



Researcher Kiran Rahalkar checks the camera traps —PANKAJ SEKHSARIA



Veterinarian Anirudh Belsare checks if the animal has a microchip —VIDYA ATHREYA



Pugmarks of a leopard —PANKAJ SEKHSARIA

VIDYA ATHREYA IS THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR WHO IS CARRYING OUT A PROJECT TO STUDY LEOPARDS IN AKOLE TALUKA

Understanding Akole's unusual PHENOMENON

Pankaj Sekhsaria

Vidya Athreya is the principal investigator of the ongoing project to study and understand the presence of leopards and their behaviour in human-dominated agricultural landscapes of western Maharashtra. Akole taluka in Ahmednagar district is the present field site of her project that has been going on for over two years. These are excerpts from an interview discussing various dimensions and challenges of her work.

How did you get interested in studying the leopards of western Maharashtra?

It began in 2003 when we moved to the Giant Meterwave Radio Telescope campus of the National Centre for Radio Astronomy in Narayangaon. My husband, Ramana Athreya is an astronomer. This region was most affected by the leopard human conflict. There were attacks every two weeks.

Many leopards that were captured had not actually attacked humans, but had been sighted or had killed livestock. I was fascinated and keen to understand how these big cats lived in croplands, close to human settlements without

any significant problems.

Your biggest challenges in your research

On the field, it is the large number of people you have to deal with. A lot of time and energy is spent talking to people and explaining what we are doing. I have also been lucky to get support from the forest department, both at the state and the local level. Project supervisors Uhas Karanth and Sukumar have also given me complete freedom in my work. The biggest challenge has been to get the media interested. A leopard living without attacking people is not what many want to write about. They are interested in writing about it when there is a problem. This is perhaps, causing the greatest harm to the conservation of this species.

What are the larger lessons?

There are three important ones:

Significant wildlife exists outside our sanctuaries and national parks (protected areas); we have a very unique situation in India where local people are still extremely tolerant of wildlife in their surroundings and conservation in India is viewed entirely through a protected area lens.

Vidya Athreya

principal investigator of the project

"The toughest part has been leaving behind my eight-year-old daughter to go out into the field. But both she and my husband have been remarkably supportive and I am grateful to them."



Now the conservation community has to start working with the local people. Also their tolerance is diminishing rapidly due to many factors and it would end up being a great loss.

We have no clue that so much wildlife exists outside protected areas and management decisions are generally inappropriate for these non-protected areas or non-forest areas.

Your experience with the local people

I have thoroughly enjoyed my work. The India I knew seems so disconnected from rural India. Yet one can sit in their house, chat about things and have a cup of tea. That has been amazing. The other thing is how politically powerful rural India is compared to urban areas (with the exception of Delhi, perhaps) and how politicians use all kinds of means to get their votes. That has been an eye-opener

Insights from interacting with local people

A lady told me that she had been seeing me coming regularly for my camera trapping work and was interested in the animals and had grown curious about the leopards herself. But, she said, she did feel occasionally scared as she had a little son.

Now, I knew that there was a leopard moving around in the vicinity as I had seen pugmarks just behind her house. I almost could not sleep that night wondering what would happen if the boy was attacked

Your family's reactions

The toughest part has been leaving behind my eight-year-old daughter to go out into the field. But both she and my husband have been remarkably supportive and I am grateful to them. My daughter asked me why leopards do

not attack people who are studying them.

Any particular challenges

The biggest challenges have been from a few male colleagues who appreciate what I am doing, but cannot handle the fact that a woman is doing this, doing it well and alone. That I have to face this in this day and age, although not surprising in our intrinsically conservative male dominated society, rankles.

The response from government agencies

The forest department has been of great help from the beginning. Be it the local staff or the senior officers, they have been very appreciative and have always shown great interest.

Your next step in studying the leopards

One of the biggest tasks before me is to educate farmers, local and state-level media, urban public, managers and policy makers about the complexities. We want to use global positioning system collars on the leopards to see how close they come to humans. We know they have many opportunities to attack, but don't and we want to understand this better.

—Concluded

Thanksgiving week begins at Sadhu Vaswani Mission

Rahul Gadekar

The Thanksgiving week began at the Sadhu Vaswani Mission on Wednesday. Various programmes of *seva* and *satsang* will be organised during the week.

The Thanksgiving week is celebrated every year to thank God for granting the founder of the mission Dada JP Vaswani with good health and strength. The first day started with the chanting of the *maha-mantra* which continued throughout the day by different singers and groups including the Pune Bridge-Builders and ISKCON. A medical camp was also organised at the Budhrani Heart Institute. Children from poor families were given nutritious items in the evening *satsang*. Many devotees took Dada's darshan on the occasion.

SINDHI CONVENTION FROM TODAY

Sadhu Vaswani Mission will hold the second Sindhi convention from February 20 to 22 at the mission. A youth session will be held with Sindhi youth celebri-



SERVICE OF THE NEEDY: Dada JP Vaswani distributing food items to poor children on Wednesday.

ties on Friday at 6 pm. Mohit Lalwani of Indian Idol fame, fashion designer Neeta Lulla, numereologist Shwetta Jumaani and others will participate and will share their experiences with the audience.

"The first Sindhi convention was held last year. This event will help to recreate the identity of every member of the Sindhi community, bringing all together in an unbreakable bond of unity,"

Naresh Singhani, the spokesperson of the mission told *DNA*.

Other programmes which will be held are *satsang*, *tirth yatra*, social service session, business session, Sindhi sangeet and question-answer session with Dada JP Vaswani. Over 500 delegates will participate. Registrations can be done by sending requests to sindhiconvention@sadhuvaswani.org



National architecture convention gets started

DNA Correspondent

The city members of the National Association of Students of Architecture (NASA) began with their annual convention—'Winds of Change: Architecture for Public Good' on February 19 at Balewadi Sports city.

The NASA has about 33,000 registered members from 120 architecture colleges. The convention which will end on February 20 is being attended by the registered members and students from the colleges.

As many as 4,000 architecture students will participate in it. Renowned architects like Uttam Jain, K Jaisim, Yatin Pandya and Shirish Beri will be present.

The event offers a platform for students to interact with their peers from across the country and expose themselves to the upcoming trends. The participants will also have an opportunity to take part in numerous aspects of architecture such as design, documentation, analysis and redesign. Those interested can call 09975999870.

BJP launches signature drive to oppose BRTS

Party workers will form a human chain on Hadapsar-Katraj route on Feb 22

DNA Correspondent

The city unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Tuesday launched a signature campaign demanding rollback of the Hadapsar-Katraj Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS) project in the city. Party workers will form a human chain on February 22 to highlight their opposition to the pilot project.

BJP spokesperson Ujwal Keskar said that the party has set up pandals at six chowks on the BRTS route and collected around 18,000 signatures.

City unit president Girish Bapat, party leaders Yogesh Gogawale, Vishwas Gangurde, Anil Shirole, all BJP corporators and 1,200 workers participated in the campaign.

Keskar said that the party will submit these signatures to municipal commissioner Praveensingh Pardeshi and



EN ROUTE: The BJP organised a demonstration at Swargate against the BRTS on Tuesday. (Inset) A man at the signature campaign that was launched on Tuesday.

convey to him their opposition to the BRTS project. He blamed the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party for introducing the BRTS project in the city.

BJP leaders said that although two years have passed since the launching of the pilot project, the civic body has not been able to successfully

run it on the Hadapsar-Katraj stretch.

The Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) is implementing this project under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM).

The project has been undertaken at an investment of Rs103.13 crore. The JNNURM

has also sanctioned Rs476.62 crore for implementing the BRTS phase I project in the city. Keskar and other leaders blamed the Congress for implementing the project without making a detailed project report. They pointed out that 27 lives have been lost in the last two years due to accidents on this route.

Music fest will open with Little Champs

Five of the TV artistes will perform at the Dagdusheth Halwai Ganpati Mandal music festival on March 27

DNA Correspondent

The Sa Re Ga Ma Little Champs will launch the annual Dagdusheth Halwai Ganpati Mandal music festival which is held between Gudhi Padwa and Ram Navmi every year.

The mandal's president Prataprao Godse said they had already sought permission from officials of the Zee channel. The singers will perform on March 27.

Kartiki Gaikwad, Arya Ambekar, Mugdha Vaishampayan, Prathamesh Laghate and Ro-



hit Raut had taken part in the show on the channel and impressed the audience. Kartiki was declared the winner of the show.

The champs will perform from 7 pm to 10 pm on the opening day. Other artistes, who will perform in this year's festival, include Usha Mangeshkar, Hridaynath Mangeshkar, Shridhar Phadke, Asha Khadilkar, Shahir Vitthal Umap and Vilas Adkar. Jaago Hindusthani troupe from Kolhapur will also perform, he said.



TUNING IN: Kartiki Gaikwad at the felicitation ceremony organised by the Nationalist Congress Party on Wednesday at the Ramkrishna More auditorium in Chinchwad.

Rally to instil patriotism begins

DNA Correspondent

Vishwas Pratishthan and Bharatiya Janata Party will hold the Abhivadan Yatra till February 26 in the city.

The procession will create patriotism among the youth and children. The organisation's president and former MLA Vishwas Gangurde said, "The death anniversaries of Krantiguru Lahuji Vastad Salve, Krantiveer Vasudev Balwant Phadke and Swatantryaveer Savarkar fall in this month. The yatra will commemorate the anniversaries and at the same time inculcate patriotism among youth.

The yatra began at Chinchwad station after garlanding of the statues of Krantiguru

Salve and Krantiveer Phadke. Brihan Maharashtra College of Commerce principal Anirudha Deshpande spoke on the occasion. Phadke's great-grandson, Gopal Phadke, and MLA Digambar Bhagde were also present on the occasion, he said.

The yatra will arrive at Chapekar Memorial on Ganeshkhind Road on Saturday, at Savarkar's memorial on Karve Road on Sunday and at Rani Laxmibai statue near Balgandharva Chowk on Monday, at Krantiveer Lahuji Vastad Talim on Ganj Peth on Tuesday and at Umaji Naik's statue inside the Tehsildar's office on Wednesday, and conclude on Thursday at Savarkar's statue near Sarasbaug.