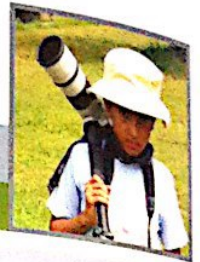


Our youngest Guest Editor shares stories and snippets on wildlife, conservation and the environment.

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

TEXT: MAITREYA SUKUMAR



Brood parasitism

In the news

CLIMATE CHANGE AND PACIFIC WALRUSES

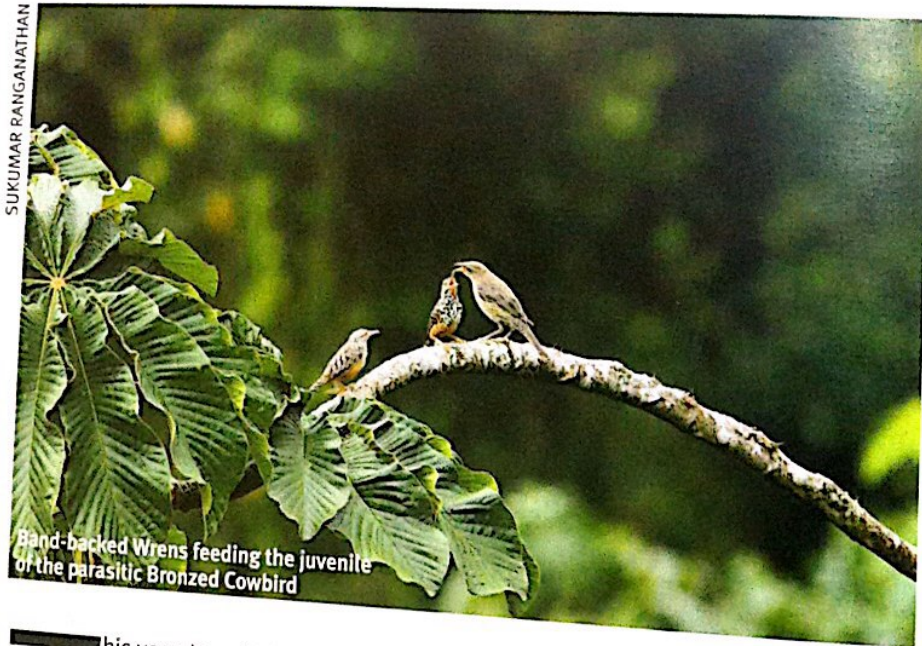
Scientists have spotted 35,000 Pacific Walruses on a beach in Alaska. Walruses are usually found on sea ice. Their presence on the beach is because there is less ice this year, a result of climate change. A crowded beach is not the best place for Pacific Walruses because there is very little food for them there. Polar bears, the Walrus' natural enemy, have also been affected by the loss of sea ice in the Arctic region. Similar gatherings of the Pacific Walruses on the beaches in the Arctic were last seen in 2011. Could this be a sign of things to come?

50% OF WORLD'S WILDLIFE GONE IN 40 YEARS

According to an alarming new report by World Wildlife Fund (WWF), between 1970 and 2010, we've destroyed half of the world's wildlife. While some species, including those of fish, birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles, have become completely extinct, the real reason for the fall in numbers is a decline in numbers of the animals which still survive. For instance, there were over a million elephants in 1970, and by 2010 the number has fallen to 470,000. The main reason for the loss of wildlife is economic development, loss of habitat and overuse of natural resources. This is a direct message to humans, indicating that we are capable of edging out other species and that we have to change our ways for the welfare of the planet.

Maitreya, 11, is a passionate birder and has seen over 500 Indian and almost 1000 global species of birds. He studies at the Shri Ram School, Moulisari Avenue, Gurgaon.

SUKUMAR RANGANATHAN



Band-backed Wrens feeding the juvenile of the parasitic Bronzed Cowbird

This year, I was lucky to witness a phenomenon which I had only read about previously. I first saw it in Costa Rica, when I was on a bird-watching trip with my parents this June. We saw a pair of Band-backed Wrens feeding a bird that dwarfed them. The bigger, but younger bird turned out to be a Bronzed Cowbird. One would think that the wrens would know that they are feeding a chick that is obviously not their own. But this is what brood parasitism is all about.

Some birds lay their eggs in the nests of other birds. The unaware hosts raise these young birds, which are often bigger than themselves. There is a cruel side to this; the bird that lays the egg (usually only one) typically pushes out the already laid egg of the original nest owners. But not all brood parasites do this; in some other species, the parasitic chick being bigger monopolises the food supply, thus starving the other nestlings. It is a surprise that the foster parents raise the young one and do not abandon it.

In India, the most common brood parasite is the Asian Koel. I saw instances of brood parasitism involving young koels and their foster parents, the crows, twice in recent months. The first time was in a wetland near Sohna in Haryana and the second time was in Vasant Kunj, in the heart of South Delhi. In both instances, a young koel was calling out for food and interestingly, it was served eagerly by its foster parents. The call of the young koel sounds very much like the calls of adult crows, which probably helps the bird to be an effective brood parasite.

Other common brood parasites include the whydahs and the Parasitic Weaver from Africa. Some birds tackle brood parasitism in a clever way. Weavers in Africa build nests with long and narrow entrance tubes that bigger parasites, such as the Diederick Cuckoo, cannot enter. In the United States, the American Yellow Warbler, when it finds an egg of the Brown-headed Cowbird in its nest, builds another nest over it to prevent the egg from hatching. ○