



The journey of a multitasking man and his ongoing contribution to conservation

Along with my RHATC Fellow colleagues, I had the pleasure of interacting with a man who wears multiple hats. H. Byju, the section editor of the Journal of Threatened Taxa, executive committee member of Wildlife Information Liaison Development, a business man, and a conservationist. This is his story and how he inspired us all.

After completing his masters in zoology from American College, Madurai, H. Byju worked in the Ministry of Home Affairs. After three years of hard work, he decided to start his own business and became quite successful at it. After

establishing his company, he came back to his passion and love for wildlife. And he started birding.

Taking baby steps, he started with bird photography and also started volunteering with the forest department. On one such birding trip to the Western Ghats, he saw a mother macaque die while trying to take the food from travellers on the road. This moved him to come up with an idea to travel all across the country from the Western Ghats to the Himalaya educating people and making them aware about how they were harming animals by offering them food and also to study road kills. He along with three of his friends made his idea come true, and named this excursion as PATH in 2016. Their journey covered a distance of 23,000 km across 20 states, within 46 days. Not only this, they carried out their awareness



program in 73 national parks and reserves and 80 colleges across the journey. This was the first trip he planned and also looked for funding all by his own and managed to raise Rs. 3.5 lakhs from Sanctuary Asia and WWF. The stay and food in most of the places was organised by his Facebook friends, most of whom he had never met earlier. As Byju stated, "Just ask your questions to people, tell them your plans. You have to get out of your comfort zone", a quote that seems to have helped him.

Amazingly, none of the people he travelled with besides himself knew Hindi. One of the biggest lessons he learnt during the trip was not to trust Google maps blindly, inferred after going round and round across the same place a number of times. The four met forest department officials all across the 20 states, and also set up sign boards to make people aware about the extent of road kills in an effort to reduce the impact on wildlife. Understanding that the greatest risk was from heavy vehicles, they carried out most of their awareness programs at dhabas for truck drivers and told them what to do and what not. Then came a dark night to this trip, counting 120 road kills in six hours across the road from Jaisalmer to Kutch in Gujarat. The RHATC Fellows were shocked and dismayed to hear such a high number of road kills. He followed up with how they came up with solutions



that they then guided the forest department to take up solutions such as canopy bridges, sign boards, speed breakers, road engineering, education, and enforcement.

On this trip he saw Himalayan Griffon Vultures in Manali, Himachal Pradesh, and the birder in him got intrigued about vultures and back home he went for raptor surveys along with other birds in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. During one such survey, he got a chance to explore vultures with shore birds in Gulf of Munnar through BNHS. An interesting fact that he shared with the Fellows was that vultures have a very acidic stomach which helps them to digest carcass. Also, we came to know about the four species of vultures found in the Moyar Valley, Tamil Nadu, that he saw from Kodanad view point. His findings from the camera traps revealed some startling behaviour on how 60–70 vultures can feed on a dead elephant in a day. He also found that the vultures in this area nest usually on *Terminalia arjuna* and said that the nesting pattern needs changed based

on livestock patterns. Also, an amazing fact that the Fellows came to know from him is that vulture poop is also very acidic and the leaves of the tree sheds from the poop.

And then came the sad story, that we conservationists come across every day, the threats. Diclofenac, that is given to cattle as a painkiller, biomagnifies down the line, affecting the vulture population, when fed on it. But seldom do we get to see happy stories, and here it is driven by emotions. The Toda tribes believe vultures to be their forefathers and worship them and have a temple for them. They feed the vultures and have the food only after the vultures have them. Just like other stories we hear, this is one of a kind, where superstitions and culture saves wildlife. Byju had one more skill that he pulled out of his hat – as a writer. He has a major contribution, in a book called Birds of Tamil Nadu (Tamil version), published by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department (TNFD). He is the author of 'Valley of Hope' a book on vultures and the RHATC Fellows were lucky enough to attend the

most recent launch of his book entitled 'Matriarch'.

Just like a true leader, Byju ended his talk by explaining to us the importance of honing our skills in leadership and handling multitasking. He gave us the example of flamingos, and how they always move in flocks and everyone is as equal as the other. This explains how leadership is all about equality. He also used the analogy of how mothers multitask, how they keep track of everything and how that deeply influenced him. Putting that in his own life, he is today a successful businessman and conservationist. He asked us to incorporate the same in our lives. He gave us insights on working with species and conservation as a whole. He gave all the 10 of the Fellows his books. He has been a true inspiration for all of us and I guess just like me all the other Fellows are waiting for an opportunity to work under his guidance.



Arpan Joshi, RHATC Fellow, 2021–22, Zoo Outreach Organization, Coimbatore, TN

