

# NATURE TRAIL

## NOCTURNAL LIFE

**BATS IN POP-CULTURE**

by Akhila S

**GLOW IN THE DARK**

by Tejas Abraham

**FEATHERED SIRENS**

by Supreetha Devarakonda

# NATURE TRAIL

## Volume 3, Issue 2

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**Our Mission** - To reach a broad spectrum of readers and ignite curiosity and scientific thinking towards the natural world, while also promoting young naturalists to develop a variety of skill sets.



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*About the Editor: Pratham is a rising sophomore studying math and computer science at NTU in Singapore. He loves birding and has a mild obsession with all things hiking. In his free time, you'll find him curled up with a good mystery novel or binging The Good Place on Netflix.*

Dear Readers,

We hope you have had a great year so far. This issue of Nature Trail explores the fascinating world of the nocturnal. Our lineup of articles, poems, and anecdotes promises to transport you to such diverse worlds as the sprawling coastlines of the Coromandel and the pristine forests of the Nilgiris, home to a dazzling array of nocturnal and diurnal wildlife. From majestic Barn owls and awe-inspiring Russell's Vipers to curious little Nightjars and Olive Ridley turtles, this issue has it all.

In putting together this edition, we aim to present a fresh perspective on the lives of nocturnal creatures and bring to light (pun intended!) their often misunderstood and ignored stories. We hope this has a positive impact on their study and inspires you to stand up for their conservation.

Until next time!

– Pratham Peshwani, Content Editor.

### **About the Chennai Young Naturalists' Network**

The Chennai Young Naturalists' Network aims to create a platform for young naturalists to interact with peers interested in wildlife and to explore various applications of a variety of skills. The hope is to help them grow not only in aspects connected to observation in the field but also give them the opportunity to explore various career options. Meanwhile we also aim to conduct outreach and educational events to help increase awareness and improve participation of the public in citizen science and other nature related activities.

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*Front Cover: Illustration of nocturnal life. Credits- Deepika Nandan*

*Back Cover: Anaimalai Flying Frog. Credits- Smriti Mahesh*

# The Case for Spooky Superheroes: Bats in Pop-culture

*Akhila S*

With dark silhouettes and shadows of claw-outlined wings etched onto glass and walls, my Halloween decorations carried a touch of eeriness, completed by the graphics of bats.

This led me to wonder how we capture the essence of bats in culture. Chiropteran biology, history, psychology, and conservation efforts have all come together to change our perception of these mammals over time.

Belonging to the order Chiroptera, meaning “hand-wing”, bats are able to carry food between their forearms. However, despite this very primate-like feature, even the Old Testament classified bats as birds instead of mammals. Linnaeus eventually recognised them as mammals in the 10th edition of his “*Systema Naturae*”. With over 1400 species, bats are immensely helpful as pollinators and predators of virus-carrying insects like mosquitoes. They also help keep insects harmful to agriculture in control. Some regions consider them a valuable food source while others use guano (bat poop) as fertilizer. Thus, many parts of the world, and especially the Asia-Pacific region, consider bats as sources of good fortune.

The West has another story to tell. The Bible saw bats as “unclean”, and many a phrase in Christian European literature compared the bat’s wings to that of the ‘Devil’ and his angels: they were both featherless wings, with a characteristic texture found nowhere else. Even Shakespeare wove words connecting bats to witches, spells and curses as seen in incantations in *Macbeth* or *The Tempest*.

Then, there was vampirism. Tales of vampires had been a part of Slavic mythology since the seventeenth century, but it was only during the nineteenth century that bats became

closely tied to vampires, following Bram Stoker’s phenomenal “*Dracula*”, in which the protagonist, Count Dracula, is able to transform into a huge bat. This led to bats being a part of many superstitions, including a particularly popular old-wives’-tale that bats would get tangled in women’s hair and have to be cut off with scissors. Gathorne Hardy, conservationist and former President of the Mammal Society, put this to the test in a series of experiments that all yielded the same result: bats can never get entangled in hair!

African views and stories about bats were of a similar tune. While some regions considered them a good source of food, just like in Asia, it is interesting to note that both Cameroon and Sierra Leone attributed blood-sucking qualities to bats. Another interesting fact is that bat meat was considered safe and not associated with any diseases in studies conducted before the Ebola outbreak of 2013. Other studies have concluded that we do not know enough about bat biology and their role as reservoir hosts for viruses to come into play in this issue.

In parts of Kenya and Madagascar, bats were held in such superstition that bat hunting as well as killing people suspected of being “vampire bats” became almost commonplace.

Bat folklore has also been documented in India, Iran, Pakistan and Myanmar. Predominantly viewed as a strange and a bad omen, surveys in Indian schools have shown that most students recognise the importance of bat conservation, even though some of them admitted to being scared of them. This has played a huge role in convincing researchers and conservationists that conservation-related education should be included in the school curriculum.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asia holds bats in high respect. They are associated with good luck and used as spiritual totems; some parts of Malaysia even consider bat meat as a cure to asthma and Vietnam is popular for its bat souvenirs. This attests to how being considered a harbinger of good fortune doesn't necessarily make an animal safe or less hunted. It's just that the reasons for the existential threats to it differ.

After the artificial bat became a symbol for horror in the genre-defining movie Dracula, other movies also went on to depict them as monstrous creatures: Fantasia is another example.

These films played a part in the development of human attitudes toward bats, with some people developing an irrational fear towards them (Chiroptophobia), which is a definite barrier to bat conservation efforts. Public attitude has not been researched enough for us to have a clear idea yet. However - one especially hopeful venture is bat tourism, which has the potential to conserve bats as well as provide social and economic benefits to locals.

Understanding the various socio-cultural representations of bats can help us formulate the best ways to conserve them: "Bat conservationists in the Asia-Pacific region should attempt to first understand the culture they are

targeting for conservation interventions, then use ethnobiological data to develop contextualized strategies for the various demographics of their target audience, leveraging on cultural values wherever possible (e.g., Bowen-Jones and Entwistle 2002)." [J. of Ethnobiology, 41(1):18-34 (2021)]

*In my opinion, the case for these spooky superheroes makes itself: being such an integral part of ecology, bats do not deserve the baseless fear and hate they receive. As a species proud of our logical reasoning, we should realise how illogical our attitudes to bats have been so far and do our bit to save them from being hunted or harmed out of prejudice against them.*

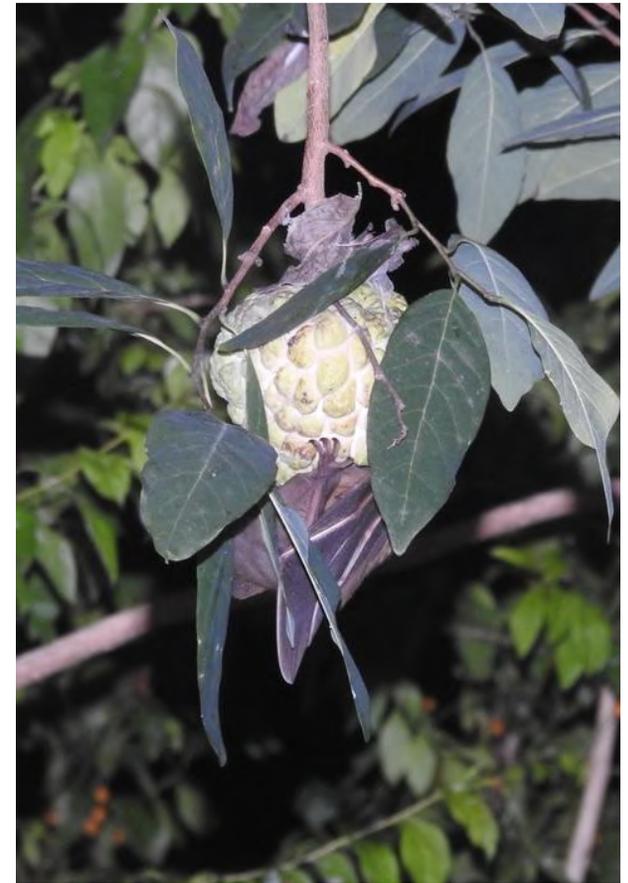
*Akhila S is a 2nd-year undergraduate at IISER Thiruvananthapuram who is passionate about behavioural ecology.*



Vesper Bat - Siddharth Srinivasan



Fruit Bat - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



Fruit Bat feeding on a Custard Apple - Balakrishnan Ram

# Hidden in Plain Sight

*Clarita Mendes*

As night settles upon the grasslands of West Bengal, curious creatures come to life. Youngsters mill about after an early dinner. A few paces away, scattered groups discuss the day's events and share thoughts on their favourite regional dishes. These are no simple people - they are young naturalists on a field trip to enjoy the biodiversity that Bengal boasts. Enthusiasm flows through their veins, rendering them perpetually excited at the prospect of coming across any flora or fauna. Especially if the subject of interest is uncommon and a sight to behold. But spotting a cryptic creature may well be a chance occasion, dependent entirely on luck and impeccable timing.

Nestled in a blanket of shadows, one such creature stirs. Feathers rustle as seemingly inanimate objects wiggle about, prepping for a night out. A series of high-pitched notes pierce through the land, only to be followed by calls of reply. The vibrant rising and falling notes of the song grab the attention of those attuned to the deceptive silence of the night. The youngsters come to an abrupt stop, peering over their balconies at the expanse of grass stretched in front of them, in search of the song's source. As it comes to an end, a bustle of activity stirs amongst these curiosity-piqued individuals. With an ear for bird calls, they huddle around, dissecting the song to mere 'ticks' and 'toks', noting down potential suspects and scouring through field guides. Eyes peering over hunched shoulders pick up details and slowly shorten the list of 'Birds of Interest'. The scene is akin to a mystery case unfolding in a sweltering four-walled sepia-tinged room, only to be shattered by the recurring chorus of songs. Detective cloaks and thinking caps are donned as sharpened ears listen with rapture. **Suspect Identified!** Torches and headlamps are pulled out, beams of light scanning across the grassland in front. The adults, while elated by the youngsters' passion, reject the notion of entering the grass for a quick, up-close scan. For it is no longer daytime, and the grasslands fringe scattered patches

of forests that act as the perfect corridors for wild animals on the prowl for a late-night meal or on the lookout for a resting place. Elephants especially have been known to wander out into the neighbouring fields and villages. As the songs slowly fade away and the last torchlights are switched off, lingering whispers and hastily scribbled lines in journals speak of a bird heard but never seen.

The calls that demanded such attention belong to the Nightjar, aptly named after its nocturnal activity and the 'jarring' noise created by its calls. Their distinctive song can be recognized long before they are spotted. Cryptically coloured in shades of brown, ochre and black, they merge into their surroundings till you can no longer differentiate soil, pebble and rock from bird. Their feathers - combinations of shades, patterns and streaked plumage - make for an ideal camouflage during the day. One might stumble upon one of them roosting on the ground or on a low branch in forests or open areas. They sit so still that they can be easily missed even from a short distance. However, their resting and nesting habits turn these birds into sitting ducks for predators. In order to combat this, Nightjars flatten and blend into the surrounding environment as much as possible. They remain absolutely still and go so far as to nearly close their eyes to camouflage themselves. This is their best defence mechanism and one that works with great success.

At dawn and dusk, the birds stir back to life, preparing to hunt for food and to communicate with others in their surroundings. Contact calls can be heard during this time, whether it is to communicate with a mate or, in the case of fledglings, when their tummies rumble with hunger. This is the prime time to hear their distinct calls. A small rotund body flanked by pointed wings and a tapered tail allows the Nightjar to take off silently into the night and pluck insects out of thin air. While their calls vary from species to species

and are generally simple, it is still difficult to pinpoint what species a Nightjar is without a detailed look at the markings of its plumage.

The mottled patterning of their feathers allows them to blend in with gravel found along roads. This, combined with the constant presence of insects near streetlights, makes roads a suitable roosting and hunting ground. However, roads come with major threats to wildlife. Blinding headlights from passing vehicles are known to temporarily shock roosting birds and eliminate their chance to flee from danger. This has led Nightjars to be very susceptible to road accidents. Only sensible eco-planning and considerations about the impact of human activity on local wildlife can protect nightjars from an early demise.

*Clarita Mendes, a Master's student in Biological Sciences, is keen on studying behavior in animals, and understanding the complex relationship between the external environment and the internal biological systems of an animal. Her curiosity drives her to notice the surrounding wildlife and pen down or sketch her discoveries. When not in lab, you'll find her snuggled up with novel.*



*Savannah Nightjar - Kedaravindan Bhaskar*

# A Glow in The Dark

*Tejas Abraham*

'Perhaps a porcupine?' she wondered aloud. Then I saw it, slithering out of the bush with a chain-like pattern on its side. 'Russell's!' I exclaimed, as both of us flew back to a safe distance. Scouring for wildlife during an impulsive night walk with a friend through an eerily silent village might not sound like a great idea. Yet, it's often unplanned events and decisions that provide fresh perspectives and unexpected insights. As it turned out, sound logic wouldn't have led us to a nocturnal wildlife carnival.

An average day at college is tiring and this one was especially long. Just as my friend and I considered going our separate ways and winding down, the idea of an evening walk came up. Before we knew it, our drained but explorative selves had set out on a walk through the neighbouring village. The landscape around campus is mostly fields and dry bush thickets, distinct from the greener centre of Bangalore city.

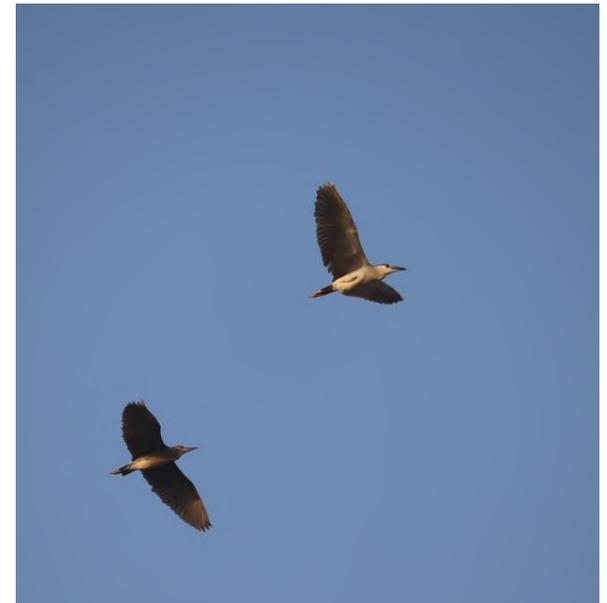
Swallows soared above and crows flew into the distance as the sky turned a stunning orangish-pink at sunset. The path we chose to walk was one we were familiar with. Still, a sense of uncertainty swept over us as darkness fell. Our eyes darted about,

hoping that our torches would uncover anything that moved. Suddenly, our gaze shot up as something swooped above our heads. It was a large Barn Owl, majestic in flight! Following cue, a Black-crowned Night Heron glided in the distance, its silhouette moving stealthily like that of an assassin in the night sky. A naturalist's delight!

These were birds we hadn't observed often in the vicinity, so we were understandably excited for what could be next. The gravel we walked on soon made way for a grassy path. Suddenly, we noticed something glowing on the ground between the grass. 'A firefly!', I said cheerfully. However, as my friend picked it up, we realised that it was in fact a larva! Left astonished, we decided to return the larva to the ground to avoid disturbing it any further. The night sky was decorated with glittering stars, many of which we wouldn't have spotted otherwise due to the presence of bright street lights. Over the span of a short walk, we had uncovered some mysteries much closer to us than the distant stars, however. But The nocturnal kingdom was not done flaunting its subjects.

Walking by open fields, buildings in the distance appeared alien to the

landscape. Echoing this sentiment, just a few paces ahead was a huge Ficus tree nestling a sacred space, a site of worship for the local villagers. As we walked under its canopy, we stared upwards into the branches. Then we heard a loud flap, followed by five more. Sensing our presence, a swarm of Flying Foxes took off from the tree, their wings flapping a deafening tune. After this surreal experience, I thought that little would come in the way of surprising us. That was until we walked up to a Lantana bush, which seemed to harbour something large inside.



*Black-crowned Night Herons - Varshini Sridhar*

The loud rustling sound invoked a strong sense of curiosity in us. We peered with our torches into the bush, hoping to determine the suspect's identity. Even a stray dog that had been following us was left puzzled, poking its nose into the bush in hope of finding the source of this noise. Then I spotted it: a Russell's Viper slithering through the grass. Having jumped back to a safe distance, we admired the intricate pattern on the serpent. The loud 'pressure cooker'-like hiss is characteristic of this species, and the experience was instantly etched into my memory. As the snake moved further away, I called the oblivious dog to draw it away from what could have turned into an unpleasant encounter with the viper. Before we knew it, we had reached the main road which would lead us back to our campus. It dawned on us that a mere evening walk separated two very different worlds.

The world I've known through my late teens was that of the forever urbanising centre of Bangalore city. However, just a few years spent living on the outskirts allowed me

to witness how a metropolis engulfs peripheral villages and their land. Bushes that housed different species of birds have been replaced by small stores. Agricultural fields around which the lives of numerous critters and people revolved have been replaced by towering buildings. One way of life, replaced by another. A familiar tale. An inevitable one? Perhaps not. In an age of growing awareness regarding the environment and the need for the biodiversity, it holds that knowledge is a handy tool. Knowing about the presence of specific biodiversity and cultural ties people hold with a region can be used as leverage to protect a space from complete and reckless transformation. It's important to note that this knowledge can only be obtained with sustained efforts to explore and document observations made in our surroundings. And who knows, it may all begin with an evening walk!

*Tejas Abraham is a graduate from Azim Premji University, bangalore. He is fascinated by ants and other critters and has a keen interest in Animal Behaviour and Ecology.*



*Indian Flying Fox roost on a Ficus Tree - Anooja A.*



*Russell's Viper - Balakrishnan Ram*

# The Dark Knights Rise!

*Harsha Prashanth*

They are everywhere..

All day they are quiet,

But at night, they are mighty.

From Day hiders to Night riders,

The flying squirrel is an epic glider.

But when it comes to Wings,

The bat does its thing.

It's dark wings of fire,

A danger from the skies higher.

It's moves are swift and sleek,

The cat- it preys on Mice so meek.

In the night all sorts prowl,

a tiny squeak, sometimes a growl.

The all-seeing head of a big barn owl,

the shiver in your spine when a grey wolf howls...

The dreaded striped wolf snake,

Gives its prey a shiver and quake,

Oh and look at the creepy slithering Krait,

Whose venom is an infamous trait.

When dawn arrives, back to their lair.

But when the sun goes down, they Are EVERYWHERE!

These creatures of the night and may be a devil in the make,

But why don't we look at them in a different take.

Let's not get them wrong,

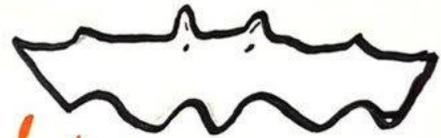
Why don't we try to get along?

*Harsha Prashanth is a 12 year old amateur artist, book lover and Star Wars fan studying at Headstart School.*



This barn owl can turn its head upto 270°!

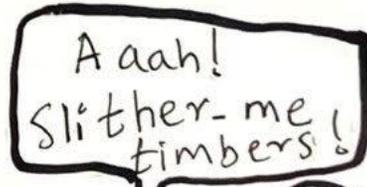
# THE DARK KNIGHTS RISE!



The grey wolf loves 'wolfing' down his prey



Night Vision Mode ACTIVATED!



A aah! Slither-me timbers!

Make way... Wolf-snake on the move!



*Indian Flying Fox- Ekadh Ranganathan*



*Common Krait- Yuvan Aves*



*Barred Wolf Snake- Yuvan Aves*

# Vibrant Visitors: An Account of Moths at My Doorstep

*Mahathi Narayanaswamy*

I spot two large blue eyes staring at me from the doormat as I walk out to the doorstep of my house to switch off the light. They burst into chaotic flight around the tube light following my disturbance. My patience wears thin while I wait for them to settle down again. "An owl moth!" I exclaim as I look at the giant, beautiful, rather worn-out moth. This was my introduction to the world of moths.

I had almost always perceived moths to be the group of insects that people knew so little about. So much so that when I saw a wall full of colourful moths while trekking in Sikkim I took a few photos and decided that even if I took more, there wasn't much I could do with them. Little did I expect that a few years later, I would be looking at moths and hoping to see more of them. Oh well, that being the case, I still hold my ground on how little is known about them. But perhaps, the possibility of being able to learn more about them is what gives us the incentive to observe and study them.

The owl moth I mentioned before turned out to be *Speiredonia obscura*, a beautiful moth with large eyes and several colours on it. Not long after this observation, my friend started

working on moths in Chennai and tried to rope me in. Night after night I began to check the light at the doorstep for moths and later on started to set up a moth screen by hanging up a mercury vapour lamp against a reflecting surface. It would typically be a wall or one of Appa's old Veshtis (dhoti). A new world opened to me as moths of every colour, shape and size showed up right at my doorstep, every day from dusk till dawn as I studied for my entrance exams. Over the past few years, a bunch of us have been doing this and have documented well over 300 species of moths from Chennai, many of which have been right at our doorsteps.

Through this write-up and the several photos of some moths of Chennai that accompany it, I hope that some of you are intrigued by this group of insects and perhaps will find yourself chasing after them, patrolling staircases in your apartment or maybe just exploring those that visit your house.

*Mahathi Narayanaswamy is 3rd year B.Sc Physics student at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She has a keen interest in Birds, Butterflies and Moths.*



*Speiredonia obscura*- Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Eublemma dimidialis*- Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Chiasmia sp.* - Mahima Nair



*Ophiusa disjugens* - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Lily Moth (Polytela gloriosae)* - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



A moth screen set-up - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Sandalwood Defoliator* - Nishanth Arvind



*Nausinoe perspecta* - Varshini Sridhar



*Prooedema inscisalis* - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Eublemma semirufa* - Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Indian Moon Moth* - Vikas Madhav Nagarajan



*Ischyja manila* - Mahathi Narayanaswamy

# Nightly Gathering in The Grassland

*Tithi Kagathara*

Cold winter, clear skies, flickering stars, howlers, and insects' cacophony at night were regular in the field. It was January 2021 and I was on fieldwork in the semi-arid grasslands of Madhya Pradesh.

On the very first day of my stay there, I saw a sub-adult Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* wandering around the guest house in search of food. For the next few days, I eagerly waited for the same individual to make an appearance but luck was not on my side. However, in the coming days, I heard Jackal howls and started to record the timing and duration every day. It was so fascinating to wait for their calls every evening outside my guest house. The howling at night was like a lullaby. Ecological research shows that the long-distance calls of Golden Jackals are for finding their mate, protecting territory, or for social cohesion.

According to my field notes, each howl lasts for 20 sec to half a minute. Jackal howling could be heard four or more times a night in winter, which was very frequent compared to other seasons. The howling was very common in the evening around 6.30 pm and at night around 9.00 pm. An interesting observation I made was that low temperature

increases the frequency of howling in the winter sometimes. Indian Jackal pack sizes are small, numbering three to four individuals. Pairs with their pups and older siblings can often be seen together.

Jackals prefer to feed during the night when human activity is negligible. They feed on carcasses that villagers throw in open areas. But during nighttime, there is very tough competition between Jackals and feral dogs for food.

Fights between Jackals and feral dogs are very common in grazing lands around rural areas these days. They are an alarming concern to the Jackal packs. Although Golden Jackals are one of the top predators of agricultural landscapes, grazing land, and urban and rural areas, an adult feral dog can kill a Jackal easily during territorial or food fights. Conservation of this small mammal is necessary to keep ecosystems alive and healthy.

Another creature that caught my attention was the firefly. A tiny blinking light on the guest house window caught my attention and it was breathtaking to see a small firefly flickering on its own. Nowadays, it is very hard to find fireflies in urban setups, so the

next evening I tried to look for it at the nearby lake but unfortunately found nothing. Asking local people around that area yielded the sad answer that the species had disappeared from the area a decade ago. In fact, the lake would glitter with fireflies at night. Hearing this, I was delighted and disappointed at the same time. Fireflies need moist, wet, and humid places to complete their life cycle. They are indicators of a healthy ecosystem. Changes in monsoon cycles, dried wetlands, land-use changes, and increased light pollution are the reasons for the extirpation of fireflies.



*Clear night sky in the winter- Tithi Kagathara*

Other than that, I observed nocturnal fauna like the Indian Nightjar, the Barn Owl, the Indian Hare, and snakes like the Checkered Keelback during night walks. Owls hooting, night birds calling, and Jackals howling are my memories of the chilly winter nights of Madhya Pradesh. The sky does wonders in winter. Selective scattering phenomena create beautiful blue and orange hues during dusk in the open field. Experiencing this amazing side of nocturnal life is not limited to ecologists but is accessible to everyone with a curiosity to know more about nature. It is important to keep the nature nerd always alive within us: the beautiful fungi, flowers, trees, bees, butterflies, birds, bats, and wild animals around us coexist in a wonderful way that human beings should learn to be a part of.

*Tithi Kagathara is an Ecology Consultant with collaborative program of Tata Power Company Ltd and BVIEER-Pune and is keen on working on ecosystem restoration and conservation. She loves spending time on field, observing nature, writing field notes, and simplifying it into articles or small essays.*



*Lake at which fireflies were observed over a decade ago -  
Tithi Kagathara*



*A pair of Indian Jackals at the grassland at dusk - Tithi Kagathara*

# Feathered Sirens

*Supreetha Devarakonda*

As the frail winter sun sets,  
And the skies take the tinge of ink and lead  
A singular screech pierces the dusk,  
Like a siren set to every three seconds,  
Consistent, unmoving, unsettling

"It's that sound again!" exclaimed Papa  
"And it's much louder now!", he observed.

Papa instructs me to bring the torchlight,  
An investment made solely for this investigation.

Torchlight sticking out of the window,  
The striking white beams stretching far  
Momentarily bleach the limp strands of coconut leaves.

"This is so much better than the phone flashlight!"- an  
enthusiastic remark

Our necks craning, trying to look past the restraining grills

Straining to catch a trace of life in the spotlight  
The crass, incessant squeals, still sharp and sonorous  
The beam still oscillating over tree tops and terraces

"Google says it may be a barn owl, Papa," I pitched,  
"Barn owls screech while true owls hoot."  
"Hmm.." a vacant acknowledgement, eyes still searching  
Certain to avenge for the tranquil he had lost for weeks

The frantic light shines on tangled foliage  
A flicker of something that wasn't dusty green  
"Papa, there!"  
And there it was, the apple face of a shying barn owl

"Is that it, a barn owl?" "Yes!"  
Cries afflicted by the sudden accusation,  
There was a transient silence  
Snuggling invisible into the shadows  
A naive bundle of fair moonlit plumage

"I can't see it, it's hiding..."

"Must be an owlet, it's frightened. Turn off the light."

Vague darkness, one... two... three...

skrrrr! skrrrr!

"Not again!" - an exasperated remark

Swinging the glowing torchlight this way and that

Trying to lure the startled little raptor out into the light

Only discernible, a twitch of the fuzzy head or wing

Behold! an ashy spectre floats in

A hearty wingspan, but the air remained still, unstirred

The masterful flight ends, a soft landing on a stem near the owlet's

A protective distance, a maternal presence

"I told you it's an owlet, that's the mother..."

She held an unwavering gaze, eyes void-like

Holding in her nurturing beak some feed

Flopping onto the little one's stem, she fully shrouds her child

The light bounces off her back tinted in obscure browns and greys

The mother swooped off the tree, the owlet resumed its cries

The enigma of the strange noises had ceased

But the discovery was quaintly fulfilling

A glimpse of Nature in one of her noble acts

"The animal rescue said it could be owls, they were right."

"What else did they say, Papa?"

"That the cries are of the offspring calling out to the parents, for food.

That they will be gone in a few weeks."



*Spotted Owlet - Balakrishnan Ram*

A few weeks surely passed, as the juveniles screeched,  
Papa's annoyance with the critter, was now intrigue.

More observations were made-

"They come from the west, at about 6:20 pm!"

"There's two more on that roof!"

More torchlight endeavours, a little research

To see and know more of these cryptic creatures

"Barn owls don't have ear tufts and bulky beaks!"

And hasty photographs of their enlightened visages

For we were now, barn owl watchers

Days went by, the cries were now a routine, a white noise.

Some evenings, the ambiance rippled with some delay,

Some nights, there were muffled, distant yelps.

Until one morning after a few more moons, Papa said

"I haven't heard the poor little things in a while...".

*Supreetha is a budding conservationist with a flair for writing who aspires to make wildlife studies accessible and effectuate more environmental consciousness in people.*



*Barn Owl - Balakrishnan Ram*

# Nocturnals

*Udita Roy*

They are active when the sun goes down  
To avoid the heat and the predators around

They hunt, mate and are active after dark  
Awake in the midnight, just opposite of lark

Have beautiful eyes, but do not really rely on sight  
Have special adaptation to be active at night

Some have specialized hearing to hunt  
Some have receptors to sense what's in front

They use their senses to find their food  
And also to fight the strangers that intrude

Wake by the night and sleeping during day  
This is nocturnal life that we say.

*Udita Roy is a final year student pursuing B.Sc Forestry, Wildlife and Environmental Science from Guru Ghasidas University.*



*Asian Common Toad - Rohith Srinivasan*

# Myth Busters

Anand K S

## The Crested Goshawk

One of the creepy wanderers of the night is a bird called the Crested Goshawk ('*Malampullu*' in Malayalam), belonging to the family Accipitridae. This bird has a characteristic call that evokes frightening folklore and figures in the minds of both young and old. There are depictions of this bird as an evil creature in the Puranas related to Krishna. It is believed that this creature can cause paralysis in both babies as well as pregnant women. In the Puranas, it was sent to kill baby Krishna by his uncle Kamsa. However, Krishna managed to beat the odds and survive its ill effects. From there onwards, Krishna was worshipped to get rid of evil.

The Crested Goshawk is a small bird of prey which measures 30 to 45 cm in length and weighs about 350 g. The female Goshawk is larger than the male and weighs around 550 g. Its wingspan is 50 to 80 cm. The male has a dark brown crown with a grey head. It has a black moustache and throat stripes. The underparts are pale and the belly bears rufous bars. The breast of the male is patterned with rufous streaks, while the female has brown plumage. Crested Goshawks feed on lizards, small mammals, frogs, large insects and smaller birds and have a wide distribution, ranging from the Indian subcontinent, South China to Southeast Asia including Indonesia and the Philippines. Even though they are in the 'Least Concern' category according to their IUCN status, loss of forest cover and human activities still pose an existential threat to them.

Their calls can be heard around dusk till midnight, when everyone is asleep. It is a shrill sound that resembles the scream of a high-pitched voice.



*Crested Goshawk - Rohith Srinivasan*



*Crested Goshawk - Melvin Jaison*



## The Mottled Wood Owl

Another creature that has profound superstitious narratives is the Mottled Wood Owl. In Malayalam, it's known as "*Kalan kozhi*" - the fowl of death. The scream-like calls of the bird create an eerie atmosphere at night. It is believed that its midnight calls herald imminent death.

Mottled Wood Owls are large birds, measuring 40 to 50 cm in length and weighing around 800 g. They are nocturnal and roost in the day, usually in pairs. Perhaps their coral-red eyelids and large dark brown eyes are the reason they have been framed as evil beings. Their nape is white and black, mixed with a chocolate colour, and their upperparts are mottled and vermiculated with reddish-brown, black, white and buff. They feed on rats, mice and other rodents, even birds, and are distributed throughout India.

Even though the Mottled Wood Owl helps farmers by preying on rodents, it is still unfortunately regarded as the fowl of death.

*Anand K. S. is a writer and the acclaimed editor of Futuræ Vitæ. He produces both, fiction and nature-based works. Having completed a Master's in Zoology, he is now looking to pursue a PhD.*

*Mottled Wood Owl - Kumerasan Chandrabose*

# Along the Coromandel Coast

*Smriti Mahesh*

The wee hours of a chilly night in February saw about 30 of us trudging up the Coromandel Coast in an attempt to find Olive Ridley turtles nesting on the beach. The moon was at a waning gibbous, making a slow retreat from its full glory at pournami (full moon). A mild north-east wind blew. The eggs from the nests found on these walks are moved to a secure hatchery from where the hatchlings are released safely into the ocean- and here's where things get interesting. Olive Ridelies display a highly fascinating behaviour called natal homing. The hatchlings that emerge on this beach will return about 14 years from now, to lay their eggs somewhere along the very same coast. Oceanic currents could take them anywhere during the non-breeding season. Riding the currents for over 5000 km as they move between feeding grounds, these turtles are not unaware of their own movements. They have been known to recognise changes in the angle and intensity of the earth's magnetic field and can tap into this power to navigate the seas.

Interestingly enough, human brains can sense magnetic fields the way so many denizens of the animal kingdom do. Perhaps magnetoreception is but a lost sense - something ancient buried in the

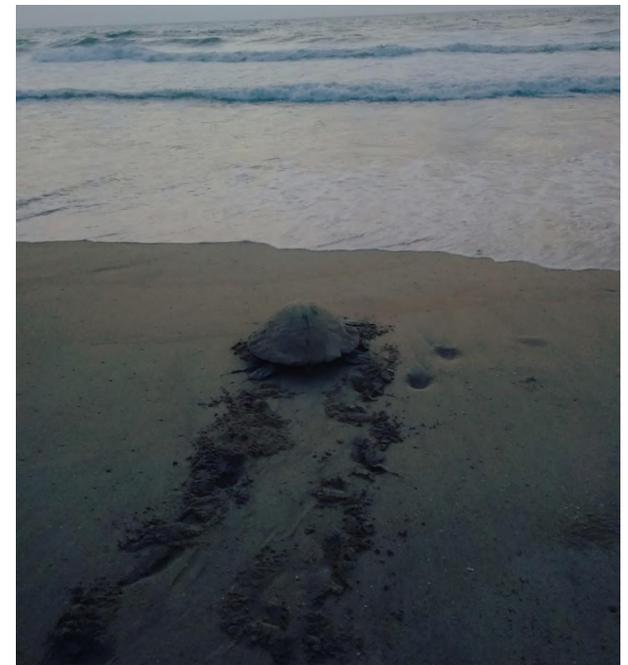
depths of our brains, used by our ancestors to navigate the planet. In recent times, we've grown to rely extensively on our more obvious senses, and Google Maps certainly hasn't helped keep our innate sense of direction alive. The ability to read nature's signs and sense changes in the ecosystem around us are tools that were once passed down through generations. Old Polynesian seafarers used the stars, the seabirds and the swell of the ocean to chart their voyages - but today, one wrong turn off the main road renders our bearings askew. As we ambled down the coast, accompanied by the crashing of the waves and the low hum of voices all around, this weighed on my mind. The human subconscious holds so many secrets buried in the sands of time.

A cursory survey of everything by the sea revealed a few discarded sea tongues (the cuttlefish's float), broken mother of pearl, a few empty wedge clams, what could be pieces of a Portuguese Man Of War and of course, the occasional single-use plastic. Countless ghost crabs scuttled underfoot, playing with the sea, sometimes hightailing it to their nests if they felt us walking too close. A close scrutiny of a pile of nets unveiled a guitarfish. Untangling it, we released it into the sea and as the

waves took it, its camouflage truly came to life- in the flowing water brushing against the sand, it was practically invisible to the naked eye.

The 6km walk on the beach ended as the sun rose, shrouded by a wall of clouds along the horizon. And as the sky took light, we went our separate ways.

*Smriti Mahesh is 3rd Year BS-MS student pursuing Biological Sciences at IISER Thiruvananthapuram.*



*Olive Ridley Turtle returning to sea - Ashraf Shaikh*



*Olive Ridley Turtle hatchlings headed to sea - Ekadh Ranganathan*

# An Intruder in The Sholas

*Abirami Ravichandran*

As a child who grew up in a tiger reserve, listening to haunting stories of the wild, I knew that I could make stories out of anything. But once you experience the wild at its best, you don't have to make up stories anymore, you will always end up with moments to talk about. The Nilgiris is a place that gave me a handful of amazing moments to talk about. We visited it last December for a project that I'm working on. I was accompanied by Manaswi and Mukta, graduate students from my lab. The journey to the Nilgiris from Bangalore is exceptional. We stayed at Avalanche, which is quite far from Ooty.

Our daily journey started at 8 am and we made sure to get back around 6 pm. But, one day, we were a little delayed on our way back. Kamal anna was driving us - he was our field assistant and also the best person one could ever meet. Mukta was seated in the front, Manaswi and I in the back. As we drove through the dark patches of Shola forest, Mukta screamed in excitement to stop the car; she seemed amazed by something and shouted: 'What is that?!' My brain came up with so many options - Tiger? Leopard? Sholakili? Let's see.

It was quite dark and we could just make out a magnificent bird sitting on a tree beside the road. I thought it was an eagle, as it was huge and dark. Peering at it, though, I realized it was an owl. Everyone in the car was amazed and ready for the next step - to capture a good picture. I looked at the owl and wondered what it could be thinking seeing us in the vehicle. It must have thought to itself, "What is going on? Did my reels go viral on Wildgram? Am I an influencer now?" or "Aren't these people overreacting?". Unfortunately, before we could get a good snap, it flew towards a nearby tree.

Now that we could see it better, we identified it as a Brown Wood Owl- its flight was quite an amazing sight. I have heard a lot about the silent flight of owls, made possible because they have exceptionally large wings compared to their body size, with their feathers acting as silencers, allowing them to fly slowly and silently unlike other birds. They have a dark patch around their eyes, fairly dark brown plumage on their back, and wings with barred underparts. Like any other owl, this one stared at us, the intruders, with a certain attitude. I failed to capture a good picture of it, but luckily, Mukta

managed to get the best out of the opportunity. Soon after, it bid us farewell and flew away.

On our way back, the three of us were looking outside into the darkness, hoping that we would be able to spot more birds. Although we weren't able to spot any more owls, we were lucky enough to see other wildlife, which gave us several more stories to tell.

*Abhirami Ravichandran is a research fellow at the National Center for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bangalore.*



*Brown Wood Owl- Omkar Dharwadkar*

## PHOTO GALLERY

*We at YNN are happy to share a few carefully curated images showcasing India's nocturnal life taken by our talented young members. Enjoy!*



*Brown Fish Owl - Aaditya S. Rajesh*



*Hippotion velox*- Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Green Vine Snake*- Mahathi Narayanaswamy



*Termite Hill Gecko*- Anooja A.



*Coorg Yellow Bush Frog- Ekadh Ranganathan*



*Brown Hawk Owls - Tanmay Jain*



*Small Indian Civet- Adit Jeyan*



*Bombay Bush Frog- Ashraf Shaikh*



*Asian Palm Civet- Adit Jeyan*



*Common Fruit Piercing Moth- Aditya Ramakrishnan*



*Saturnia sp.- Ekadh Ranganathan*



*Kodaikanal Bush Frog- Aditya Ramakrishnan*



*Indian Bullfrog- Anooja A.*



*Brown Hawk Owl- Adit Jeyan*



*Katydid- Ashraf Shaikh*



*Grasshopper emerging from its moult- Ashraf Shaikh*



*Scorpion- Ashraf Shaikh*

