SACON NEWS

Vol.12 (3): July - September 2015

A TRIP TO THE HIGH RANGES

The scenic landscape of High Ranges is located in the northern part of the Southern Western Ghats that includes southern part of Nelliyampathi Hills, Anamalai Hills, Cardamom Hills and western portion of the Palni Hills. It encompasses three sub regions namely, the Central High Range (Kannan Devan Hills), the Eastern Anjanad Valley (Marayoor) and the Western Pooyamkutty - Idamalayar valleys.

As acclaimed ecologist and environmentalist Dr. Sathis Chandran Nair states, while describing the High Ranges,"The widest reaches of the Western Ghats in Kerala is the High Ranges. It is also the highest reaches". Most of the forests of High Ranges are on the western slopes drained by Idamalayar and Pooyamkutty Rivers and their valleys. The Pambar River originates from the eastern side of Kannan Devan Hills, and is drained into Amaravathi River through Chinnar.

Giant Squirrel

The forest types of High Ranges include high elevation montane-forests and grasslands, humid and high elevation forests, humid mid elevation and humid low elevation evergreen forests in the windward side and dry forests in the Anjanad Valley. The present land use pattern of high ranges include Protected Areas (Eravikulam National Park, Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, Kurinjimala Wildlife Sanctuary, Anaimudi National Park, Pampadum Shola National Park, Mathikettan Shola National Park, Thattekkad Bird Sanctury and Idukki Wildlife Sanctuary), non protected areas such as Malayattoor, Kothamangalam, Mankulam, Munnar, Marayoor and Kottayam Forest Divisions which encompass vast stretches of high value biodiversity areas, commercial plantations such as tea, cardamom, and coffee, mixed cultivation area or human dominated home gardens, tribal settlements, river valley projects and urban/peri-urban areas.

Idamalayar Reservoir

On 4 February 2015, we set out from Coimbatore to experience the High Ranges as part of a UNDP research programme entitled "Developing an effective multiple-use management framework for conserving biodiversity in the mountain landscape of the High Ranges". Later, Dr. Balakrishnan Peroth and Dr. Praveen from Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram (JNTBGRI) also joined us.

We planned for a three day quick reconnaissance survey across the High Ranges through Idukki –Munnar and Chinnar. We crammed ourselves into the jeep with our luggage in the excitement of the trip, not realizing of what was at stake until we got off later with cramps. Our first stopover was at Idamalayar dam site. During our walk on the banks of the reservoir we were greeted by quite a number of bird species and the notable ones included River Tern and the strikingly colorful Flame-throated Bulbul. Then we headed to Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary. Lying below western slopes of the hills, Thattekkad is known for its rich avifaunal diversity. We met Dr. R. Sugathan, the Research Officer stationed at the sanctuary who helped to put us up in the dormitory. Later in the evening, we drove towards the core area of the sanctuary. The tall trees initially prevented us from seeing any birds but we heard familiar calls of the Malabar Grey Hornbill, Small Minivet, Scarlet Minivet, White-cheeked Barbet, Coppersmith Barbet, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Malabar Parakeet, Lesser Hill Myna, Grey-headed Bulbul and Dark -fronted Babbler and after a short walk we sighted all except the last two. We were also able to see Common Goldenback, Vernal Hanging Parrot and Chestnut-tailed Starling. It was getting dark and we called it a day and headed back to the dormitory.

Flame-throated Bulbul

The next day by 7.30 AM we started our journey to Idukki Wildlife Sanctuary. After a long winding journey we reached Idukki Wildlife Sanctuary by 01:00 PM. We visited the eastern edge of the Sanctuary, a grassland area which seems to be heavily used by Gaur and Elephant. We did not mind the scorching sun and we ran up climbing the rocks to have a bird's eye view of the sprawling expanse of the reservoirs of the Idukki Hydroelectric Project and the WLS. On the adjacent mixed forest plantation we saw common birds like Red-vented bulbul, White-cheeked Barbet, and Red-whiskered Bulbul. Just few hundred meters outside the park we noticed Cattle Egret, Little Egret and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher.

Glad-eye bush brown

After our heavy lunch at Kattapana (in Idukki), we started to Munnar climbing the roads through the cardamom hills. It was much cooler here and when we stopped on our way up in the middle of a cardamom estate for few minutes the whole area was noisy with Lesser Hill Myna's loud calls. We also had glimpses of White-bellied Treepie (WG endemic), Malabar Parakeet (WG endemic), Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Rufous Treepie and Malabar Whistling Thrush. After this point we heard the Malabar Whistling Thrush almost in all our stoppings until we left Munnar.

The narrow winding roads on the way to Munnar and our jam-packed jeep tempted many of us to throw up (especially those who were sitting on the rear).Although most of us managed without harm it was Praveen who fell prey to it. Finally by dusk the view of beautiful tea estates started welcoming us. It was 7 pm when we reached Munnar town and we accommodated ourselves in Forest Department Guest house. The following day morning 7.30 we visited the charismatic Mr. Kariappa, the Group Manager of Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company, who was willing to provide us with one of the estates' dilapidated buildings to be used as a base camp for this study.

After a brief discussion with him we visited our proposed field camp site, a big house with wood and glass façade and wooden floorings surrounded by tea plantations and seated atop a mount. By the time we reached, the Lantana bushes, which had completely covered the house during the long period of non-use was cleared and the house looked almost ready to be occupied. We were able to see a pair of Barking deer in the tea plantations down and many small birds including Red-whiskered Bulbul and Common Rosefinch feeding on *Erythrina indica* flowers near the house. We all got busy in selecting suitable rooms in the house – at that time anticipating that we would be staying there for a year. Just the look and feel of the house and its picturesque surroundings made us eager to start and jump into the project right away.

We happily started back to Munnar town and drove across the tea estates to Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary- which is in the eastern most corner of the high ranges adjoining the Palani hills. We found the lush evergreen and shola forests giving away to dry deciduous and scrub forest of the eastern Anjanad Valley. We stopped by to have a closer look at the Thoovanam waterfalls. We met forest guards and watchers of the Chinnar WLS who were eager to identify and know more about birds and butterflies. We promised them that we will organize a training workshop on our next visit. And so began our journey downhill to the great plains of Coimbatore. It was 5 pm when we reached Pollachi, after a tea we dispersed in different directions. The sad part of the story is that so far we never got a chance to visit the High Ranges again or conduct any field studies as all our project activities have been put on hold due to some local issues.

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NESTING OF GREY HERON, *ARDEA CINERA* AT THOGARIKATTI, DAVANGERE, KARNATAKA, INDIA.

Grey herons at the nest

Colonial nesting sites of various water birds in India are known to be under severe threat due to various anthropogenic pressures and natural calamities. The Grey Heron, *Ardea cinera* is one such large colonial bird of the family Ardeidae distributed throughout South East Asian countries with only few nesting sites reported from India with only around 80 in the whole country as reported by Subramanya (1996). Breeding season for Grey Herons in South India is from November to March.

On 25th March 2014, during a field survey around Harakanahal village, we observed a nesting site of Grey Herons comprising of three nests located at 14o 50' 11.58" N & 75o 55' 35.17"E on a lakeside near Thogarikatti village. The site was at about 8 km North-west of Harpanahalli town of Davangere district, Karnataka. The nearest forest area, Harada Reserve forest, was around 10 km west of the site. At the time of our observation the nests were in the fledging stage and we could record only one fledgling in one of the nests, while other two nests were empty. The nest was built on the branches of a *Prosopis juliflora* plant overhanging the lake from the marshy edges. All the three nests were placed at a height of about 1.5 m to 3.5 m above the water surface, and made up of dried twigs. According to a recent study in Japan reported by Mashiko and Toquenaga (2014), Grey Herons facilitated the new heronry formation by initiating the nesting in a particular wetland which in turn invited other species to establish their colonies in the respective area (Mashiko & Toquenaga. 2014). It might be interesting to look at whether similar ecological role is played by Grey Herons in heronry expansion in the Indian context.

Nest with fledgling and adult

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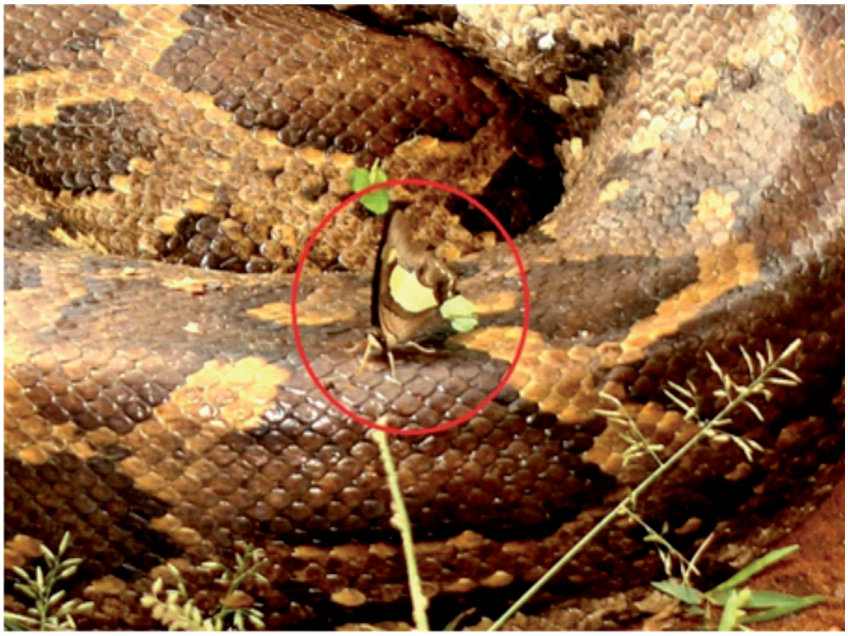
A BIG PYTHON, A SMALL BUTTERFLY AND THE DEADLY VIPER

Indian Rock Python, *Python molurus molurus*

On 29th October 2015, around 12.30pm, we received a call from our nearby Ashram at Anaikatty to rescue a snake. It was Raman Swami who informed us that there was a big python inside a tank behind the Ashram temple. We asked him again, whether it was a python or not. Because, once he had handled a Russell's viper mistaking it for a python and got bitten while trying to restrain it. Since it was a false bite, he luckily escaped without any danger. This time he was sure that it was a python. We went with few of our colleagues from SACON for rescuing the snake. We were amazed at the sight of a huge snake lying in the tank.

One herder told us that he had noticed the snake when his cows suddenly panicked while approaching the tank. Probably it would have fallen in the tank in the previous night. It became more aggressive at our presence. We tried to hold by its tail and pull the snake out, but it was very heavy and active. The snake made several attempts to bite. We took few minutes to bring the snake out of the tank and finally confined it safely. The python was about 10 feet long and weighed about 35kg. We took the snake to a nearby forest -little away from human habitation, and released. As soon as we opened the sack, it moved out, coiled itself and started hissing.

At the same time we also observed an interesting thing; a butterfly (Common Nawab) was sitting over its body and trying to suck up nutrients as it does in mud-puddling. Butterflies are known to get their nutrients by feeding on wide variety of resources ranging from overripe fruits, animal dung, urine, bird dropping, human sweat, dead crabs, fish and carrion. Issac Kehimkar reported a sighting of butterflies sucking on dead pit viper and tiger-centipede in Ultapani, Assam. The butterfly was sitting over python for more than five minutes till it entered inside the bushes.



Common Nawab, Polyura athamas sitting on Python

The scrub-forests and open field areas in the Anaikatty hills possess a suitable habitat for Indian Rock Pythons and Russell's vipers. Several rescues have been made recently from the surrounding human prone areas, including Python (2 including the present), Russell's Viper (2), Spectacled Cobra (2), Rat Snake (3). It is noteworthy that the villagers here are willing to relocate snakes instead of killing them. We also have noted a common misconception: sometimes people mistakenly identify Russell's viper (*Daboia russelii*) as pythons. Since Russell's viper is a deadly venomous snake, this misconception can lead to fatal bites. Indian rock python, *Python molurus molurus* is a non-venomous snake and it can be easily identified from a Russell's viper based on the size, body shape, scales and patterns over the body. The big size, asymmetrical dark-edged blotches on the upper body and smooth body-scales help us to distinguish python from a Russell's viper. In pythons, parts of the head are pink with streaks on sides. Russell's viper has smaller head scales, very large nostrils and three longitudinal series of dark oval or round spots on the upper body; sometimes connected in the middle row. In young ones these marks are very distinct, but in adults, it may not be very clear. Also the Russell's viper is rough in appearance and maximum length is only two meters. Careless handling of snakes often leads to threats. In general, we should be very careful in handling or rescuing any snake, even it is non-venomous.

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BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

They hover on tree tops, bushes, above your terrace, skimming over water – they are just everywhere and they are in thousands. *Pantala flavescens* or commonly called as The Wandering Glider, is a circumtropical and migratory species of dragonfly. They are seen in swarms from late August to November in Southern India. It is a very common, ochre and rusty coloured dragonfly, which most of us would have surely seen and familiar with.

People have for long believed (and still do) that these dragonflies are harbringers of rains. There is a common saying in Tamil Nadu: 'Thattan thalaparanthal thappathu mazhai'(When a dragonfly flies low, a shower sure follows) and in Kerala they are aptly called as 'Onathumbikal' (they are in swarms during the Onam season, which is August-September). Perhaps, their presence has something to do with the availability of water rather than the coming of rains.

Pantala flavescens at SACON

I believe, temporary water bodies which get filled in the south-west monsoon are sufficient for these dragonflies to lay eggs. And since they have a fast larval developing period (38- 65days, depending on the availability of water), they emerge in massive swarms just before the North-east monsoon, leading to the misconception that they are indicators of rain.

The wandering glider is known to be a migrating species and a recent study by Charles Anderson in Maldives throws an interesting light on the long distance migration that these insects undertake. Anderson who has been making detailed records since 1996, has noticed the sudden appearance of *Pantala flavescens* by the end of October that peaks in November and December and only to disappear completely after. Maldives has no surface fresh water source, hence there is by no means these insects can have a complete lifecycle in the islands and the nearest land mass is southern India which is about 800 km away.

Anderson has deduced that these insects make use of the monsoon rains (north-east) and the prevailing winds to travel from South India to Eastern Africa making a stopover at Maldives. In Eastern Africa, it makes use of the short spell of rains and makes a round trip back to Southern India just before our south-west monsoon, a journey of 14,000 km to 16,000 km – if proven; it could beat the Monarch Butterfly which covers 7000km. It takes four generations for the dragonfly to complete the full round trip. The dragonfly feed on aerial insects during the migration period. It coincides with migration of insect-eating birds such as bee-eaters, night jars, cuckoos which winter in Africa, suggesting that they maybe feeding on the dragonflies in their journey. There are records of these dragonflies crossing the western coast of India and out into the sea: they were thought to be 'doomed' in Anderson's words. Yet, as J.R.R Tolkein once said, "Not all those who wander are lost".

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SACON INKS MOU WITH HINDUSTHAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

On 09th September 2015, SACON signed an MOU with Hindusthan College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore. The students from Visual Communication department, planned to create awareness among the public about the wetlands and conservation of wildlife through bike ride covering all the states of India for 45 days. In addition to creating awareness, they will also visit the wetlands of national importance and the Ramsar sites on their travel route to collect the information related to wetlands. Dr. Mahendiran Mylsamy and Dr. Goldin Quadros of Wetland Ecology Division gave a talk on the importance of wetlands and discussed the important wetlands to be encountered on their journey.

SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, MOEF&CC VISITS SACON

Mr. Ashok Lavasa, IAS, Chairman (Governing Council, SACON) and Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of India visited SACON and attended the 67th Governing Council meeting held at the centre on 16th June 2015. The Secretary was given a warm welcome by the scientists, staff and scholars of SACON. Dr. P A Azeez, Director, SACON appraised the Secretary about the aim and functions of SACON. During the visit, a tree sapling was planted by the dignitary at the centre.

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Third DST-SERB School in Avian Biology

Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB), Department of Science and Technology (DST) had organized the 3rd School in Avian Biology. The school was hosted by the Department of Zoology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya from 27th September to 11th October 2015.

Twenty-two researchers (including me and Shivkumari Patel from SACON) from across India representing 14 states had participated in the school. The 15 days training programme comprised orientation lectures, main lectures (by renowned scientists from India and abroad), practical sessions, field works, followed by participants' poster presentation. The orientation lectures covered broad topics like, birds as model system, birds & climate change, avian vocal communication, avian systematics & diversity of Indian birds, and avian circadian behaviour. The main lectures dealt on the topics like origin of birds, mating systems in birds, biogeography of Indian birds, avian phylogenetics & phylogeography, avian neurobiology, conservation biology, avian circadian & circannual rhythm, and bird flight & migration. We also had field work training on vegetation sampling techniques, mist netting, bird capture & recapture methods.

We had the privilege of attending the stupendous lectures of foreign faculties like Prof. Scott V. Edwards, Harvard University, Prof. Christopher G. Guglielmo, University of Western Ontario and Dr. Barbara Helm, University of Glasgow. Their lectures covered avian phylogeography, bird flight and bird migration respectively. We also cherished the lectures of Dr. Rajah Jayapal (avian evolution, mating systems, systematics & biogeography) and Dr. Shirish Manchi (conservation biology) from SACON.

It was indeed a great opportunity to discuss and interact with fellow researchers of avian biology from across India and scientists from India and abroad.

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IUCN SSC CONFERS POSTHUMOUS TURTLE CONSERVATION APPRECIATION AWARD TO DR S BHUPATHY

IUCN SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group,
Turtle Survival Alliance, Turtle Conservancy, and Turtle Conservation Fund

Turtle Conservation Appreciation Award

Subramanian Bhupathy

For Significant Contributions to the Conservation and Biology of Indian Chelonians, and in Honor and Appreciation of His Leadership and Commitment to Turtle and Tortoise Conservation

Presented Posthumously at the 13th Annual Symposium on Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles
Tucson, Arizona, USA, 6–9 August 2015

Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group
Anders G.J. Rhodin, *Chairman Emeritus*

Turtle Survival Alliance
Rick Hudson, *President*

International Union for Conservation of Nature/Species Survival Commission Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group conferred 'Turtle Conservation Appreciation Award' posthumously to Dr S Bhupathy.

In a communication to Mrs Subha Bhupathy, wife of Late Dr Bhupathy, Mr Anders G J Rhodin, M.D., Chairman Emeritus, IUCN SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group stated that 'In view of his outstanding contributions and significant leadership on the biology and conservation of turtles in India and the world, we are honoured to now present you with the enclosed Posthumous Turtle Conservation Appreciation Award in his honour'. We take this opportunity to thank the organizers for this great gesture towards Dr Bhupathy who we will always fondly remember for his immense contributions to Indian herpetology and conservation of turtles in particular.

सालिम अली पक्षि-विज्ञान एवं प्रकृति-विज्ञान केंद्र

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Editor : Dr. Mathew K Sebastian

Editorial Board : Dr Rajah Jayapal & Dr Goldin Quadros

Design : Srinivasan A

July - September 2015

Printed & Published by the Director, Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Anaikatty, Coimbatore - 641 108, Tamil Nadu, India.