

# Cambodian Journal of Natural History

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Botum-Sakor mammals  
Bamboo and livelihoods  
Virachey herpetofauna

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Cover photo: (© Jeremy Holden/ Global Wildlife Conservation). Possibly the world’s rarest otter, the endangered hairy-nosed otter *Lutra sumatrana* has been found in Cambodia’s Cardamom Mountains (previous volume), Tonle Sap Great Lake (see Heng, this volume) and Botum-Sakor (Royan, this volume).

## Editorial - In memoriam of Lim Kannitha

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Four years ago, in February 2006, Kannitha was one of 24 students who made up the first intake of our new MSc course in Biodiversity Conservation at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Like most of her peers, Kannitha came from a family of very modest means and her educational background was mixed. As such, it was tempting to think that Kannitha would follow other students out of the course before completing it. But Kannitha defied the odds because she had what many of her peers lacked: determination, an indomitable spirit and a hunger for knowledge that left her eager to learn and to overcome challenges. Rather than being upset about failing her first assignment, Kannitha welcomed the feedback as a chance to improve her research skills. She quickly realised that the MSc course was not only a challenge, but the opportunity of a lifetime, and it made her work harder and become even more determined. She studied hard to reach a level of scientific excellence both for herself and for her country.

Unfortunately, Kannitha's tragic demise to malaria in February 2010 came much too early for her to enjoy life as a scientist - a life she richly deserved and aspired to. She represented the very best of the MSc course and possessed the rare combination of qualities required to make a good scientist: curiosity, commitment, creativity, intelligence and altruism. Kannitha also had the tenacity to break from traditional conservatism and face new challenges with a smile and without prejudice. Her open-minded spirit made her at home amongst all cultures, both in the lab as well as in the field. I had no reservations in recommending her to pursue her studies in Denmark with Prof. Dr Ole Naesby Larsen (Odense University) and Prof. Dr Knud E.



Lim Kannitha (© Chey Koulang).

Heller (Copenhagen University) who repeatedly acknowledged her outstanding potential as a scientist and appreciated her wonderful demeanour and positive personality.

While breaking with traditional cultural expectations as a woman and pursuing her studies, Kannitha was also a role model for many of her peers and younger students, whom she never failed to help whenever she could. She had charm, was mild-mannered and possessed a very winning personality that made her a favourite amongst her

peers and teachers. She will leave immense sadness and grief amongst fellow students and scientists in Cambodia and in Europe, and not least amongst her family and friends.

It is not meaningful to say that death is unfair, but in this case I would say that it came at a very untimely and tragic moment because the empty space she has left is far too large. Much has been lost with her demise as one of Cambodia's most promising young researchers in the field of biodiversity.

Kannitha will be sorely missed by students and fellow scientists.

*Editor's note:- A trust fund dedicated to the memory of Lim Kannitha is presently being established by Conservation International, Fauna & Flora International and the Royal University of Phnom Penh. The aim of the fund is to sponsor scholarships and research opportunities for Cambodian women in the area of biodiversity conservation. Individuals interested in supporting the Lim Kannitha Trust Fund are encouraged to contact Dr Neil Furey (n.furey.ffi@gmail.com) for further details.*

## Letters to the Editors

This occasional section presents informative contributions of fewer than 650 words, usually in response to material published in the Journal. Letters to the Editors are not peer-reviewed (unlike Short Communications and Full Papers), but may be edited for length and English grammar.

### Obituary to the black-bellied tern

It is with deep sorrow that we report the demise of the last surviving black-bellied tern *Sterna acuticauda* in Cambodia. This species nested on the sandbars of undisturbed rivers and faced many odds during the last few decades. By the late twentieth century, disturbance, nest predation by domestic dogs and opportunistic egg harvesting by local people had already brought it to the verge of extinction, with only two pairs clinging on to sandbars of the Sesan River in Ratanakiri Province. These birds were seen for the last time in 2003, and although one pair hatched two chicks that year, no black-bellied terns have been seen since. A two-day search in 2008 failed to locate any members of the species, and a dedicated three-day search along the Sesan River earlier this year unfortunately confirmed the fears that the population was extinct in Cambodia. The hydrological and ecological impacts of the upstream dams built in Vietnam were arguably the nail in the coffin for the last Cambodian representatives of the black-bellied tern.

After the greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* (last shot in 1935) and the Indian skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* (early 1960s), this is the third bird species to have been lost in Cambodia, and – a dubious distinction – the first one of this century. More tragically, a species vanishing in the Kingdom today almost always means not only a national loss, but also a regional one: the Cambodian birds were indeed the only survivors in the entire Mekong region.

It is also revealing that the last two bird species extirpated from the country were riverine specialists. So the black-bellied tern followed its relative the Indian skimmer, and is survived by a community of sensitive riverine birds heading towards the same fate at high speed. The river tern *Sterna aurantia*, the river lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii* and the great thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris* are bound to join the national cemetery of species if the threats they face are not addressed rapidly. Aside from shedding light on this silent death, this obituary wishes to stress the urgent need of conservation action to save the country's riverine ecosystems and biodiversity. If the proposed government scheme of hydroelectric dams, especially those on the main Mekong Channel, is implemented, not only will it erase a unique wildlife assemblage, but it will also dramatically impact the livelihoods of tens of thousands of fishermen as well as the food security of millions of Cambodians.

May this letter ring an alarm bell that awakens the people of Cambodia, their Royal Government and the conservation community. May it help preserve a priceless and highly threatened riverine heritage and curtail the waiting death list of soon-to-be extinct feathered citizens of the Kingdom.

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The last known brood of the black-bellied tern in Cambodia, April 2003 (© Andrea Claassen).



Sandbars of the Sesan River: critical nesting habitat for a suite of endangered riverine birds, January 2010 (© Howie Nielsen).