



BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



AUGUST, 2022

CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Dear Members,

This e-newsletter of the BNHS is packed with updates from our field work and the events we hold for nature conservation. This is our attempt to make sure you get to know about the work of your Society in real time and to ensure that you are with us on this journey!

Vulture history is made!

BNHS made history when it successfully bred *Gyps* vultures in captivity. Now we have taken another landmark step for vultures, by releasing some of our captive bred birds into the wild. The vision for us was always clear – to raise *Gyps* vultures in captivity, work on phasing out vulture toxic drugs, and then release the birds.

On 18 July, 9.30 AM, we released 10 Oriental white-backed vultures *Gyps bengalensis* from the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC), Raja Bhatkhawa, West Bengal, at around 9:30 am. Mr. Apurba Sen, IFS, Chief Conservator of Forest and Field Director, Buxa Tiger Reserve, Mr. Praveen Kaswan, IFS and Mr. ----- Deputy Field Directors, Buxa Tiger Reserves, Mr. NripendraSingh, IAS, Additional District Magistrate, Land Reform, other forest officials of West Bengal, Dr. Vibhu Prakash – the coordinator of BNHS' vulture program, myself and all our staff of the VCBC were present at the event. The Officers quietly lifted the gate of the

release aviary with the help of a pulley located in a hide, 50 m away.

All the ten vultures hatched in captivity at the VCBC Raja Bhatkhawa centre were between two to four years old and were deployed with satellite tags or Platform Transmitter Terminal (PTT). Three rescued Himalayan vultures *Gyps himalayensis* were also released simultaneously, with coloured darvic rings on their feet.

The Oriental white-backed vulture fitted with a satellite transmitter, and released in the wild

The Oriental white-backed vultures are resident in West Bengal, so they are likely to remain in the State or in neighboring areas like Assam, Meghalaya, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Himalayan vultures could possibly go to their breeding areas which could be in Central

Asia, China or High Himalayas. The next six months will be crucial and will tell us how safe the environment in the surroundings is for future release.



The Oriental white-backed vulture fitted with a satellite transmitter, and released in the wild

The first release of 10 Oriental white-backed vultures was in February 2021, from West Bengal. It was successful as all the vultures could find food and water and there was no drug related mortality! Although they continue to be around the release aviary and food

is still being provisioned, the birds fly, soar and mingle with free ranging vultures. These vultures had travelled up to Kalimpong in West Bengal and Dhubri and Barpeta in Assam from the release aviary.

The release of the captive vultures in wild is a very significant step in vulture

conservation. The vulture population crashed in the country due to the veterinary use of the drug diclofenac and the conservation breeding programme was set up as an insurance against extinction of the now Critically endangered *Gyps* vultures. The Government of India moved in quickly

and banned the veterinary use of the drug in 2006.

There was evidence of drastic reduction in the use of the drug based on the scientific investigation of the cattle carcass tissue samples and this release will actually test the efficacy of the Government efforts. ■

The Indian Skimmer is skimming India!



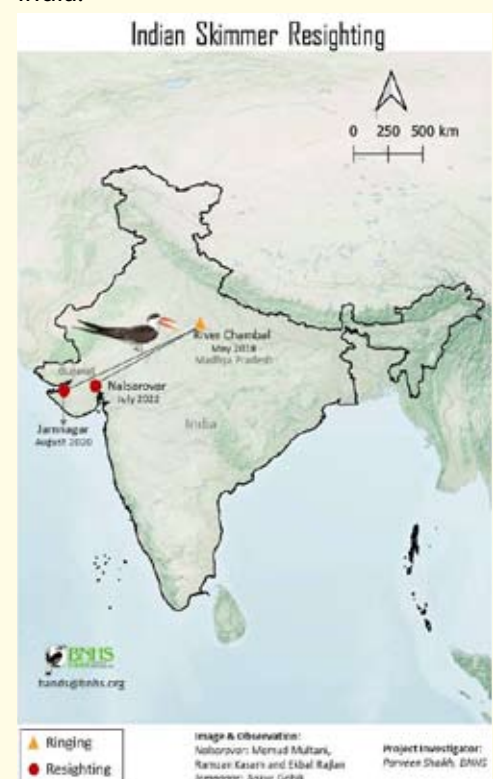
H04 guarding its nest in Chambal in April 2022

Birds continue to surprise us with their movements! There's always something new to learn. BNHS scientist, Ms. Parveen Shaikh, has been working on endangered Indian Skimmers *Rynchops albicollis* for years now. This is a bird that nests on riverine sandy islands and has most of its known

breeding population in Chambal river. Parveen has been following Skimmer movements by ringing the birds, to understand which places are important for them.

H04 is among the first skimmer chicks that we ringed in 2018. And since then H04 has been showing special

appearances at different places. In April 2022, we saw H04 nesting and guarding its chick in the Chambal River. Barely two months after this, on 6 July 2022, H04 was seen and photographed in Nalsarovar, Gujarat by Memud Multani, Ramzan Kasam and Ekbal Rajlani. Earlier in 2020, H04 was seen wintering near Jamnagar. Now it has chosen Nalsarovar. The Skimmer is literally skimming India!



H04's movements between Chambal and Gujarat

Speaking of bird movement, a ringed Bar-headed goose *Anser indicus* has made its way across the Himalayas- an international bird indeed! If you see any birds with bands or tags, please write to us at bands@bnhs.org. ■



H04 photographed in Nalsarovar, Gujarat on 06 July 2022. Photo by Memud Multani

Flamingo flappings

BNHS has been conducting long-term ecological monitoring of migratory birds visiting Thane Creek since 2017. To understand wintering birds' habitat use and migration patterns, our researchers deployed bird rings and colour flags at sites around Thane Creek. So far, around 18,500 birds have been ringed and flagged, and BNHS has been able to get resights within India and from other

countries.

To understand flamingo migration, BNHS has deployed six GPS/GSM tags on three greater and three lesser flamingos during January to April 2022. Three of these six flamingos have now moved to Gujarat. The details of the movement of these flamingos are as follows:



Juvenile Greater Flamingo 'McCann'. Leg Band Code 'ABF'



Lesser Flamingo 'Sálim'. Leg Band Code 'ASR'



Lesser Flamingo 'Humayun'. Leg Band Code 'ALD'

'McCann', a juvenile Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* named after Charles MaCann (1899-1980), former Assistant Curator of BNHS, an eminent naturalist and a prolific writer, left the shores of Mumbai on 14th July evening and landed near Ghogha in Gujarat on the morning of 15 July 2022. It took 15.45 hrs to cover the 300 km journey. It is the third GPS/GSM tagged bird that has reached Gujrat from Mumbai.

'Sálim' ('ASR' leg band), named after Dr Sálim Ali has reached wetlands near Ghogha town in Bhavnagar District of Gujarat. It took a non-stop flight from the wetland near Vashi on 6 July 2022 at 4.57 PM, flew over Dahanu and reached

Ghogha Beach on 7 July 2022 at 9.25 AM. It took 16.28 hrs to cover this ~ 300km journey.

'Humayun', a Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minore* equipped with GSM tag and leg band 'ALD' at Navi Mumbai on 19/04/2022, has flown to Bhavnagar, Gujarat on 30 June 2022. Named after renowned ornithologist and one of the stalwarts of BNHS, Mr. Humayun Abdulali, the bird is located in wetlands along Nawa Bandar Road, which leads to Bhavnagar Port.

We are eagerly following the adventures and flappings of our flamingos! ■

New bird records

On 14th April 2022, our team recorded two individuals of Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* in the Kanyakumari salt pans in Tamil Nadu. This is a new species for the district, and it was in full breeding plumage. On further visits, the BNHS team encountered five more individuals at the same location, last seen on 10 May 2022 and they were mostly observed in a single flock. This is the first authentic photographic record for this species from extreme southern Tamil Nadu or southernmost India.

On 28th June 2022, a regular field visit to the Puthalam salt pan in Tamil Nadu yielded a surprising 11 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus* in the area, which is the second sighting of this species in Tamil Nadu after one in Coimbatore,

in 2018. This is also the first sighting of this species from extreme southern India- the first authentic record both through sighting and photography. We consider this to be a range extension for this species.

The BNHS team at Point Calimere and Kanyakumari has been busy with projects involving intensive ringing, bird monitoring, training workshops and public/social events. At Point Calimere, during the migratory season 2021-22, 2,058 birds of 59 species were ringed. On 7 February 2022, the team ringed record number of 102 birds. Out of the 24 waders recaptured at Point Calimere during this season, 11 individuals were ringed from earlier seasons. At Kanyakumari, a total of 582 individuals of 28 species were



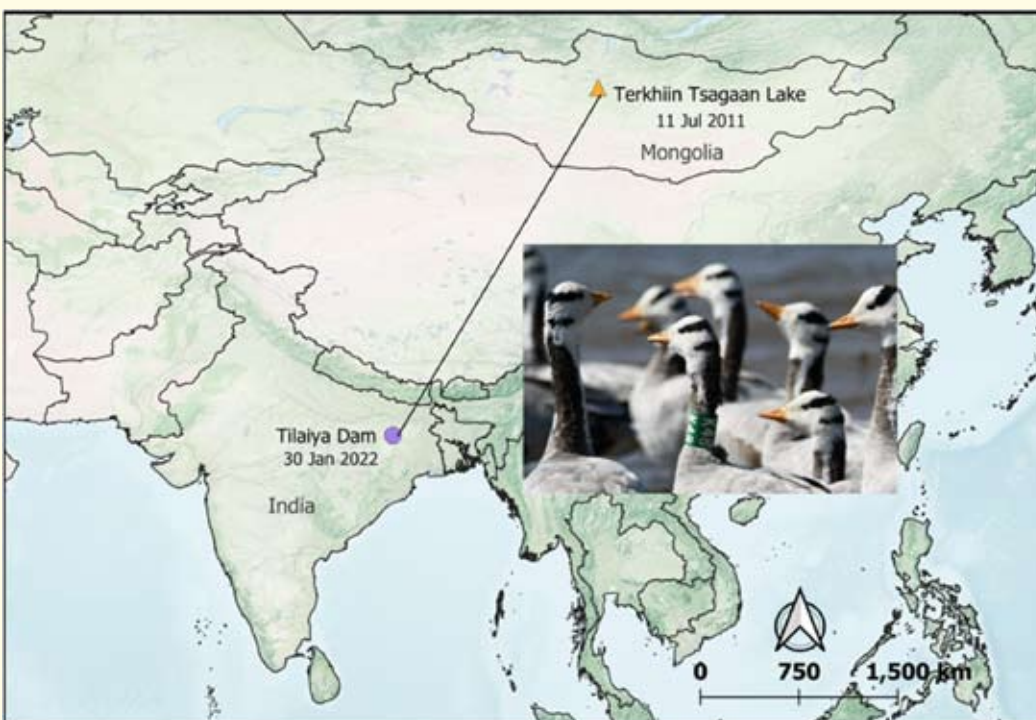
Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in Puthalam saltpan, Tamil Nadu- a range extension

ringed between 4 January and 1 June 2022. 20 of these birds were resighted in the same area. This summer (July 2022), we have recorded more than 2,750 Indian Spot-billed Duck and 3,000 Eurasian Coot in the salt pans of Kanyakumari. It is noteworthy to mention that such numbers have never been recorded in the district for the last decade.

We also held a two-day Bird Identification training program in Point Calimere and one day field visit to Kanyakumari for 45 rangers trainees from West Bengal and

Assam undergoing training at the Central Academy for Forest Service, Coimbatore. They were briefed about bird ringing activities and bird identification techniques. ■

The oldest bird recaptured was a Common Redshank at Point Calimere, after eight years.



Bird Ringing Corner

A colour-marked Bar-headed Goose K48 was resighted at Tilaiya Dam, Koderma District, Jharkhand which was reported to bands@bnhs.org in early July 2022. The observation was shared with Wildlife Science and Conservation Centre of Mongolia. The ringers reported that the bird was ringed nearly 11 years ago at the North-west bay of the Terkhiin Tsagaan lake in province Arkhargai of the Central Mongolia. During ringing, K48 was identified as adult female and weighed about 1900 grams.

Report Tagged Birds:
bands@bnhs.org

Labels	
▲	Ringling
●	Resighting

Ringers
Nyambayar B & Tseveenmyadag N
Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia

Image & Observation
Dr.Satya Prakash,
IBCN Member & Team

Discovery of a new, endemic plant!



We are delighted to announce the discovery of a new plant, *Lepidagathis mahakassapae*, from Satara plateau of Maharashtra. Belonging to plant family Acanthaceae, this beautiful, pink-blossomed plant is endemic to Satara. We discovered the plant in an expedition in 2019, and realised that it falls in the Genus *Lepidagathis*. We studied it for two years in all seasons, comparing it with other species of *Lepidagathis* in India. At the end of the study, it was found that this plant is new to Science and is found only in the plateaus of Satara, Maharashtra.



Lepidagathis mahakassapae

This plant does not grow upright on flat plateaus, rather spreads like a matted bed, and can grow up to two and a half meters in length. It belongs to the category of monocarpic plants like Karvi (*Strobilanthes*) in the Acanthaceae family. Monocarpic plants bloom only once in their entire life and after producing fruits and seeds the whole plant dies. This new plant also gets its full growth in 2 years and from March onwards it starts blooming in hot climatic conditions on the plateau. After some weeks, hard capsules can be observed on the plant among spiny bracts. On the onset of humid conditions, the capsules release seeds. New plants then take root in rock crevices.

This new plant falls into the IUCN 'Endangered' Category. Human-induced fires and various types of constructions on high elevated plateaus appear to be primary threats to this plant and its population is on the decline.

The plant is named in the honour of the Pippali Manav born in the Brahma family in Magadha, later known as Mahakassapa (Mahakashyap), a principal disciple of the Buddha foremost in ascetic practice (Dhutanga). The paper has been published in the journal *Nordic Journal of Botany* and the authors are Sushant More, Parle Tilak Vidyalyaya Association's Sathaye College, Mandar Sawant and Harshal Bhosale, Bombay Natural History Society,

Sharad Kambale, Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj's Arts, Commerce & Science College, and Rohit Mane, Department of Botany, Shivaji University Kolhapur. ■

Godawan Smarak

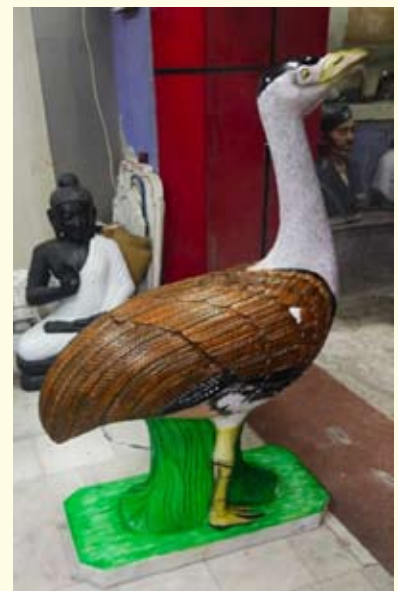
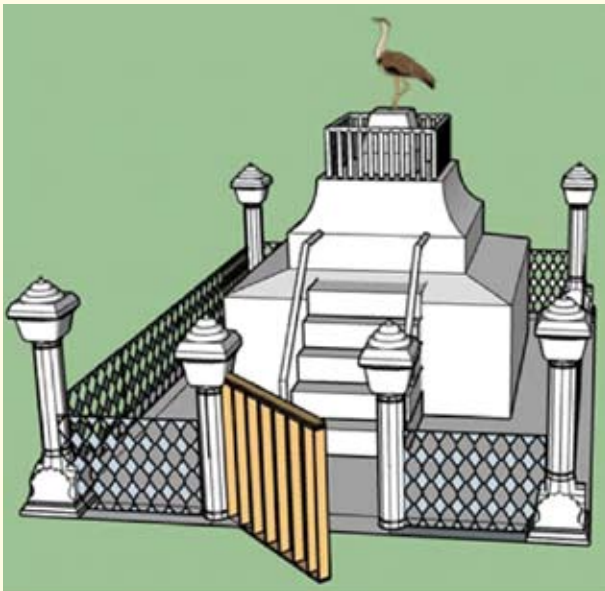
On 16 September 2020, a Critically Endangered Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigricaps* died due to Collision with the high-tension transmission line. This incident happened in Deg Rai Mata Oran, a Sacred grove, conserved by local people near Devikot in Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan. The locals from Sanwta-Rasla area felt that the female GIB which succumbed to the powerlines was the daughter of the Oran, or "Oran Ki Beti". They approached BNHS to help build a memorial for the deceased bird. BNHS took the initiative to construct a life-sized marble statue of the GIB.

This was a joint effort, as conservation often is. For erecting the

Godawan memorial, Shri Sumer Singh Bhati, conservationist from Sanwata-Rasla village made an appeal to local people on ground as well as through Facebook and managed to get the required material. Additional support was provided by Rotary Fellowship of Wildlifers for conservation (Rotary club), Bengaluru. The most challenging task was making a life-sized marble sculpture which took more than a month for Mr. Nemi Chand Sharma an artist from Jaipur.

An inaugural event was organised by the Deg Rai Mat Oran Trust and the locals from Rasla-Sanwta Panchayat on 11 April 2022. The event was chaired by Shri Kalyan Singh Moolana,

Chairman of the Deg Rai Mat Oran Trust and co-chaired by Sh. Kulwant Rai Sharma, Commandant, Border Security Force (BSF). Myself, Dr. Sujit Narwade and his team from BNHS were present in this inaugural ceremony. People and environmentalists from various places in Jaisalmer district attended the inaugural function. The event was supported by Mr Devi Singh Bhiksar, Haathi Singh Moolana, Doorjan Singh Rasla the members of the Deg Rai Mat Oran Trust, Mr Moti Singh and Mr Kanwraj Singh. BSF Officials and Jawans who were present at the inaugural function were briefed about the presence of the bird in their duty areas. ■



Stages of creation of a masterpiece

Creating a fenced carcass dump to reduce competition between free-ranging dogs and vultures

In 2020-2021 BNHS conducted an extensive multi-season survey across Jaisalmer district and some parts of three districts of western Rajasthan namely, Barmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner. The grasslands of Thar provide a wide range of ecosystem services and support numerous threatened species, including the bustard and raptor species. Around 150 vultures including (*Gyps indicus*, *Gyps himalayensis*, *Gyps fulvus*, *Neophron percnopterus*, *Aegypius monachus*) were found near village Khetolai. We found that the vultures are facing stiff competition from free ranging dogs and wild boars, who try to scavenge their food. Villagers from Khetolai informed us about gradual increase in number of dogs and wild pigs in recent years and they are not only competing with the vultures for food but also attacking Chinkara and livestock as well. During further interactions with the villagers we realized that instead of throwing carcasses in the open, a fenced carcass

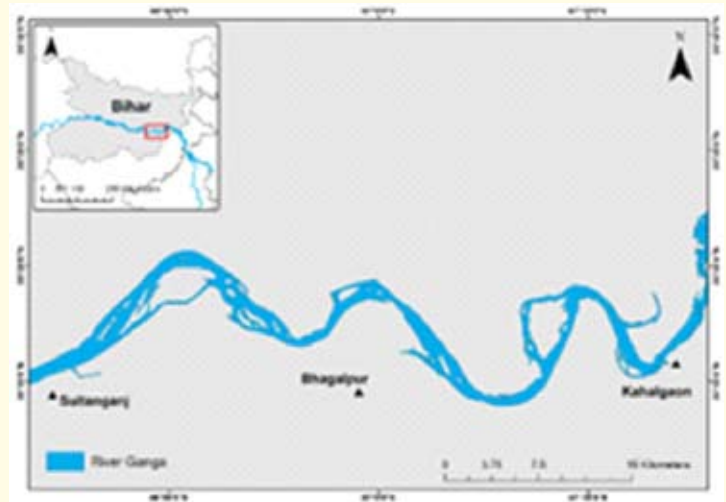
dump will not only prevent free ranging dogs and wild pigs from scavenging, but also facilitate food for the endangered vultures. The village Panchayat Khetolai approached BNHS seeking scientific, technical and financial support to create a fenced area where the livestock carcass of the concerned village panchayat can be dumped and monitored.

The aim was to reduce the approach of predators such as the free ranging dogs and wild pigs to the dumpsite and then cut down undue competition for the avian scavengers especially the vultures. The work for this fenced dump site started on the occasion of World Environment Day 2022, on 5 June.

The village panchayat spared 1 Bigha of revenue land for developing a carcass dump site located almost one and a half kilometer from the village center. The fence is secured with stone pillars, metal wires and mesh, and deep trenches with stone slabs. ■

Studying birds in Vikramshila dolphin sanctuary

The Bombay Natural History Society, Wildlife Institute of India, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University and DECC-Bhagalpur Forest Division collaboratively launched an expedition to study Bird Diversity and conduct acoustic monitoring of Dolphins in Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, in Bhagalpur, Bihar. This is India's only Protected Area for Gangetic River Dolphin *Platanista gangetica*. Launched in April, this was an exciting adventure exploring the revered Ganga, its Ghats and its 22 diverse Sandbars for river bird richness, nesting species, auditory range of Dolphin, Mapping sandbar morphometrics, habitat,

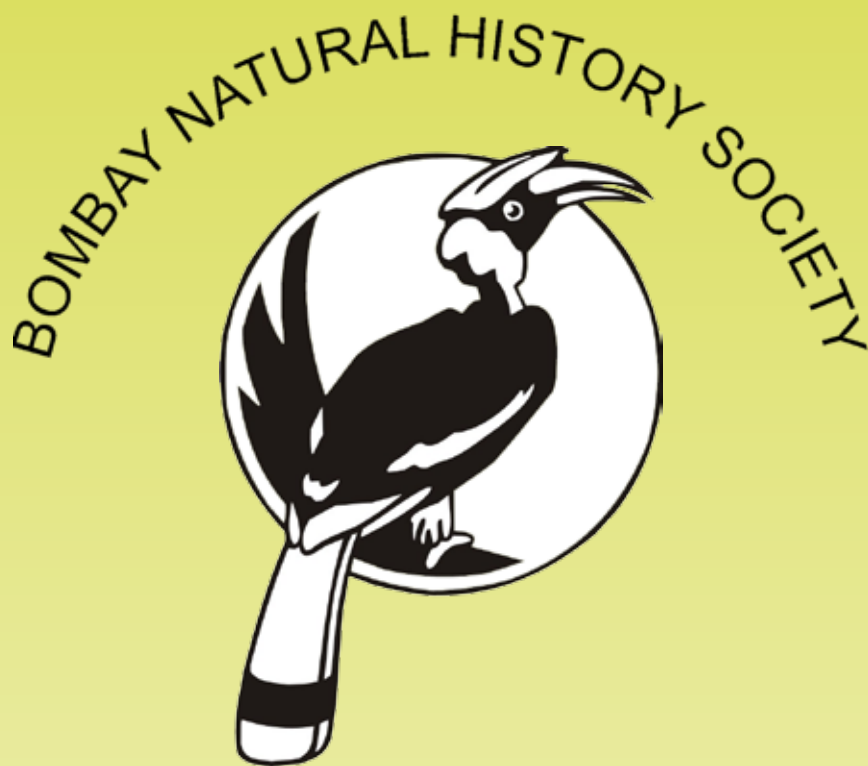


pollution, interactions with local river communities, evaluating threats and existing policies. A Team of 10-12 members including local Dolphin Mitra were involved in this monthly survey which commenced from April until June end 2022. We also recently concluded the two-day capacity building and green skill development workshop for River Monitoring benefitting Forest Guards and few volunteers involved in the local river conservation program. ■

Thank you for reading and for being with us on this conservation journey!

Bivash Pandav

Dr. Bivash Pandav, Director, BNHS



BNHS MISSION

Vision: Premier independent scientific organization with a broad-based constituency, excelling in the conservation of threatened species and habitats.

Mission: Conservation of nature, primarily biological diversity, through action based on research, education and public awareness.

CONTACT US

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