

currently employed as a result of tourism around the lake.

Source: *BirdLife International News* (2008), http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/01/lake_natron.html

Bitter pill for Kenyan wetland

Plans to reclaim nearly 20,000 ha of the Tana River delta on Kenya's northern coast are causing concern among environmentalists who believe the development will be a national disaster. The Tana River delta covers 130,000 ha in total and is a vital ecosystem for the animals and plants that live there, including several Endangered and Near Threatened species, and for the local people who depend on the fertile land for their livelihoods. The proposal involves using most of the 20,000 ha to grow sugar cane, some of which would be destined for the biofuels market, while other areas would be used for rice farming. An environmental assessment has been carried out but it only considered a 3-month time period, and did not take into account the benefits that would accrue from increased tourism in the area.

Source: *BirdLife International News* (2008), http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/02/tana_delta.html

Geckos benefit from elephants' destructive powers

A new study has found that the population of Kenyan dwarf geckos increases proportionally with the number of trees damaged by elephants as they pass through the African savannah. The effects of elephants on a habitat are often considered to be destructive but for the dwarf geckos the increase in the number of split tree trunks, snapped and fallen limbs, and stripped bark provides them with a wide choice of places to nest and lay their eggs. The relationship between the 7,000 kg elephants and the tiny geckos is a good example of elephants' vital role as ecosystem engineers, although the researchers note that an overabundance of grazers such as elephants can have a negative effect on trees, and can even affect the geckos themselves.

Source: *National Geographic Society News* (2008), <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/02/080201-elephants-geckos.html>



Financial boost for science education and research in India

The 95th Indian science congress, held in January, was the venue for an announce-

ment by India's prime minister of an unprecedented funding package for science. In addition to funding many new universities and institutes, including 30 new Central Universities, there will also be thousands of new polytechnics, vocational schools and skill-development centres. School children will also benefit, with 10,000 scholarships of INR 100,000 per year for 5 years being offered to those who enrol on science degree courses. To fund these schemes, there has been a five fold increase in the education budget for 2007-2012.

Source: *Nature* (2008), 451(7175), 112-113.

Mystery illness affecting India's gharials

Indian researchers are baffled following a large number of deaths among the Critically Endangered gharial population. Sixty-seven of the fish-eating crocodilians died in 1 month at the Chambal River sanctuary, in Madhya Pradesh, with one or two carcasses washing up on the river banks every day. Post-mortems have indicated that the gharials died from an as yet unidentified illness, although there are reports that the deaths were caused by cirrhosis of the liver, leading to speculation that there may be toxins in the water. Gharials are distinctive crocodiles, with long snouts for eating fish, and can grow up to 6 m in length. A team of international veterinarians is travelling to India to help in the identification of the disease that could decimate the gharial population, which numbers c. 1,500 individuals.

Source: *BBC News* (2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7171866.stm

Good news at last for vultures

Measures taken to reduce and replace the drug diclofenac to halt the dramatic decline in vultures are proving successful in Nawalparasi District, Nepal, with evidence that the number of white-rumped and slender-billed vulture nests in the area has doubled in the last 2 years. Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) is working alongside a number of other NGOs, as well as government agencies, vets and local communities to try and halt the decline through a number of means, including a country-wide conservation-awareness campaign and the creation of a locally-managed vulture restaurant. In addition, BCN has replaced USD 8,000 worth of diclofenac with the safe alternative meloxicam in 10 western districts, including Nawalparasi. Although the overall situation for vultures in South Asia is far from secure, Nepal's experience shows that it is possible to effect positive change.

Source: *BirdLife International News* (2008), http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/01/nepal_vultures.html

Future of elephant corridor secured

A strip of land connecting two reserves in Karnataka, southern India, has been handed over to forest officials by the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Wildlife Trust of India. This is the first time that land bought by wildlife charities has been handed over to the government to protect elephants. An MOU has been signed between the parties involved, and in return for the title deeds to the land, the Forest Department is charged with maintaining the Edayargalli-Doddasampige corridor as a safe passage for elephants. The 10 ha corridor is 0.5 km wide and 2 km long, and links two forested areas that would otherwise be cut off from one another by agricultural land. There are 88 elephant corridors in India, serving an elephant population of an estimated 25,000.

Source: *Wildlife Trust of India press release* (2007), http://www.wildlifetrustofindia.org/html/news/2007/071220_elephant-corridor.htm

New subspecies of bird found in Nepal

First spotted in 2005, the Nepal rufous-vented prinia has recently been recognized as a new subspecies, providing a geographical link between a prinia subspecies found in Pakistan's Indus river basin and another subspecies occurring in the Brahmaputra of north-east India. The Nepal rufous-vented prinia has a long tail and slender beak, and its colouration is intermediate between the chestnut colour of the Pakistani subspecies and the grey colour of the Indian subspecies. This discovery brings the number of bird species seen in Nepal to 862 but researchers warn that the new subspecies is threatened by loss and degradation of its wetland habitat, with a maximum of only 500 individuals in existence.

Source: *BBC News* (2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7227696.stm

Assam government seeks investigation into rhino deaths

The death of a fourth Indian greater one-horned rhino in Kaziranga National Park in just over 1 month has prompted the Assam government to ask the Central Bureau of Investigation to examine the recent dramatic increase in poaching incidents. In 2007, 20 rhinos were killed in the Park, the first time that the number of deaths has reached double figures for 10 years. More than half the world's 2,700 greater one-horned rhino live in the Park,

making them a tempting target for poachers. Such is the demand for rhino horn, used in traditional medicine, and as an ornamental dagger handle in the Middle East, especially in Yemen (see *Oryx*, 41, 431), that it commands prices of USD 38,000 per kg. *Source: News Post India* (5 February 2008), <http://newspostindia.com/report-35312>

Spoon-billed sandpipers found wintering in Myanmar

Satellite maps, historical records, and previous surveys led researchers to investigate parts of the Bay of Bengal and the Martaban (Mottama) Bay in an attempt to locate wintering Endangered spoon-billed sandpipers. Their efforts were rewarded with the discovery of 48 sandpipers, including a juvenile ringed at the sandpipers' breeding grounds in Chukotka, Siberia. Numbers of spoon-billed sandpipers have fallen dramatically in the last few years, with the population now numbering only 200-300 breeding pairs. The discovery of the over-wintering birds underlines the importance of the mudflats along the Arakan coast, which, apart from some small scale prawn farming, are largely intact and are home to tens of thousands of arctic waders, as well as supporting many local livelihoods.

Source: BirdLife International News (2008), http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/02/sbs_myanmar.html

Indian tiger count called into question

A state in eastern India is disputing the results of a tiger population census carried out by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (see also pp. 173-174). The Authority's census indicated that Orissa has between 37 and 53 of the 1,411 tigers remaining in India but authorities are claiming that a local count in 2005 showed that the state contained 192 tigers. There is particular disagreement about the number of tigers counted in Similipal Tiger Reserve, with the most recent count putting the number at 20, while the 2005 local count found 101 tigers in the Reserve. India's tiger population, estimated to number 10,000 a century ago, has been decimated by poaching and the effects of urbanization.

Source: BBC News (2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7246121.stm

Sumatran tiger parts still widely available in retail outlets

A follow-up study to a survey carried out in Sumatra in 1999-2002 found that little action has been taken against retail outlets

selling tiger parts, despite the authorities having been given the requisite information after the last survey. The new survey investigated tiger trade in 28 Sumatran cities and towns, and found that eight had tiger parts for sale, with 10% of all retail units surveyed selling tiger parts. An estimate of the number of tigers killed to provide the parts being sold, based on the number of canines found, is 23 individuals. This figure is lower than the 52 individuals calculated to have been killed in the last survey but there are fears that the lower number indicates that there are simply fewer tigers left in the wild.

Source: TRAFFIC (2008), <http://www.traffic.org/home/2008/2/13/tiger-tiger-future-not-so-bright.html>

EAST ASIA

Volunteers and soldiers join battle against oil slick

The worst oil spill in South Korea, declared a disaster by the South Korean government, is threatening to wreck havoc in Cheonsu Bay, used by thousands of birds for over-wintering and as a stopover during migration. Ten thousand tons of crude oil were spilt in the disaster, which occurred after an oil tanker was hit by an industrial barge that had broken free of its towing lines. The oil slick at sea was reported to extend c. 130 km south of the spill centre, and beaches were covered in a thick layer of oil, leading to fears for livelihoods of local people, and the long-term future of the area's ecology.

Source: BirdLife International News (2007), http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2007/12/korean_oil_spill.html and *BBC News* (2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7134967.stm>

Humpbacks safe for now

Following negotiations with the chairman of the International Whaling Commission, Japan has agreed not to carry out its proposed hunt of 50 humpback whales in the Antarctic. Japanese officials have agreed to postpone their humpback harvest until after the next annual meeting of the IWC at the earliest, although they are continuing with their so-called scientific whaling programme, which will see the capture of up to 50 fin whales and 935 minke whales. This decision has been met with relief by many, and has been seen as an indication that Japan is serious about working to preserve the IWC.

Source: NOAA press release (2008), http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2007/20071221_humpback.html

Crustaceans develop a taste for island

Tiny crustaceans that inhabit the small island of Hoboro in southern Japan are eroding themselves out of house and home. Rises in ocean temperatures around the island have led to high densities of the crustaceans' food, plankton, around Hoboro, with the result that there are now millions of the tiny animals on the island. Known locally as *nanatsuba-kotsubunushi*, the crustaceans make nesting holes in the rocks of the island, thus making it weaker and more vulnerable to weathering and erosion. The island is made of soft rock called tuff, which consists of compacted volcanic ash, making it an ideal nesting substrate for the crustaceans. Researchers have estimated that at the current rate of erosion, the island may disappear within a century.

Source: National Geographic News (2008), <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/01/080103-bug-island.html>

NORTH AMERICA

US jaguars do not justify formal recovery plan

The US Fish and Wildlife Service have decided not to use the framework of the Endangered Species Act to try to save jaguars from extinction in the USA. Jaguars used to range throughout the southern states but no longer occur here, apart from the occasional sighting of males in New Mexico and Arizona. These roaming individuals are not enough to warrant the creation of a formal recovery programme, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which instead intends to concentrate efforts on countries south of the border where the jaguar still occurs. Environmentalists have accused the US Fish and Wildlife Service of abandoning the jaguar.

Source: Nature (2008), 451(7177), 386.

Whooping cranes break migration record

Record numbers of America's tallest bird, which numbered only 56 individuals in 1970, made the return journey from their summer breeding grounds in Canada to their overwintering grounds in Texas. Habitat management and strict protection of the whooping cranes has seen their population rise to 73 pairs in 2007, and a record number of at least 257 individuals were counted at the Costal Bend of Texas in the winter of 2007. The cranes that migrate between Canada and Texas are the only self-sustaining population of whooping cranes in the world, and they appear to be