



## SOME DEAD AND GONE, SOME BACK FROM DEAD

India has seen many species disappearing from the wild since Independence. There have been many which have not been sighted in hundred years and more. Some are dead, gone for sure. For some, hope still flickers among naturalists and wildlifers. This optimism is not always misplaced. There have been a number of species which have been rediscovered in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### EXTINCT

#### Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*)

The cheetah once ranged throughout Africa and the Middle East, across to Tajikistan in the north and India in the southeast. Currently, throughout its range outside of Africa, it has been exterminated or is on the verge of extinction. The last Indian cheetah was said to have been killed in 1948. The last Indian cheetah in captivity died in 1962. Cheetahs were easy to train, and rulers kept huge numbers for hunting gazelles.

#### Pink headed duck (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*)

The last sighting in the wild was reported in 1935 from Darbhanga in Bihar and last captive bird died in 1944. The bird's extinction resulted from excessive hunting and habitat destruction. It was locally distributed in the wetlands of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and occurred rarely in Nepal, with most records from the North-east. It was always considered uncommon or rare and was last seen in the wild in 1949, surviving until around the same time in captivity. Recent and positive leads from a series of questionnaires about its possible continued existence in north-east India were the result of confusion with red-crested pochard *Netta rufina*.

#### Himalayan mountain quail (*Ophrysia superciliosa*)

This enigmatic quail was last seen in Jerapani in Uttaranchal in 1868. Some birdwatchers are said to have seen it even in 1876 near Mussoorie. This bird was a ground-dwelling montane forest meadow seed-eater endemic to the western Himalayan foothills. Field observations during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century suggest that it may have been relatively common, but it was certainly rare by the late 1800s, potentially indicating a population decline. The lack of re-

cords for over a century suggests that the species may be extinct, although there have been few well organised searches for it. Specimens are present in Liverpool, London, and New York. The chances that a small population survives in some remote area in the lower or middle Himalayan range seem slim.

#### Smaller one-horned (Javan) rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*)

The Javan rhinoceros is divided into two sub-species: *Rhinoceros sondaicus sondaicus* in Ujung Kulon, Indonesia, and *Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus* in Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam. A third sub-species *Rhinoceros sondaicus inermis* inhabited the Sunderbans area in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. This sub-species became extinct sometime between the 1800s and early 1900s. The reasons for its disappearance from India is not clearly known.

#### Asiatic two-horned Rhinoceros (*Didermoceros sumatrensis*)

The smallest of the rhinos, the Sumatran rhinoceros, was also present in India. An Indian sub-species, *Didermoceros sumatrensis lasiotis*, was also reported in the past along the Sankosh River. It was hunted in the forests of Dalgaon.

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## **REDISCOVERED**

### **Forest owlet (*Athene blewitti*)**

This recently rediscovered species has a tiny, fragmented population known from only four localities. It is inferred to be declining as a result of loss of its deciduous forest habitat. A crepuscular, diurnal bird, the forest owlet lives in dry deciduous forests interspersed with shrubs and grasses. The forest owlet is endemic to central India. Until its rediscovery in November 1997, it was known from seven specimens collected during the 19th century at four localities in two widely separated areas, northern Maharashtra, and south-east Madhya Pradesh/western Orissa. The new name of the species is *Heteroglaux blewitti*.

### **Jerdon's courser (*Cursorius bitorquatus*)**

The Jerdon's courser is a rare bird endemic to the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh and extreme southern Madhya Pradesh. Historically, it was known from just a few records in the Pennar and Godavari river valleys and was assumed to have been extinct until its rediscovery around Lankamalai in 1986. Not seen after 1895, the bird was rediscovered at Reddipally village in Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh after a vigorous search. It has, since, been sighted at six localities in the vicinity, with all six probably holding birds from a single population. The new names of the species is *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*.

### **Travancore evening brown (*Parantirrhoea marshalli*)**

The Travancore evening brown, one of the rarest butterflies in the world, was rediscovered from Periyar Tiger Reserve after a gap of several decades. It is a brushfooted butterfly (belonging to the Nymphalidae family).

### **Malabar large spotted civet (*Viverra civettina*)**

The Malabar large spotted civet was once very common in the coastal districts of Malabar and Travancore in southwest India. By the late 1960s it was thought to be nearing extinction. None were seen for a long period of time until 1987, when it was rediscovered about 60 km east of Calicut in Kerala. A 1990 survey revealed that isolated populations of the Malabar large spotted civet still survive in less disturbed areas of South Malabar.

### **Andaman green calotes (*Calotes andamanensis*)**

This lizard from the Andaman Islands was believed to have disappeared for ever, till it was rediscovered at the fag end of the 20th century. It is an arboreal (living on trees) and insectivorous reptile.

### **Did You Know???**

During the Mughal Empire in India the Emperor Akbar is said to have owned 1,000 Cheetahs.

## **From the Desk**

This issue of Travelogue brings you information on the various species of India that have gone extinct and rediscovered over the last century.

Wishing you a happy reading.

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