

THE MUD ON BOOTS PROJECT

BY CARA TEJPAL

Sanctuary readers know that the Mud on Boots Project is a booster programme designed to empower grassroots conservationists across India. Our focus is on those dynamic community leaders who display purpose and initiative, but lack support for their work. The reasons for this can stretch from geographical remoteness and language barriers to incomplete formal education. We provide selected individuals a monetary grant and customised support over a two-year period that allows them to enhance the scope of their knowledge and work. In each issue of *Sanctuary* magazine, we also publish highlights from our Project Leaders' field sites.

RANJAN RAMCHANDANI



Sanctuary Asia, April 2020



SHIV KUMAR, LAHAUL FOREST DEPARTMENT

YELLOWHAMMERS AND WOLVES

In January and February 2020, Project Leader Shiv Kumar was thrilled to document two elusive species in the Lahaul Forest Division of Himachal Pradesh. Shiv spotted a Yellowhammer during this year's Great Backyard Bird Count in January. This is potentially the first record of the species from this area! Shiv's luck held through February too, when he sighted three Tibetan wolves in

Lahaul. This stunning subspecies of the grey wolf occupies high altitudes and has evolved to withstand low oxygen levels. Shiv's documentation of Lahaul's biodiversity (see page 6) is important because though this forest division does not include a single Protected Area, it is home to innumerable rare Himalayan wildlife.

DOWN THE KUMARADHARA

In Karnataka, Project Leader Bhuvan's

exploratory surveys took him on a journey down the Kumaradhara river. Assisted by watersport expert Abhi Mandela, Bhuvan undertook a preliminary survey of the river to assess the distribution of keystone species such as otters and record the threats to their survival. During the downstream and upstream (six km. each way) survey from Snaughat, Bhuvan's team sighted three freshwater crocodiles, numerous Fishing Owls, and signs of otter presence. Unfortunately, the



COURTESY: BHUVANESHWARA H C

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COURTESY: SAJAL MADHU

downstream segment was found to be heavily polluted, partly by pilgrims. Bhuvan reported the condition of the river to the Additional District Commissioner, who promised action on the issue.

LESS CONFLICT, MORE COURT

Project Leader Sajal Madhu has reported a decline in human-elephant conflict in Chhattisgarh's Dharamjaigarh block this year. For the first time in years, Sajal found no incidents of conflict over a two month period. He also, however, reported a decrease in the elephant population.

In February 2020, 219 elephants were reported from Chhattisgarh state with 15 in the Dharamjaigarh block. Comparatively, 237 elephants were reported in the state in 2019. The reasons for this fluctuation have not been ascertained. In 2011, Sajal found that 1,000 acres of forest land was going to be lost to a proposed open cast coal mine. Subsequently he raised a petition against the project at the National Green Tribunal, and in 2014, the project was shelved by the Supreme Court. However, the same forest land is once again under threat from the Karnataka Power Corporation and Sajal is working on raising a new petition to protect this land.

SWAMP NEIGHBOURS

Project Leader Malhar Indulkar held a workshop to encourage organic farming amongst farmers owning land neighbouring the sacred *Myristica* swamp known as *kanhalachi rai* in Maharashtra. The workshop was led by Rajan Venkatesh in Babarwadi village and was attended by eight farmers who were taught how to make an organic pesticide and organic fertiliser. Malhar shares that farmers who had already adopted such practices via previous workshops of this nature have reported increased and better-quality yield. The processes shown by Venkatesh have been further taught to

farmers in Hevale village by Malhar's associate Narayan ji.

LAND SHARKS IN MANGAR

The muddled status of Haryana's Mangar Bani forest (see *Sanctuary* Vol. 40 No. 2, February 2020) has left it vulnerable to encroachment. Sure enough, in December 2019, Project Leader Sunil Harsana recorded illegal construction underway inside a fenced section of the forest. Though the activity was immediately reported to the Forest Department, no action was taken. Subsequently, in January 2020, Sunil along with 15 citizen volunteers and members of the media demarcated 47 sites being encroached



COURTESY: MALHAR INDULKAR

upon or degraded within Mangar Bani during an awareness rally. The pressure that built from this initiative compelled the District Administration to take action on the complaints. However, this has been unsatisfactory in addressing the issue of land grab in

Mangar. Sunil and supporters from the Aravali Bachao campaign are determined to keep building public support and mounting pressure on government authorities to protect the fast degrading Aravalli forests of the National Capital Region. 🐾



COURTESY: SUNIL HARSANA

The Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project runs on public donations. Along with a monetary grant, our Project Leaders receive support in the form of capacity building workshops, campaign coordination, networking, government liaising, expert mentorship and more! To meet our Project Leaders and contribute to the Mud on Boots Project, head to www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org.