PIT STOP

Quarterly Newsletter of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust

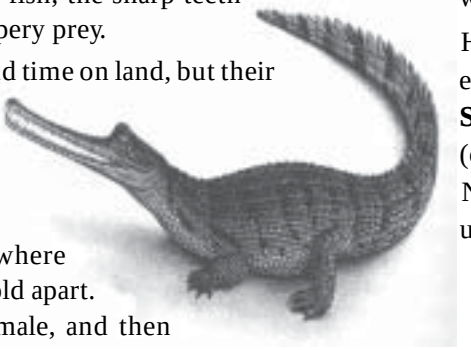
July–September 2004

Gharials *Gavialis gangeticus*

Gharials are fish-eating crocodiles, found exclusively in the Indian subcontinent. They inhabit the large rivers of northern and eastern India—Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra and Mahanadi. They can also be found in the rivers of Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Gharials are large, even for crocodiles (they're the second largest species among crocodilians)—a large male can reach more than 7 metres, and a female can grow to more than 4 metres. Compare this with the average human Indian male who measures 1.6 metres!

The outstanding feature of these crocs is their long slender snout, with extremely sharp inter-locking teeth. Those sharp teeth have a special purpose. Since gharials live entirely on a diet of fish, the sharp teeth are particularly useful to grip their slippery prey.



Gharials are water babies—they do spend time on land, but their legs are weak (compared to other crocodiles) and they are slow and easily tired when they have to belly-slide on land.

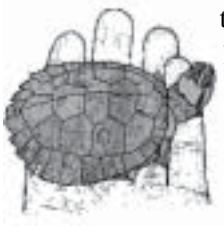
Gharials are among the few species where adult males and females can be easily told apart. (Try telling a female mugger from a male, and then you'll know!) A distinctive fleshy knob or *ghara* grows on the tip of the adult male's snout. The *ghara* is absent in females. *Ghara* in Hindi is the round earthen pot used to fill water. The name *gharial* originates from this word.

There are three sub-families in the family of crocodiles: 1. crocodiles, 2. alligators and caimans, and 3. the gharial. Gharials are the only species in their sub-family. There is a similar looking crocodile found in Malaysia (scientific name *Tomistoma schlegelli*)—but it isn't exactly like a gharial. That's why its common name is… false gharial! Come and check out the false gharial at the Croc Bank, Pit Number 18, and tell the difference between the two species.

Animal Traffic at the Croc Bank

This April, the stork paid a visit to the Croc Bank, lugging nineteen very special hatchlings. The *Kachuga kachuga* or painted roof turtles (a critically endangered species) that live in the 'temple tank' surprised the Croc Bank staff with their little ones. This is the first time these turtles have bred successfully in captivity (in India), making it a very significant event.

The Croc Bank has, for many years, been involved in the research and breeding of turtles in captivity. It has recently developed a project that involves captive breeding of 17 species of critically endangered Indian freshwater turtles and tortoises, in collaboration with the U.P. and M.P. Forest Departments. The project aims at assessing the current population of the endangered turtle species, getting hold of other specimens to breed them for restocking programs, planning habitat protection and management—all of which may prove crucial to the survival of these turtles.



Message in a Bottle

The Croc Bank runs an important research base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, called ANET (The Andaman and Nicobar Environmental Team). Researchers from various parts of the world use the facilities of this base to study animals and plants in these environmentally rich islands. The islands, for those who are unaware, are located in the Bay of Bengal, to the east of India. About 306 islands and 266 rocks form the archipelago, of which only 38 islands are inhabited.

How much do most of us know of these emerald green islands? To this purpose, **Pit Stop** is going to feature a regular column (called *Message in a Bottle*) on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, its original people, and its unique flora and fauna. Watch this space.

The *Croc Bank Newsletter* has had a huge facelift: for starters, we're now calling it **PIT STOP** (you'll know what that means if you're a visitor to the Bank). And, we've added quite a few new features. It's also now a quarterly – in a new size – and with a separate Tamil version. Do let us know what you think of the new look. Write to us at mcbtindia@vsnl.net (sub: pit stop mail). We'll reply!

—Eds.

"Well of course I did it in cold blood! I'm a reptile."

from 'The Far Side' by *Gary Larson*

NEWS

Turtle Rescued from Debris of Demolished Structures

A turtle, trapped in the debris of demolished structures, was rescued by a youth at Besantnagar. It was later handed over to wildlife officials.

P. Raja, an Exnora lifeguard at Elliot's Beach, was returning to his house in the nearby Odaikuppam fishing village, at around 1.00 p.m. He saw the turtle in the debris dump built on vacant land near the skating rink.

He tried to release the turtle into the sea. However, instead of swimming, the turtle crawled slowly. Unsure what to do, he carried the turtle to the lifeguards' tent at the beach.

The reptile was later identified as the endangered southern flapshelled turtle. It is found in ponds and tanks with muddy floors, and embankments. It is not a marine turtle, and therefore it floundered in the sea. Dr. K. Venkatraman (Office-in-Charge, Marine Biological Station, Zoological Survey of India, Chennai) said that this species is listed under Schedule I of the International Union for Conservation of Natural Flora and Fauna. No data was available on the population of this species, he added.

[from THE HINDU, 18 February 2004]

If you want to know what to do when you find a reptile in your neighbourhood, write to the Croc Bank (mcbtindia@vsnl.net) or contact the Wildlife Warden's office (Phone: 24 32 1471).

Mongoose Fur: Prime Target for Poachers

Are mongooses in villages being killed for their fur? Wildlife officials recently seized painting brushes with mongoose-hair bristles. Following a tip-off, state wildlife officials conducted a surprise raid on a few shops in Park Town. They seized about a thousand brushes of various sizes. Three persons were arrested.

Investigations revealed that poaching of these small mammals has increased of late. The fur collected from a single mongoose can be used to make over a hundred paintbrushes. The animals are captured using snares or metal cages and are then killed.

Mongooses play an important role in controlling rats and mice, which damage crops and are considered pests by farmers. P. Subramanyam, Deputy Director of Wildlife (Southern Region), says that poaching of this animal, and dealing in articles made from its body parts, is punishable by law—with imprisonment upto seven years and a fine of upto Rs. 25,000.

Instead of using brushes made from mongoose-hair bristles, children and professional artists should ask for painting brushes with synthetic bristles, which are available in the market. Brushes are also available made of pig-, goat- and horse-hair—these do not require the animal to be killed.

Thieves Return 'Mister Cranky Pants'

13 April 2004, Sydney, Australia. Would you upset an alligator named Mister Cranky Pants? Some thieves chanced it, but apparently soon regretted it. The four-year-old alligator was stolen during the weekend, from a reptile park north of Sydney. On Monday however, the thieves let him go—they probably underestimated his moodiness. The animal was later recovered in a nearby creek.

A zoo official puts it this way, "Mister Cranky Pants is a real cranky pants. He gets moody. The thieves probably realized they were messing with the wrong alligator and quickly dumped him." Mister Cranky Pants now needs a quick medical check before he gets back to his 'gator family. But, how's Cranky doing? The official said, "You can tell if alligators are stressed or not stressed by their eyes. He looks glad to be back."

Did You Know?

What is an egg tooth?

Imagine being trapped in an egg—and waiting to get out. You could so with a little help in a situation like that, right? The egg tooth is Nature's version of a chisel, used by all little hatching reptiles and birds to break their way into the world.

The egg tooth usually grows on the snout of embryo reptiles and on the bill of embryo birds. The hatchling uses it to cut open the hard egg shell, and then conveniently sheds it a few days after hatching.

The tooth is also known as the egg caruncle. It is visible even in live-bearing lizards and snakes. It isn't required here; therefore it is smaller, but not completely absent.

Why do snakes shed their skin?

A snake's skin has two layers. The inner layer contains the blood vessels, nerve endings, glands and connective tissues. The outer layer is a protective covering, shielding the snake's body with its rows of overlapping scales.

Slithering through rough and stony ground, a snake's skin is exposed to scrapes, cuts and bites. Not surprisingly, the outer layer wears out and needs to be replaced periodically.

The number of times a snake sheds its skin depends on various factors—particularly how well-fed the snake is (which is relative to how much it grows), and what damage the skin has experienced. The shedding-cycle varies for different snakes; in fact the cycle varies even within the life term of an individual snake. The technical term for this process is 'ecdysis'.