

Site conservation in India

Title To view the **original PDF of this World Birdwatch article**, [click here](#). Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS, BirdLife in India), one of the largest membership-based conservation NGOs in India, is the oldest organisation in the BirdLife Partnership, having recently celebrated its 125th anniversary. In 1998, BNHS established the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN), in collaboration with BirdLife International and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK). IBCN is a network of NGOs and individuals coordinated by BNHS. It is formally constituted, and until recently had a Project Manager and Assistant, employed by BNHS with funding from the RSPB to coordinate its activities via a network of volunteer State Coordinators. IBCN was created principally to monitor and safeguard Important Bird Areas (IBAs), and to provide local knowledge for the publication of *Important Bird Areas in India*. However, it has developed into something more, aiming to create a unique grassroots mechanism for applying a common approach to site monitoring and undertaking sound conservation action across India. The publication in 2004 of *Important Bird Areas in India: Priority sites for conservation* gave a baseline to improve knowledge of India's birds, especially threatened species. Four hundred and sixty-six IBAs were identified throughout the country. Several State level IBA publications are now in the planning and production stages. IBCN is now one of the leading membership networks in India, with about 700 individual members and 80 member organisations, adding up to more than 2,000 bird enthusiasts. Members are very positive about IBCN. Typical comments include, 'it is the best available network, as it embraces small, local conservation groups like no other network in the country.' Others point out that it provides a way of turning an interest in birdwatching into serious study and conservation work. Members also feel that national and international links with BNHS, with BirdLife International, and with the RSPB in the UK are a great help in their advocacy work for IBAs and species. IBCN members are predominantly male. Most have a university degree; many have a further degree or level of professional training. They are also relatively affluent. Some are engaged in site monitoring and protection, but many have joined to learn more about conservation, through reading IBCN's magazine *Mistnet*. Most are keen to develop skills in conservation, and want training to help them in protecting sites and species locally. For example, Sri Kushal Chandra Boruah is 22 and an IBCN member. He lives near Kaziranga National Park IBA in Assam, and grew up with a keen interest in birds. Abidur Rahman is 29 and also a bird guide. He wants to see more money from the increase in tourism in Assam going to local people, so that they are encouraged to protect species and habitat. He thinks IBCN has the most potential of all conservation groups to make a difference regionally, and sees joining as a 'platform to launch a bird career'. He is hopeful for training from IBCN in the future, and would like to see the provision of community-based optics equipment so that monitoring could be more effective. The member organisations are most often nature groups, which are based in particular areas and engage in work at specific IBAs, or sometimes a network of several IBAs. Many operate as, or coordinate, Site Support Groups (SSGs). Mandar Nature Club (MNC) in Bihar state regularly monitors several IBAs, including Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, Usheshwarsthan, Kawar Lake Wildlife Sanctuary,

Chauras of North Bihar, and Danapur cantonment area. At these sites their activities include raising awareness and promoting an interest in birds, and doing advocacy at state level and with the local police and civil administration. MNC involve local NGOs and communities in their efforts. A recent success was at Kursela River and Diara Flood Plains IBA, where MNC discovered a large colony of Endangered Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius* breeding. This generated a tremendous amount of awareness to protect these birds; as a result the population is increasing, despite the species decreasing elsewhere in the state. Jhanjimukh-Kokilamukh IBA in Assam consists of 350 hectares of natural wetland surrounded by grassland and rice paddies, and is very important for migratory wildfowl. The SSG, Katekee Environment Conservation Forum, is made up of 35 local people whose aims are to raise local awareness about the importance of the site, and to stop hunting of birds, illegal fishing and buffalo grazing. The group is visited every two to three weeks by BNHS's Asif Hazarika, who provides support, encouragement and a link to the wider network. The group works on an entirely voluntary basis, but as elsewhere in Assam they are keen to develop some form of bird tourism, perhaps linking with other sites. The majority of IBAs are surrounded by human habitation. Awareness raising about these IBAs among local communities is crucial for their conservation. There are several good examples of IBCN members conducting successful education programmes. In fact, at the Nature Conservation Society of Nazikh (NCSN) in Maharashtra, the feeling is that in terms of making a difference locally, nothing is really possible without it. When asked about the biggest threat to local bird populations, the head of NCSN, Mr Raha, says: "the killing of birds by catapult." NCSN has paid for and provided education materials to teach local school children more about the birds around them, and the reasons for their decline. They say this is having an effect on the children's behaviour, reducing the incidence of catapult hunting. NCSN has also built an education centre with its own campground, where they bring groups of school children. "Most children will not have heard of an IBA, let alone been to one", says Mr Raha, who is also State Coordinator for IBCN. Over a two-day visit children are taken to visit three IBAs including two wetlands. "The sight of 20,000 wildfowl is something they don't forget. I want to have a hundred thousand children visit the sites and take part in our programme." In a phrase that perfectly describes the goal of IBA Local Conservation Group networks, he adds, "It is important that they learn about the amazing place they live in, so they will take responsibility for it".

Case Study - Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary IBA and the "Nature's care and friend" Site Support Group

This site of almost 4,000 hectares is situated 17 km north of the town of Sibsagar in Assam, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. A swampy flood plain with areas of more open water, it is important for many globally threatened species including Greater and Lesser Adjutants *Leptoptilos dubius* and *L. javanicus*, and Swamp Francolin *Francoelinus gularis*. The SSG "Nature's care and friend" was formed by local people worried by the scale of illegal hunting and fishing at the IBA. Their SSG is currently entirely self-financed, through small financial contributions from villagers and the profits from a small tea concern owned by the group's secretary, Mukunda Hazarika. The group was established nine years ago but has been particularly active for the past three, producing posters and leaflets to educate local villagers about their environment. The group maintains a small building in the village for meetings and education. On top of the environmental side of their work, they also provide health information for local villagers, such as the benefits of breast feeding. Through advocacy and awareness-raising at villages bordering the sanctuary, and by engaging with the people who live there, they have managed to reduce significantly the winter hunting of waders and wildfowl.