

Lest we forget

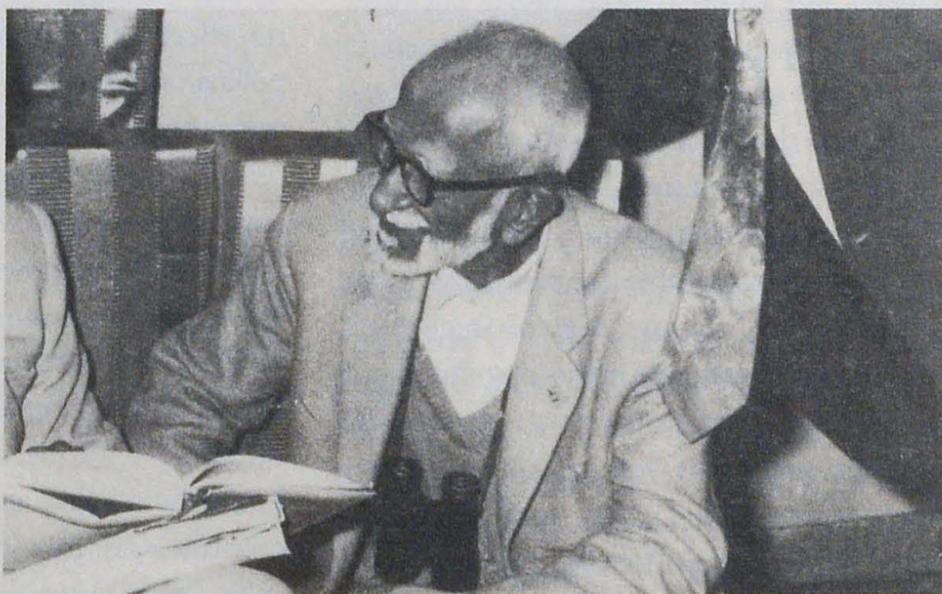
Long before wildlife conservation was an acceptable concept, a dedicated band of conservationists braved the fashions of the day to protect what they knew was a vanishing heritage. Those who sought such protection in the days of shikar had to cope with derision and animosity on a scale we will probably never understand. The 1970s and 80s were better years for Indian wildlife. With a Prime Minister who was committed to protecting wildlife at the helm, there was synergy between officialdom and NGOs. Victories were won, species were recovered, habitats regenerated. The credit goes to the men and women at the helm of both private and government wildlife initiatives. Their vision laid the foundation for the survival of India's endangered species and habitats. This listing is far from comprehensive. It is intended merely to remind today's green warriors that they stand on the shoulders of stalwarts who shared their values when they were alive.



Humayun Abdulali (left) with Mrs. Indira Gandhi (right)

ABDULALI, HUMAYUN: Original thinker, passionate conservationist, pioneer naturalist and visionary – Humayun Abdulali was all these things and more. His negotiations with the Central Government allowed the Bombay Natural History Society's (BNHS) Hornbill House to have in its premises offices, a library and its collections. He made outstanding contributions to the ornithological knowledge of Indian birds, particularly in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Several species of birds including the *Pycnonotus cafer humayuni*, the first to his credit, *Accipiter virgatus abdulalii* and the Nicobar Scops Owl *Otus alius* were named after this legendary ornithologist. He has even had a species of frog named after him – *Nyctibatrachus humayuni*. Abdulali was the Honorary Secretary of the BNHS between 1950 and 1962 and he took up the herculean task of cataloguing birds in the collection. He worked with the forest department to draft the *Bombay Wild Birds and Wild Animals Protection of 1951* on which the *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972* is based. He authored over 265 papers and articles. His efforts led to the ban on the export of frogs in the 1970s and were also instrumental in the creation of Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park. He also played a central role in halting the plan to build a highway through the Park.

ALI, DR. SÁLIM: Known as the "Grand Old Bird Man of India" – he was India's finest ambassador for wildlife. Renowned as one of the best ornithologists in the world, Dr. Ali conducted systematic bird surveys in India at a time when few Indians were even interested in birds. He rediscovered the Finn's Baya in Kumaon's Terai region and initiated a scientific approach to studying birds. His efforts helped mould the Bombay Natural History Society to make it one of the finest natural history institutions in the country. In the 1970s, he lobbied hard and successfully to thwart construction of the controversial Silent Valley Dam in Kerala and to ensure that the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary was protected. His *Book of Indian Birds* and *Indian Hill Birds*, among a number of other publications continue to be standard references to millions of bird-lovers in the subcontinent and have contributed significantly to the development of professional and amateur ornithology in India. In association with his lifelong friend Dr. S. Dillon Ripley, he produced the monumental *Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan* in 10 volumes.



Dr. Sálim Ali

BAKER, E.C. STUART: A British ornithologist, Edward Charles Stuart Baker came to India as an officer of the Imperial Police Force. He often spent his free time studying and collecting birds and learning about the species in the subcontinent. Though he did a little work in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bengal, his main work was in Assam. Despite losing an arm to a leopard attack, he loved the wilderness and wrote a number of books that included, *The Indian Ducks and their allies*, *Game Birds of India and Ceylon* and *Fauna of British India: Birds*. The White-naped Yuhina *Yuhina bakeri* was named after Baker.

BLATTER, ETHELBERT: A Jesuit priest, Reverend Father Ethelbert Blatter, S.J. was a botanist of great repute and regarded as a pioneer in Indian plant taxonomy. He came to India in 1903, joined St. Xavier's College, Mumbai as professor of botany and devoted himself to the study of Asian flora, travelling extensively and making large collections, which formed the basis of his writings. He also founded a herbarium in the college. Today, this herbarium houses the largest collection of plants in Western India. Author of acclaimed books such as *Some beautiful Indian trees*, *Beautiful flowers of Kashmir*, *The Palms of British India and Ceylon*, *The Ferns of Bombay*, *The flora of the Indus delta*, *The flora of the Indian desert, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer*, Blatter was also the Vice President of the BNHS.

BURTON, R.W.: Conservationist, naturalist and author, R. W. Burton played a significant role in the protection of India's natural resources. His articles published in the *Bombay Natural History Society Journal* in 1948, which referred to wildlife as India's vanishing asset, actually paved the way for the formal establishment of the Indian Board for Wildlife.

CHAMPION, F.W.: An officer with the Imperial Forest Service based in the Central Provinces of India, Champion chartered new territories in wildlife photography in India. Following in the footsteps of pioneer wildlife photographer George Shiras who took night-time nature pictures using a trip wire, Champion photographed India's nocturnal wildlife and produced wonderful portraits of wild tigers. His motley crew of porters had to carry his heavy plate camera, tripod and flash equipment – a metal box with magnesium powder, which was fired by a spark from a battery. Yet, his photographs could rival any present day digital photograph. So powerful were his pictures, that it inspired the likes of Jim Corbett to wildlife photography. Champion's writings were just as evocative, and spoke against permitting cars in forests and limiting gun licenses. His books *With a Camera in Tigerland* and *The Jungle in Sunlight and Shadow* are considered triumphs of photography and find themselves on the bookshelves of practically every naturalist and photography enthusiast.

CHOUDHURY, S. R.: Saroj Raj Choudhury protected Simlipal in Orissa until the day he died. In those days, Choudhury and his pet tigress Khairi were household names in Orissa. The tigress was brought to him as a two-month-old abandoned cub and he went beyond the call of duty and risked his life for her. He kept an immaculate log of her every move, and research activities between 1973 and 1982 centred around the tigress. Founder Field Director of Simlipal, Choudhury dedicated his entire life to protecting wildlife. The tigress though was not the only one to share his quarters – a mongoose, pangolin, sloth bear, wild cat twins, a country dog, python and a blind hyena lived there and each had a name. As Director of Project Tiger, he introduced and refined the tiger tracing method where the pugmarks of each animal were recorded. He inspired all contemporary wildlife research in Orissa and conducted biological and management studies on sambar and chital. A stern and tough man, he had a reputation of suffering no fools.

CORBETT, JIM: Legendary hunter and tracker of 'man-eating' tigers, Jim Corbett evolved into an ardent conservationist who found far more pleasure in shooting with his camera. His accounts of the hunting and killing of man-eaters are related in his book, the *Man-eaters of Kumaon*, a greatly acclaimed title, which has been translated into 27 languages. His other books also continue to be popular to this day. Corbett lectured at local schools and villages to spread awareness on the need to conserve wildlife. He helped create the Association for the Preservation of Game in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh), and the All-India Conference for the Preservation of Wild Life. He also helped establish the Hailey Park, which was later christened the Corbett National Park. In his later years, he gave up the gun completely, preferring to use the camera to indulge his lifelong passion – to be in the wilds. After Independence, Corbett retired to Kenya where he continued to write about tigers and other wildlife.

DEB ROY, SANJOY: A professional forester of great repute, Deb Roy began as a forest officer in Assam in 1956 and committed his entire life to conservation. As Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam, he played a significant role in the protection of the Manas and Kaziranga National Parks. He continued in the tradition of earlier forest officers of selective burning of grasslands as a habitat management tool. He challenged the poachers in Manas with great courage, and was in the field with his staff during gun battles. He also worked as an advisor to the Environmental Investigation Agency's 'Tigers in Crisis' campaign. His work, first in the field and later in New Delhi as Additional Inspector General of Forests at the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests, were crucial contributions to Indian wildlife. He also enjoyed being in

the field and his deep understanding of forests, wildlife and people was well appreciated. One of his outstanding achievements was the rediscovery of the pygmy hog in eastern Manas, after it was believed to be extinct.

DHARMAKUMARSINHJI, R.S. R.S. Dharmakumarsinhji or 'Bappa' as he was popularly known, belonged to the royal family of Bhavnagar and like most royals of the time, he was a passionate hunter. However, his interest in hunting soon transcended into a lifetime of protecting



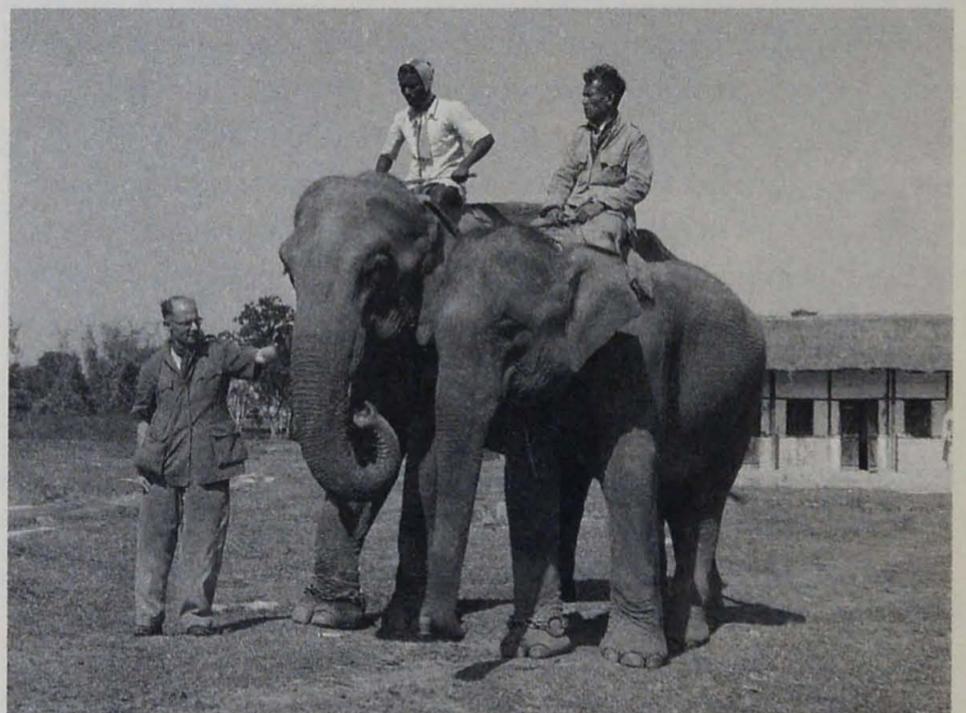
Dharmakumarsinhji or 'Bappa'

wildlife. He was fascinated by animal behaviour – how the cheetah tackles his prey and even the sexual stamina of lions. He played an important role in protecting the Asiatic lion and when he died in 1986, he was a popular figure, known and recognised for his passion and commitment to wildlife conservation. A prolific writer, his books *Birds of Saurashtra* and *Sixty Indian Birds* are still sought after. *Reminiscences of Indian Wildlife* is

another valuable collection of hunting anecdotes and his reflections on the natural history of India.

GANDHI, INDIRA: Former Prime Minister and a passionate wildlifer, there has been no politician since Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to provide decisive direction on wildlife and environmental issues. When conservationists approached her to take up protection of wildlife, with the tiger as a flagship species, she did not hesitate, and Project Tiger was born. She banned hunting, fur exports and initiated efforts for the drafting and the implementation of the *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972* and the *Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980*. In November 1981, Mrs. Indira Gandhi issued a letter to all state ministers forbidding any construction within 500 m. of the tide line. This led the Environment Ministry to set up an expert group to probe the dynamics of coastal ecosystems.

GEE, E.P.: Naturalist and author, Edward Pritchard Gee contributed greatly to the early protection of wildlife in India. E.P. Gee, a tea planter, spent his life observing and photographing wildlife in India and his works reflect a lifetime of involvement with the wild. He played a significant role in ensuring protection for the Kaziranga National Park in Assam, where he spent a large part of his life. He was one of the first visitors when Kaziranga



E.P. Gee

was opened to the public in 1938. Gee spent more than 13 years observing elephants, and created one of the first growth gradients for the elephant. Gee is best known for his discovery of the golden langur *Trachypithecus geei*, one of the rarest of the six different langur species in India. His much-revered book *The Wild Life of India* provides a unique overview of the wildlife parks in India.

GIBSON, ALEXANDER: Alexander Gibson, an East Indian Company surgeon, was also a botanist, forester and writer. Gibson catalogued around 1,885 species of plants comprising 566 genera. His monumental work gave shape to the *Dapuri Drawings*, a book of remarkable botanical watercolour that he commissioned. Most of the plants were grown in the botanic garden under his control in the Bombay Presidency.

GODREJ, S.P.: S.P. Godrej conceived the Godrej Mangrove Project on the suggestion of Dr. Salim Ali and Dr. A.K. Ganguli. The project ensured protection for the mangroves, phased out infiltration of people and worked on reintroducing an extinct mangrove species. Founder Trustee and President of WWF India, he was most passionate about tigers. Despite being the head of one of India's leading industrial houses, he spent far more time working for the conservation of nature. He was well-loved and respected and a prominent spokesperson for wildlife conservation in India.

HUME, ALLAN OCTAVIAN: The original founder of the Indian National Congress, A.O. Hume was also much admired in ornithological circles. He put together the largest collection of Asiatic birds and documented them. He built an impressive private museum and library in his home in Simla. He also travelled extensively, from Etawah, Manipur and Cuttack to Rajasthan and even the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to pursue his passion. He was an extraordinary naturalist and his genius was complemented by impressive organisational skills. The 'Hume Collection' that is housed at the British museum consists of some 75,577 specimens. Many of these species were first described or discovered by Hume. He also started a quarterly journal *Stray Feathers* – a journal of ornithology for India and dependencies that helped build a network of ornithologists from around the country. The journal published descriptions of new discoveries as well as critical reviews of all ornithological works of that time. His major works include *My Scrap book: or Rough Notes on Indian Oology and Ornithology*, *Game Birds of India, Burmah and Ceylon* and *Nests and Eggs of Indian Birds*.

JERDON, T.C.: The study of Indian ornithology as a serious science truly started with the publication of T.C. Jerdon's classic, *Birds of India*. He provided English names for over 1,000 native species and though a number of them have been changed over the years, his work was the basis for many other studies and inspired Britishers of the era to take up birding. A British physician, zoologist and botanist, he also wrote *Fifty Illustrations from Indian Ornithology*, *The Game Birds and Waterfowl of India*, *Mammals of India* and *The Birds of India: A Natural History* in three volumes.

KRISHNAN, M.: Naturalist, author and wildlife photographer, M. Krishnan is one of the most respected names in natural history writing. Initially, Krishnan struggled to make a living by writing and selling his drawings to small magazines. He even worked with the Maharaja of Sandur near Bellary in Karnataka, as his political secretary. His essays were published by *The Hindu* and *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. His weekly column in *The Statesman* was published for 46 years – from

1950 to 1996, the year he died. As a photographer, he used only black-and-white film and a camera that was a composite mix of accessories he assembled himself. His columns, poems, essays and sketches reveal his joys, experiences and observations of wildlife from small and large creatures to nature in temple art and folklore, and conservation issues. He was also responsible for getting Vedanthangal declared as a bird sanctuary. A wise, forthright and opinionated man, this chronicler of the natural world did not shy away from writing or speaking about what he believed in.

MILLARD, W.S.: W. S. Millard was a well-known naturalist and the honorary secretary of the Bombay Natural History Society. It was Millard whom the 10-year-old Salim Ali approached to identify the bird he had shot. That was the beginning of a lifelong association that taught the young Salim to love birds. Millard co-authored *Some Beautiful Indian trees* with E. Blatter. Millard was also the Editor of the *Bombay Natural History Society's Journal* and promoted natural history and gardening.

MILROY, A.J.W.: As Chief Conservator of Forests, Assam, A.J.W. Milroy worked for Indian wildlife until he died in 1936. A courageous conservationist and disciplinarian, Milroy daringly took on poaching gangs in Kaziranga. A keen forester, he started his career as an officer in the elephant *kheddah* service in 1909. At that time, elephant-catching was very common and practiced by all and sundry tea planters. Milroy's tireless efforts helped humanise the elephant-catching industry and he played a crucial role in convincing the government to revise existing rules to allow only the forest department to take on the job. He suggested opening Kaziranga to visitors and was also instrumental in getting Manas declared a game sanctuary. Later, largely due to his efforts, Kaziranga and Manas were declared national parks.

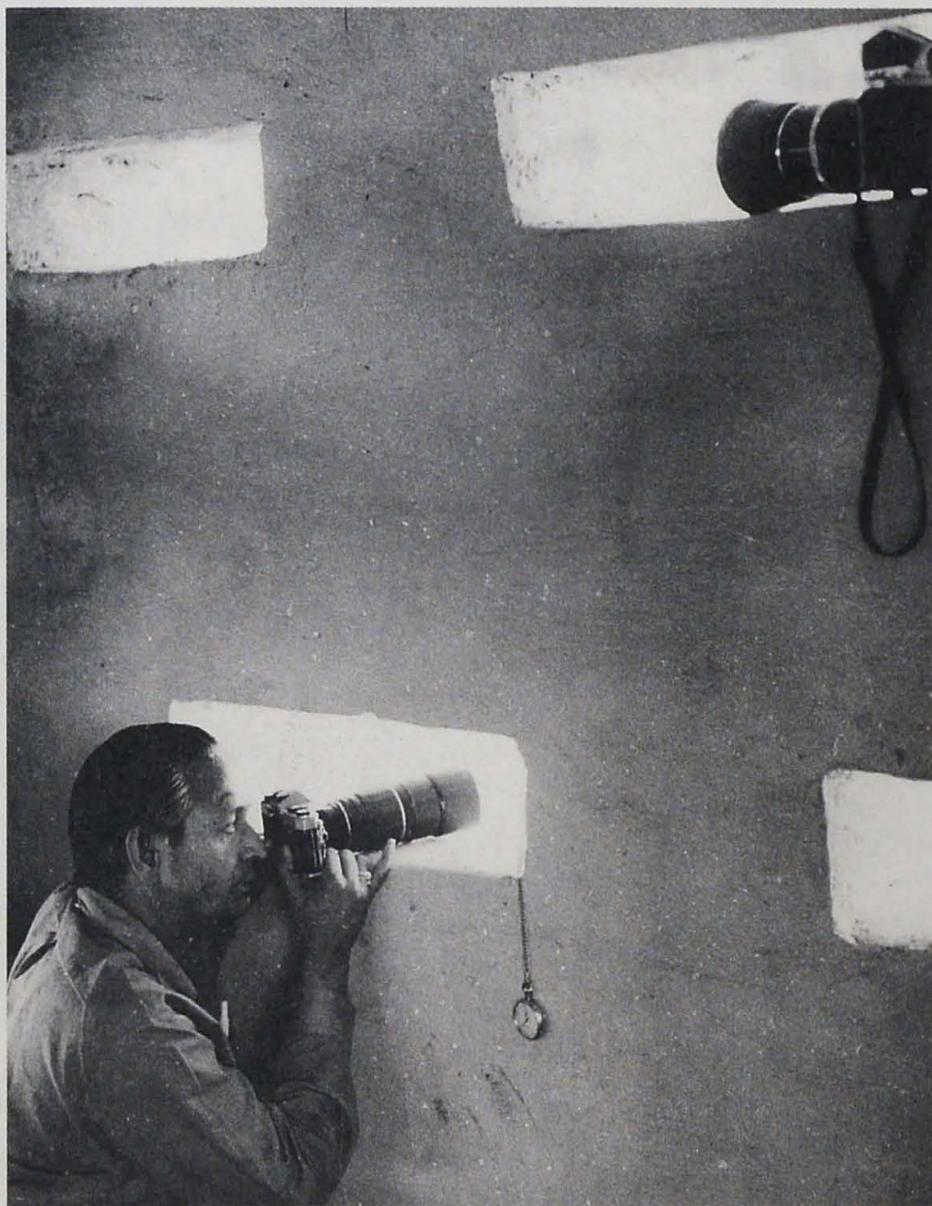


S. Dillon Ripley (left), Dr. Salim Ali (centre)

PRATER, S. H.: Former Curator at the Bombay Natural History Society, S.H. Prater was a keen observer of wildlife. He regularly contributed to the Society's natural history journal. As early as 1933, he presented a paper on the problems of wildlife protection in India, when this issue was still in its nascent stage. His works have been extremely influential and have played an important role in the protection of Silent Valley from the proposed dam in the 1970s, the banning of the export of frogs, and derailing a proposed highway through Mumbai's pristine Sanjay Gandhi National Park. His *Book of Indian Animals*, first printed in 1948 and reprinted several times since, is one of the best volumes on mammals in the country and is still a standard reference.

RIPLEY, S. DILLON: An American, Ripley first visited India when he was 13 years old. During this visit, a walking tour into Ladakh and western Tibet sparked his lifelong fascination for birds of the Indian subcontinent. He served on the board of the World Wildlife Fund in the U.S. for many years and was the third president of the International Council for Bird Preservation. His decades-long collaborative research with Dr. Salim Ali, resulted in the widely acclaimed, 10-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. He also served as secretary of the Smithsonian Institute (1964-84), and his vision and courageous ideas transformed it into a vibrant interactive organisation and one of the greatest museums and centres of learning on Earth.

SANKHALA, KAILASH: It was Kailash Sankhala, a forest officer, who was the driving force behind Project Tiger and one of the first to raise a voice in favour of protecting the tiger, as early as 1956. He had studied the tiger and its habitat extensively under a Jawaharlal Nehru



Kailash Sankhala

Fellowship and this earned him the privilege of being the first Field Director of Project Tiger. Sankhala helped to weld together a team of dedicated officers and garnered the required political support. It was his perseverance and dogged efforts that brought the tiger back from the brink of extinction. He authored several books and essays on India's wildlife including *Tiger! : The Story of the Indian Tiger*. In 1989, he started Tiger Trust, an NGO to enable him to continue to dedicate his life to the cause of the tiger. Today, we could do with a man as committed and unyielding in his endeavours as Sankhala, to provide a new lease of life to the tiger and its endangered home.

SHAHI, S.P.: A *shikari*-turned-passionate-advocate of wildlife conservation, Shahi was extremely emotionally involved with the

forest and its denizens. He played a significant role in pushing the Bihar Government to protect the state's wildlife. As Chief Conservator of Forests, he stood up to politicians and fiercely defended the wild habitats under his care. His studies on the Indian wolf are widely referred to even today, and it was his commitment to these animals that convinced the Bihar Government to protect them. He took up photography at a late stage in his life, but became an accomplished wildlife photographer and his works were published widely. He chronicled his observations in the book *Back to the Wall* and *The Saga of Wildlife in Bihar*, which was published in 1977.

STRACEY, P. D.: As Chief Conservator of Forests, P.D., Stracey worked to put an end to poaching in Kaziranga. As the word 'game' in game sanctuary connoted hunting, he changed the term to wildlife sanctuary. He authored the monumental classic *Elephant Gold*. He was one of the first to list the problems of loss of forest cover, erosion of topsoil and desertification caused by *jhumming* or slash-and-burn agriculture in Northeast India. He was also Honorary Secretary of the Wildlife Preservation Society of India, Dehradun. Following his retirement, he went to Abyssinia to set up the society's wildlife service.

VJAYA, J.: J. Vijaya was India's first woman herpetologist. As assistant to Edward Moll, the Chairman of the World Conservation Union's Freshwater Chelonian Specialist Group, she undertook a nationwide survey of turtles. She wrote about the turtle trade and photographed the olive ridley slaughter on Digha beach in West Bengal and the meat markets of Kolkata, which appeared in *India Today*. This exposé resulted in an immediate reaction from the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who not only came down heavily on the exploitation but also wrote to the Coast Guard to protect sea turtles. Vijaya also studied and documented the forest cane turtle and in 2006, the turtle was officially renamed as *Vijayachelys silvatica* in her honour.

With inputs from Bikram Grewal



J. Vijaya