



SACON News



Vol. 16 (3) July - September 2019

SACON News

July to September, 2019

In this issue

Institutional events

27 th Annual General Meeting of SACON	4
Inauguration of the "National Centre for Avian Ecotoxicology"	4
Independence Day Celebration	5
Faculty Recruitment	5
World Ozone Day 2019 Celebration	5
Bio-Statistics Training Workshop	6
Invited Talk – "From Nuthashes to En Dashes"	6
Guest Lecture, JNCASR	6
Talk on "State of India's Birds"	6
Visit of State Forest Service Officer Trainees	7
Visit of Foresters and Forest Guard Trainees	7
Workshops for Foresters	7
Participation in First International Conference on Semi-arid Mountain Environment - 2019, Abha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	8
Participation at 29 th International Congress for Conservation Biology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	9
China Innotour for Indian Young Scientists 2019	10

Popular articles

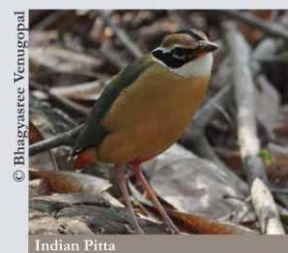
A chick's day out – Learning the art of survival	11
A Journey from Agriculture to Wildlife Toxicology	13
My first steps in Meghalaya	14



Common Dartlet



Common Hawk Cuckoo



Indian Pitta



Tickell's Blue Flycatcher



Asian Paradise Flycatcher



Common Hedge Blue



Brown breasted Flycatcher

Layout

Bhagyasree Venugopal

Designing

A. Julffia Begam

Front Cover

White-rumped Munia © Paul Antony

Back Cover

Double banded Judy © S. Jeevith

From the Director's Desk

It is with pleasure that I present the 'July to September 2019' issue of SACON's newsletter for the second quarter of the financial year 2019-2020, covering snapshot of the various activities and advancements of the centre.



In this quarter, the 27th Annual General Meeting of SACON was held and chaired by Sh. Prakash Javadekar, Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India. The Hon'ble Minister also inaugurated the National Centre for Avian Ecotoxicology and interacted with our Researchers. SACON recruited a new faculty in this quarter and some of our faculty members participated in international conferences held at Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and China. SACON also had the pleasure of hosting several resource persons from various institutions for invited talks, lectures, workshops and training programmes. In this quarter, 41 in-service State Forest Service Officers of various State Forest Departments visited SACON for field exercises as part of their induction training program, and 21 State Forest Service Officers Trainees participated in one-day training modules. We also provided training to 269 Forester Trainees and 55 newly recruited Forest Guards about SACON's research activities. Additionally, for this issue, SACON researchers have contributed some interesting accounts of their experiences from the campus and their respective fields.

Dr. K. Sankar, Director



27th Annual General Meeting of SACON

Sh. Prakash Javadekar, Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India visited SACON to chair the 27th Annual General Meeting of SACON held on 24th August 2019 at SACON, Coimbatore.



As part of the AGM, the Director, SACON briefed the Hon'ble Minister about SACON's Perspective Plan (Short, Medium and Long – term) in its Priority Areas of Research/Activities for the period 2017-18 to 2031-32. The perspective plan would help the MoEFCC in implementing projects and activities to fulfill the ministry's objectives in preparation of Policies, Plans and Schemes for the conservation of biodiversity, particularly avian diversity, and in the implementation of schemes on conservation and monitoring of ecosystems and landscapes. During the visit, the Hon'ble Minister, MoEFCC, interacted with the research personnel of various ongoing research projects of SACON to understand their respective studies across various biogeographic zones of the country.

Inauguration of the National Centre for Avian Ecotoxicology

On 24th August 2019, Sh. Prakash Javadekar, Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India inaugurated “National Centre for Avian Ecotoxicology” with the funding support of the MoEFCC.



This facility at SACON can handle the challenges posed by the continued entry of newer chemicals into the environment. The modernized facility at SACON is equipped with sophisticated instrument, namely High-Performance Liquid Chromatograph-Mass Spectrometer (LC-MS/MS), High-Performance Liquid Chromatograph (HPLC), Gas Chromatograph-Mass Spectrometer (GC-MS/MS), Gas Chromatograph (GC), Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometer (ICP-MS), Atomic Absorption Spectrometer (AAS) and UV / Visible Spectrometer. While there may be an analytical facility available elsewhere in India to deal with environmental contamination, SACON is the only institute in the country which carries out ecotoxicological research, focusing on birds.

Independence Day Celebration at SACON

Independence Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm at Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) on 15th August 2019. The celebration began with the hoisting of the National Flag by Dr. K. Sankar, Director at 09:25 AM. After the National Anthem, Dr. Sankar addressed the gathering. Subsequently, different sports activities were organised on the campus between research scholars/M.Sc. students and the Faculty/Staff.

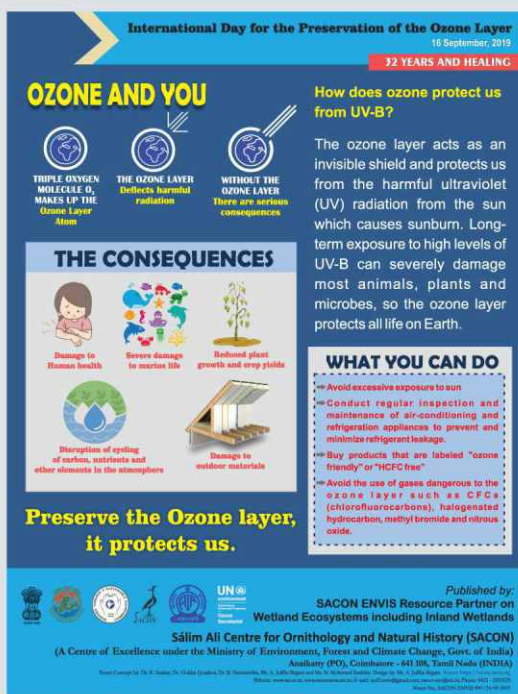


Faculty Recruitment

Dr. Aditi Mukherjee was appointed as a Scientist in the Extension Division at Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Dr. Aditi was also an alumna of SACON. She reported for her duty as an Extension Officer at SACON with effect from 17th July 2019.

World Ozone Day 2019 Celebration

World Ozone Day is observed annually on 16th September to commemorate the signing of the Montreal Protocol on substances that deplete the Ozone Layer. As per the direction received from the MoEFCC and the Director SACON, the SACON ENVIS RP promoted World Ozone Day on 16th September 2019. The team distributed educational posters to students; and celebrated the day with All India Radio (AIR) Coimbatore – FM Rainbow 103. The Station Director/Program Head, AIR, Coimbatore, Smt. Chithralega, ADP released a poster themed “32 Years and Healing” published by SACON ENVIS RP. The AIR-FM Rainbow 103, Coimbatore gave SACON ENVIS staff a platform to spread awareness about the significance of observing the World Ozone Day.



Smt. Chithralega, Station Director / Program Head, AIR, Coimbatore released the World Ozone Day 2019 poster published by SACON ENVIS RP.

Correspondence: hemajan11@gmail.com

World Ozone Day 2019 poster by
SACON ENVIS Resource Partner

SACON News Vol. 16 (3) July to September 2019

Bio-Statistics Training Workshop

SACON organized a training module on Bio-Statistics for the Research Personnel of SACON from 5th to 9th August 2019. Dr. K. Thiyagesan, Principal (Retd.), AVC College, Mayiladuthurai (Tamil Nadu) imparted training on various aspects of biostatistics and its applications. A total of 27 researchers attended the training programme. The objective of the workshop was to enhance the capacity of



the researchers to develop skills in designing research with an appropriate hypothesis, and understandings of systematic data collection, analytical methods, and interpretation. The workshop covered specific topics including Types of Data, Sampling Methods, Graphical Representation of Data, Descriptive Statistics, Introduction to SPSS, Exploring data with Graphs-SPSS, Normal Distribution and central limit theorem, Hypothesis testing, Correlation, Regression, Multiple Regression, Assumptions in regression, Transformations in regression, Logistic Regression, Comparing two means – ‘t’ tests, Comparing Several Means ANOVA (GLM1), Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), Non-Parametric Statistics, Factor Analysis, Multilevel Linear Models and Reporting in Scientific write-ups. The training included both theory and hands-on practical sessions. On the last day, subsequent to the summing up session, certificates of participation were awarded to each participant by Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON.

Invited Talk – “From Nuthashes to En Dashes”



Mr. Kumaran Sathasivam, Palladium Documentation, Chennai delivered a talk titled “From Nuthatches to En Dashes” on 29th August 2019 at SACON. The talk was based on Mr. Kumaran’s perspective of ‘Academic English Editing’. It also covered various aspects of ‘English Language’ skills that are required to be understood in order to improve popular science writings, and academic or technical writings.

Guest Lecture, JNCASR

Dr. C.P. Rajendran, Emeritus Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bengaluru, Karnataka guest lectured a talk on “Past climate as a key to understand the future - some examples from India” on 29th July 2019 at SACON.

Talk on “State of India’s Birds”

Dr. Suhel Quader, Senior Scientist, Nature Conservation Foundation, Bengaluru delivered a talk at SACON on 7th August 2019 on “State of India's Birds” Report, to be jointly published by a consortium of organizations including SACON, which will include key findings on population trends of select bird taxa.



Visit of State Forest Service Officer Trainees

As part of the Induction Training at Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Coimbatore, a batch of 41 SFS Officers from Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, visited SACON to undertake a training programme on Road Alignment Field Exercise from 6th to 8th August 2019 at SACON Campus. The field exercise was conducted by the CASFOS.

On 28th August 2019, 21 State Forest Service Officers of CASFOS visited SACON for their field exercise on “Wildlife Forensics” as part of a workshop organized by the CASFOS on “Legal Issues in Forestry and Wildlife”.



Visit of Foresters and Forest Guard Trainees

The Tamil Nadu Forest Academy, Coimbatore in association with Tamil Nadu Forestry Training College, Vaigai Dam, sent 05 batches of Foresters (269 Trainees) and 55 newly recruited Forest Guards to SACON from 5th to 9th August 2019, and on 16th August 2019 respectively for an exposure visit about the research activities/programmes of SACON.

Workshops for Foresters at SACON

On 20th September 2019, SACON organized a one-day “Hands-on” training workshop for foresters, in collaboration with Tamil Nadu Forest Academy (TNFA) on “Biological sample collection from dead animal carcass, their packaging, and transport to the laboratory for species identification” at TNFA, Coimbatore. A total of 92 participants including 88 Trainee Foresters of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department attended the workshop. The workshop covered the following lectures and practical demonstrations:

- Role of SACON in bird conservation
- Role of ecotoxicology in bird conservation
- Identification of birds using DNA and feathers
- Demonstration and practice of feather sampling
- Biological sample collection: Public Health Prospect
- A case study on wildlife crime, its causes and current status with special reference to bird trade and lesser known species
- Collection, preservation, packaging, and transportation of biological samples – Practical demonstration
- The practice of sample collection, preservation, packaging and transportation of biological samples by the participants



Participation in First International Conference on Semi-arid Mountain Environment-2019, Abha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



© H. N. Kumara



© H. N. Kumara



© H. N. Kumara



© H. N. Kumara

Dr. H. N. Kumara, Principal Scientist, SACON, was invited for a plenary talk on “Commensal primates: Issues, mitigating measures and its consequences” at the First International Conference on Semi-arid Mountain Environment - 2019, organized by The Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The conference was held from 16th to 19th September 2019 in Abha town. The subject experts from different universities and government organisations of the Kingdom Saudi Arabia, and speakers from 20 countries presented their research findings. The conference had “Commensal primates and their management strategies” as one of the major themes wherein Dr. Justin O’Riain, South Africa, Dr. Ahmed Albouq, Saudi Arabia and Dr. Kumara, India discussed primates conflict issues to address the Hamadryas baboon-human conflict in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Kumara discussed different mitigative measures that have been undertaken to address the primate-human conflict issues in India.

Participation at 29th International Congress for Conservation Biology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



As part of the international research networking, Dr. T. Ramesh from the Division of Conservation Ecology, SACON, presented his work on “Socioeconomic characteristics, livelihoods, and perceptions toward resolving human-tiger conflict in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India” under the theme: Ecology at the 29th International Congress for Conservation Biology, held on 22nd July 2019 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, organised by the Society for Conservation Biology, Washington DC, USA. The congress was opened by Debborah Luke, Executive Director, Society for Conservation Biology, followed by various scientific-sessions and plenaries. The International Congress was based on major themes that covered presentations under various thematic topics including Conservation capacity building, Social science, Adaptive management and monitoring, Advocacy and engagement, Alien and invasive species, Behavioral ecology and conservation, Conservation at the land-water interface, Savanna conservation, Conservation biology, The Asian wildlife trade: Extent, impacts and solutions, Conservation genetics, Conservation GIS, Conservation in hotspots, Citizen science, Conservation modelling, Conservation science, Ecosystem / conservation area management, Inventory and monitoring, Wildlife trade, Ecology, Marine conservation, Biomes conservation, Traditional knowledge and conservation, Freshwater conservation, Landscape conservation and planning, Habitat degradation and fragmentation, Human-wildlife conflict, Monitoring and modelling, Overexploitation of natural resources, Community-driven conservation, Conservation geography, Ecosystem functions and services, Evolution and conservation, Forest conservation, Habitat degradation and fragmentation, Conservation politics and policy, Scientists, stakeholders, and managers: bridging the gap, Protected area planning and design, Recovery of endangered species, Risk assessment and uncertainty, Conservation psychology and conservation on private lands, Spatial ecology and conservation, Sustainable agriculture, Urban area conservation, Disturbance ecology, Population viability analysis, Recovery of endangered species, Use of traditional ecological knowledge in conservation design and planning, Wetland conservation and Urban area conservation. In total, there were nearly 900 presentations running in eight parallel sessions from 21st – 25th July 2019. In addition, there were workshops, symposiums, discussion and plenaries under various conservation themes. Dr. Ramesh’s talk on resolving human-tiger conflict in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India received positive feedback from the scientific community. The congress was marked with the attendance of conservation scientists, young researchers, and student communities representing more than 60 countries. This congress was one of the largest conferences in the field of wildlife conservation, designed to bring together students, scientific researchers, and professionals to discuss the development and progress of research in wildlife conservation. By attending this congress, Dr. Ramesh had an opportunity to interact and network with researchers working on various issues related to wildlife conservation with hopes to extend possible scientific collaborations.



China Innotour for Indian Young Scientists 2019

Dr. T. Ramesh, Scientist from Conservation Ecology Division, SACON was selected as one of the 20 young scientists from India for China InnoTour scheduled from 23rd - 29th September in Kunming and Shanghai for Indian Young Scientists 2019. The Programme was supported by the Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of Science and Technology of China. The visit aimed at developing collaborative research projects, exchange of students, and faculty between India and China. The inaugural bilateral meeting was held at Kunming on 23rd September 2019. The opening ceremony was chaired by Mr. MA Minxiang, Director-general of Yunnan Academy of Scientific and Technical Information/Deputy-Director General of China-South Asia Technology Transfer Center.



Dr. Ramesh interacting with Prof. Chen Mingyong and postgrad students from the School of Life Sciences, Yunnan University

As part this collaborative exchange visit, Dr. Ramesh visited various Institutions/Universities and interacted with faculty members from Kunming University of Science and Technology, Yunnan University, Chinese Academy of Sciences, State Key Laboratory of Phytochemistry and Plant Resources in West China, Kunming Botanical Garden, Tongji University, UNEP-Tongji Institute of Environment for Sustainable Development, Shanghai Key Laboratory of Special Artificial Microstructure Materials and Technology, School of Physics Science and Engineering, Fudan University, State Key Laboratory of Molecular Engineering of Polymers, Fourier Intelligence, TMi Rob, Zhangjian International Innovation Port, Zhangjian Entrepreneurship Workshop and Zhangjian Transnational Enterprise Incubator. He also participated in the 2019 Global Science and Technology Innovation Conference. He strongly believes that this prestigious program “The China InnoTour for Indian Young Scientists” will help in setting up a new visionary strategy for research collaboration with Chinese counterparts towards solving common environmental issues through partnership, harmonious relationship, coordinated actions and sound policy framing over faculty and student exchange programs.



Inaugural bilateral meeting held in Kunming

A chick's day out – Learning the art of survival

C. Divyapriya and Sri Sowmiya, M.

We all remember our first day at school, also first day at the office. But how do the birds spend their first-day out-from-their-nest? Let's explore the two Red-whiskered Bulbul (RWBB) chicks, their vocalizations and their flying lessons at the SACON library atrium.

On the afternoon of 18th September, Ponamma Akka and I (Divyapriya) noticed two RWBB chicks. One (chick A) on the grass and the other (chick B) clinging on the wall. We first assumed that they fell from the nest, but soon we understood that it was their time to learn the survival life-lessons. The chick A was quite active, took short flights from the ground to a guava tree and then to the sun-shade with clumsy landings. Chick B was quite calm and made indistinct, soft notes. Chick A once took a short flight from *Bougainvillea* plant and landed on the verandah towards the library staircase. The parents alerted the chick to move away. They went closer to the chick and flew high and made several high-pitched shriek notes. The chick was vigilant in observing each movement around and remained there for a while. Sri Sowmiya then joined me to observe these spiky-haired chicks.

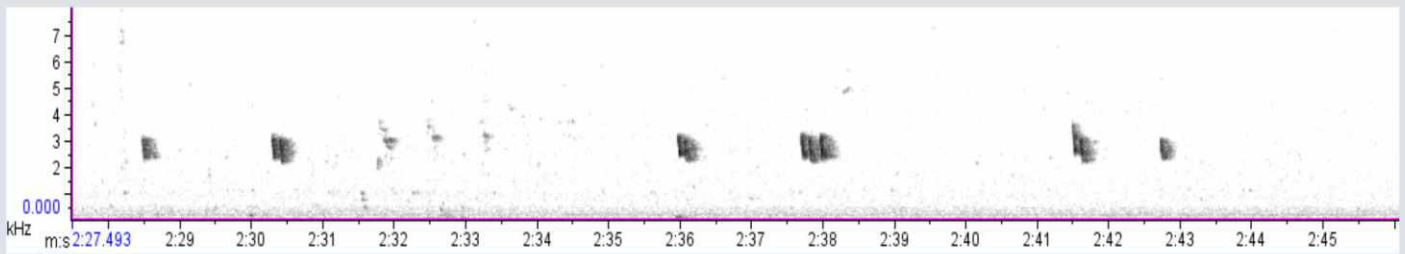


Fig. 1 The two-elemental and three-elemental begging call of Red-whiskered Bulbul

Chick A made two-elemental and three-elemental begging calls (Fig. 1) towards the parents. 'Element' is the fundamental unit or single note vocalized by a bird. Chick B took a perch at the tip of the *Bougainvillea*, just beneath the library sunshade – a safe inconspicuous perch. As the dusk arrives, chick A perched next to chick B, with their head tugged-in into their bodies, just like a pair of puffed-up feather balls.



Fig. 2 The parent feeding the chick at *Bougainvillea* perch



Fig. 3 Chick B clinging on the *Araucaria* sp. tree bark

Both remained in the roost till around 06:45 am the next day. But, around 09:20 am, there was only one chick observed (Figures 3 and 6). Perhaps the active chick A had moved out to face the day on its own. The parents were not seen regularly, except during feeding intervals at 09:30 am, 12:30 pm, 02:30 pm and 05:30 pm. Upon hearing the parents' call from a distance, the chick responded with soft calls (Fig. 1). When the parents were at proximity, it made high-pitched notes with a higher call rate (more elements at a single go; Fig. 4).

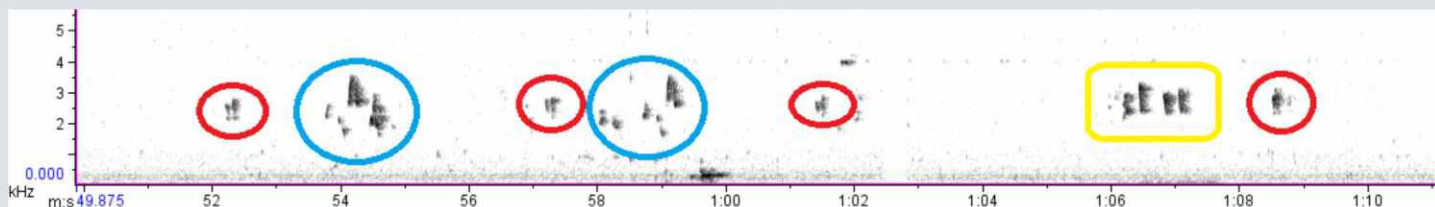


Fig. 4 The two-elemental chick begging call (red ring), adult RWBB call (blue rings). Chicks four-elemental call (orange box) as response to parent's call

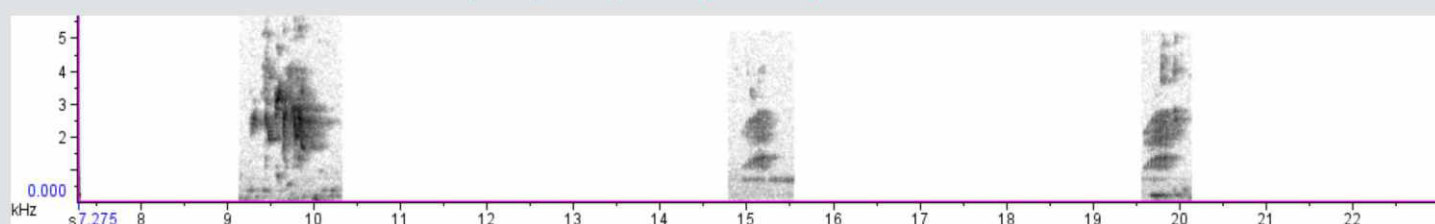


Fig. 5 Syllables made by parents' as contact call

A particular event was overwhelming. After a cumbersome flight, the chick fell on the ground. The parents made swift, acrobatic short flights from the *Bougainvillea* to a nearby plant and then towards the chick on the ground. They repeated this gesture back and forth with high-pitched notes. The chick grasped the intent and followed the path of parents and reached *Bougainvillea* perch. The parents successfully taught a vital life-lesson 'flight' to the chicks, we believe. It was quite amazing to observe the tutor and the student. The chick roosted on the 'Shenbagam' plant *Magnolia champaca*. Along with this family, there were other bird species such as Yellow-billed Babblers, Red-vented Bulbuls, White-rumped Munia and Scaly-breasted Munias, observed in the garden during the late afternoon.



Fig. 6 A Chick in one of its clumsy landings

On the third day, 20th September 2019, the lone chick remained in the roost till 06:50 am. The chick made loud calls and swift flights. This call resembled a hybrid of their usual two-elemental notes ending with adults' notes. Generally, the chicks memorize the sequence of the adult's calls and repeats until it matches with the adults. That is how the chicks learn to sing. From clumsy landing to smooth, swift flights; from soft, indistinct calls to loud and high-pitched calls, we witnessed the way the spiker chicks learned and grew. Yes! So it was time to face the world away from the comfort zone (Fly the nest!!).

Correspondence: cdp08india@gmail.com; srimsovmiya@gmail.com

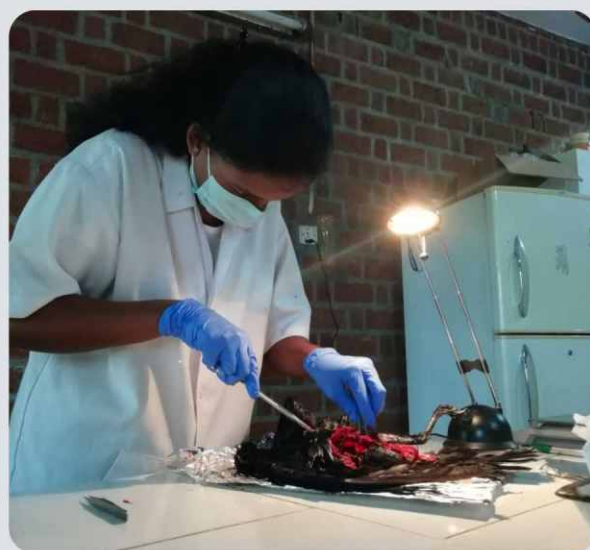
A Journey from Agriculture to Wildlife Toxicology

V. Bhagyasree

Having studied agriculture-based subjects for 6 years, my passion since childhood remained the same: serving wildlife and its conservation using the tools that I learnt in my graduation and post-graduation. My appointment as a biologist at the Division of Ecotoxicology, SACON was a fruitful result of a long term quest. Becoming a biologist has its own perks. I could travel to places!! While many have trouble shifting from one place to another, it is entirely opposite in my case. I love to travel. Meeting new people, tasting new cuisine and getting to learn different languages, fascinate me.

My first stop from SACON was at Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The Annual Kite Flying Festival held during January is very famous over here and interestingly many local resident birds escape from places where people fly kites. During the kite festival, many birds get injured and some even die. My first sample collection was from here. Then came my first fear- Post-Mortem! Being new to this field, and having experienced only sample collection of soil, water and plant, gave me a deep shrill about this new subject on biological sample collection.

After returning to SACON from the field site, I took into learning post-mortem on dead birds. My senior and colleague, Ms. Kirubhanandhini, took up the challenge of teaching me with a dead Baya Weaver bird. An important concept I wish to bring to notice here is the method of her teaching. While retrieving each organ from the dead bird, she discussed the significance of it with reference to both long term and short term accumulation of contaminants. The methodology, purpose, and end-use was clear to me while retrieving the organs. This experience was a good example of passing on knowledge from seniors to juniors.



**Learning post-mortem in
SACON laboratory**

And then came my trip to Odisha and Andhra Pradesh! With base camps set at Chilika lakeside at the Wetland Research and Training Centre, Balugaon and Forest Quarters, Visakhapatnam, the field survey work was the next target in mind. The sample collection from Nalban bird sanctuary was interesting. The boat rides to the sanctuary at early hours were followed by a relentless search for dead birds that took most of the forenoon session. The field conditions sometimes would turn out to be too demanding or compelling. I faced one such situation where I had to perform post-mortems on dead birds in the boat itself on our way back to the base camp. It was a two-hour journey with scissors and forceps in hands which I shall never forget!!

Known as the “City of Destiny” by many, Visakhapatnam in itself is a land of subtle art and heritage. True to its name, the city fosters new hope, a new path, and a whole new ideology and opportunity for those seeking. The city is rich in Geo-Heritage spots, hosts an active navy base, plentiful bird-watching hubs, lots of recreational spots and most importantly the long beaches.

My work on this particular study of contaminant residue analysis on bird tissues and feathers has helped me to experience both laboratory and field aspects of a researcher’s life. On field, the task of making the common public aware of the importance of this work was most challenging. I understood the basic problem here. We, humans, have been running behind technology so much that we have left out a major existence from whom we can learn any technique, any purpose, any invention, any remedy - the *Nature*. This field of wildlife toxicology is one such tool where a researcher gets the opportunity to establish the harmfulness of any chemical before it



Dead bird sample collection from Nalbana Bird Sanctuary, Chilika and conducting postmortem on boat

can cause irreversible damages to the ecosystem. Laboratory results, delivered on time can help interrelate the chemical in question and its effect on a particular habitat or the entire ecosystem before any catastrophic events happen.

After a span of 21 months, I am both contented and hopeful that I am finally doing what I love to do and hope to learn more techniques, meet more people in this field, and expand my horizons over time. From remediation of contaminated environments (Masters Dissertation) to Ecotoxicology, it has been a wonderful but demanding journey. The study of the effect of harmful chemicals that we use on soil, water, plants and micro and macro-organisms has been my area of interest. I am now happy that, in addition to the above-stated substrates, I have now gained exposure to birds too. My gratitude towards SACON is immeasurable and it will remain the same. When I joined SACON, one of my well-wishers said: “You are working in a paradise”, which turned out to be true and I would feel that each day while getting ready to go to my laboratory!

Correspondence: venu.bhagyasree@gmail.com

My first steps in Meghalaya

S. Sangeeth Sailas

It was during a period of frustration when my ideas on owl acoustics for my master’s project weren’t working out until Dr. S. Babu, my guide suggested me to study owls in the context of community reserves in Meghalaya. Dr. P. Pramod, who is also guiding my dissertation seconded the idea. After my second semester examinations in June (five months before I start my dissertation), I decided to leave for Garo Hills, Meghalaya.

Dr. P. V. Karunakaran, Principal investigator of the Meghalaya project asked me to treat my short ten-day trip as an opportunity to see and explore the landscape while helping Megha, a researcher documenting mammals in the community reserves. Hoping that ideas for my dissertation would come to me as I experience the landscape, I flew to Guwahati, the gateway to the other north-eastern states.

On reaching Guwahati on the fourth of July, I traveled to Paltan Bazaar and booked a seat in a share-taxi to Tura. Tura is the second-largest town in Meghalaya, where the base camp is located. On arrival, I was received by Megha and Karthik; the latter documents herpetofauna of the community reserves. Over the next few days, I went birding during the mornings, helped Megha with the identification of mammals and birds from her camera-trap images and attended the Sunday service at the local St. Andrews’ Church. After the service, the priest introduced me to Sr. Leyas, a doctor at the Mission Hospital nearby who happened to be from Kerala, my home state. With her and her fellow sisters, I ended up eating *puttu*, *aethikka* and *kadala curry*, the traditional breakfast cuisines from Kerala sitting in far away north-eastern state of Meghalaya!

We then traveled to Selbalgre, a tiny village in West Garo hills that owns the 22-hectare Selbalgre community reserve. Over the next seven days, I assisted Megha in her setting up of camera-traps and Sherman traps

(basically a metal rat trap for small rodents) during the day. We would check the Sherman traps every day and take tissue samples (ear-clippings) and body measurements of the trapped animals.

I had never been to the North-east before and so I was thrilled to see all these birds like the Sub-oscine Long-tailed Broadbill and the north-east subspecies of the Golden-fronted Leafbird, having a small red patch on its forehead. We would also go for night surveys along the trails in the reserve, when I would look for owls, play their calls and try to detect them from their response. It was raining most of the time and owls do not call much during rain, so as expected, their response was very poor. But towards the end of the trip, the rains had reduced a bit and I was able to hear them. On one occasion, five Asian Barred Owlets called from different directions in call response to my call playback! I also heard Collared Scops-Owls and was informed by a local fisherman of a potential roosting site of a Tawny or Brown Fish Owl in a large cavity in a tree beside a stream bank.

From my visit, I was able to understand the landscape composition and how the community reserve was surrounded by various elements such as village forests, settlements, cultivated areas and plantations (commonly *Areca* sp.). While community reserves were not exactly “islands” located within a swathe of contrasting habitat, I could feel that the vegetation inside the reserve was much denser. However, I wondered if a small 22-hectare community reserve would make a difference for the owls in the landscape. Perhaps, as Dr. S. Babu says, the old-growth trees with large girth would be concentrated inside the reserves, on account of their greater protection. I am hoping to test both these ideas with the data I collect during my dissertation.

I was also able to gain some insight into the local culture and customs through my observations and conversations with our field assistant Gulab Marak, who had previously worked for Dr. Divya Vasudev, studying Hoolock Gibbons. Interestingly, in Meghalaya prevails a matriarchal society where the maternal surname is passed down to the children. Women are the primary breadwinners while men take greater responsibility in child-rearing. Marriage within tribes is also not practiced, which was something that made me think of my population genetics classes. The day before I left, I got a chance to see an Oriental Bay Owl that was kept as a pet in a house in Selbalgre. While it made me uncomfortable to see it wet and dirty, I was assured that it was well fed. It surprised me to hear that the owl was caught from a tree just behind their house since the species is described to be found only in dense evergreen vegetation.

While the ideas for what I would eventually work on did not come to me naturally as I saw the landscape, they were definitely shaped by my experiences. I was able to make a judgment on the feasibility of ideas I got later and relate various studies I read subsequently to the landscape, I visited. Now, after my return to SACON and successful defense of my proposal on the “Effects of local and landscape-level factors on owl assemblages in a partially-fragmented landscape in Garo hills, north-eastern India”, I am both extremely excited and slightly nervous to start my fieldwork in December, and looking forward to new experiences.



**An Oriental Bay Owl
kept in a house in Selbalgre**

Correspondence: ssangeethspeaks@gmail.com



Editorial Board

Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Dr. T. Ramesh & Mr. R. Jayakumar

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

सालिम अली पक्षिविज्ञान एवं प्रकृतिविज्ञान केन्द्र

Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

A Centre of Excellence under Ministry of Environment,
Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India

आनैकट्टी, कोयम्बतूर - 641 108

Anaikatty (Post), Coimbatore – 641 108

Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Tele: +91 - 422-2203100, 109; Fax: +91 – 422 – 2203132

Website: www.sacon.in

Email: salimali@sacon.in, salimalicentre@gmail.com

To

July - September 2019

Printed & Published by the Director, Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History,
Anaikatty (Post), Coimbatore– 641 108, Tamil Nadu, India.