SACON News

Vol. 18 (4) October – December 2021



From the Director's Desk



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This issue of October to December 2021 marks the conclusion of another year. Following the reasonably controlled covid pandemic, it's critical that we remain calm, motivated, and focused on our development. With this note, I'm pleased to extend an invitation to the readers of this issue of SACON News. This issue of SACON News includes activities of the institute that took place during the last three months of 2021.

SACON's Nature Education-Extension Divisions and ENVIS Resource Partner collaborated to host a series of Webinars and awareness activities in various schools to commemorate World Wildlife Week and Sálim Ali's birth anniversary ENVIS RP hosted a webinar on Spider Diversity to raise awareness about the diversity of spiders. In light of Covid, the once-a-year Sálim Ali Nature Trophy Competition was held online this year with more than 650 entries from school students and teachers. With visits by forest authorities, students from several universities, and public participation through SANF meetings, we resumed our nature awareness programmes on our campus following Covid-safety protocols. Many young researchers joined SACON under several projects of the 'Visionary Perspective Plan' and had their orientation session in December '21. This issue's popular section also has several engaging articles from our researchers, which I hope the readers will enjoy. We hope to return to our readers with more engaging topics in the next issue. Continue to be safe and blessed.

Dr. S. Muralidharan, Director in charge

SACON News

October - December 2021

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Wildlife Week Celebration 2021



From October 2 to 8, the Nature Education & Extension branch of SACON hosted a series of webinars as part of the Wildlife Week celebration. Wing Commander S. Srinidhi, Joint Director, Aerospace Safety (Ornithology), Indian Air Force, talked on "Conflict between Birds and Humans in Aerospace" on October 3. On October 4, Dr. Shirish, Principal Scientist, Conservation Ecology Division, SACON, gave a webinar session on "The Underworld– Life in Dark." Dr. Farah Ishtiaq, Senior Scientist, Tata Institute for Genetics and Society, presented a talk on "Zoonotic Diseases with a Focus on Birds" on October 7. All lectures and interactive sessions were very informative, with attendees from around the country.

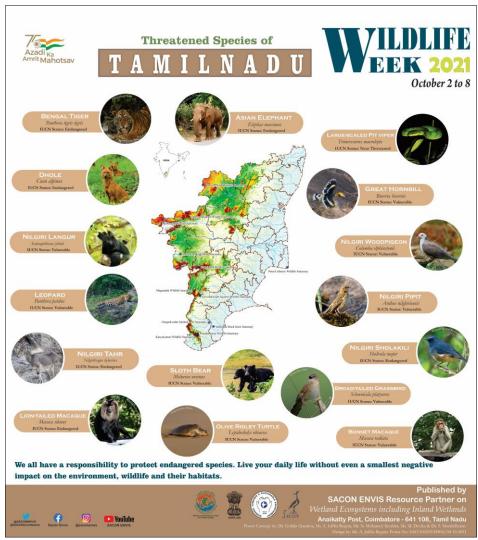


SACON ENVIS RP also celebrated the Wildlife Week at a Government Tribal Residential High School in Mavuthampathi, Walayar, Coimbatore. The SACON ENVIS team designed a Wildlife Week poster with the theme "Threatened Species of Tamil Nadu," raising awareness about the value of flora and fauna and the key causes of species decline. In addition, the students and teachers discussed the environmental consequences of single-use plastics. A documentary about wildlife was also screened for the students

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The theme of World Wildlife Week 2021 was *"Forests and Livelihoods:* Sustaining People and Planet"



Poster released on threatened species of Tamil Nadu by SACON ENVIS RP

Visit of CASFOS Officer Trainees

On October 4, 36 Officer Trainees of 2021–2022 Forest Range Officer Batch undergoing induction training at Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Coimbatore, visited SACON. A series of activities for the participants of the training course was scheduled. These included lectures by SACON Faculty and Researchers.



Visit of Students from KG Arts & Science College, Coimbatore



Mahendiran Mylswamy, Dr. Senior Scientist, spoke about Bird Conservation and SACON's past and ongoing work, Ph.D. Scholars Mr. Prateek Dey and Ms. Swapna Devi Ray, National Avian Forensic Laboratory (NAFL), introduced the types of equipment in the laboratory and explained the importance of their respective studies. Dr. K. Nambirajan, Project Scientist, briefed about the Ecotoxicology laboratory's techniques and types of equipment. In the concludina session. Dr. Ρ. Pramod. Senior Principal Scientist, interacted with the officers about birds and bird watching. Research Biologist Volunteers Mr. Anoop Raj P.N. and Ms. Angel Joy guided the officers in Bird watching to the Nature trail on campus.

On October 6, 8 students from the Department of Management, KG Arts & Science, paid a visit to SACON. Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Scientist, gave an overview of SACON and its research initiatives. Dr. P. Pramod, Senior Principal Scientist, gave a talk on "Introduction to Birds and Bird watching." Ms. Sowmiya, Nature Education Assistant, and other researchers then took the students to the campus's Nature Trail.

Sálim Ali Naturalists Forum (SANF) Meeting-October 2021

The SANF is where the general public can interact and collaborate with SACON on its various activities. SANF members have been a part of SACON for over a decade, and the family continues to grow with new additions of Coimbatore City's wildlife enthusiasts. Each such meeting begins with early morning bird watching, faculty lectures on specialised themes, and discussions on various agenda items.





The monthly meetings resumed on October 10 with tremendous zeal, following the relaxation of COVID restrictions. The participants went on a trek through the campus's forests under

the supervision of Dr. P. Pramod, Senior Principal Scientist. Post breakfast, Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Scientist, talked about her research on "Burrow-dwelling animals in Keoladeo National Park, Rajasthan". During the presentation, Dr. Aditi highlighted the relevance of the least-concerned species, Porcupine in the ecosystem.

Visit of Kathaikalam Butterfly Library group

A group of 55 students and their parents visited SACON on October 29 for an exposure visit. Dr. P. Pramod, Senior Principal Scientist, SACON, led an interactive session on nature and its wonders. Mr. Anoop Raj P.N., Senior Research Biologist, delivered a lecture on "Introduction to Birds" and took the group to the campus's Nature Trail accompanied by other research volunteers.



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Institutional Events

Sálim Ali Nature Competition-2021





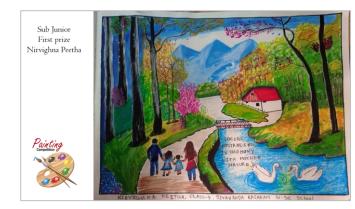
SACON has been conducting Sálim Ali Nature Competition for Coimbatore School Students every year. These competitions are to raise awareness about "Nature" among School Students and Teachers. Due to the Covid–19 pandemic, we organized online competitions for students and teachers. Three entries in each category with innovative, original ideas were declared winners. The entries were open at National Level for Students and Teachers across the country.

For students, we conducted Painting and Elocution competitions with the "*Social Distancing in tune with Nature*" theme. We received a total of 549 entries under four categories for *Painting*: up to 5th (Sub Junior), 6th to 8th (Junior), 9th to 10th (Senior), 11th to 12th (Super Senior); and 71 Video Entries for Elocution under three categories: 6th to 8th (Junior), 9th to 10th (Senior), 11th to 12th (Senior).

For teachers, we asked Junior, Middle, and Senior School Teachers to submit a short lesson plan on hands-on activities for teaching concepts related to nature under the theme "*Not All Classrooms have four walls*." The best entries were awarded certificates and prizes in each category. SACON

Institutional Events

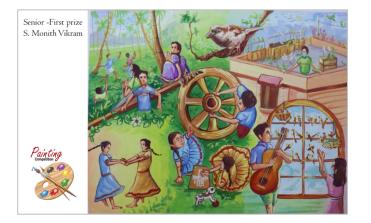
Here are some of the best paintings received:











Super Senior - First prize – R. Daitchika





Super Senior –

Second prize Sonali Sandeep Raut



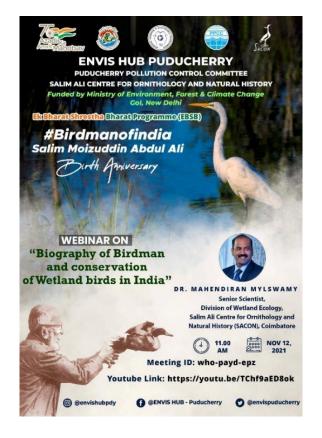


Dr. Sálim Ali's 125th Birth Anniversary Celebrations

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To commemorate the 125th Birth anniversary of Dr. Sálim Ali, SACON organized an online memorial lecture on November 12, on the theme "*Biodiversity Conservation: Global Perspectives*". The guest speaker was Dr. V.B. Mathur, Chairperson, National Biodiversity Authority, Government of India. After the talk, the winners of the SANF competition were announced.





Parallelly, SACON ENVIS RP and Puducherry ENVIS Hub organized a Webinar on "*Biography of Birdman and conservation of Wetland birds in India*" by Dr. M. Mahendiran, Senior Scientist, SACON.

Visit of Student from Sri Krishna College of Arts & Science

On November 17, 44 students from Sri Krishna College of Arts & Science's Biotechnology department visited the SACON campus. Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Scientist, gave an introduction talk

about SACON and the students were led on a nature trail on campus with Ms. Sri Sowmiya M., Nature Education Assistant. They then had a conversation with Dr. Pramod, Senior Principal Scientist, about the wonders of nature, followed by Sri Sowmiya's discourse on "Introduction to Birds and Birding". After the event, we showcased a short wildlife film for the participants.



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Institutional Events

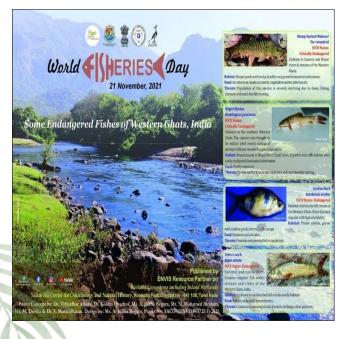
Sálim Ali Naturalists Forum (SANF) meeting-November 2021

On November 21, the SANF meeting began with a bird-watching session. The gathering took place on "World Fisheries Day". The Guest Speaker, Dr. Goldin Quadros, Principal Scientist, ENVIS Coordinator, and the SACON ENVIS team released posters and briefed the attendees on the significance of the day, threats to fisheries, and endangered fish in the Western Ghats. We held a meeting following the special session to discuss the SANF's future actions.











Visit of BBA Students from Nirmala College, Coimbatore



On December 6, 56 students from the BBA Department of Nirmala College for Women visited SACON for exposure. Dr. Pramod, Senior Principal Scientist,

and Mr. Anoop Raj, Senior Research Biologist, interacted and introduced students to the ongoing activities of SACON. Ms. Sri Sowmiya M., Nature Education Assistant, escorted the students to campus's Nature trail and later gave a talk on "Birds and Bird Watching." We also hosted a short wildlife documentary at the end of the programme.

Orientation Programme SACON's New Research Personnel



On December 7, SACON hosted an Orientation Program for all newly appointed research personnel for the "State Action Plan" Project. Dr. P.R. Arun, Senior Principal Scientist, gave a welcoming message, followed by an Inaugural address by Dr. S. Muralidharan, Director in charge. Dr. Rajah Jayapal, Senior Principal Scientist, briefed the researchers on "State Action Plans (SAP): Strategies & Methodology." Dr. Shomita Mukherjee and Dr. P.V. Karunakaran, Senior Principal Scientists, led an interactive session on "Research Integrity: Guidelines on Adopting Best Practices in Data Collection, Organization, Synthesis, and Attribution." SACON's Finance Officer, Mr. Aneesh Abraham explained the "Guidelines for maintaining accounts and submitting Statement of Expenditure" to the research personnel. Members of the Internal Complaints Committee, Dr. Shomita Mukherjee and Dr. H.N. Kumara, Principal Scientists, led an important session on "Know your rights: Sexual harassment at work." Dr. Kumara, who is also the Coordinator of the Internal Research Committee, ended the programme with a Vote of Thanks to all participants.

Visit of Chemistry Students from Nirmala College, Coimbatore



On December 11, 38 students from the Chemistry Department of Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, visited SACON. Ms. Sri Sowmiya M., Nature Education Assistant, gave an introductory talk on Birds and Bird Watching. Mr. Anoop Raj, Senior Research Biologist, informed the students about SACON and its activities before taking them to the campus's Nature Trail. The participants were also shown a short film about the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.



Webinar on "Spider Diversity" by IT Officer, SACON ENVIS RP



On December 15, Ms. Devika Maruthasalam, IT Officer from SACON ENVIS Resource Partner, delivered a lecture on "Spider Diversity" in the Popular Lecture Series organized by the Zoology Department of Maharshi Dayanand College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai. The webinar aimed to create awareness about the diversity of spiders among the students

Success

SACON's farewell to Mr. Muthupandi, Accountant

Mr. M. Muthupandi, Accountant resigned from his duty on December 20, 2021, to join as Senior Accounts Officer at the National Institute of Design, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Muthupandi joined SACON in December 2009 as an Accountant and played a significant role in the Finance Division of SACON. The SACON family wishes him well in all his future endeavors.





Colour Pencil Sketch of Great Hornbill by SACON's Researcher, Deepti Gupta





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Popular Articles

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Walking through the Pages

By Ms. Rachaveelpula Sreeja, Junior Research Biologist, Conservation Ecology Division Correspondence: srija238@gmail.com

As part of the preparation of a State Action Plan for Avifaunal conservation in Telangana, I had to write about the ornithological history of Telangana. Worried about not knowing where to start, I began reading about the ornithological history of India. After skimming through a few pages, I found myself reading between the lines. Realizing that Sálim Ali (the Bird Man of India) also struggled to make a career in Ornithology in India without a formal degree in the subject, my mouth pursed in a self-satisfied smirk, as the situation has not changed much even after so many decades. Nevertheless, his perseverance and hard work paid off and served him the honor of being the foremost expert in the field. That was the lesson from his story. His adventures in the wild, the 70 km trek on camelback in the wet mud to discover the breeding grounds of Lesser Flamingo (*Phoeniconaias minor*) in the Great Rann of Kutch seems stupendous. At a point in time, I felt I was a lilliput crawling through the alphabets and experiencing the stories of his times.

I walked into the beautiful library of SACON many times, but this time it felt special. l entered the References room, which homed the history wrapped in pages, bounded, and stood still in the undisturbed racks. I opened those hefty voluminous books to unravel the stories of time and nature. The fragrance of antiques creeped into my nerves, and I started to breathe in the smell of old books, the foxed yellowtinged papers, the print of the type machine, and the fragile nature of the pages. Though there was no time machine, I could travel back through time. As I read from the old volumes through the new volumes, I could walk the transition of the style of printing, the variety of fonts, from old hand drawings to the high resolution coloured images, glossy paper, the ten rupees 'Hornbill' magazine to the current costlier version, the old monikers of our British Indian states, the change of spellings from 'Goojerat'/'Guzarat' to the present-day Gujarat (which made it impossible to use keywords to search). Surprisingly, I also started accepting the importance of numbers after sitting and counting the number of species present in the checklist of five detailed volumes of the inventory of avian fauna produced by Sálim Ali as part of the Hyderabad State Ornithological Survey (1931–1932).

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The number of specimens collected was given, but I could not find the mention of the number of species present in the text. The importance of numbers (hitherto a much neglected topic) dawned on me only after I spent a whole afternoon counting the species manually. I also wondered how much computers have made our lives easier and, at the same time, made us equally lazy.

Old scientific literature is a diamond glittering in the sun. It explains the greatest treasures of nature in the simplest forms possible. Their reasoning is like an ice knife that can cut through the viscous layers of biases of humans. Their observations do not limit to the species alone but to the species in relation to the environment, studying the systems as comprehensive entities and not standalone units of a system, which I think we are losing out in today's world and wrongly naming it as specializations. If a neurologist studying the function of the brain doesn't know the function of the heart and the blood vessels that supply the oxygen to the brain to keep it alive, can we really call them a specialist? Studying particular taxa shouldn't restrict ourselves to taxa alone but should also connect with other aspects of its basis of life. The strength of such an observation can be witnessed even today. The trend in the predation of crops by the Plum-headed parakeets in Amarabad Plateau described during 1931-1932 in the Hyderabad State Ornithological Survey still holds good even today after many decades. The observations were not just made on the birds alone; the checklist of birds provided so much more than the species names that we see in the checklists produced today. They talked about the tree in which the bird was found and discussed the possibility of its occurrence and other intricate details. I don't take the freedom to judge anyone, but I myself can't identify many trees, insects, and other taxa which the birds heavily depend on, but I started to learn once I realized its importance. I know not much to comment on the current literature or the technicalities of the current day science. Still, the crystal clear expression of the earlier naturalists describing the science of nature fascinates me. That's the thing with nature; it swirls up an ocean of thoughts in me, making landfall on these plain naïve pages that accept my thoughts without question.



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Popular Articles

Someone's life is a gift to another

_{By} Ms. Priyanka Bansode,

Former SACON Researcher Correspondence: priyankabansode02@gmail.com

Scavengers might not be the first thing to pop into our mind when we think about birds, animals, or the beauty and balance of nature. However, we know that they are crucial to the stability of ecosystems and food webs. Nonetheless, they are quite an oversight. Vultures are the most efficient terrestrial vertebrate scavenger. By consuming dead animals, called carrion, they remove dead carcasses from the environment and help balance the food web by controlling many bacteria and pathogens. If left unchecked, the carcass may turn into the ideal hospice for a range of harmful pathogens to animals and humans. Scavengers, in turn, help eliminate these toxic substances from our environment, mitigating the spread of diseases that may otherwise disrupt local food webs and threaten human health and the economy. Sudden population shifts have the potential to destabilize local food webs. As a result, a healthy vulture population is essential to maintain the food web's equilibrium and control the spread of other diseases and pathogens from infecting humans. Having known the importance of Vultures, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) launched a Vulture Action Plan 2020-25 to conserve vultures in the country. Many states, including the State Forest departments, several non-governmental organizations, and research institutes, are also taking steps to protect these birds. Vulture numbers have plummeted during the previous two decades, putting most of the vulture species on the endangered species list. Diclofenac (a non-steroid anti-inflammatory medicine used by farmers to treat cattle) was once considered the primary cause of their population reduction. However, other factors inducing their decline include habitat loss due to deforestation, habitat fragmentation, mining, human disturbance, and misconceptions surrounding them. The most prevalent feature of all was cattle carcass-related issues, including inappropriate dumping of carcasses and the presence of feral dogs. The vulture's primary food source is dead cattle. However, the manner of opening the corpses has changed in recent years. Previously, wild predators such as leopards, wolves, and hyenas would tear the body open, or local slaughter businesses would leave pieces nearby for the vultures to consume. In the present times, unattended dead cattle are increasingly being devoured by stray dogs. Despite the abundance of food, stray canines may serve as a source of competition for the threatened vultures. Although cattle are revered in some regions of our country, many may be seen striding on the country's roads. Infertile, aged, and enfeebled female cattle having no more alert native utility or commercial worth are frequently abandoned by their owners. This has led to a tremendous rise in the stray cattle population. The problem has worsened with the ban on abattoirs. To tackle this issue, the Government has come up with solutions like Gaushala: The Protective shelter for stray cattle in India. Indigenous cattle dominate the country's cattle population, but the crossbred cattle population has increased significantly, threatening the indigenous cattle's genetic diversity. Hence, Gaushalas are an excellent alternative for managing the ever-increasing stray cattle population and conserving our deteriorating genetic base.

I witnessed the role of these scavengers throughout my fieldwork days. Once, after riding 45 kilometers to our fieldwork site in Raisen District (Madhya Pradesh), we came to a halt over a bridge, taken aback by the sight of the Halali dam. While admiring the morning bliss of this scenic sight, a tree piqued my curiosity as I saw an assemblage of 15-20 vultures roosting over it.

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I suspected there was a dead animal around. I couldn't see much because it was 6:30 a.m., and my vision was hazy due to fog smear. With a bit of disappointment, I proceeded to do my fieldwork at Dhamnoda, a small nearby settlement. While conducting our questionnaire survey with locals, one mentioned the reappearance of vultures in the surrounding area and informed us about the Gaushala near the Halali dam. Assuming that this is the cause of the Vultures' congregation in the region, my curiosity drove me to Gaushala's location. When we arrived at the location, we noticed two individuals transporting a dead cow on a bullock cart. After following them to the disposal place, I stood back and observed as these men dragged the cows down and dumped them on the ground. We looked closer after they left and were astounded by dead cow carcasses heaped on top of each other. The carcasses were all over, wherein several scavengers and other bird species were feasting.

The entire sight reminded me of "the consumerresource system," i.e., "The death of one was a reason for the survival of others." Many bird species, including House Crows, Jungle Crows, Common Mynas, Asian Pied Starlings, Black Kites, Shikaras, Short-toed Snake Eagles, Bank Mynas, and Tawny Eagles, among others, were feasting, along with a few feral dogs. But it was the Endangered species such as the White-rumped vulture (Gyps bengalensis), Indian vulture (Gyps indicus), and Egyptian vulture (Neophron percnopterus) that stood out. Not only were there adults, but there were also more than 20 Egyptian vulture juveniles. Gaushala's dumping site has become a tremendous supply of food for these vultures, and the dam water and surrounding forest have provided an excellent nesting area for them. We learned from the authorities that the " Brijmohan Ramkali Gau Sanrakshan Kendra" was founded in 1984 and currently houses around 1500 livestock. Cattle in this Gaushala die at a rate of 2-3 per week, primarily due to natural causes and illness. When the animals are dead, they remove the skin and dump the rest at the Caracas dumping site behind the Gaushala. Feral dogs, wild boars, jackals, and many birds feed on the rest of the body. Cattles are vaccinated twice a year, and a veterinarian frequently visits for routine checkups. When asked about the uses of Diclofenac for any treatment, one responded that they are ignorant of it owing to a lack of information about medications. Nonetheless, my impromptu visit to this Gaushala helped me learn a little more about these vultures, issues of cattle carcasses and even feral dogs as competitors. I realized that if people are made aware of the role of these birds, they will be more mindful of their importance and subsequent conservation.



Egyptian Vulture



White-rumped Vulture



Indian Vulture

Note: The images are for reference and are not from the site mentioned in the article



Editorial Board

Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Dr. T. Ramesh & Mr. R. Jayakumar Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Editors or Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

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