Crowned eagles (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*) are the predators of this new species of monkey but the main threat to this species of monkey comes from human beings. Hunting for bush meat is the most serious threat. The researchers suggest immediate control on their hunting by creation of a protected area as well as active monitoring.

### New Bird Species in India

A new species of bird belonging to the family Rallidae has been discovered in the Great Nicobar Islands, the largest Island of Nicobar Group. The credit for the discovery of this new species of Crake previously unknown to science goes to the scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (Andaman & Nicobar regional centre) Mr. S. Rajesh Kumar and Mr. C. Ragunathan. The news of this amazing discovery was published in the 17 June 2012 issue of *Bulletin of the Oriental Bird Club*.

Professor Pamela Cecile Rasmussen, a renowned American Ornithologist and an authority on Indian birds, has confirmed the discovery of this new species of bird. Pamela Rasmussen is known the world over as the coauthor of the acclaimed *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* (Volume 1 and 2).

Post Independence this is the third instance of the discovery of a bird species in India. The first bird species to be discovered in independent India was in the year 1948 when India’s birdman Late Dr. Salim Ali and
American ornithologist Late Sidney Dillon Ripley reported the discovery of a new bird species Rusty-throated Wren babbler Spelaeornis badelegularis from the Mishmi Hills of Arunachal Pradesh. Salim and Ripley had got a single dead female specimen of the bird. The species was was reported again by American ornithologists Ben King and Julian P. Donahue in the year 2006.

The second instance of a discovery of a new species of bird in India was in the year 2006. Raman Athreya, a professional astronomer and an amateur ornithologist, reported the finding of a new species of Liocichla, an Asian babbler near Eaglenest wildlife sanctuary in western Arunachal Pradesh. It was named Bugun liocichla (Liocichla bugunorum) after the local Bugun community. A live bird was successfully netted in 2006.

After a period of six years another new species of bird has been discovered in India. S. Rajeshkumar found a single Crane at Govind Nagar tsunami shelter on the east coast of Great Nicobar on 21 November 2011. The bird was observed foraging for insects in the open for about fifteen minutes at a range of four meters and provided good views. As he photographed the bird, it was silent throughout the encounter and when disturbed instead of taking flight ran away quickly and hid up a steep slope.

For convenience the new found crane is being called the “Great Nicobar crane”. The bird will not be scientifically named till a type specimen (normally a dead bird) is collected. When a new species is described a dead individual is preserved in a museum as the ‘type specimen’, which proves the existence of the species and displays the features that distinguish it from other species. The newly discovered Great Nicobar crane is about the size of an adult White-breasted waterhen with a thick bill and faintly short tail.

Scientists from the Zoological Survey of India will now attempt to locate and study more individuals of the Great Nicobar crake and most importantly try to secure a type specimen for the purpose of scientific naming and further studies.

**New Lease of Life for Northern River Terrapins**

The Northern River terrapin Batagur baska is now restricted to parts of North-eastern India (Orissa and the Sundarbans region of India), part of Sundarbans in Bangladesh and possibly Myanmar. It is a critically endangered species. There are no known active nesting sites and no population data exists for this species but it is clear that wild populations have crashed with only remnant survivors remaining (Balan D. Home, TSA 2011 Magazine).

These rare terrapins are feared extinct in the wild because for the past few years there has not been a single sighting. Only a few remnant have been recorded from village ponds of the Indian and Bangladesh Sundarbans where people keep turtles as pet and a source of eggs. In November 2010 a wild male was seen slaughtered at a market in Dhaka providing evidence of a few remaining species in the wild but the picture in the Indian part of the Sundarbans is much more grim.

The last Batagur (a juvenile female) was caught by a fisherman in 2006 and is kept at the Sajnekhali Interpretation Centre of Sundarbans Tiger reserve. The Northern River terrapin is more endangered than the ferocious Royal Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans. Batagur baska are listed as critically endangered in the IUCN Red Data book and protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. It is also included in Appendix I of CITES.

Batagur turtle was formerly abundant at the mouth of the Hooghly/Ganga River (Gunter 1864) but they were captured in large numbers in the mid 19th century and transported to Calcutta for making turtle soup as a substitute for sea turtles especially in those months of the year when sea turtles were not available. Earlier, the fat was in much demand for the manufacture of soap (Kausik Deut, Zoological Survey of India). River terrapin’s flesh and eggs are also considered a delicacy and due to this the species have been heavily harvested and exploited throughout their range for a very long time. Habitat loss and pollution have also contributed to this species decline (TSA).

Batagur baska now survives only in captivity. Their total population in captivity numbers only forty. Thanks to the efforts of the Turtle Survival Organization (an organization with several partners that works towards the goal of zero turtle extinction) the Batagur baska have now got a new lease of life. Recently the birth of the fifty baby Batagur terrapin has brightened the chances of survival of these rare terrapins.

A small captive group of about ten Batagur baska had been kept at the Sajnekhali interpretation centre for years. These terrapins had never reproduced. A TSA India team led by Mr. Shailendra Singh visited the facility in March and made a few recommendations like including the addition of a nesting beach as eggs might get wasted if laid in water. Surprisingly, this simple husbandry adjustment was sufficient to induce egg laying.

On 12th June the staff of the Sundarban Tiger reserve had a pleasant surprise when they found hatchlings of Batagur baska swimming in the pond. Twenty-five hatchlings were recovered.

In neighbouring Bangladesh, again due to the efforts of TSA and Bangladeshi NGO Carinam and the forest department of Bangladesh with the support of Vienna Zoo, on 7th June twenty seven baby Batagurs were hatched at the breeding facility at Bhawal National Park (Bangladesh). Out of these two hatchings died. The remaining population of twenty-five hatchlings are said to be doing fine.

These fifty hatchlings born at Sajnekhali Interpretation Centre (Sundarban Tiger Reserve), India and Bhawal National Park (Bangladesh) have shown a glimmer of hope of bringing back the Northern River Terrapins from the brink of extinction.

**And Now for the Bad News**

**Asiatic Lions in Danger**

Asiatic Lions (Panthera leo persica), which once roamed in northern and central parts of the country, are now sadly restricted to a small area in Gir, Gujarat. The rampant hunting of lions for sport and the destruction of their habitat coupled with the fierce competition for the same prey from the
Crowned eagles (Stephanoaetus coronatus) are the predators of this new species of monkey but the main threat to this species of monkey comes from human beings. Hunting for bush meat is the most serious threat.

cunning and crafty tiger have spelled doom for these majestic beasts.

Since 1913, when a handful of Asiatic lions were left and the species was on the verge of extinction, the Nawabs of Junagarh stepped in to protect the lions. The active royal patronage received during the British rule and after independence by the Gujarat government’s active conservation measures have made Gir the last abode of the Asiatic lions.

According to the last census of Asiatic lions of Gir conducted in the year 2010 the number of lions was 411. Reason enough to be content? If wildlife experts and researchers are to be believed the ground reality is quite different and the Asiatic lion’s survival is hanging by a thin rope. Wildlife experts have been stressing for a long time that the Asiatic lions need a second home far away from Gir and that too fast. And they have pinpointed valid reasons for it.

First and foremost the Gir lions are especially vulnerable to outbreak of diseases since the population of lions here have descended from as few as a dozen remnants. According to geneticist Stephen O’Brien, who has studied Gir lions, if one does a DNA fingerprint Asiatic lions actually look like identical twins. The gene pool is dangerously shallow meaning a disease that affects one Gir lion could quickly affect many. This fear of disease outbreak is not unfounded because in the year 1994 in Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park 800 lions out of the 2000 odd lion population had fallen prey to Canine distemper and had perished. Forty per cent of the lion population was wiped out within a period of roughly four months. Such an epidemic can easily wipe out the total lion population at Gir.

Disease stalking Gir lions is not unheard of since only a few years back a viral disease had hit some Asiatic lions where the beast could not coordinate its limb movements. Further, domestic cattle forms a substantial part of the Gir lions’ diet. According to government estimates, every year lions kill about 1200 to 1300 domestic animals in Amreli, Junaghar, and Bhavnagar districts. The domestic cattle can transfer bovine tuberculosis to the lions, which once gripped lions at the Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Natural disasters can also wipe out the lion population. Tanzania’s Ngorogoro Crater lions were decimated when rains spawned swarms of blood-sucking flies that left the big cats with festering sores. A massive cyclone in the mid-80s at Gir caused a lot of damage. In Gir several incidents of forest fire have also occurred in the past.

The 1400 odd sq km Gir protected area cannot hold more than 250 lions while according to the last census there were 411 lions. Lions are territorial predators. An adult lion roughly requires an area of 30-40 sq km and weaker males are pushed out of the territory. Each territory has a pride consisting of several lionesses and their offsprings protected by a lion. The sub adult males are not tolerated and they are driven off and the deposed male after gaining in years and strength looks forward to gain control over a pride and he has to fight a brutal battle to become the new master and caretaker of the pride. Lack of new territories can lead to more brutal and fatal battle and can force the lions to look for new territory outside the protected area.

Naturally, lions are seeking new territories and are being frequently sighted where they have not been seen before. A lion was caged at Diu airport and another caught at Porbandar airport. Another lion made a kill in Laduli village near Ahmedabad and a lioness with her three cubs was found in Gondal passing through a densely populated area. The lions are leaving the core area and straying into villages adjoining the Gir protected area and are getting bolder and attacking cattle.
According to *Environ*, Vol. xi no.2, the lions are capturing their lost territories in Girnar, Mitala, Shetrungi river basin as well as the forests of Bhavnagar districts and are also moving into the coastal forests. The BBC team which was in Gir for filming of “Land of the Tiger” opined that there were no lions in coastal areas anywhere in the world and were taken aback to learn that Gir lions are the only lions in the world that are living in coastal areas too.

Due to lions trying to move out of the Gir protected area in search of new territory, man-animal conflicts are on the rise. Lion attacks on villagers and livestock in areas adjoining the Gir sanctuary have risen. Each year there are estimated fifteen cases of lion attacks and they take place outside the park. In April a lion killed a man who was said to be pelting stones at the lion. In 2007 five lions were electrocuted by a villager in Amreli district within the Gir forest range while...
trying to protect his farm and cattle from the big cats.

Wildlife experts and researchers have been advocating the creation of a second home to save the Asiatic lions from the imminent danger of extinction. In the 1990s on the recommendation of the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, Kuno-Palpur Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh was selected as a suitable second home of the Asiatic lions. However, reluctance on the part of Gujarat has led to the lion relocation programme being put on hold. In fact, a bitter battle is being fought in the Supreme Court.

Giant Tortoise Gone Forever
On 24th June 2012, the world lost a species of a Giant tortoise of the famed Galapagos Archipelago, connected with British Naturalist Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. Lonesome George the male Pinta Giant tortoise or Abingdon Island tortoise (Chelonoidis abingdonii) belonging to the family Testudinidae was the last surviving member of his species and with his death the species of Pinta Island Giant tortoise has become extinct.

Lonesome George passed away in his corral situated at the Galapagos National Park (Ecuador). Pinta tortoise was already listed as Extinct in the Wild on the IUCN Red List of threatened species. Lonesome George was estimated to be about hundred years old. The Galapagos Island Giant tortoises are not only the largest tortoises in the world but also longest living of all vertebrates.

Without any sightings the Pinta Island Tortoise was thought to be extinct. But, in the year 1971 a rare finding of the tortoise was made by a Hungarian scientist and the male tortoise was named Lonesome George.
The one and only reason for the extinction of the Giant tortoise species are human beings. Human greed and intervention in their natural habitat has destroyed these species of Giant tortoises. During the 18th and 19th century Pinta Giant tortoise or Abingdon tortoise were captured by sailors as a source of fresh meat supply. The tortoises also became the prime food source of new settlers in the Galapagos Islands in the 20th century. These indiscriminate killings and predation of tortoise eggs and hatchlings by rodents led to their populations dwindling rapidly.

Without any sightings the Pinta Island tortoise was thought to be extinct for most of the last 100 years. But, in the year 1971 a rare finding of the tortoise was made by a Hungarian scientist on Pinta Island and the male tortoise was named Lonesome George. One of the rarest animals in the world, Lonesome George was shifted to the Charles Darwin Research station situated on the Santa Cruz Island in 1972. Several attempts were made to find a female tortoise on the Pinta Island but all in vain.

Further, captive breeding efforts with closely related subspecies were never successful. Either Lonesome George did not mate with them or when he did the eggs laid by the female were found to be infertile.

Migratory Birds Desert Kolkata Zoo

The pond at the Kolkata zoo had been hosting migratory birds for a long time. But for the past few years these winter guests have totally deserted the zoo’s pond.

Kolkata like other parts of the world is becoming a victim of global warming. The climate of the city is gradually changing. According to a few old residents of the city, earlier winter used to arrive in the month of October. However, since the past few years the arrival of winter is getting delayed – the duration of the cold season has reduced. Migratory birds used to flock to the zoo’s pond in October and used to stay here till the month of March.

Alipore is now a busy part of the city. The area has become a concrete jungle with highrises dotting the skyline. Noise and air pollution is rampant in the area. Experts point out that these highrises as well as increasing level of pollution provide an obstruction in the migratory bird’s arrival. A five star hotel built bang opposite the zoo was chiefly blamed for obstructing the migratory bird’s path. The then retired joint director of the Zoological Survey of India Mr. Biswamoy Biswas had warned that the construction of the hotel may lead to lesser arrival of migratory birds to the zoo’s pond.

The pond of the Kolkata zoo used to primarily host Trans Himalayan and birds from the Caspian sea region like Large whistling teal, Small whistling teal, Pintail duck, Combed duck, Flamingoes, Pelicans, White stork, Black necked swan, Brahminy duck and many others.

Urbanization of Kolkata’s rural areas as well as adjoining areas led to the filling up of water bodies, and farmlands were acquired for construction of roads or buildings. This led to food shortage for the migratory birds. Further, the boundary of the pond was concretized with drastic effect on the pond’s ecosystem.

Lack of upkeep has also led to the high level of pollution of the pond’s water. The water of the pond has turned brackish. The presence of Indian moorhen is an indicator of the health of the water and due to the polluted water Indian moorhen have deserted their colony built on the artificial island of the zoo’s pond.

Migratory birds like solitude. But with heavy footfall in the winter months the migratory birds were not only harassed by the unruly crowd but also hunted. People used to hunt them by employing the method of trapping them by flying kites.

At the edge of the pond a large information board erected by the zoo authorities gave wonderful information about the various types of migratory birds visiting the zoo’s pond. But now this signboard has also gone missing. Have the zoo authorities given up all hopes of the return of the beautiful winter guests?

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