



This current issue of the newsletter (July to September), the second quarter of the financial year 2017-2018, outlines several activities of SACON and also includes a popular article on 'A tale of finding the dhole' by Ms. R.K. Niveditha, research scholar at SACON. We bought a new staff bus for SACON during the last week of July for helping the faculty, staff and research fellows commute between Coimbatore and Anaikatty on all working days. This was possible by the kind approval of Shri Ajay Narayan Jha, IAS, the Secretary, MoEFCC and Chairman of our Governing Council. The 69th meeting of our Governing Council and 26th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of SACON Society were conducted during the reporting period. As a follow-up of AGM and as per the wish of Late Hon'ble Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change; Shri Anil Madhav Dave, the President of SACON Society, we created a "Help Line" in SACON's website for the benefit of common people of India who care for birds and their habitats, and the same was inaugurated by the Secretary, MoEFCC & Chairman, Governing Council on 29th July 2017.

The other news items in this issue are, the Fulbright Alumni meet at SACON based on the request from United States-India Education Foundation (USIEF), New Delhi, Nature Camp activities on campus and several ENVIS activities including 'World Ozone Day' celebration.

I hope that all members of our Centre community will have a productive winter and summer ahead as we pursue our new projects, and return refreshed and excited about the 2017-18 academic year.

Dr. K. Sankar
Director

New Staff Bus for SACON

For the past 26 years, SACON did not own a staff bus and the centre was hiring a bus annually on contract to convey the faculty members and staff from Coimbatore city to Anaikatty and back. As a welfare measure, a 32 seater staff bus, EICHER PRO 3009 ABS was purchased by SACON to transport faculty members, staff and research scholars. The bus was inaugurated by Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON on 24.07.2017 and is operated from Gandhi Park to SACON and back on all working days.

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A Tale Of Finding The Dhole

Staying in the hostel of SACON campus is a forever wonderful experience. I have always loved to explore the backyards of my hostel. We have corridors at the back of every room which open towards the wilderness of nature and the huge summit of the Nilgiris. We also have a water hole constructed a few feet away from our hostel. I enjoy spending my evening tea-time in the corridor, gazing at the water body for Spotted Deer, Indian Peafowl, Indian Robin, Black-naped Hare and listening to the chirps of birds, the blowing wind, the snort of Wild Pigs, the scream of Peafowl and sometimes, the trumpet of the Elephant.

Usually, we inmates go for a walk along the scrub jungle to reach the stream on the western side of the hostel running into a wooded valley. The stream is bounded by small check dams at three different points. This small construction holds water for a longer time, even after the monsoon. Our stream gets most of its water from the north-east monsoon, though the south-west monsoon also showers rain on the forest. It was the end of June 2017 and it was flushing green everywhere. We were in a festive mood after escaping the scorching summer.



Black-naped Blue Monarch
Hypothymis azurea



White-cheeked Barbet
Megalaima viridis



Crested Serpent-eagle
Spilornis cheela

On a Saturday morning, I, along with Divyapriya, took a nature walk along the woods. It was around 6.00 a.m. we were dressed in our field attire and, armed with cameras and binoculars. The very first friends to come inside the frame were the Blue-winged Parakeets, a party of five birds hanging from an Ixora plant. The chilli-red beaks and yellowish tail-coverts added beauty to the endemic parakeets of the Western Ghats. We continued walking along the trail. Our eyes savoured the huge



Common Mormon
Papilio polytes



Common Gull & Common Emigrant
Cepora nerissa, Catopsilia corcaele



Banded Peacock
Papilio crino

mountains, the rising sun and its light peeping from the hills creating a mixture of shadows and lights, the sky painted with cotton clouds, and the smoke rising from the chimney of a brick kiln. It was a pleasant morning. A Shikra came and perched on the topmost branch of a dead tamarind tree and started calling aloud. We identified it to be a juvenile through our binoculars. Indian Robin were seen hopping around on the ground searching for breakfast. I was video graphing a cooing Spotted Dove, the spotted patch on its neck expanding and contracting as it called. Suddenly the mist of silence was pierced by the alarm calls of two Red-wattled Lapwing and my friend whispered, "Wild Dogs!" I focused my eye lenses on that spot, I could see one bird running on the

ground calling and the other fluttering above trying to drive the Wild Dogs away. She said, “three, three, three”, and I asked “where?” Unfortunately, I could see only the last one running, which my eyes captured as a blurred image taken in slow shutter speed.

We rushed down the valley looking for the dogs but found only their tracks. We followed the tracks that continued till the main stream. There was no flowing water, only rocks and pebbles. We lost the tracks of the dogs. We saw some remains of dead Peafowl and Grey Junglefowl. We assumed it could be the kill of the Wild Dogs. After investigating the surrounding, we moved towards the first check dam. I had visited the place when it was drying out in the hot summer. The summer of this year was really bad and it left everything almost dry and dead. Now we could see some shades of green and there was good moisture in the check dam. A huge congregation of butterflies was seen around the wet soil. The Common Grass Yellow, the Striped Tiger, the Plain Tiger, the Yellow Orange Tip, the Mottled Emigrant, the Lemon Pansy, and the Blue Tiger were engaged in mud puddling.

We hid under a tree and waited for some time. I sat on a tree root which had grown into a swing. Suddenly we heard a bird in flight. It was a White-cheeked Barbet, another endemic species of Western Ghats. The bird seemed to check out some berries in the tree. In the morning sunlight its beak shone beautifully as though it had worn a peach coloured lipstick. Then we heard a high pitched ringing note, sweench-weech, sweench-weech and sweench-weech. We scanned every nook and corner and found a tiny azure-blue coloured creature with a cool black cap on the head; it was a Black-naped Monarch. The blue fairy posed for some shots and started moving towards the canopy.

We, then, decided to walk ahead towards the second check dam. As there was no water flow we walked through the stream instead of walking along the sideway. We reached the second dam, where there was some water. We could hear the screams of two Crested Serpent-eagles flying straight above us. Simultaneously we heard a continuous whistling “ne-menue-nee-menue-ne-menue” (do not read instead whistle the words you will get the actual call). I heard the call for the first time and ask myself “what would it be?” Like answering my doubt she said, “It is a Puff-throated Babbler”. My friend, Divyapriya who is most soft-spoken, ironically works on bird songs and calls. It is a great feeling to spend time with such acoustically inclined people. She helped me a lot in identifying bird calls. There was a pair of those babblers hidden inside the leaf litter. We tried hard to spot them and they finally came out and sat on the reeds. One started whistling and I shot a video of it. I played the video to my friend and suddenly the bird started whistling in response and flew away with strong disapproval. Just a few feet before the second dam, the stream had a tributary that ran from the North. We shifted our route towards that tributary. It had small rock cliffs lining the sides and big rocks on the path. The stream was completely dry; leaf litter and waste had accumulated once the waters had settled down underground. A water mark was seen on the rocks which made us guess the height of the water flow. We climbed every rock and reached a narrow region of the stream, which eventually ended the short trek and forced us to return back. We got a couple of new experiences but could not find what we were looking for.



Asiatic Wild Dog *Cuon alpinus*

Dawn fell and we were back at the hostel; I was already outside on the corridor with my tea and faced the water body. I could not believe what was happening; a Wild Dog came out of the water tank and moved into the bushes. I zoomed my view as much as possible and I could see the water dropping from its bushy tail. I quietly jumped out of the corridor. I tried to look everywhere as there was a possibility for the dog to cross, but I could not see. Within a few minutes, I heard whining that sounded like a normal dog, but it was the Dhole. I followed the sound and I could hear one more individual making the same call. They were communicating with each other and the third one also joined the team later. I heard three Dholes, starting from the first one which was far ahead near the foot hills, then the second one at the centre and then the last follower. This clearly gave a picture of a group following its leader. Dholes are very well

known for hunting in packs and they usually surround the target animal from all sides and give them little chance of escaping. To achieve it they make various vocal modulations like whistles, clucks and mews to communicate with the group. The calls slowly faded away. To clear the doubts about their communication, I browsed for some information and listened to their various vocalisations. I saw a Wild Dog documentary made by Blair Wiese in the Indian forests. That night we continued discussing the Dholes. We planned another trip to see them.

The next day, we started our trip to see the hunters. My other friend Aditi, who is a burrow animal expert, also joined us. The aim of the day was very precise and focused on finding the Dholes. We were scanning through binoculars and walked straight to the area near the Lapwing's nesting site where we first sighted the Dhole. There were no signs of threat, the birds were calm and started their alarm calls on seeing us. We moved ahead to the check dam. On the way we looked for fresh Dhole tracks but failed. The old ones could not be seen as deer and cattle would have walked over them. So we concluded that there was no Dhole movement in the morning. With little hope, we continued our journey to the dam.



Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii*

As usual butterflies flew everywhere like the falling leaves blowing in the wind. We sat on the bank of the stream. As it was a thicket area even small sounds echoed, we tuned our ears to be aware of every small sound and movement. Some small chestnut coloured birds were flying on the opposite bank. They played hide and seek as they were emerging and vanishing into the bushes. Then a group of twelve birds flew down to the stream and perched on the twigs. They were the Scaly-breasted Munias. The twigs started swinging because of their body weight. They drank water from the stream. They communicated with each other with a call like tit-tit-tit-tit. Two White-rumped Munias, another species of the Munia family also joined them. The latter had a black head, a white belly, a white rump and coffee-brown wings. The chirps of those birds and some sunbirds filled the surrounding.



Spotted Deer *Axis axis*

Unexpectedly we heard a strange sound. It sounded like heavy breathing of a big animal. Due to water scarcity in summer, animals visit waterholes often. It is this season which gives us the ultimate chance to see almost all our campus wildlife much closer. The streams slowly start drying up during this season and at the peak they cease to exist. When the need doubles, the artificial water holes are the only hope for our wild friends. Considering this, SACON has made two water holes inside the campus at two different places. One is at normal ground level and the other also has

a raised tank that has a specified structure where only Elephants can drink using their trunk. These artificial water holes play a very important role in the summer. We can see Elephants, Indian Gaur, Wild Pig, Spotted Deer, Hare, Peafowl, other birds and even snakes using these water holes. But sighting a Wild Dog is rare. So now this unknown animal also might have come for that, hence we decided not to disturb them and walked back. Our Sunday passed with a great regret without seeing the Dholes.

Monday arrived; as usual I reached the workplace. Ponnamma akka was mopping the floor. I thought of asking her about the Dholes as she stays close to the campus. I stopped by and asked, "Have you seen any Wild Dog here?" She replied, "Our family has settled here after my marriage which was around thirty years ago but I have seen them only thrice", she paused..... (Oops! I told to myself, "if she, who has been here for years, seen them only thrice then the chance for us is unclear")..... She continued, "but one of our neighbours had seen three of them last Saturday night, while they were hunting their goats", and this kindled my hope. If they had successfully hunted domestic goats there are chances of them trying again and for us to see them.

It was 5.40 pm in the evening. As soon as I reached the hostel I took the camera, went out and sat on the corridor. The Yellow-billed Babblers were hopping around making trilling calls. A male Peafowl with his gorgeous long train-

feathers walked towards the water. When it approached the tank, it made a sudden and abrupt retreat and retreated into the bushes. I waited about an hour but nothing happened. A herd of Spotted Deer came near the water; and I readied to take a video of them drinking water. Suddenly, the herd panicked and ran into the woods through the other side. Their act was very quick as if they have heard a gunshot. I had no idea what happened.

Within few seconds there emerged the three stunning red creatures from the tank one by one. The sounds of the deer might have interrupted them. What I had visualised for the past three days had now come true. It was 6.41p.m. The first one peeped out and looked around to see what the sound was. Then it slowly moved out of the tank towards the forest. Now I could see the dripping water drops from the tail more clearly. The second hunter saw me, it seemed a little confused. It stared at me, sniffed the surrounding, and then moved a bit faster following the first one. The third one also jumped out and went running behind the others. All were males. At last, the tale had a lovely ending.

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Rapid Biodiversity Survey at the Multi-Product Special Economic Zone (SEZ)/Industrial Park at M/s Tata Steel SEZ Limited, Gopalpur, Odisha



Pied kingfisher
Ceryle rudis

SACON's Environmental Impact Assessment Division conducted a rapid biodiversity survey in the proposed Multi-Product SEZ/Industrial Park at M/s Tata SEZ Limited, Gopalpur, Odisha during June 2017. The park is largely dominated by grasslands, marshlands, artificial and natural water bodies including wetland patches, creeks, and forest patches including open scrub vegetation. After a thorough reconnaissance survey, 72 point counts were laid in the intensive sampling zone (10 km²) following a stratified sampling design, according to habitat types, to document bird species. Opportunistic visual encounter surveys were conducted to record species from other taxa (mammals, reptiles, amphibians, dragonflies, and butterflies) along with sign evidences such as calls, animal droppings/scats and tracks. We present preliminary results from our survey and a few photographs of species sighted in the park (Fig. 1a-d). We recorded 4 species (4 families) of mammals, 64 species of birds (33 families), 6 species (6 families) of reptiles, an amphibian (Bullfrog *Hoplobatrachus tigrina*), 23 species (5 families) of butterflies, and 6 species of

dragon flies from family Libellulidae. Based on the total count of bird species recorded, Paddy-field Pipit *Anthusrufulus* was the most abundant followed by Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, and Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*. Several nests of Streaked Weavers *Ploceus manyar* were found on *Phoenix sylvestris* trees and lapwings nested at the periphery of water bodies. One evening, the rare Pale-capped Pigeon *Columba punicea* was sighted close to the dense *Pandanus* vegetation at the boundary of the park. According to the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act (1972), 3 species of mammals recorded belong to Schedule II, 3 species of birds recorded belong to Schedule I and 2 species of reptiles recorded belong to Schedule II were recorded in the site. Certain sections of the park are heavily grazed by livestock and local people are dependent on the creek for fishing. Further surveys will be conducted to document fish species in the park. Over all, the park supports 103 species across all taxa suggesting that the proposed area is rich in fauna.



Indian flap-shelled turtle *Lissemys punctata*

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69th meeting of the Governing Council of SACON

The 69th meeting of the Governing Council (GC) of SACON was held at 10.00 am on 29th July 2017 at Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), Coimbatore under the Chairmanship of Shri Ajay Narayan Jha, IAS, Secretary, MoEFCC, Govt. of India. At the meeting the Director, SACON informed that during the 25th Annual General Meeting of SACON Society, held on 16th May 2017, under the Presidentship of Late Hon'ble Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change; Shri. Anil Madhav Dave (President – SACON Society), while praising the achievements of SACON towards conservation of birds in India and the nature education activities for school children for the past two and a half decades, suggested that SACON should develop modalities to reach out to the general public to address their common queries pertaining to bird conservation issues in the country. In view of the above, SACON has created a “Help Line” in its website for the benefit of common people of India who care for birds and their habitats. The “Help Line” was inaugurated by the Secretary, MoEFCC & Chairman, GC during the GC meeting.



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26th Annual General Meeting of SACON

The 26th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) was held at 9.00 am on 4th September 2017 at Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu under the presidentship of Dr. Harsh Vardhan, Hon'ble Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Govt. of India.

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Nature Awareness Camps at SACON

The Nature Education Division of SACON has been conducting residential Nature Awareness Camps for school children since August 2017. Schools were given options of having either 2 or 3 days of nature awareness camps on SACON campus. Students from Standard 5th to 9th participated in these camps. To date, six two-day nature camps were conducted on campus during August - October 2017. In total 192 children and 16 teachers participated in these camps.

These camps introduced basic ecological concepts; enhanced observation and interpretation skills of children through activities, games and interactive sessions. These camps were also aimed to motivate them towards conservation-oriented lifestyles and to encourage qualities of leadership, exploration and nature observation. This 'Nature Experience' given to children and teachers has huge potential to trigger sensitivity and appreciation of nature and conservation, leading to positive environmental actions at different levels.



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A Report on “Ozone Day” activities at Coimbatore

Every year 16th September is observed as "International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer" and popularly known as the “World Ozone Day”. The year 2017 marks the 30th anniversary of the Montreal Protocol and the theme for this year was "Caring for all life under the sun". The MoEFCC directed all ENVIS centres across the country to conduct awareness programmes as a run-up to the World Ozone day programme.

In this regard, the SACON ENVIS team executed several activities independently and collaboratively with different organisations and institutions to reach out to the school children as well as the layman.

Dr. Goldin Quadros, Coordinator of SACON ENVIS Centre gave a talk on “Importance of Mangrove Ecosystem in the protection of Ozone Layer” at Nirmala College, Coimbatore. The students were informed of the choices that they could make in protection of the environment including the Ozone layer. Concurrently, an interactive programme was held by the ENVIS team at the Government Higher Secondary School, Pethappamapatti, Udumalpet to discuss the topic “Ozone layer depletion – causes, effects and search for solutions to preserve it”. A video film on “Ozone Layer Protection” was screened and awareness materials in the form of posters prepared by the United Nations (UN) were distributed.



SACON ENVIS collaborated with the Decathlon Sports Shop at Coimbatore where the management periodically screened the Ozone awareness videos prepared by the UN throughout the day on 16th September. Oberoi Flight Services, Chennai also collaborated to create awareness among its employees and screened the Ozone awareness videos as well as distributed the awareness material.

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Workshop-cum-Training-Programme on GIS/Geo-Mapping at Bhaskaracharya Institute for Space Applications and Geo-Informatics (BISAG), Ahmadabad, Gujarat

The ENVIS Secretariat organized a three day Workshop-cum-Training Programme on GIS/Geo-Mapping at Bhaskaracharya Institute for Space Applications and Geo-Informatics (BISAG), Ahmadabad, Gujarat during 21st – 23rd September 2017. As part of the training, Mr. Yashvir Singh, Economic Advisor, MoEFCC made a presentation on the revamped ENVIS Scheme of the MoEFCC. The presentation was followed by discussions and clarifications by the Senior Economic Advisor Dr. Anandi Subramaniam and other officials from the MoEFCC on the deliverables and the functionality of the ENVIS programme across the country. The training programme on GIS/Geo-Mapping started by a detailed presentation on the utilities of the Remote Sensing by Dr. T.P. Singh, Director, BISAG. The participants were then divided into regional groups for discussions and training on District Level Data Mapping and Grid Based Monitoring by the BISAG trainers. The other presentations included case studies by ENVIS Chandigarh on the use of India State-Level Basic Environmental Information Database (ISBEID) data for monitoring and a detailed one on use of QGIS in GRID monitoring by Dr. T.V. Ramachandran, IISc, Bangalore. Dr. Goldin Quadros (SACON ENVIS coordinator), Ms. Julfia A. Begum (Information Officer) and Mr. Mohamed Ibrahim (IT officer) attended the workshop.



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Green Skill Development Programme (GSDP): Foundation Course – Valedictory Function



The Valedictory function of the “Green Skill Development Programme (GSDP): Foundation Course” was jointly organized by ENVIS Centre, SACON and Botanical Survey of India (BSI), Southern Regional Centre, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) Campus, Coimbatore. The function was held at the Auditorium, BSI, TNAU Campus, Coimbatore on 6th September 2017. The Welcome Address was delivered by Dr. K. Althaf Ahamed Kabeer, Scientist, BSI, Coimbatore. Dr. Goldin Quadros, ENVIS Coordinator, SACON felicitated the valedictory function. Dr. C. Murugan, Head, BSI, TNAU Campus, Coimbatore, delivered the special address. The trainees of GSDP gave their feedback and shared their experiences regarding the programme. The Chief Guest of the Day, Dr. G.V.S. Murthy, Former Head, BSI, TNAU Campus, Coimbatore delivered the valedictory address stating the importance of GSDP held from 6th June 2017 to 5th September 2017 and distributed the participation certificates, memento and kits to the trainees. At the same time, Dr. G.V.S. Murthy felicitated the resource persons from SACON ENVIS Centre and BSI, Coimbatore for delivering lectures with a certificate and memento. The Vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. R. Manikandan, Scientist, BSI, Coimbatore. The programme ended with the trainees planting tree saplings in the backyard of BSI, TNAU Campus.

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Fulbright Alumni meet at SACON

United States-India Educational Foundation chose SACON as the venue for its Executive Director to meet the Fulbright Alumni in Coimbatore region. Around 12 Fulbright Scholars who had been to the US on different Fulbright fellowships assembled at SACON in the presence of Mr. Adam Grotzky, Executive Director and Ms. Maya Sundararajan, Regional Officer, Chennai on the 20th September 2017. Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON welcomed the gathering and briefed them about SACON and its research initiatives. Mr Adam in his talk said that he was happy to be at SACON to meet the Fulbright Alumni and solicited suggestions on widening the scope of Fulbright Fellowship programme. The Alumni and a visiting US Scholar shared their experiences as Fulbright Fellows. All were taken on a tour of the SACON facility and then on a nature trail hike on campus. Mr. Adam thanked the Director of SACON for consenting to allow SACON to be the rendezvous.

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First International Small Wild Cat Conservation Summit, 11th to 14th September 2017

Small cats have received very little attention globally when compared to their larger cousins. Of the 41 species of extant cats distributed globally, only 5 are large (excluding the two species of Clouded Leopard). For the first time conservationists and biologists working on small wild cats across the globe came together. The Summit was held at the Port Lympne Wild Animal Park in Kent, UK and funded by the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund and The Aspinall Foundation. Researchers from 14 countries presented work on 27 species of small wild cats. A

result of this Summit was the formation of the Small Wild Cat Network that would enable sharing of information and experiences to promote small cat research and conservation programs around the world.



I presented our recently concluded work on four cat species (Leopard Cat, Marbled Cat, Golden Cat and Clouded Leopard) in Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh which was funded by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. My talk was titled "A tale of tails- an attempt to decipher small cat distributions through tail lengths". The Summit was a great opportunity to interact with cat biologists as well as to see several small wild cats kept in captivity at the Park. The enclosures

were beautifully designed and the habitat of each species was replicated to perfection. The cats were very used to their keepers and even allowed us to observe and photograph them for long durations. "For the official press release of the Summit please visit www.smallwildcat.net"

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Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Editors or the Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

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