

A Newsletter on the Natural History, Ecology and Conservation of the Agasthyamalai region, Western Ghats, India

AGASTHYA

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SPECIAL FOCUS

GRASSLANDS AND FARMLANDS



ASHOKA TRUST FOR RESEARCH IN ECOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Editorial

Welcome back to AGASTHYA!

In this edition, we bring you fresh perspectives on the dynamic worlds of *Grasslands and Farmlands*. These landscapes are more than just patches of yellow and green—they are vital ecosystems, sustaining biodiversity, securing food production, and contributing to climate resilience.

Our contributors take you on a journey through the evolving Agasthyamalai landscape, shedding light on the challenges facing its disappearing grasslands, and the biodiversity nurtured by its agricultural fields. We bring you stories that explore the flora and fauna of these open ecosystems, as well as fascinating interactions between them. Be sure to read our special feature on the enigmatic Harriers, offering a glimpse into their lives and the ongoing conservation efforts to protect these remarkable birds.

We hope these articles spark curiosity, inspire thoughtful conversations, and cultivate new ideas for all our readers, highlighting the beauty and importance of these vital landscapes.

Happy reading and stay inspired!

Aditya Ganesh

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Supported by



IN THIS ISSUE

Oops! The Shop is Shutting Down	3
Golden Veils of Prosperity	4
Crawling Caterpillars in the Grassland	5
The Role of Ants in Grasslands	6
The Intricacies of the Ever-changing Grasslands	7
An Unexpected Encounter	8
A Missed Opportunity	9
O' Stork, O' Stork, O' Red-legged Stork	10
Wobbling Through the Paddy Fields of Singampatti	11
Monitoring Harriers in a "ONE" Matrix	12
Embracing Human-Wildlife Coexistence	14
News and Events	
Snippets	
Research Highlights	

Cover Page: Grassland of Vilathikulam.

Back Cover: Front view of Agasthyamalai Community Conservation Centre.

Flip Cover: *Lindernia minima*

Credit: Vinod M Kumar

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Agasthya is a tri-annual newsletter by ATREE's Agasthyamalai Community Conservation Centre (ACCC) aimed at highlighting issues of research and conservation concern in the Agasthyamalai Region, Tamil Nadu

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Oops! The Shop is Shutting Down

In my earlier note 'hey get me a snack' I had mentioned how Montagu's Harriers are pursued and their prey, often a grasshopper, is snatched away from them by the fish-eating Brahminy Kites. I posed some questions towards the end of that article on why Brahminy Kites behave this way and what could be the reason for it. Perumal Nagar grasslands where we did this study, is a fairly undisturbed one until things changed in 2018. A piggery came up on the eastern side close to the lake. The pigs were fed with refuse, mostly chicken waste from hotels with lots scattered around the place. This attracted lots of scavengers, especially crows and kites. Brahminy Kites took a liking to the place and hundreds of them could be seen flying or perched on a post. These birds tended to chase other birds including other kites and harriers. Montagu's Harrier (or Monties) was the most common bird when kites arrived in large numbers in 2019. The kites quickly realised that to get a juicy grasshopper, which they could anyway not catch but probably steal and relish, is to wait for the

Montagu's to get one. Monties are very efficient in picking them. Pallid and Marsh Harriers don't do that and are often less successful in catching their prey. So Monties became a dependable corner shop for the kites to get a snack. The consequence of this on the harriers has been pretty devastating. With the intake of food diminishing and foraging increasingly very intimidating, the Monties started to leave the area and even change their roost. Slowly the kites were deprived of their snack corner. What would they do next and how Monties are adapting to this onslaught would be a study on the resilience of a migratory species. Please look for more updates as Siddharth, a Master's student is closely watching this interaction and some interesting results are emerging which will be written about in the next edition of 'get me a snack' series.

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A Montagu's Harrier on the wing. Photo: Sankar Subramanian

Golden Veils of Prosperity: Crotalaria in Tirunelveli's Paddy Fields

As the November monsoon drapes Tirunelveli in its refreshing embrace, a striking spectacle unfurls across the paddy fields—the golden bloom of Crotalaria. Known as sunhemp, this leguminous plant not only paints the land in vibrant hues but enriches its heart—the soil. My visit to these fields was not just a visual treat but a lesson in how nature and tradition blend seamlessly in local agricultural wisdom. Farmers sow Crotalaria as green manure, a centuries-old practice that rejuvenates the soil. Its quick growth and nitrogen-fixing properties make it a natural fertilizer, reducing dependency on chemical inputs while enhancing soil fertility and structure. The farmers of Tirunelveli, stewards of this sustainable tradition, cultivate Crotalaria between rice crop cycles. As I watched, they prepared the fields, plowing the plants into the moist earth. This act symbolized renewal—a reminder that life's cycle thrives on giving back to the land. The decaying plants release nutrients, supporting

microbial activity and improving water retention, crucial for the paddy's next growth phase. Beyond its agronomic benefits, Crotalaria fields support biodiversity, attracting pollinators like bees and butterflies, creating a lively mosaic of life. Crotalaria cultivation is not merely a method but a metaphor for harmony between human needs and environmental balance. Inflorescence's golden yellow hue is strongly associated with happiness, while green is a universal representation of growth. Green and yellow stand for cheer and forward movement. It amazes me that they are creating a new formula together. As the monsoon clouds roll away, leaving behind fertile lands, the legacy of Crotalaria endures—a golden testament to sustainable farming in Tirunelveli's vibrant heartland.

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A farm full of Crotalaria in Tirunelveli. Photo: K.S. Arun Kumar

Crawling Caterpillars in the Grassland



An Indian Grass Lily (*Iphigenia indica*) in full bloom. Photo: Thalavaipandi S

Wherever I go, my eyes are always keenly focused on small arthropods around me, especially butterflies, moths, and caterpillars, as I am deeply interested in and passionate about observing and documenting Lepidoptera diversity and their behavior in various landscapes.

On 15 December 2024, our annual Harrier census survey in the grasslands of Radhapuram provided an opportunity for some interesting sightings. As soon as I got down from the jeep, I noticed some Lily Moth (*Polytela gloriosae*) caterpillars crawling around and a few others feeding on Indian Grass Lily (*Iphigenia indica*). After walking a short distance into the grassland, I found another caterpillar on a Devil's Backbone plant (*Cissus quadrangularis*) growing among the shrubs. This green caterpillar had a red tail and a strange eye-like pattern on the front part of its body. It was feeding on the plant.

I identified the caterpillar after returning home from the survey. It was the Vine Hawk Moth (*Hippotion celerio*), a member of the Hawkmoth (Sphingidae) family. This caterpillar is an important defoliator of



The caterpillar of the Indian Lily Moth

grassland vegetation and serves as prey for various animals. Many insectivorous birds depend on these insects and their earlier life stages for protein, particularly for feeding their chicks. Cuckoo birds, for instance, are adept at feeding on hairy moth caterpillars commonly seen during the monsoon in grasslands.

Further studies and observations on the life cycle and natural history of this species is required to enhance our understanding of its role in grasslands. Such information is limited even for the common moths found around us.

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The Role of Ants in Grasslands

Grasslands are among the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Historically, there has been limited documentation of grassland biodiversity, however, interest in grassland restoration is now growing. I have spent considerable time studying grasses in two sites in the Tirunelveli district, Munnanjipatti and Tharuvai. One notable similarity between these sites is the presence of ants, which play an essential and often underappreciated role in the functioning of arid grassland ecosystems. Ants contribute significantly to grassland regeneration by supporting key processes such as seed dispersal, soil aeration, and nutrient cycling.

During a visit to Tharuvai, I noticed that the summer season had taken a toll on the vegetation. The vegetation was sparse, with seeds dispersed, and much of the grass cover gone. However, under a stone, I discovered something remarkable: ants had stored a large number of grass seeds before the summer heat had set in. Upon closer inspection, I identified the seeds as belonging to the *Panicum* species.

A similar observation was made at Munnanjipatti. There, ants had stored seeds after the rainy season,



Pheidole sp. ants carrying grass seeds

during the seed dispersal period, in preparation for the summer to come. Interestingly, the grass species varied between the two sites: *Panicum* spp. in Tharuvai and *Alloteropsis cimicina* in Munnanjipatti. Their seed-storing behavior not only ensures plant regeneration but also helps maintain resilience of grasslands in the face of environmental challenges like seasonal droughts and temperature extremes.

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Stored grass seeds. Photo: S. Selva Kumar

The Intricacies of the Ever-changing Grasslands

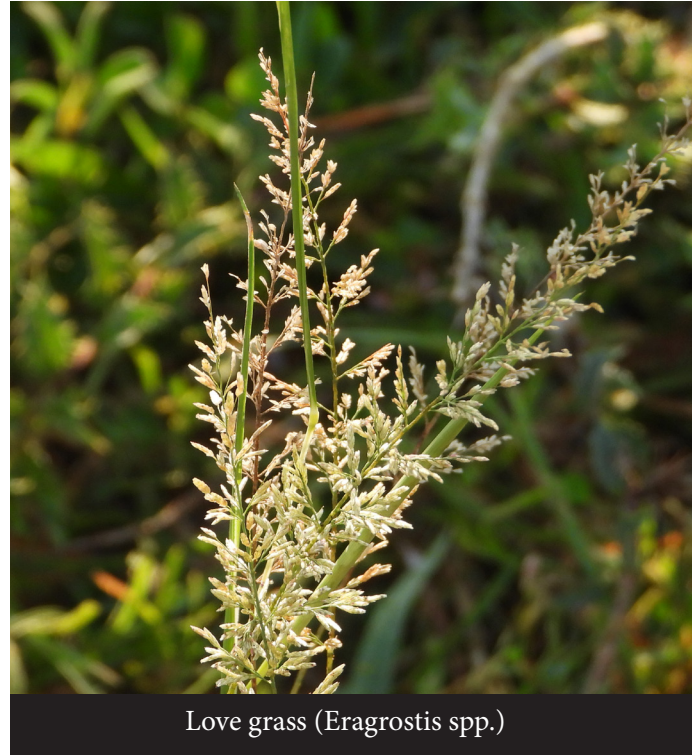
Every day here starts with a beautiful warm sunrise, the sun peeking over the foggy sky and the lush green mountain range - Agasthyamalai overlooking the ACCC campus. Add to this the daily morning sniff from the field-station doggie Gingee and one is ready to face the beautiful day!!. This is a very wholesome experience, just like the grasslands!

This being the first time I am exploring grasslands on my research journey, I have come to discover how open natural ecosystems such as grasslands are highly self-sustaining/regulating. For instance, a few interactions with scientific experts and the best local experts, the pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, taught me how plant-animal interactions such as grazing and native biodiversity are what keep these grasslands alive. In one of my interactions with a grass taxonomist I understood something very interesting: ants play a very important role in grass seed dispersal alongside other pollinators in grasslands.

When grazing is limited or absent in some of the grasslands due to various reasons one of the ways that these grasslands sustain is through the ants that are ever-present. As the ants carry the grass seeds from one place to another dropping a few along their way home - boom! that's where the grass starts to bloom.

Further, while exploring various options to restore degraded grasslands such as the ones near Agasthyamalai, one of the steps might include introducing or planting native grass species; I do understand that this will not be very critical in this kind of a landscape which is highly self-regulating. However, natural processes can be facilitated perhaps by weeding and constant monitoring as invasive species do cause a huge problem overall for the grasslands of Tirunelveli.

Additionally, what amazes me most about these huge grasslands is the fact that these are home to so many beautiful birds, one of which is the Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*)- a new personal favorite.



Love grass (*Eragrostis* spp.)

I saw it somersaulting and spreading its Prussian blue wings almost like an acrobat up from the mobile tower poles watching, waiting and flying just to tumble onto the grass blades and feed on a grasshopper - making it a meal. They are deceptively drab looking at first glance with their brown rump and an ordinary blue tail. However, when it takes flight, its real beauty is witnessed! Just like the grasslands that may look like 'wastelands' or drylands at first casual glance to most people. However, its true richness is revealed only when one experiences what grasslands offer in terms of so much diversity, providing home to diverse pastoral communities as well as livestock, birds, ants and so many others in Tirunelveli; and the best part is they (the residents) return what they take before they leave! Leaving the grassland richer than before!

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An Unexpected Encounter

My journey with ATREE began in the grasslands of Tirunelveli. In August 2022, while preparations for ATREE's highly anticipated 25th anniversary celebrations were underway in Bengaluru, I had decided to stay back at 'MG farm', an important grassland and harrier roost site, to complete my field data collection. The atmosphere at MG farm felt different without the presence of its harriers. These winter migrants start appearing here only towards the end of October. Nevertheless, the open country was brimming with biodiversity for anyone willing to observe. Black winged kites (*Elanus caeruleus*), Common kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*), Shikras (*Accipiter badius*), and Indian eagle owls (*Bubo bengalensis*) are a few raptors that frequent MG farm, apart from the harriers, and prey on the subjects of my study: rodents.

My study involved 'live-trapping' grassland rodents using Sherman traps, which are essentially metal boxes with bait inside. Since rodents are typically crepuscular or nocturnal, they interact with the traps at night, and I would regularly find a few trapped rodents during my daily morning checks. A closed trap indicated that a rodent had likely been captured, and I would gauge its weight to confirm. However, it wasn't until I opened the trap that I could identify which species had been caught. To safely take

measurements and examine the trapped rodent for accurate identification, I would carefully transfer it from the trap into a sturdy, transparent plastic bag. This process was done with great care to avoid causing any distress to the animal or harm to myself.

One bright Sunday morning, while conducting my usual rounds through the grassland, I came across a closed trap. I picked it up and, feeling the weight, suspected it contained a gerbil (*Tatera indica*). As I secured the trap and bag to begin the transfer, I was utterly surprised when, to my amazement, a juvenile krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*) slithered out instead. I paused, both startled and amazed. This experience was a reminder of the dangers that can arise unexpectedly while working in the field. Encounters with kraits can be lethal, and this experience made me realize how important it is to remain alert and cautious, even when performing routine tasks. I gently released the snake back into the grassland and reflected on the need for heightened awareness in the field. While studying wildlife, we must always be mindful of the interconnectedness of living systems and the potential dangers in our environment.

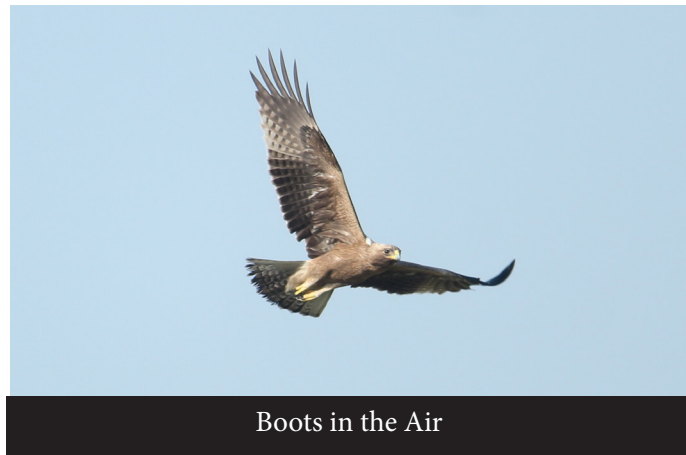
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A Common Krait foraging for prey. Photo: Thalavaipandi S

A Missed Opportunity

It was a cold morning in January 2024 and I was surveying birds at Ilayanainarkulam, Radhapuram. This landscape containing grasslands and farmlands is an important harrier monitoring site. Due to record-breaking rainfall and floods over the previous month, many grassland sites around Tirunelveli had become temporary. lentic waterbodies. As a result, it attracted a host of waterbirds – from pelicans and stilts to pintails and grebes. On my right were farmlands with chilli plants, teeming with small birds such as prinias and silverbills, and to my left was a temporary lake, populated by cormorants, ibises and ducks. Just as I finished my survey and started to return, I suddenly noticed the sound of heavy wings flapping near me. It was a Booted Eagle with an Indian Pond Heron in its talons! Startled by my presence, the eagle took flight and suddenly dropped the pond heron. To my surprise, as the heron hit the ground, it immediately flew away! The eagle then perched on a palm tree and started preening its feathers. For a moment, I wondered if the eagle was disappointed with losing its meal. A few minutes later, the eagle took flight again and started circling the place. I was rooted to the same



Boots in the Air

place, observing this bird for over 20 minutes. During this time, it attempted to scoop down onto the ground a few times but did not grab any prey. I returned to my bike wondering whether I was responsible for the eagle losing its meal. But regardless of whether the eagle felt disappointed, what stays with me is the overwhelming awe I felt as I witnessed this incredible moment.

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Booted Eagle foraging in the grassland-farmland matrix. Photo: R. Sankaranarayanan

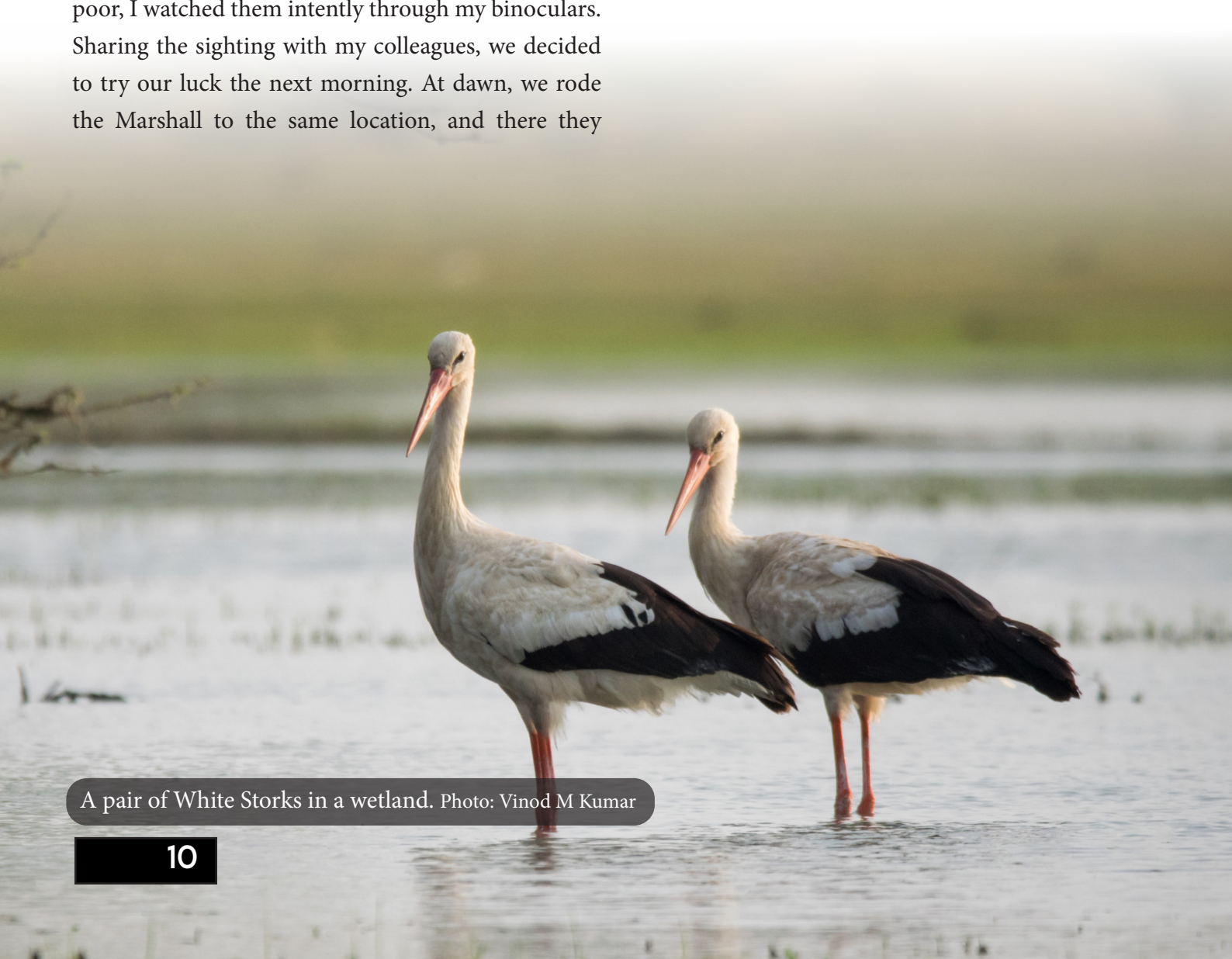
O' Stork, O' Stork, O' Red-legged Stork

During the winter of 2019-2020, I volunteered with the ACCC for studying migratory harriers in Tirunelveli's disappearing grasslands. One evening, as part of a survey with Dr. T. Ganesh at the vast grasslands of Moolakaraipatti, I stood on the western side scanning for harriers. Only a few harriers foraged nearby and a kestrel hovered in search of prey. Suddenly, three large birds descended onto the grasslands at a distance. At first, I thought they were Asian Openbills, but their size seemed larger. Curious, I photographed them and when I zoomed in, my heart leaped with joy — I recognized the sharp red beaks of the White Stork, a bird I had longed to see since reading about it in my 7th-grade Tamil textbook! Overwhelmed, I tried to approach them for a closer photo, but they flew away. Later that evening, as the sun set, the trio returned to the same spot. Though the lighting was poor, I watched them intently through my binoculars. Sharing the sighting with my colleagues, we decided to try our luck the next morning. At dawn, we rode the Marshall to the same location, and there they

were — the majestic White Storks silhouetted against the golden sunrise, their reflections sparkling on the water. It was a magical moment as we captured the beauty of the trio on camera. Interestingly, my research on eBird revealed a sighting of three White Storks in the same region five years ago. Could they be the same birds? Seeing this magnificent species brought a deep sense of fulfillment, reminding me of the ancient Tamil poem, “நாரை விடு தூது” written by சத்திமுத்தப் புலவர் (Saththimutha Pulavar) where the poet calls the White stork to carry forth his message of longing to his wife who is in a faraway land. This experience was a perfect blend of nature, nostalgia, and wonder!

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A pair of White Storks in a wetland. Photo: Vinod M Kumar

Wobbling Through the Paddy Fields of Singampatti

Rice is the staple food for a lot of us in southern India and paddy is grown across large extents along river basins throughout. Paddy cultivation requires the fields to be inundated with water, turning the crops into a kind of artificial wetlands, at least temporarily. These agricultural fields function as novel ecosystems, harbouring biodiversity, the nature of which is yet to be explored in depth by researchers and conservationists. In the month of October, while the heat was still furious, and the crops were not sown yet, I was in Singampatti village on a project assessing feasibility of acoustic monitoring of biodiversity in paddy fields. As I struggled to walk through the stubble, I would often get distracted by larks hopping across in the fields, platoons of babblers marching past, or mynas, with their frivolous strides.

In the next month, these fields were flooded with water, ploughed, and prepped for paddy cultivation. This brought in all kinds of birds - a paddy field full of Cattle Egrets, and some Little and some Intermediate too, Barn Swallows and Asian Palm Swifts, and Blue-

tailed Bee-eaters. As the Cattle Egrets trail behind tractors, exploiting the fresh meal that is dug up along with the dirt, the swifts would manoeuvre so graciously in the air with utmost finesse. I wondered if swifts are called swifts because they are swift. I looked it up, and as it turns out, the name of their family is Apodidae, meaning, “footless”, how poetic!

In the coming months, as I continue to wobble across, documenting the events happening in the paddy fields of Singampatti, I can only hope to be able to walk through them as sure footed as the farmers who work in these fields.

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A view of paddy field. Photo: Kezia K

Monitoring Harriers in a “ONE” Matrix

After centuries of neglect and being termed as “wastelands,” open natural ecosystems (ONEs) are now increasingly being recognised for harbouring rich biodiversity and their role in sustaining local livelihoods. These ecosystems are spread across western India to the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. The semi-arid savanna grasslands (henceforth savannas) of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts currently exist in a matrix embedded amongst croplands and urban settlements. They support a number of migratory raptors that includes endangered ones such as the Greater Spotted Eagles, Egyptian Vultures, and harriers, whose populations have been on the decline across this region. The savannas are an important refugia for these species during the months of October to March wherein they migrate from their Central Asian breeding grounds to spend their non-breeding/wintering months preying on insects and other smaller vertebrates. Among the six species of harriers that winter across India, three are commonly found in the savannas of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi, namely the Montagu’s, Pallid and the

Western Marsh Harrier. Occasionally, Pied Harriers are also reported in the region. The team at ACCC have been monitoring harrier populations across these savannas since 2015.

Why is it important to monitor harriers in this region?

Firstly, harriers are highly specific to savanna habitats, wherein they do not just hunt for prey, but also choose sites with sparse tree cover and adequate grass cover to roost (sleeping sites) on the ground in the nights. Often, these roosts contain many harriers comprising one or all three above-mentioned species that are commonly found here. Harriers are also very specific to these roost sites with individuals coming back to these sites repeatedly - to forage and roost - each year. This means, harriers are important flagship species of these savannas and monitoring them can provide an idea about ecosystem health.

In 2021, a synchronised survey of all identified harrier-roosts (26 sites) spread across the savannas

A tagged male Montagu’s Harrier. Photo: Sankar Subramanian

of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi was kick-started by the ACCC team with the help of volunteers and citizen scientists. The year 2024 marked 4 years of this monitoring. The results of the survey paints a bleak picture for harriers in the region with average counts across all roosts reducing from roughly 6 harriers (counts per site/total number of surveyed sites) in 2021 to less than 3 harriers in 2024, marking a significant decline of more than 50%.

Why this decline?

This decline in harrier populations is not surprising considering the fact that the savannas in the region have increasingly become fragmented and disturbed. In the last 4 years, many of the harrier roosts have faced disturbances such as setting up of new quarries, canal network, conversion to other land use forms such as agriculture with some of the savannas completely lost to plantations of eucalyptus and coconut, and urban settlements.

What can be done to conserve harriers?

Although harriers are still surviving and roosting in this “ONE” matrix, it is important to conserve and protect the small discontinuous tracts of remaining savannas in the region for their long term survival. Protecting harrier roosting and foraging sites can also help conserve other savanna specialists ranging from mammals such as the Indian fox, to reptiles such as fan-throated lizards and insects. This would require concerted efforts that involve multiple stakeholders that includes but not limited to the various State government departments, research organisations and local farming and pastoralist communities.

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The Harrier Watch team in the field. Photo: Thalavaipandi S

Embracing Human-Wildlife Coexistence

The time spent at ATREE – ACCC in 2019 during my Master’s project was one defined by new experiences and valuable lessons. My research centred on mapping owl diversity in the region, particularly within the agricultural landscapes bordering the KMTR. Through the study, the presence of three species of owls in the region were confirmed - Indian Eagle Owl, Barn Owl and Spotted Owlet - living in areas where agricultural and forest land overlapped.

Interestingly, in this region local farmers traditionally employed a unique strategy of installing owl perches to attract these magnificent birds, which served as natural controllers of rodent pests. This strategy served to benefit both the groups, with the owls aiding humans in protecting their farms from rodent attack and the former benefitting from a perch for easy prey sighting. However, with increased availability of pesticides and rodenticides for rodent control, this age-old practice is fast disappearing. My study therefore also aimed to ascertain the number of farmers still utilizing owl perches. The findings revealed a stark reality: among the 20 farmers surveyed, only one continued to employ owl perches in conjunction with traps to manage the rodent population on their farm.

Carrying out research on some of the most captivating birds was incredibly exciting and it offered a glimpse into the delicate balance of coexistence between humans and wildlife. Over the two months I spent there, I learnt a lot more about this intricate balance that enriched my understanding, revealing both the challenges and the beauty it entails. The community in and around the KMTR shares the space with some diverse megafauna such as the “big four” venomous snakes, sloth bears, leopards, elephants and much more. The ground reality is very different to what we learn in classrooms or in books. With human-wildlife interactions on the rise due to habitat loss and land use change, the work that ACCC is undertaking in



Sudha and other interns engaged in fieldwork

this region is critical.

One such programme was the snake bite mitigation awareness workshops, which was conducted in collaboration with the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT), directly confronting sensitive and critical issues at their source. India leads the world in snakebite-related fatalities, underscoring the urgency of engaging with communities in regions like KMTR, where human settlements are closely intertwined with wildlife habitat. These workshops dispel myths, provide detailed guidance on appropriate first aid measures, and emphasize the importance of swift action. They represent a significant stride toward fostering harmony between people and nature, a goal that becomes painfully apparent when one has suffered the loss of a loved one. The team also regularly conducts educational programs with students, igniting their excitement, curiosity, and appreciation for the natural world. These initiatives contribute to nurturing a compassionate society that places coexistence and harmony at its core. The various projects that ACCC works on and engages in, all aim to provide communities with the support and right skills to live in harmony with nature.

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News and Events

- Upgrades at the field station: A Mahindra camper has been purchased as a new field vehicle. A new all-in-one weather station has been installed at ACCC.
- A new drone has been purchased at ACCC
- ACCC hosted students and faculty from the Michigan University's Taubman College from 15 - 20 October 2024
- The 4th Annual ATREE Birdman's Walk was conducted for differently-abled children on 12 November 2024.
- The 9th BELL PINS-ATREE Conservation Leadership Award (BACLA) was conferred to Mr Jawahar for his work in reviving and restoring nandavanams (temple gardens) in Tirunelveli.
- Conservation Connect, an experiential learning course was conducted for 22 school teachers from Virudhunagar from 27 - 30 December 2024.
- Dr KP Karthikeyan, the District Collector of Tirunelveli, inaugurated a Nandavanam at Harikesanallur and visited the ACCC campus on 01 Jan 2025.
- Workshops were conducted on water resources, forest and biodiversity along with the District Administration of Tirunelveli at the Dohnavur Fellowship.

Snippets

- Four Egyptian Vultures were spotted in MG Farmhouse in Moolakaraipatti on 27 Nov 2024 by **Saravanan, Sankaranarayanan, Selvakumar and Arun Kumar**
- Synchronised harrier surveys was conducted across 22 sites in Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi in December 2024 and February 2025
- An Indian Fox was spotted at Canal Roost (Sri Rengarajapuram) on 16 Dec 2024 by **Vinod M Kumar**
- A herd of nine elephants and a King Cobra was spotted in the tea estates of Nalmuku on 08 Jan 2025 by the **phenology team**
- Great hornbill spotted in Kodayar and Manjolai in January 2025 by S **Thalavaipandi**

Research Highlights

- **Sankaranarayanan, R., Ganesh, A, Selvakumar, S., & Thalavaipandi, S. (2025).** New Locality Records of the Bare-bellied Hedgehog, *Paraechinus nudiventris* (Horsfield, 1851) from Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India. *Records of Zoological Survey of India*. 124(3), 321–323. [Link](#)
- **Sankaranarayanan, R. (2024).** Attempted Kleptoparasitism by a Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* from Tamil Nadu, India. *Indian BIRDS*, 20(6): 179-180. [Link](#)
- Migratory Harriers skip Thamirabarani basin as infrastructural growth ruins habitat. [Link](#)
- தாமிரபரணியில் நீர்நாய்களின் எண்ணிக்கை குறைவதால் என்ன பிரச்சனை? [Link](#)



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23.3°C

Average temperature



169.62 mm

Average Precipitation

(November 2024 to January 2025)



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