

THE MUD ON BOOTS PROJECT

BY CARA TEJPAL

Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project was formally established in January 2017 as a natural extension of our effort to support grassroots level wildlife conservationists in India. The Project is effectively a booster programme that empowers conservationists who go unrecognised because of a lack of affiliations, educational qualifications, mainstream opportunities and language barriers. Those selected, known as Project Leaders, receive a monetary grant and customised support from Sanctuary over a period of two years. Thus far, 23 inspiring conservationists, working in diverse regions of the country, have benefitted from the programme and broadened the impact of their work.

We at the Sanctuary Nature Foundation have huge respect for those whose boots are muddy from the hardwork and toil that wildlife conservation in the field demands. The Mud on Boots Project is our ongoing salute to such men and women. Here are a few updates, as shared by our current Project Leaders.



GURPRAV SHIRODKAR



SHIV KUMAR/LAHAUL FOREST DEPARTMENT

KIDS AND CAMERA TRAPS

Brown bears and snow leopards have been on our mind, with Project Leader Shiv Kumar's camera traps revealing glorious snow-dusted footage of these charismatic animals. Shiv has been documenting the biodiversity around the village of Udaipur in Lahaul district, while he goes about his work as a forest guard. Interestingly, Shiv's cameras captured a rare leopard cat last month.

Over the last two months, Shiv has also been extending his community outreach work by conducting workshops for

students and teachers from three schools. He uses these events to introduce children to the biodiversity of the region, and to discuss relevant conservation issues, such as the poaching of male Himalayan Monals for their beautiful crests.

Shiv always has a camera in hand, and has created an amateur documentary on the wildlife of Lahaul from the footage he has gathered over the years. This documentary was screened at all three schools, where posters produced by the Sanctuary Nature Foundation and books shared by SECURE Himalaya were also distributed.

CRIME PATROL, MOVIE NIGHT AND MORNING WALKS

The vigilance of Project Leader Ashwin Gurusrikar's volunteers and informants revealed the electrocution of a tusker near the Halaguru range of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. Upon visiting the spot and confirming the tip-off, the team informed the Karnataka Forest Department of the death. The volunteers and the forest staff discerned that the elephant came in contact with an electrified fence that was erected for killing wild animals and not just protecting



ASHWIN GURUSRIKAR

crops, as the fields in the area were fallow. An FIR was filed against the land owner and they have been booked under various sections of the *Wildlife Protection Act, 1972*. Ashwin and his team, who together form the Vanodaya Wildlife Trust, have been providing invaluable support to the Cauvery Forest Department for over a decade.

November 2019 was also busy with outreach and education activities conducted in different fringe villages of the sanctuary. Wildlife filmmaker Shekar Dattatri's 'The Truth About Tigers' was screened on two separate occasions – once for 125 children from Honiganahalli High School, and a second time for 250 residents of Doddalchikere. The movie screenings were followed by interactive sessions on conservation and the importance of protecting the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. In December 2019, Vanodaya's volunteers also organised birding trails for 75 students from two schools. The kids were taught the basics of bird identification, and were able to spot over 27 species on their trails.

SEASON WATCH

In Haryana's beleaguered Mangar Bani forest, Project Leader Sunil Harsana's Eco Club keeps hope alive. The Eco Club members spent December 2019 observing changes in their environment as Mangar took on its winter avatar. Sunil organised a field trip to the Sultanpur National Park with help from the Laksh Foundation and members of the Delhi Birders group, for club members, and a forest walk to introduce residents from Faridabad and Gurgaon to the biodiversity in their city.

Mangar Bani faces grave threat from landgrab and encroachments. Sunil Harsana has been working with experts and citizens to confront these. Turn to page 74 for a detailed report on the issue.

PRELIMINARY SURVEYS

As Project Leader Bhuvan H.C. slowly but surely expands the scope of his work, his need for data has also increased. Over the past few weeks, Bhuvan has conducted preliminary



SUNIL HARSANA

surveys to identify habitats used by lion-tailed macaques and otters. Both are threatened, charismatic species, and icons for diverse forests and clean streams respectively. Bhuvan visited sites in Kaginahare, Kempuhole, and Bisle on the basis of anecdotal reports of sightings. His findings will lay the foundation for future conservation interventions.

Those who regularly read our updates are aware that Bhuvan, in coordination with the Forest Department has also been overseeing the maintenance of native tree seedlings. The saplings are doing well and

will be ready to be planted as part of a research and habitat restoration initiative in March 2020.

As with many of our Project Leaders, Bhuvan lays great emphasis on conservation awareness and education. He conducts workshops, leads nature trails, and engages with local communities through the year. Notably, in December, he took up the issue of garbage disposal along the trail to Pushpagiri Peak. Subsequently, the Range Forest Officer took the decision to employ two more people to the Village Forest Committee to keep the trail clean and enforce a plastic ban.



BHUVANESHWAR H C

As the Mud on Boots Project enters its fourth year, we whisper a word of thanks to the late Tina Abraham, a friend of Sanctuary and a lover of all things wild. Our project evolved from the TINA grant for grassroots conservationists, an initiative set up by Paul Abraham in memory of his late wife, who lived to protect wild nature.

HOLI TREES AND ELUSIVE OTTERS

Project Leader Malhar Indulkar's efforts to protect a rare and enigmatic *Myristica* swamp moved up a gear this winter. It is tradition for the local community to cut an old tree from the swamp on this occasion. Given the ecological value of this sacred grove, Malhar and another grassroots conservationist, Narayan kaka, are now rallying their community through a concerted pride campaign. To this end, they have approached the local temple committee to discuss the matter of conservation of the grove, initiated a survey to count the trees in the swamp, engaged with the Forest Department, coordinated organic farming workshops for farmers who live near the grove, and triggered media coverage on its value. Malhar and Narayan kaka have also been nurturing a nursery of 37 *Myristica* saplings with the intention to transplant these at degraded sites.

Malhar's quest to document and protect the otters of the region is ongoing, and over the past two months he welcomed several volunteers to help him with his surveys. Point surveys conducted through November and December yielded no direct sightings but plenty of evidence, including spraint and claw marks, of otter presence. His outreach work also intensified in December, with workshops conducted for children from two high schools. Amongst the nature walks, camera trapping and plaster casting activities, Malhar also encouraged students to write their own fictional works on the otters of the Terekhol river. Twenty such stories were produced by the young writers.

The Mud on Boots Project is kept afloat by generous contributions from wildlife enthusiasts in India. To support our work through a monetary donation and meet our Project Leaders, log on to www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org



MALHAR INDULKAR



COURTESY: OUTLOOK RESPONSIBLE TOURISM AWARDS

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Indranil Roy, CEO, Outlook Group, Meenakshi Sharma, Director General, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and Jose Dominic, Co-founder & Director, CGH Earth.

On January 17, 2020, Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project won the Gold Award for Best Wildlife Project at the Outlook Responsible Tourism Awards held in New Delhi.

The selection was based on a rigorous, two-stage application process, and the jury included conservationists Belinda Wright, Prerna Singh Bindra, and Ranjit Lal, amongst several other eminent personalities. Ten wildlife conservation projects were long-listed for the award, from which three were then short-listed. These included projects by our friends from The Corbett Foundation, and the Devalsari Environment Protection and Technology Development Society (see page 88), both of which are also doing invaluable work for communities and wildlife.

Cara Tejpal, Director of the Mud on Boots Project, accepted the award on behalf of the Sanctuary Nature Foundation and all the Mud on Boots Project Leaders. At Sanctuary Nature Foundation, we recognise that conservation is driven by communities, and only by recognising and empowering community champions can we hope to protect the biodiversity that sustains us all.

For more details go to www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org/projects/mud-on-boots