakhipur village outside the sanctuary. In July last year, Borthakur wrote to the state chief minister about the same.

Hoolock gibbons rely on tree canopies for movement. The sanctuary’s dense vegetation, including Assam’s state tree, Hollong, provides ideal conditions for their arboreal lifestyle. However, shrinking forests and widening canopy gaps threaten the gibbons’ survival. “Gibbons are fascinating not only because of their arboreal nature but also due to their

Bheleuguri Ratanpur village outside the sanctuary, says the residents believe the canopy break has led to the separation of gibbon families for years and may have caused inbreeding depression. “A genetic study can prove it,” he says.

Dilip Chetry of Aaranyak, an Assam-based conservation non-profit, says rerouting the track 5.7 km south of the sanctuary is an easy solution to the problem. “This would protect the wildlife and facilitate future track expansion,” he says. **DTE**

⊗ @down2earthindia