



SACON News

Vol. 17 (3) July – September 2020





SACON News

July – September, 2020

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Feature Article Image
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From the Director's Desk

As we continue to persevere our fight against the global pandemic COVID-19, I sincerely hope all our readers are safe and healthy during these uncertain times.

Complying to the COVID-19 protocols laid down by the Centre and Tamil Nadu State Government, SACON in the last quarter (Jul-Sep.) conducted some online virtual activities. I am immensely proud to inform that the first batch students of SACON's M.Sc. (Ornithology & Conservation Biology) course successfully defended their dissertation with diverse research topics executed in different landscapes of the country. SACON also organized a *National Art Contest* for children across the country through online entries to commemorate the 'International Day for Preservation of Ozone Layer' on 16th September 2020. SACON coordinated a *Online Refresher Course* for the in-service Forest Officers of Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Coimbatore. During the reporting period, one of SACON's long-term serving Driver, Mr. P. Subramanian superannuated from his services.

This issue also features articles and art-work from our researchers with interesting narratives of their experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown.

I hope you all have a good time reading and request all our readers to not to put their guards down against the pandemic.

Dr. K. Sankar



INSTITUTIONAL EVENTS

Wildlife Management Training Course for CASFOS

The Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Coimbatore, organized an Online Refresher Course for the in-service Forest Officers of different states from 7th to 12th September 2020, with inputs from SACON faculty to coordinate a module on “Wildlife monitoring and population census protocols and habitat management”. Dr. H.N. Kumara, Principal Scientist, Division of Conservation Biology, Dr. T. Ramesh, Scientist, Division of Conservation Ecology, and Dr. P. V. Karunakaran, Principal Scientist, Division of Landscape Ecology, delivered lectures during the training programme.

Dissertation Defense Seminar by Students of M.Sc. (Ornithology & Conservation Biology) Course

SACON is proud to inform that the first batch students of the M.Sc. (Ornithology & Conservation Biology) course at our institute (affiliated to Saurashtra University, Rajkot) successfully defended their dissertations in an online seminar conducted during 23rd - 24th September 2020. Students had earlier developed their dissertation topics and presented their proposals in an open seminar on 29th August 2019. The field work was conducted between December 2019 and April 2020 and the dissertation topics were as follows:



INSTITUTIONAL EVENTS

Name of the student	Title of M.Sc. dissertation	Funding Agency
Abhilasha S. Fulzele	Effects of sterilization on social organization and behaviour of free-ranging rhesus macaque (<i>Macaca mulatta</i>)	MoEFCC, Govt. of India
Deepak Chavan	Influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on anti-predatory behaviour of Peninsular Rock Agama (<i>Psammophilus dorsalis</i>)	Wildlife Trust of India
Purnima Mohite	Composition of intertidal rock pool sedentary fauna from select beaches of southern coast of Maharashtra	WWF-India
Priyanka Das	Dry season forage selection by Asian elephant (<i>Elephas maximus</i>) in a fragmented landscape, northern West Bengal	MoEFCC, Govt. of India
Sangeeth Sailas S.	Factors influencing the habitat use of owls in a mosaic landscape in Garo Hills, Meghalaya	Raptor Research and Conservation Foundation
Shardul Joshi	Insectivorous bird communities of monoculture plantations in Konkan region, Maharashtra	MoEFCC, Govt. of India
Shriranjani L. Iyer	Urban green spaces and their effect on bat activity in Pune, Maharashtra	MoEFCC, Govt. of India
Subhiksha Lakshmi Maxima	An assessment of butterfly species composition across a disturbance gradient in Garo Hills, north-east India	MoEFCC, Govt. of India
Swapna Lawrence	Influence of timber plantations on high-altitude understory insectivorous birds in the Nilgiris landscape	MoEFCC, Govt. of India

The following two External Examiners were nominated by the Board of Studies, Saurashtra University to evaluate the dissertations and to conduct their viva voce examinations:



Dr. Karthikeyan Vasudevan,
Senior Principal Scientist, Laboratory
for Conservation of Endangered
Species (LaCONES), CSIR - Centre for
Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB),
Hyderabad.



Dr. P.O. Nameer,
Professor & Head, Centre for Wildlife
Studies, College of Forestry, Kerala
Agricultural University, Thrissur.

The External Examiners congratulated all the students and their supervisors for the diversity of research topics executed in different landscapes of the country and for the academic rigour of their dissertation works, despite the logistic constraints and challenges posed by prolonged lockdown owing to the coronavirus pandemic.

We thank all the Supervisors at SACON and Co-supervisors drawn from other leading institutions for their guidance and support to the students. We also thank the funding agencies that sponsored the dissertation research projects and various state forest departments for granting us the required research permits.

Dr. Rajah Jayapal
PG Course Director, SACON

INSTITUTIONAL EVENTS

National Art Competition on World Ozone Day

SACON conducted a National Level Art Competition for Children (age groups: 10–13 years and 14–17 years) to commemorate International Day for Preservation of Ozone Layer on 16th September 2020. The theme for the Art Competition was “Ozone Day - 35 Years and healing”. A total of 78 entries were received from across the country. This event was organized with the sole motive of promoting awareness and sensitizing the younger generation about the importance of the protection of the earth’s ozone layer. The outstanding entries (four in each age category) were awarded e-certificates and befitting prizes.

Group A: Age 10–13 years

Winning Entries

1st Group A 10–13 years
Age: 12 years
Bhubaneswar, Odisha
DAV Public School

Kumar Arijit Mishra




Winning Entries

2nd Group A 10–13 years
Age: 11 years
NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh
Delhi Public School, NOIDA


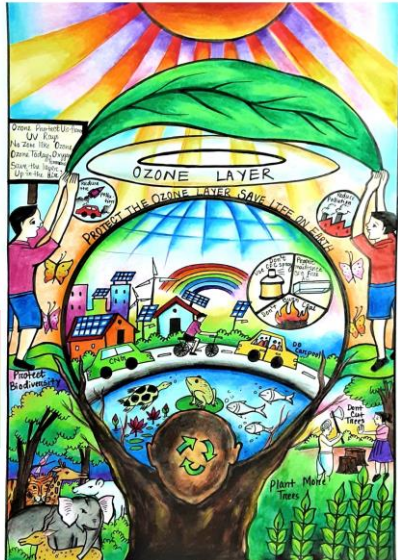
Deepshikha De




Winning Entries

3rd Group A 10–13 years
Age: 13 years
Khordha, Odisha
Buxi Jagabandhu English medium School



Aisha Panda

Winning Entries

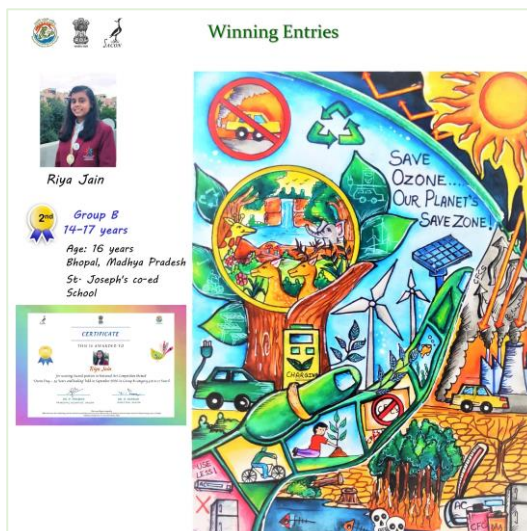
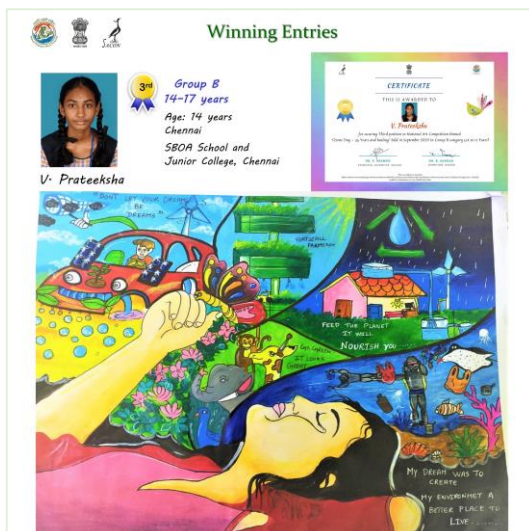
4th Group A 10–13 years
Age: 13 years
Chennai, Tamil Nadu
Montfort Matric Sr-Sec School, Chennai

R. Sayali

INSTITUTIONAL EVENTS

Group B: Age 14-17 years



Superannuation of Mr. P. Subramanian, Driver, SACON

Mr. P. Subramanian, Driver, superannuated on 30th September 2020 from the service of SACON, after putting in more than 26 years of dedicated service. SACON will fondly remember his services to the institution.



POPULAR ARTICLES

Dead turtle on nest – How far are we from Human-induced Extinction?

Kirubhanandhini V.

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We are all aware of the various forms of environmental crises induced by one species on the planet. All the anthropocentric activities such as industrialization, urbanization, logging, hunting, etc. have ultimately led to global biodiversity loss, habitat loss, forest fragmentation, pollution, contamination, climate crisis, and altered trophic scales. Ironically, our species is oblivious and insensible about all the devastating impacts of their own actions on not just the environment or other lives but also of their own. We were often taught that humans are at top of the food chain, but we are in fact nowhere close. The result of recent COVID-19 global pandemic that claimed many 'human' lives; the enforced lockdown days made thoughtful people ponder what the 'human' species has done to the world. It scares me to think that 'my' species is capable of doing much worse.

During the lockdown days, I pondered over some pre-pandemic experiences I had while I was in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh for a field survey to find dead birds. The place is also one of the mass nesting sites of the smallest species of sea turtle—the Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) also known as the Pacific Ridley. This species is categorized as 'Vulnerable' in the IUCN red list of threatened species and protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. Despite these protection efforts, the species continues to face threats to its dwindling habitat and threats from predators including humans. One day while doing a field survey, I came across several Olive Ridley nests that are protected by the Andhra Forest Department through their *In-situ* conservation programme. To my surprise, I also encountered several footprints near the nests which appeared to be of dogs. Upon asking the locals of nearby *Chinnayanam* Village, it was evident that dogs were frequent visitors to these nests and preyed on the turtle eggs. On moving further, I came across a dead turtle on its nest. Although the reason for the death was unknown, however an attack by a dog was evident.



©Kirubhanandhini V.



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Olive Ridley Turtle nests across a beach in Kakinada district, Andhra Pradesh. (Top) nest protected by the Andhra Forest Dept; (Bottom) disturbed and unprotected nest

POPULAR ARTICLES

Dog footprints near the nests of Olive Ridley Turtles on a beach in Kakinada district, Andhra Pradesh.



©Revanth



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Dead Olive Ridley Turtle in Kakinada district, Andhra Pradesh

A study in 2003, reported the mass death of 806 Olive Ridley turtles along the Andhra Pradesh coast which were mostly depredated by Dogs *Canis familiaris*; while jackals *Canis aureus* and hyaenas *Hyaena hyaena* were also sighted occasionally depredating turtle nests (Tripathy *et al.*, 2003). Domestic dogs, when they use natural living space without human assistance, are one of the worst invasive alien species (Lessa *et al.*, 2016). Apart from introduced dogs, other anthropogenic activities on the beaches such as fishing, anchoring, loading and unloading of fishing vessels, drying of fishes, etc. by the fishing communities, often directly impact the beach habitat (Honey and Krantz 2012). Indirectly, these activities are known to change thermal profiles that evoke a change in the natural behavior of adults and hatchlings of several turtle species. (Witherington *et al.*, 2003, 2007). Further, marine pollution, oil and gas exploration, agricultural runoff, and sewage discharge also affect the beach habitat (Frazier *et al.*, 2007).

Encountering this 'one' dead turtle on its nest made me realize the extent to which we as a species have vastly impacted our very own planet that we inhabit. We have introduced invasive species, overexploited every possible resource that we could, caused pandemics, and are now even changing the global climate at a rate faster than the geological standards. According to the known geological history, the planet has witnessed five major mass extinctions due to natural factors like climate change, ice-age, volcanoes, and the last one around 65 million years ago due to an asteroid hit (Alvarez, 1983). We are now on the precipice of the sixth, except this time it is 'Us' causing it at a rate 100 times higher than ever before. This thought always reminds me of the book by Elizabeth Kolbert— *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* which argues that "Earth is in the midst of a modern, man-made, sixth extinction" and "we humans are destined to become casualties of our own environmental recklessness".

POPULAR ARTICLES

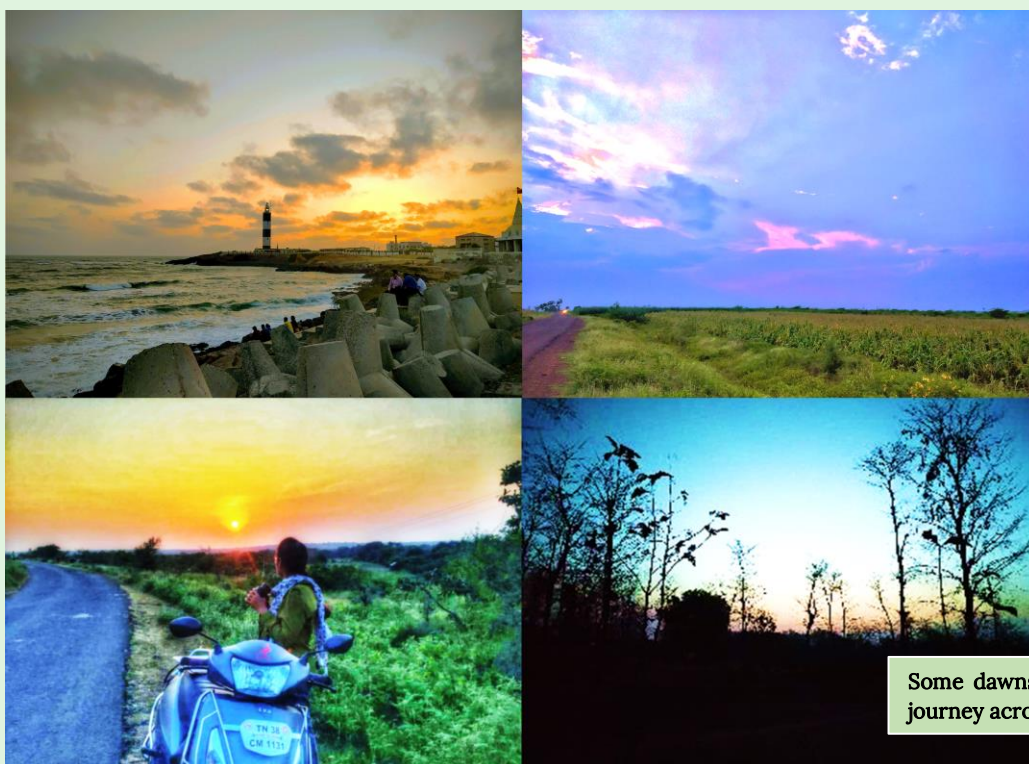
***“Atithi Devo Bhava”*— The Guest is God**

Priyanka Bansode

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“Why to study and save birds?” “Why do we need them?” “Are you counting birds?” “Do you always travel this far to see these birds?” “Is this your job?” “Why are you trying to conserve them?” “What will you get?” “Do you think you can do it?” ... These were the most common questions bombarded at us by people wherever we went for a survey as part of our project on synanthropic birds across several states.

It was my dream to travel across India, and this project gave me an amazing opportunity to do so. Traveling through six states, and pursuing my dreams did not come easy. Breaking the norms of a conservative family to travel alone on a two-wheeler with unknown people, waking up at different places every 2-3 days, staying in different motels, understanding different cultures, languages, landscapes, cuisines and also dealing with my own reservations, qualms, and flaws— nothing came easy, but I managed to deal with it all with each day passing. I went vagabonding across the country on my project’s TVS Jupiter with my entire luggage, as I changed locations and reached new places every day. I truly enjoyed and loved the entire process. My inquisitiveness and fascination for unknown natural destinations helped me to endure this excursion. Every sunrise and sunset had its beauty and a story to share that I started to grasp soon, as I progressed through my journey. I traversed through the National and State highways which appeared never-ending; maneuvered difficult roads with potholes, grits, boulders, mud, and dust, as I managed to reach every destination without fail. The colour of the dust clouds bewilderingly changed with every landscape and even appeared to engulf me as I would always receive amusing responses from the reception desk of hotels that I would reach with all my muddy self.



Some dawns and dusks of the journey across different states

POPULAR ARTICLES

Roads through ghats covered with canopies were my favourite to ride on. The lush green giants on the sides would feel like gallant guards doing their duty to protect me from the scorching sun. The sun rays would spear the trees and sheen through, as we played hide and seek that would bring a certain sense of exuberance to my exhausted self. Roads through the dry deciduous forest had an artistic beauty with different shades of brown, golden, yellow, and some patches of green. Coastal roads enthralled me with the roaring sounds of thrashing waves and the damp ocean winds. The coastal roads of Goa and Karnataka were lined with long stretches of tall Areca nut and coconut plantation, whereas Gujarat coastal roads were covered with scrubs and vast salt pans on either side. The coasts of Gujarat would often look more pink than blue because of the magnificent beauty of Flamingos. I would often take short water and tea breaks just to admire the scenic beauty of nature and the magnificent sights were enough to forget all the weariness and fatigue of long drives. The semi-arid and arid regions bestowed a different sense of pleasure. These regions would often make me think about how the species harboring these regions have thrived; and that it was now my turn to understand, learn, and survive.

India is known for its rich and diverse culture, traditions, languages, cuisines, and vast floral and faunal diversity. At times, I have experienced these differences even within a short journey of 100 km. As a conservation science student, I was always very keen to understand and experience these interactions. Our country also has an innate sense of worshipping nature and all its elements, which is key to the conservation of all the life forms around us. Once, while conducting a questionnaire survey with locals in Gujarat, we (my research team) realized how inherently the locals (respondents) are connected to nature and their surroundings, and how much love, attachment, and respect they possess. The conversations gave us an insight into their diverse views, thoughts, and values that they have inherited from their ancestors. The locals, in particular, treasured the presence of birds around them and they were very keen to continue their efforts to protect and conserve them through their existing traditional knowledge.



TVS Jupiter and the endless roads

POPULAR ARTICLES

Some common sights while traversing Gujarat



Nilgai – The Largest Asian Antelope



Grey mongoose mating on an agricultural field



Rescued Parakeet Nestling



Bengal monitor basking



Village hospitality in Gujarat

In another incident, while conducting our survey in Patan district, Gujarat, we reached our last point-count location of that day at around 6 P.M.. The location was near a farmhouse and as we started our count, a young boy from the nearby village curiously approached and was excited to see us with our field gears. Soon the entire family joined us with a certain sense of curiosity. We and our work were of particular interest to an aged man who appeared to be a senior member of the family. As he started interacting, he invited us to his backyard where many bird species were roosting. He showed us Peafowl, Mynas, Pigeons, Treepies, and Sparrows and spoke about their importance for the environment and surroundings. He spoke with remarkable enthusiasm and mentioned colloquial names of several birds. With his inherited knowledge, he narrated how humans should live in harmony with nature, respect it, and not exploit it for personal greed. He endlessly spoke about deforestation, poaching, and rivers getting dried. This man was not educated and had spent his entire life in the same village, and even then, he garnered tremendous knowledge that left us flabbergasted. He then invited us to his house, offered tea, and to our surprise pointed at an old shoebox which was tied to the roof that had sparrows nesting inside. Upon asking him about this idea, he informed that a few years ago someone gave him these boxes to put up for sparrows to nest which were then used by a couple of sparrows. Seeing this, he started hanging more shoe boxes which attracted even more sparrows.

POPULAR ARTICLES

The Old Man and the sparrow family



Boxes kept for sparrows



Research Team in Gujarat

All together, there were 15 individuals in their house using three boxes and the family would routinely feed them every day. The old man's modest act and wise thoughts further enthralled us when he stated that “the birds came before us on the earth, and they have the first right to feed and survive; we humans must learn the power of *Mother Nature* and not try to overpower anything, because if we do so then conflicts will arise”. As he spoke, I unexpectedly noticed a pair of sparrows mating on a tree branch. The entire experience of meeting this family, learning about their innate love of nature, and the company of wonderful sparrows was one of the most enriching and unforgettable moments of my journey.

Like this, many other families in Gujarat are doing their bit for the birds around them. They keep bird feeders outside their houses, and even rescue and attend injured birds before letting them free. They immensely believe that their act of feeding birds and sheltering them is pious. These people might not be aware of the scientific importance of their actions, but their religious and cultural beliefs were letting them do their bit for the conservation. They trust the process of coexistence and sharing of resources. Despite the limited resources, these people admirably welcomed not just us but the beautiful birds to their backyard and lives, truly justifying the Sanskrit verse '*Atithi Devo Bhava*' which literally translates into '*Respecting guests with the same respect as God*'.

POPULAR ARTICLES

WEBINARS— During pandemic!!

Swapna Devi Ray

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Bling!! Bling-Bling!!!

“Updated invitation: xxx xxx xxxx @Wed Sep 0X, 2020, xx pm-yy pm (IST) (xxxxxxxxx@gmail.com)” or “Reminder: XXXX xx xxxx starts in 1 day”—The most common e-mail notification since this lockdown started. On an average, 2–5 email notifications would pop up each day in the mail inbox from various sites just to notify the upcoming webinars and webinar reminders.

The online platform has been used most frequently for sharing experiences and knowledge from various research fields. For researchers, it provides a great opportunity to share their experiences and to gather knowledge from various sources with zero travel cost. Since March 2020, in India, everything went under lockdown and public gatherings were strictly prohibited due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Moreover, being called positive (to Covid-19) after meeting people has become the greatest fear since the outbreak of the pandemic. At this point, online learning through '*webinars*' became a norm to reach out and fulfill the knowledge goals in educational inequalities, certified as *Digitally Upgraded !!!* According to the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the word “Webinar” was first coined by Eric Korb in 1998 which is the most frequently used term in the current phase of E-learning. To begin with, initially, every webinar was free of cost and most of them were either arranged on the Facebook platform or via Google meet. People preferred Facebook, the popular social networking system as a platform for their webinars. Even, Facebook Live with a group of people discussing different field experiences and work done in wildlife and conservation were common. Within a short time, different institutions, NGO's and agencies working in wildlife fields started systematically organizing webinars with inputs from resource persons. Eventually, Zoom meeting, Cisco WebEx, GoToMeeting, Join.Me, Hangout, etc. joined the ongoing trend. Now, there are registration fees to participation fees for every scheduled session/course. Although few webinars are still streaming free, one must subscribe to their YouTube channels for the recorded version.

Being locked up at Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) campus during this pandemic was a completely new experience for me. Facing the shower of anxiety, stress, and all sort of hormonal trauma, it was really hard to stay focused on research. Nevertheless, just to sharpen the sword of knowledge and diverting the brain from panic pandemic situations, attending webinars related to ecology and wildlife conservation and personal interest were a solace. However, living on a remotely located campus during the lockdown and managing to be online with the inconsistent network was a challenge and a test of patience. Despite all the obstacles, I managed to participate in 66 webinars organized on different platforms by different organizers from April to September 2020. Some really interesting webinars were streaming via Facebook, Zoom, and alongside their YouTube channels, which provided real good insights of ongoing research trends, techniques, and introduction to the basics of particular topics (59% of the webinars that I attended). In the six months as a *Webinarian*, I observed that people attended webinars mainly for specific reasons like, for personal interest, to gain knowledge, and for e-certificate.

POPULAR ARTICLES

Interestingly, maximum participants would stay connected till the end of the session where certificates were being issued after submission of feedback forms at the end of webinars (36%). There were a few webinars wherein the flyer mentioned the provision of e-certificates but later never provided one (5%). On a positive note, attending these meetings brought me in contact with many like-minded individuals and as in several online platforms where you make friends like Facebook friends, WhatsApp friends, Hangout friends, etc., I now also have 'Webinar Friends'!!.

Out of curiosity, I tried to find from my webinar friends how many webinars did they attend and was appalled at knowing that some had an average of 20 per month. I am of the opinion that webinars are attended based on the topic of interest, however the resource person of the webinar also matters a lot. It would help to interact with the resource person to clear doubts after the session. At times, attendance to the registered webinars would drop down because of the resource person or poor quality of presentation. Webinars should be attended for gaining knowledge but not for getting certificates. All the online courses and presentations provide a great platform to interact with experts and an opportunity to get connected with people working in the same field. By accelerating knowledge with communication skills, webinars can have a real positive effect on our learning process. Although this sudden educational evolution brings enormous risks towards all educational systems based on basic resources; a rigorous assessment and proper implication of current online learning trends could really help to bring up a new generation of digitally upgraded people.

Researcher's Corner— Art & Conservation

The last few months have been the longest that I have stayed off the field since the lockdown began. Work from home comes with its challenges and as I juggled with work-home balance, I tried to make the most of it. Although I miss the sheer thrill of discovering new things each day on the field, that certainly did not change as I reconnected with the wild creatures around me. A visiting squirrel, hovering dragon and damselflies, crawling spiders, mysterious moths, fluttering butterflies, noisy parakeets, have all kept me company. From the songs of early birds to the croaks of evening frogs kept me wondering at the sheer existence of several lifeforms around us which we often overlook. I have been amazed at how much life exists around us, surprisingly so inside the gigantic city, Mumbai. Here is my attempt at painting my favourite spot in my house with the usual visitors.

Pandemic and Window Wonders

Zainab Khan, JRB.

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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 Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History.

सालिम अली पक्षिविज्ञान एवं प्रकृतिविज्ञान केन्द्र

Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

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To

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