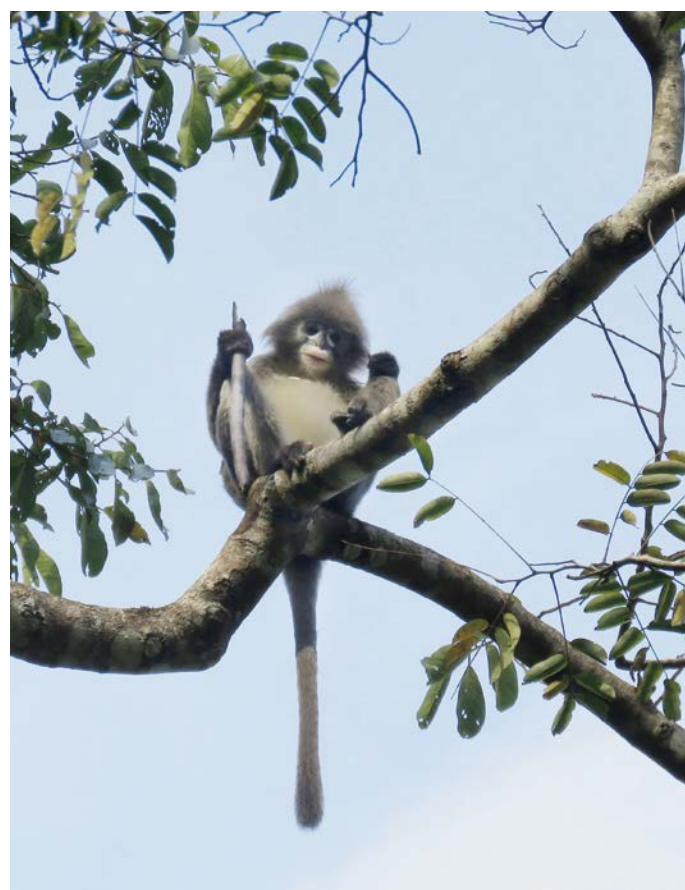


# Dampa's Mowgli helps find a tiger

A daily wage forest guard's dedication to conservation and love for photography means that Mizoram's Dampa Tiger Reserve has a rich documentation of its wildlife, and now, the site's first photographic record of a tiger in seven years



The image of a tiger captured by a camera trap in May this year, the first proof of tiger presence in Dampa since 2013

**SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY**

IN November 2020, a member of the Tiger Protection Force at the Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram found a pugmark along a river bank and asked Zakhuma Don to deploy camera traps. For a while, the traps only picked up evidence of common leopard cats. Since the area was in a buffer zone, Don was eventually asked to retrieve the traps for fear that they might be stolen. Early this year, a team from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) began conducting research in the reserve and Don requested their deployment once again. It paid off.

While checking the traps last month, he found the vivid image of a tiger. "I was thrilled," he says, "this came after seven long years of tracing and camera trap-pings; I couldn't believe my eyes." He sent it to the authorities for confirmation and WII's Department of Endangered Species Management ultimately confirmed that he had indeed photographed a tiger in Dampa.

This was special because since 2013, Dampa has not found any trace of tigers despite efforts to photograph and surveys of fringe



villages around the reserve. TR Shankar Raman, senior scientist at the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore, says he isn't surprised. Raman first went to Dampa in 1994-95 to conduct research. "Dampa is not like other tiger reserves in India," he says. "Large parts of it have dense evergreen forests that are not ideal tiger habitat. This new photo reveals that tigers are definitely found there, but it is likely that

they occur at a very low density." Dampa, on the other hand, has one of the highest density populations of clouded leopards in Asia, along with other rare species like the hoolock gibbon, peacock-pheasants and blue pittas. The reserve is also part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. "Though it is called a tiger reserve, it is special for the other species found there, which are unique to northeast India," he informs. "A whole range of other wildlife gets protected in Dampa thanks to its notification as a tiger reserve." This is reason enough for not all efforts to be trained towards tiger conservation alone. Forests are sometimes cut to create artificial grasslands, while prey is artificially increased in the name of tiger conservation. "That kind of habitat disturbance should not happen in Dampa."

A few years ago, Raman was invited to conduct a bird survey at the reserve by the Mizoram forest department and met Don who accompanied him in the field. A resident of nearby West Phaileng, and a member of the protection force, Don's stays in anti-poaching

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Zakhuma Don, who is part of Sanctuary Asia's Mud on Boots project, has been documenting the reserve's biodiversity through photos and videos, managing to capture rare animals like the clouded leopard and the hoolock gibbon. These have been used by the forest department in their outreach material



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camps, along with patrolling and routine protection duties have given him an intimate knowledge of the landscape. Raman says that a host of researchers, a list in which he includes himself, have benefited from Don's knowledge and wildlife monitoring skills, and the way he actively assists in planning and deployment. For Don, while the interest in wildlife and its behaviour has increased over the years, aided by a longstanding passion for photography, he has

come to realise that the forest needs protection too, from poachers and encroachers who collect forest produce. Don has been a part of Sanctuary Asia's Mud on Boots project designed to support grassroots conservationists.

He has also been documenting Dampa's biodiversity through photographs and videos. These have in turn been used by the forest department in their outreach material, presentations and calendars. Through his training with Green Hub, which engages in conservation education and climate

**Through his training with Green Hub, which engages in conservation education and climate sustainability through the visual medium, he [Don] learnt videography skills and with little to no budget and resources, even made short documentaries on Dampa, which were screened locally and shared on social media**

sustainability through the visual medium, he learnt videography skills and with little to no budget and resources, even made short documentaries on Dampa, which were screened locally and shared on social media. "There has been

a lot of awareness creation about Dampa and its wildlife that is attributable to his photo and video documentation," admits Raman.

While highlighting the remarkable skills and diligence of Dampa's forest staff who work

in extremely difficult conditions, challenging terrain and remote camps, he points out that they have been working without regularisation of their employment for years. "There are members of staff who have worked for 20 years on daily wage. Zakhuma himself has worked for 13 years like this. Technically, he can lose his job anytime," he says. Don, meanwhile, continues tirelessly to spread awareness through his conservation work.

sucheta.c@mid-day.com

## CYNERA RODRICKS

WHILE the COVID-19 pandemic has robbed us of many experiences that we were looking forward to, it has been a lot harder on toddlers, who are just entering school. The learning milestone for pre-schoolers across India has taken a hit, and their first classroom experience, where they are taught everything from how to hold a pencil to socialising with peers, has been put on hold. Naturally, this has parents anxious.

Yoko Rai, music educator and professional ventriloquist, admitted her son Zac, 5, to Borivli's Don Bosco School last year, thinking he would be able to enjoy all the amenities the school had to offer. However, due to the pandemic, the classes shifted online. One of the biggest challenges she faced during this time was handing over an electronic gadget to her son. "At this point, you want children to see, learn and explore things physically. To suddenly hand him a mobile or laptop makes me uncomfortable," she says. To create a conducive environment for learning, Rai has arranged for a coffee table and chair for Zac, so that he knows this is where his virtual school is. "Since class interaction is minimal, it's really difficult for these kids to make friends online. I realised Zac was having trouble bonding with his classmates." To get him out of his shell, she has signed him up for another side class, where kids his age are allowed to interact as much as they want. There's no structure followed, and the teacher is allowed to indulge the kids.

Vashi resident Candice Martins, too, has been trying to make her son, Ethan Lewis, currently in kindergarten, understand the

# Mom, what is school?

As classrooms remain locked up for a second year in a row, parents and teachers face the challenge to create a class-like environment at home for first-time schoolers



Five-year-old Zac Britto is currently studying in senior KG at Don Bosco, Borivli. His mother Yoko Rai has signed him for a side class, where the only agenda is for kids to be themselves

concept of school. "As a parent, I make him aware of the decorum he would have to maintain had he been in school. For instance, I tell him he can't just get up and go to the washroom, without taking the teacher's permission. I have also kept a set couple of clothes aside, which he wears only to school. I see to it that he logs in 15 minutes early. The idea is to set a routine." She thinks these small disciplinary measures will help him demarcate school from home.

To inject fun and creativity into learning, Vanessa D'Costa has pasted stickers, cut outs and charts of planets, birds and animals on the walls of their Borivli home for her son, Styne. "I also use DIY crafts using available materials to teach rhymes and short stories, which are

taught in school," she says.

While parents admit that schools are doing the best they can to keep children engaged, it's the lack of validation from teachers that's posing to be a problem. "The teacher has to look at a screen with around 15 to 20 students and it's not possible for her to acknowledge everyone. There are times when Ethan has made a drawing and shows it on the screen, but the teacher doesn't respond. He then looks to me for acknowledgement. I have to make him understand that she has seen it, but she can't respond right now," says Martins.

Tanishq Sheikh is a preschool design specialist and owner of Teacher's Lounge Indi, a curriculum design and teacher training company. According to her, due to

a short attention span, it's not easy for toddlers to focus on a device for long hours. "A virtual school can never replace a real school, however, this is our only option. To make this effective, teachers have to build a strong connect with these kids. Many teachers are also using phones, so they have to keep scrolling to check on all the students. I try to advise schools to have two teachers, so that one can teach and the other can monitor." Tanishq also advises teachers to give all students an equal chance to speak up. "In a physical world we don't have a mute button, we ask children to self-regulate, so the child automatically learns. This is an important part of their emotional and personal development which teachers tend to neglect or disre-

## How to make learning fun

● Greta Gonsalves, a senior KG teacher from St Mary's kindergarten, says they provide kids with teaching aids. "We record our own videos on how to write alphabets and numbers. There is a lot of animation involved in our presentations to make them catchy."

● Getting children to either do yoga, dance, or sing is an effective way to make children active during school hours, Tanishq Sheikh recommends. "Giving your child an incentive after he or she completes their homework also helps. Take a picture of their work and send it to their teacher. For children, appreciation is important. Teachers can make a Facebook group or a Google drive folder and they can drop their comments over there, in case they are unable to acknowledge all kids on call."

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Tanishq Sheikh,  
preschool design  
specialist



gard. There's a level of disrespect towards the child when we don't let them speak. If you keep children constantly on mute, when will they know when to speak? I recommend teachers to put them on mute only for the first two weeks, but after that get them into the habit of listening to you or maybe ask them to raise their hands to ask for permission," says Sheikh.

smdmail@mid-day.com



Ethan Lewis, 3, attends nursery online