

## 30 Years of Conservation through Birds

### Hatching.....

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 1976 four bird enthusiasts, namely Messer's G.P.B. Karunaratne, S.U.K. Ekaratna, S.W. Kotagama and R. I. de Silva gathered at the Fife road residence of Mr. R.I. de Silva to discuss how the concept of bird watching can be carried to bird enthusiasts among the general public, an area which was previously limited to a niche group. This happened to be the maiden meeting of the Field Ornithology Group. On that day they also chose a logo for the organization in the form of the Red-faced Malkoha, an endemic species mostly confined to the pristine rainforests of Sri Lanka. Further, the main objectives of the society were set out as follows:

- \* Bring together people who are interested in the study and conservation of birds in Sri Lanka
- \* Generate interest among laymen and students of natural history on the study and conservation of birds
- \* Institute, direct and carry out island wide programmes of field study, on various aspects of bird biology
- \* Establish links with other groups in other parts of the world with similar interest

It was further decided that FOG should be based in the University of Colombo. In October 1977 a request was made to the Faculty of Science in this respect and the Faculty of Science has approved FOG as a part of the Department of Zoology. In January 1978 the senate of the University of Colombo formally approved this decision. FOGSL has maintained a healthy symbiosis with the University of Colombo for the past 30 years where both institutions have benefited immensely. To further strengthen this bond FOGSL in year 2001 established two Gold medals for distinguished students in Ornithology, the P.B. Karunaratna Memorial Gold Medal for Ornithology and the Field Ornithology Group Gold Medal for Ornithology.

### The brood....

Mr G.P.B. Karunaratne, a renowned naturalist was chosen as first President of the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (FOGSL). Mr S.W. Kotagama was appointed the Secretary/ Treasurer and Messer's G.P.B. Karunaratne,

S.U.K. Ekaratna, S.W. Kotagama, R. I. de Silva, G.L. de Silva, L.B. Ranasinghe and L.H. Jayawickrama were named the founder members of the group. Subsequently, Prof. George M. Dunnet of the Aberdeen University, Scotland, a well-known conservation biologist was appointed the Scientific Advisor of the society.

In keeping with the main objective of bringing together people from all walks of life who share a common interest, that is conservation of birds, membership was kept open. The only qualification one required to join was an interest in birds. Encouraging a greater number of bird lovers, FOGSL welcomed them with the lowest membership fee for a society of this caliber. The membership fee is kept at a nominal rate in principle even to this day, to make it affordable to all. Voluntarism has been and will continue to be the main contributing factor to the success of this society.

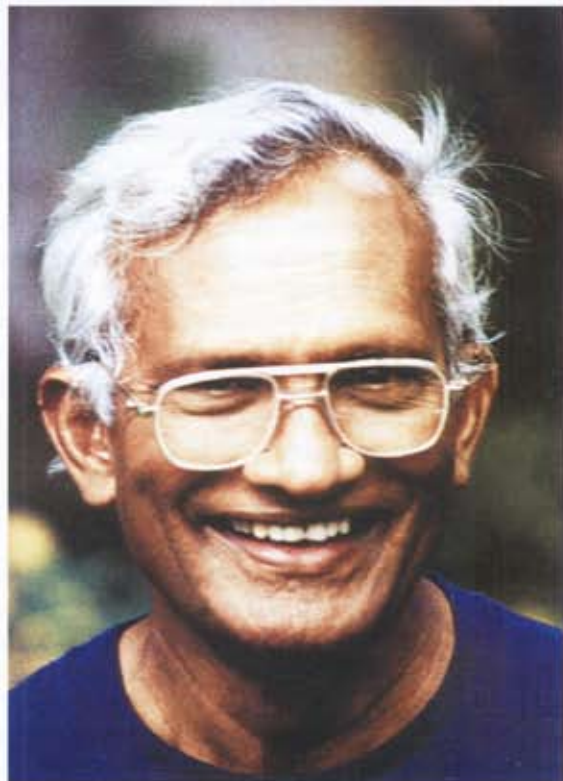


Plate 1: Late Mr. P.B. Karunaratna, first president of the FOGSL

The current membership consists of bird enthusiasts from different walks of life who volunteer their services under the guidance of a committee. The committee members, in turn, consist of a group of volunteers with varied skills.

On 19th October 1997 the first branch of FOGSL was established in Galle, Sri Lanka. In order to support a wide-ranging membership both here and abroad FOGSL entered cyber space in 2003 with the launch of the FOGSL e-group and website ([www.fogsrilanka.org](http://www.fogsrilanka.org)).



**Plate 2: FOG Kids; young naturalists learning from a foreign Intern student**

Over the years the junior members of the FOGSL have shown a steady growth. Therefore the FOG Kids programme was launched two years ago to cater to the junior membership of the FOGSL. This programme offers youngsters a wonderful opportunity to learn about birds and their conservation with lots of fun-filled activities. Learning with outdoor activities in different field locations provides hands-on experience in the field.

### Together for birds and people...

Towards achieving its objective of bringing together persons interested in birds and generate interest in the study and conservation of birds, FOGSL has instituted number of activities. Some of the key activities are as follows;

A number of programmes are organized for the members, thus creating an awareness of our feathered friends. The Sinhala lecture series conducted by FOGSL spreads the message of conservation of birds to a larg-



**Plate 3: Members gathered at a monthly meeting**

er cross section of the student population in Sri Lanka. On the last Saturday of the every month general meetings are organized for members, with special talks, slide shows, video shows or film shows, to improve their knowledge of birds and their conservation. A lecture series on ornithology takes place before each general meeting to provide members a more advanced and scientific guidance to the study of birds.

Field trips of 01 - 04 days to various locations for bird watching are planned to encourage the members to identify and study birds, in-situ. Three major field workshops of 03 - 05 days are organized annually. The Wader Study Workshop at Bundala, the Workshop on Field Study Techniques including Bird Ringing at Buttala and the



**Plate 4: Watching birds at Sinharaja during the members' field trip**

Workshop on Mixed Species Flock Studies in Sinharaja World Heritage Site are conducted with the aim of improving scientific and practical knowledge on the different aspects of birds.

The "Bird Watchers' Conference" is organized occasionally to share experiences and records of members among themselves. The Ornithological Research Seminar (ORS) is organized annually to share the results of research, conducted by FOGSL researchers, among members. These events are especially meant to improve the information available on birds, since many species are inadequately studied.

The annual exhibition on bird conservation is organized in memory of FOGSL's first president, the late Mr. G.P.B. Karunaratne. A vast amount of up-to-date details on threatened birds, their habitats, natural history of birds, conservation issues regarding birds, and birds of Sri Lanka, together with aspects of ecotourism, are disseminated through this exhibition. In conjunction with the exhibition a photographic competition named 'Together for Birds and People' is also held annually to encourage amateur photographers to enjoy the pleasures of photography without disturbing birdlife and its habitat. This again helps to enhance the awareness among members and the general public.

Keeping abreast with international events, FOGSL members participate in the International Dawn Chorus Day, World Bird Watch and World Bird.

FOGSL also conducts many programs to create awareness among future naturalists and conservationists (especially school children) under the theme



**Plate 5: Preparing to plant a tree. School's Analog Forestry Programme in Southern Province**



**Plate 6: FOGSL's Environment Education Programme; probably the longest running such programme in Sri Lanka**

'Conservation Through Birds' at the Mahapola Education and Trade Exhibition organized by the Mahapola Graduate' Foundation and held in schools island wide, in an attempt to reach a broader target group. Further, FOGSL has launched a programme titled '2000 school clubs by 2000' to establish a network of 2000 school bird organizations by the year 2000. This programme gave birth to many conservation conscious young naturalists all over the island.

FOGSL also conducts an environmental education programme to disseminate knowledge on environment science among school children. FOGSL has been continuing this program in ten schools for the past 15 years. This was recently extended up to thirty-five schools with the sponsorship of Loadstar (Pvt) Ltd. FOGSL has also established and maintains Medicinal Gardens (Osu Uyan) attached to these schools, again with the financial support from Loadstar (Pvt) Ltd.

The "Walk for Wetlands" program was launched in collaboration with The Overseas School of Colombo to raise funds for the conservation of wetlands. This led to the conservation of the Talangama Tank, which is one of the best wetlands remaining in the Colombo Metropolitan area. The program resulted in a series of publications and many activities to create awareness on wetland conservation, which eventually lead to bird conservation.

In 2005 FOGSL initiated a School Analog Forest Establishment Program with five schools adjacent to

lowland rainforests in Galle and Matara districts with the objective of establishing forest patches near school premises and to improve the tree cover in the school garden, while creating nature awareness among the children as well as their parents. The programme's success led it to receiving more funds for its continuation this year as well.

FOGSL also conducts an annual workshop at the Sinharaja World Heritage Site for the students of different areas of study in the University of Moratuwa in collaboration with World University Service Moratuwa (WUSM) which provides nature education to these students. The programme has been offered over the past 19 years and has generated a great deal of enthusiasm among the students of University of Moratuwa.

Over the past two decades FOGSL has also made a tremendous effort to create awareness about birds among the general public through publication of books. The first publication of FOGSL 'A Systematic Nomenclature for the Birds of Sri Lanka', authored by D.G.A. Perera and S.W. Kotagama was launched in 1983. This was published in association with Thisara Publishers and was written in both English and Sinhala languages. Through this publication, FOGSL introduced a scientific system for the nomenclature of birds for the first time in Sri Lanka.

After G.M. Henry published his field guide to Birds of Sri Lanka in 1955, no complete publication on birds was introduced. This has created a big vacuum for a updated field guide, even though Henry's book was reprinted in 1971. Realizing the demand by bird watchers for an up to date and affordable field guide to birds of Sri Lanka, FOGSL published its first Field Guide in the English language in 1994. It was authored by Prof. S.W. Kotagama, and Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando.

Recognizing the need for publications in the vernacular, FOGSL published a number of books on the subject of ornithology in Sinhala. "Sri Lankawe Kurullan Handunaganimu" (Let's Identify Birds of Sri Lanka) and "Kurulu Lowata Pivisuma" (Entry to the World of Birds) generated an interest among laymen and assisted in encouraging Sinhala readers to birding. However, Realizing the need for a Sinhala field guide to meet FOGSL's objective in popularizing bird watching in Sri Lanka, a complete Sinhala language Field Guide was produced in 1998. It was the first ever field guide published in Sinhala language. There was a huge demand for the book proving the success of the methodologies practiced by FOGSL in popularizing bird watching. Prof.

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**Plate 7: First ever publication of a complete field guide to the birds in Sinhala language**

Kotagama and Athula Wijayasinghe authored this book, while illustrations were done by renowned artist-scientist Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando. This was the first ever publication of a complete field guide to birds in Sinhala and probably recorded the highest circulation in the field of natural history in Sri Lanka where 15,000 copies were sold or distributed to every corner of the island. 'Siri Laka Kurullo' is a tribute to all Sinhala speaking bird lovers, giving them an opportunity to enter and enjoy the enchanting world of birds. In order to enhance understanding among school children, FOGSL distributed free copies of 'Siri Laka Kurullo' to libraries in schools of eight provinces including the Eastern province.

Recently FOGSL also initiated a pocket guide series to provide low cost and easy-to-use material on common birds, waders and mammals. In addition, a number of checklists on important birding sites were

produced. Further, many booklets were produced on various titles such as 'Why Birds?', 'What is that Bird?', 'Ecology of Waders', 'Bird Counts', 'Bird Study Methods', 'Birds Flocks at Sinharaja', 'Bird Behaviour Study Techniques,' 'Eco Tourism', etc. to provide information to general public on birds and bird study methods.

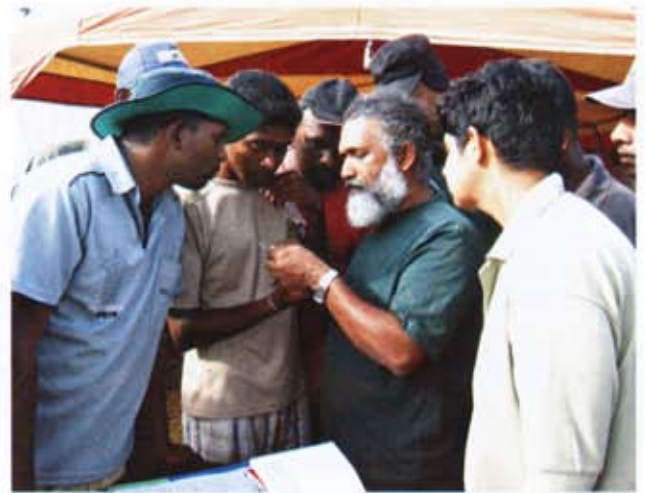
To keep membership updated of events and conservation issues regarding birds FOGSL publishes a quarterly bulletins in both English and Sinhala languages named 'Malkoha' and 'Kedetta' respectively and they are distributed free of charge to all members. FOGSL also publishes an occasional journal 'Blue Magpie' to disseminate its research findings to its members and general public. The Sinhala news letter 'Ualena' is specially published by FOGSL to create an awareness on biodiversity conservation among school children.

A series of posters was also produced to provide information on various groups of birds such as endemic birds, wetland birds, threatened birds and raptors. yet are the series was produced to create awareness on wetlands, important bird areas and the conservation of flagship species such as Sri Lanka Blue Magpie.

The special feature of all these publications is that they are very reasonably priced making them affordable compared to other publications available in the market, thus making them available to the general public. A detailed list of FOGSL publications appear in the last page of this magazine and can be purchased from the FOGSL office.

### Flying High. . . .

In keeping with its third objective of instituting, directing and carrying out Island wide programmes of field



**Plate 8: Gaining experience on bird handling, Training workshop on bird ringing at Bundala**

study, on various aspects of bird biology, FOGSL has passed many milestones over the past thirty years.

In 1981, FOGSL started research studies in the Sinharaja Forest Reserve on a number of aspects of birds. One of the main areas of research was the study on mixed species feeding flocks which still continues. This is probably the longest study in this aspect in the world. Since then, many research programmes including single species studies were conducted by FOGSL.

FOGSL has also initiated single species studies during the last decade. Two study programmes have been conducted so far where the biology and ecology of two endemic species, the globally threatened Sri Lanka Blue Magpie and near threatened Sri Lanka Spot winged Thrush were studied. A vast amount of information was



**Plate 9: Camping facilities developed at Buttala OFSMC**

gathered through these study programmes which will benefit the future conservation efforts of these two species.

FOGSL has been conducting bird ringing programs since its establishment with the help of many international collaborators. In 2005 FOGSL launched the National Bird Ringing Programme with the collaboration of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC). At present FOGSL is nominated by the Department of Wildlife Conservation as the only organisation permitted to conduct bird ringing in Sri Lanka. At present FOGSL is Planning to link up the National Bird Ringing Programme with the Central Asian Flyway network.

FOGSL has been nominated the implementing agency of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program of Sri Lanka. This is a programme, which identifies priority sites for conservation in the country. The project is carried out in two phases. Phase I was inaugurated in 2000 to identify and list the Important Bird Areas that resulted in the Preliminary Site Directory. Phase II commenced in 2004 to survey the preliminary sites in detail and develop conservation actions to ensure their protection. As a result of this IBA programme, five Ornithological Field Study and Monitoring Centers (OFSMC) in five different regions of the island are to be established to cover different types of habitats. Of these, one in Buttala and the other in Sinharaja have already been established.

In 1997, members of the FOGSL carried out a research expedition in the Delwala Forest Reserve in collaboration with a team of students from the Cambridge University. Further, FOGSL conducted number of short-term studies including biodiversity surveys in important



Plate 10: FOGSL hosted 6th BirdLife Asia Council Meeting in year 2000 at Ranwell Holiday Resort

locations during the past thirty years.

The study of wetland birds and their habitat is the other major area of research carried out the recent past. These studies were conducted in a number of areas such as Annavilundawa Sanctuary, Bundala National Park and Yala East National Park. These studies have mainly focused on bird species such as Spot Billed Pelican (vulnerable), Painted Stork (near threatened), Pheasant Tailed Jacana and Purple Swamphen.

### Spreading the Wings..

In 1977, Dr. Salim Ali, an eminent ornithologist was invited to Sri Lanka as FOGSL established it's link with the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), the largest and the most prominent institute for natural history in the region. This bond enabled FOGSL to conduct many training sessions, including bird ringing, for it's members.



Plate 11: Delegates who participated at the 1st meeting of the BirdLife International in 1994 at Roseinhiem, Germany. FOGSL represented Sri Lanka at this event.

Later when the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and natural History (SACON) was established, FOGSL was able to forge a strong link with it as well, especially with respect to sharing research information and providing training to young ornithologists in Sri Lanka.

In 1981 the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) Asia conference was held in Kandy. This was organised by ICBP Sri Lanka, a collective body of a number of local nature organizations including FOGSL. When the ICBP was re-formed as BirdLife International in 1994, it recognized FOGSL's active participation in conservation. Dr. S.W. Kotagama was elected Technical Advisor for Asian Relations. The launching of the Asian Red Data Book (ARDB) program and data compilation commenced in 1995. FOGSL was Sri Lanka's counterpart in this program and was a step ahead compared to the other countries in the region. Recognizing FOGSL's capacity by its role in the ARDB-Threatened Birds -Sri Lanka component in data collection and compilation, FOGSL was given the status of "National Affiliate" followed by 'country representative' of BirdLife International.



**Plate 13: Launching of the IBA Phase II: Hon. Minister A.H.M. Fowzie (Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources) unveiling the IBA logo.**



**Plate 12: FOGSL has sent a delegation to 'Bird Watching Fair' in Taiwan, which is an annual event for bird watchers in the oriental region**

Apart from its links with India, FOGSL was able to make strong links with other ornithological societies of Asia, especially the Wild Bird Society of Japan, and Wild Bird federation of Taiwan. On many occasions FOGSL has worked with these organizations on issues of common interest such as conservation of migratory birds and development of bird tourism in the region.

When the first ever Pan Asian Ornithological Congress (PASOC) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> BirdLife Asia Council meeting were held from 09 - 16 November 1996, in Coimbatore, India with the participation of over 300 delegates from over 17 countries, the Sri Lankan delegation of 13 FOGSL members, headed by Dr. S.W. Kotagama, was the largest participating foreign delegation. The Sri Lankan delegates presented seven research papers in six sessions of PASOC. At the end of the congress Dr. S.W. Kotagama was elected Secretary General of PASOC, for the next four years. In 1999 FOGSL managed to send a large delegation to the World Bird Conference as well. One of the greatest achievements of FOGSL at regional level came in year 2000 when it was put in charge of organizing the 02nd Pan Asian Ornithological Congress (PASOC 2000) and 6th BirdLife Asia council meeting in Sri Lanka.

At national level, FOGSL has forged many links with a number of Sri Lankan organizations interested in conservation of birds. FOGSL established a link with the Mahapola Graduate foundation in 1995. Through this link

FOGSL was able to reach out to the general public, focusing mainly on school children using the Mahapola exhibition as a platform.

In 1997, FOGSL introduced the 'Bird Friendly Hotels' concept to the hospitality industry which is responsible for generating a major part of Sri Lanka's foreign revenue. This programme provides relevant training to hotel staff and technical assistance to develop an environment friendly atmosphere. The concept was first accepted by Hotel Sigiriya, which was developed into a bird friendly facility. FOGSL provided the technical support necessary for the development of a comprehensive interpretation scheme and training of nature interpreters. Later many other hotels have requested technical support from FOGSL to convert their facility in a manner favorable for bird based tourism.

When Sri Lanka was devastated by the Tsunami in December 2004, FOGSL played a major role in re-establishing the natural habitats and community life in Tsunami struck areas like the RUK (Rakawa, Ussangoda and



**Plate 14: FOGSL president receiving the 'BirdLife Conservation Achievement Award' from Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, Honorary President of BirdLife International.**



Kalametiya) in collaboration with many donor agencies and well-wishers. Through this programme FOGSL supported infrastructure development of five schools that included the renovation of buildings, improving sanitation facilities, development of school libraries by donating books and essential accessories, establishment of fully equipped computer laboratories and providing desks and chairs for students, etc. An environment awareness programme has also been initiated in five schools in the Kalamatiya area and is been conducted successfully for the past two years.

At the request of the Ministry of Local Government, FOGSL functioned as the technical advisor of the Nature Parks and Bird Paradises program that was aimed at building a positive relationship within communities in the areas where there are important bird habitats. This program was conducted through local Ministry Government bodies, which appeared to be the best institutes for the task of conservation in rural areas.

Starting from a humble beginning FOGSL has come a long way. The greatest testament of its achievements was when FOGSL was awarded the world's first-ever 'Conservation Achievement Award' by the BirdLife International at the World Bird Conference in 1999. The citation of the award stated as follows: "in recognition of an outstanding contribution to International Bird and Biodiversity Conservation".

## Salutation to the friends who offered feathers to form FOGSL's wings. . . .

**A**s we pause for a moment to look back at achievements over the past 30 years in the field of conservation there is a group of people that must be mentioned as they have supported most of these conservation initiatives quite readily. We would like to say a big thank you to all the organizations listed below for their generous support. We would also like to acknowledge all the individuals who have provided financial contributions as well as their time and energy for the organization but whose names are not mentioned here, but remembered fondly at this moment.

- \* Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)
- \* Salim Ali centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON)
- \* Wild Bird Federation of Taiwan (WBFT)
- \* Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ)
- \* Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- \* BirdLife International Partnership Development Fund
- \* Ricoh Japan
- \* Landcare Australia
- \* Sri Lanka Telecom
- \* United Nations Development Programme and Global Environment Facility
- \* Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources
- \* Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation
- \* Lanka Seya
- \* Whittall Boustead (Travel) Ltd.
- \* Nature Odyssey
- \* Sigiriya Village
- \* Jetwing Eco Holiday
- \* LGJ and Sons
- \* Hideki International
- \* Wildlife Heritage Trust
- \* Loadstar Pvt. Ltd.
- \* E.A.P. Group Pvt. Ltd.
- \* Overseas School of Colombo
- \* Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (Buttala Campus)
- \* Foundation for the Heritage of Arts (Bundala)
- \* Aqua Marine Products
- \* Kouni UK
- \* PATA 50
- \* PATA Foundation
- \* Lets Travel
- \* Mungo Terrain
- \* Superlink Travel Pvt. Ltd.
- \* Realm Tours (Pvt)Ltd
- \* Thotupola
- \* Kandalama Hotel
- \* Aitken Spence Travels Ltd
- \* Amaya Lake Resort
- \* Ella Adventure Park
- \* D. Holidays (Pvt) Ltd
- \* Walkers Tours Ltd
- \* Alpine Hotel (Pvt) Ltd
- \* www.kaputa.com
- \* Wild Holidays(Pvt) Ltd
- \* Souvenirs Marketing (Pvt) Ltd
- \* Giritale Hotel
- \* Adventures Lanka (Pvt) Ltd
- \* Heritage Expeditions (Pvt) Ltd
- \* Ceylon Adventure Sports
- \* Walk With Jith
- \* Ranweli Holiday Village

