

BNHS Mission Statement

Conservation of nature, primarily biological diversity, through action based on research, education and public awareness

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Tiger Cell Fund: BNHS organises conservation activities for the Tiger in the Western Ghats and Satpura Mountains

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City Forest Fund: Activities for the protection of Sanjay Gandhi National Park and Tungreshwar Sanctuary, Mumbai

Forest Guard Fund: Financial support to forest guards for their extraordinary courage to protect forests and wildlife

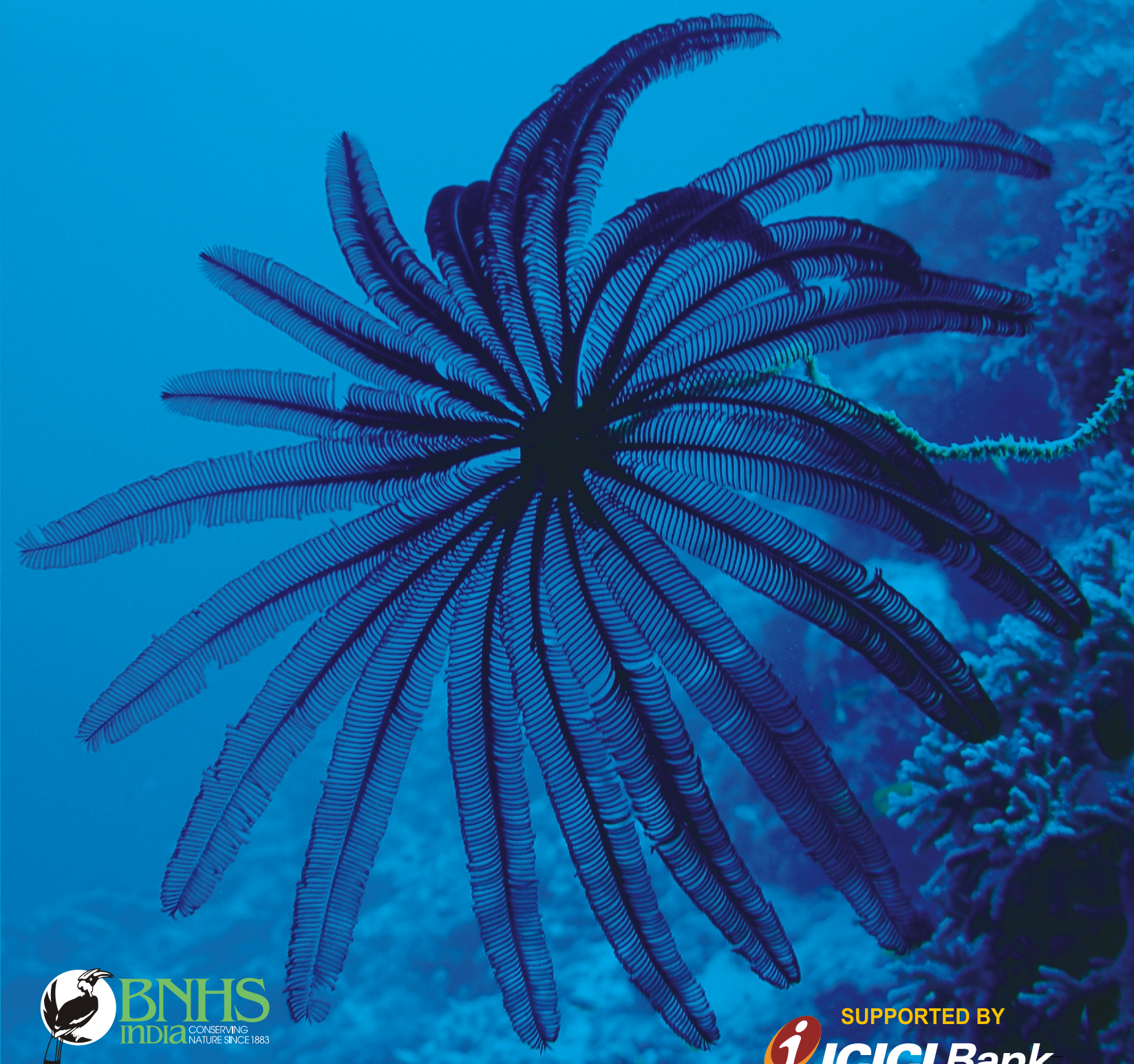


For more information on the Society and its activities,
Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, S.B.Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023, Maharashtra, India.
Tel.: (91-22) 2282 1811, Fax: (91-22) 2283 7615; Email: bnhs_conservation@vsnl.net or dapte@bnhs.org, Website: www.bnhs.org

GREEN GOVERNANCE

Quarterly Newsletter on Biodiversity and Business

April-October (10-11), 2006



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Editor

Mr. Deepak Apte

Editorial Board

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Mr. Debi Goenka
Dr. Asad R. Rahmani

Principal Investigator

Mr. Deepak Apte

Editorial inputs

Vibhuti Dedhia

Layout and Design

Gopi Naidu

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For more information

Write to

Deepak Apte
Conservation Officer
Head, Conservation Department
Bombay Natural History Society
Hornbill House, S.B. Singh Road,
Mumbai 400 023. India.
Tel: (91-22) 2282 1811
Fax: (91-22) 2283 7615
E-mail: dapte@bnhs.org
Website: www.bnhs.org

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What are the similarities between a Jerdon's Courser and a Tiger? Similarities between a Jerdon's Courser and a Tiger, you may ask! Though unusual, the question is definitely not inappropriate. Both the Jerdon's Courser and Tiger are nocturnal and crepuscular in habit, can be recognized in the wild from their footprints, are endangered and their presence in the wild can be confirmed by setting up camera traps. The dissimilarities between the two are also many. But the most important is that the Tiger has a wide distribution, while the Jerdon's Courser is at present known from only in and around Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah district, Andhra Pradesh.

If you want to see a Tiger you need to visit the nearest tiger reserve or zoo in the country. But if you wish to see a Jerdon's Courser you will have to go to Cuddapah. Undoubtedly the Tiger is the most charismatic and beautiful mammal of India, and perhaps the world. No wonder it attracts such attention. But other than individuals who are truly nuts about birds no one even ventures around to seek this elusive little bird. Most of us have seen tigers either in the wild or in zoos, but only a few of us have got a glimpse of the Jerdon's Courser in the wild.

You must still be puzzled why we are comparing the Jerdon's Courser with the Tiger. We compare this beautiful bird with this magnificent mammal because it is equally in danger and needs as much attention as is being given to the large striped cat. If the Tiger, the flagship species for conservation in India, had been present in Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary the management would have given their best to protect this habitat, and in turn benefit the other species in this Sanctuary, including the endangered Jerdon's Courser.

The Jerdon's Courser is a small cursorial bird that inhabits open patches in the scrub jungle. It is nocturnal or crepuscular in habit. The Jerdon's Courser was first described by

Are Jerdon's Courser's less important than Tigers?

Text: P. Jeganathan & Asad R. Rahmani

Photographs: P. Jeganathan

P. Jeganathan is a BNHS Senior Research Fellow and working on the Jerdon's Courser for last 5 years.

Asad R. Rahmani is the Principle Investigator of the Jerdon's Courser Project and the Director of BNHS.



The critically endangered Jerdon's Courser is threatened by the Telugu-Ganga Canal

T. C. Jerdon in c.1848. Till 1900, some birds were recorded near Pennar and Godavari river valleys, and near Anantapur. Subsequently, efforts by well known ornithologists such as Whistler & Kinnear and Dr. Sálím Ali to record this elusive species were unsuccessful. Special explorations organised by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) in 1975 and in 1976 in collaboration with the Smithsonian

Institution, Washington and World Wildlife Fund-India, respectively did not achieve positive results. This led to the belief that the Jerdon's Courser was extinct. Finally, in January 1986 it was rediscovered near Reddipalli village, Cuddapah District, Andhra Pradesh .

At the time of the rediscovery this place was cleared for the construction of the



Several hectares of scrub jungle habitat around two protected areas, declared mainly for the Jerdon's Courser, was cleared for the construction of the Telugu-Ganga Canal

Telugu-Ganga canal. Fortunately, the then authorities from Andhra Pradesh Forest Department and the Government of Andhra Pradesh recognized the importance of the place and declared it as the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS), which included the rediscovery site, and adjusted the proposed course of the Canal

to avoid the Sanctuary. Soon after its rediscovery near the Lankamalai hill ranges the Jerdon's Courser was recorded from the foothills of Turupukonda Hill range nearby, which was declared as the Sri Peninsula Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuary (SPNWLS) that spreads over Cuddapah and Nellore district.



No permission was sought from the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department for clearing the scrub jungle habitat and for constructing the Telugu-Ganga Canal around the protected areas

The Jerdon's Courser's ecology and habitat requirements were not clearly understood. Since 2000 the Bombay Natural History Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Universities of Reading and Cambridge, funded by the Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species, United Kingdom, in collaboration with Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, have made considerable progress in developing standard survey techniques to detect the presence of the Jerdon's Courser. They described the broad habitat requirements and used this information to identify new sites in and around Sri Lankamaleswara and Sri Peninsula Narasimha wildlife sanctuaries.

In 2000, the known distribution for a Jerdon's Courser was a single site a few hundred metres in diameter in scrub jungles inside the SLWLS. Recent studies have recorded the distribution of this bird in three new places, all of which are within about 14 km of the original rediscovery site. More importantly all these sites fall either at the fringe or outside the SLWLS. While the population survey work is in its initial stage, the research team is excited about getting permission for conducting radio-telemetry studies.

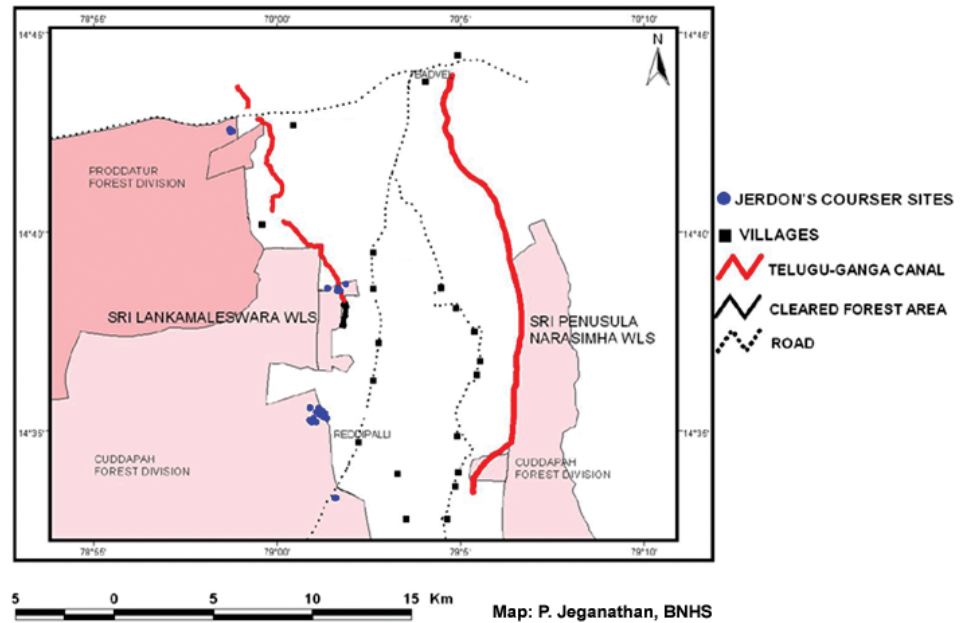
One of the major threats to the elusive Jerdon's Courser at present is the Telugu-Ganga Canal, which starts from Srisaillam Dam. Recent studies show that Jerdon's Coursers have a strong preference for a particular density of scrub jungle habitat. They are most likely to occur where the density of large (>2m tall) bushes is in the range 300-700 per ha, and where the density of smaller bushes is less than 1000 per ha. Jerdon's Coursers also seem to prefer areas with woody plant species, such as *Hardwickia binata*, that are characteristic of mature scrub. Such habitats are found mainly around the eastern part of Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary. Studies estimate that about 1600 ha of potentially suitable habitat

for the Jerdon's Courser is outside this Sanctuary.

In the second week of October 2006, we noticed construction around the eastern part of SLWLS, inside the Yerraballi Forest Block, which belongs to the Forest Department. We have recorded the presence of the Jerdon's Courser in 2001 in this very place from footprints, call and also by direct sighting. We immediately informed the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (APFD) in this regard. The brave efforts of Mr. B. Sundar, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) of Cuddapah resulted in the immediate discontinuation of the canal work. Apart from this canal, another canal is being constructed along the SPNWLS boundary that eventually enters the Sanctuary area. Interestingly, the Telugu-Ganga Project officials had no permission to construct the canal inside these areas, therefore the persons responsible for this construction were arrested for violating the Forest Conservation Act and Wildlife Protection Act.

We estimate the total loss of potentially suitable Jerdon's Courser habitat around the eastern part of SLWLS to be about 22 ha. This includes disappearance of one of the three new sites where the Jerdon's Courser has been recorded since 2000. If the canal work continues it will destroy about 650 ha of suitable habitat. Besides, the proposed canal route is very close (about 500 m) to the place where the Jerdon's Courser has been regularly sighted since the day it has been rediscovered. This is the only place in the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary and perhaps the only place in the world at the moment where one can see and hear the Jerdon's Courser almost anytime although potentially suitable habitat exist in and around this sanctuary as well as in the Sri Peninsula Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuary.

Mr. Aitanna of Reddipalli village is the only person in this world who has seen this bird on a number of occasions. He is a forest guard in Cuddapah forest division. He and



Map showing the route of Telugu-Ganga Canal in and around Sri Lankamaleswara and Sri Peninsula Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuaries in Cuddapah district, Andhra Pradesh

Dr. Bharat Bhushan had played a pivotal role in rediscovering this bird in 1986. If you want to see the Jerdon's Courser you will first have to meet Mr. Aitanna. He will take you to the nearby scrub jungle with his torch and buzzer, which masks the footfall, and start walking relentlessly. He will not be happy if he can't show you the Jerdon's Courser. When we talked about the canal construction he was equally sad. He clearly remembers the day when he met the late Dr. Salim Ali and the late Mr. Pushp Kumar, the Additional Chief Conservator, in-charge of wildlife. They were in Reddipalli soon after the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser and played a pivotal role in the declaration of SLWLS and realignment of the Telugu-Ganga Canal. He wondered how this could be happening after nineteen years and especially to such a rare bird, which is considered the 'Pride of Andhra Pradesh'.

Fortunately the canal work has stopped for the time being. Indeed Mr. B. Sundar deserves full credit for this. But the reward he got for saving the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser habitat was a forced holiday, followed by a transfer order! In fact if the Telugu-Ganga Project authorities had

informed him before clearing the forest and constructing the canal he would have suggested the realignment of the canal route. We could have averted this ecological and financial waste. Instead of lamenting over the lost scrub jungle it's now time to think about restoring it. It is time to take a pre-emptive conservation action to save the remaining scrub jungle habitat. The only solution is the realignment of the canal away from the Jerdon's Courser habitat. This is the only way to save the Jerdon's Courser, as well as to benefit the locals.

Jerdon's Courser may not be as popular as the Tiger. However, it is a well known bird nationally and locally. A first day cover depicting the Jerdon's Courser was issued by the Indian Post in 1990, it was the mascot for the Cuddapah heritage festival 'Kadaposthavalu' in 2004 and is the mascot of Cuddapah Police Department. In 2005, a special cover was issued by the Indian Postal Department on Red Sanders tree *Pterocarpus santalinus*, which is also considered the 'Pride of Cuddapah'. That stamp was cancelled by a seal, which shows the Jerdon's Courser. There are several signboards around the Sanctuary and in

Cuddapah. Apart from this the Jerdon's Courser is popular as one of the rarest birds in the world. IUCN lists the Jerdon's Courser as Critically Endangered, the highest category of threat for a wild population. The tiger is categorized as Endangered. Both the species are listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, and are considered as priority species under the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016) of the Government of India.

When tigers disappeared from the tiger reserves they got national and international attention. A task force was formulated immediately by the authorities. Is the Jerdon's Courser less important than Tiger? The Jerdon's Courser also requires similar attention and action at the moment. We don't ask for a task force, all we need is that the canal constructed around the eastern part of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary be realigned and the habitat present outside be included in the Sanctuary. Jerdon's Coursers need your support, we urge all the readers to write to the concerned authorities stating your concern. Let us all work together and save the remaining space for the Jerdon's Courser.

How this canal will affect the Jerdon's Courser habitat?

The new canal poses at least three threats to the Jerdon's courser

1. Construction will destroy the remaining scrub jungle habitat of the Jerdon's Courser in the eastern part of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary.
2. The canal will permit the extension of irrigated agriculture to many areas outside the Sanctuary that are scrub jungle at present. Scrub jungle will be cleared for agricultural purpose, its habitat destroyed the Jerdon's Courser population will diminish.
3. Increased agricultural activities will lead to increased human activity in and around

the Sanctuary. This is likely to increase unauthorized use of the Sanctuary and any remaining scrub jungle outside it. Increased use is likely to deteriorate the suitable habitat of the Jerdon's Courser.

BNHS has prepared a detailed report on the impact of the Telugu-Ganga Canal in the Jerdon's Courser habitat. It can be downloaded from www.bnhs.org.

Please write polite letters to following asking that the Telugu-Ganga Canal which was planned to construct around the eastern side of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary be realigned.

The Minister for
 Environment & Forests,
 Paryavaran Bhavan, CGO Complex,
 Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110 021
 Tel.: +91 011 2436 5633,
 Fax: +91 001 2436 2222.
 Email: mef@menf.delhi.nic.in

Dr Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy
 Hon'ble Chief Minister
 Green Lands Circle, Begumpet,
 Hyderabad
 Tel: 040-23455698, 23455205,
 23452933, Fax: 040-23410666
 Email: cmap@ap.gov.in

Chronology of actions taken so far

- **Second week of October 2005** - BNHS Field team observed the canal work near Sri Lankamaleswara and Sri Penusula Narasimha Wildlife sanctuaries, and informed the Divisional Forest Officer, Cuddapah.
- **Third week of October 2005** - Letter by Director, BNHS to Principle Chief Conservator of Forests, Andhra Pradesh Forest Department. Canal work stopped in both the sanctuaries.
- **Mid November 2005** - Letter sent to Govt. of Andhra Pradesh to realign the canal by BNHS, WWF-India, BSAP, RSPB, Birdlife International.

- **Second week of December 2005** - Report on the impact of the canal on the Jerdon's Courser habitat published online on the BNHS website - www.bnhs.org. Letter by Director, BNHS to prominent conservationists in India on the canal issue.
- **Fourth week of December 2005** - Team of experts from BNHS, BSAP, WWF-India met Chief Secretary, Secretary – Irrigation Department, Govt. of Andhra Pradesh. A Report was submitted to the government of Andhra Pradesh.
- **Fourth week of December 2005** - Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Mr. Bittu Sahgal, Sanctuary Asia, before the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) constituted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India.
- **First Week of January 2006** - Director, BNHS visited the canal sites and also met District Collector, Cuddapah.
- **31st January 2006** - First hearing on this issue by CEC. Government of Andhra Pradesh agreed to realign the canal. Estimated potentially suitable habitat loss due to the proposed realignment is 157 ha.
- **14th February 2006** - Second hearing on this issue by CEC in Hyderabad. BNHS was asked by the CEC to suggest an alternative route in view of the importance of the Jerdon's Courser.
- **First week of March 2006** - Report submitted to the CEC by BNHS, suggesting two alternative routes, which would have least damage on the Jerdon's Courser habitat.
- **11th March 2006** - Third hearing on this issue by CEC in Hyderabad.
Andhra Pradesh Irrigation Department has sought time to examine the alternatives provided by the BNHS on the realignment of the canal. The CEC directed that during the interim period there should be no further construction till an alternative route is worked out. ■