

Obituary

Padma Bhushan

Shri Hemendra Singh Panwar

(22 March 1937–29 May 2026)



Shri H. S. Panwar was a colossus of wildlife conservation movement in India. A giant, who was a forerunner in the transformation of the Kanha National Park and Tiger Reserve into what it is today; whose effort brought back the near-extinct hardground Barasingha *Rucervus duvaucelii* deer in to the famous Kanha meadows; and who

envisioned the first voluntary relocation of villages from the Kanha landscape, which later became the norm and backbone of village relocation from protected areas, and the foundation of eco-development programmes in the protected landscapes of India. He was none other than Padma Bhushan Shri H. S. Panwar, an Indian Forest Service Officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre, whose contribution in shaping the wildlife conservation scenario in India for more than five decades will be a treatise by itself.

When he was deputed to the national capital of India in 1981, after an illustrious career in the forest service in Madhya Pradesh, to lead the ambitious Project Tiger, he went beyond the concept of Project Tiger—save the tiger, the apex predator, all other fauna is saved—to a much wider view of landscape-level ecosystem conservation. He brought into focus the often-forgotten contributions of the protected Project Tiger sites and their immense ecological services; especially, and most abundantly that of water, besides harbouring the largest percentage of the striped feline in the world. He summed up his thoughts on the extraordinary achievements of Project Tiger in a seminal paper entitled, “What to do when you’ve succeeded: Project Tiger ten years later” (Panwar 1982).

In 1985, the Government of India gave him the responsibility of taking forward the nascent (established on 22 May 1982) Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in Dehradun. It was his vision and leadership that shaped the WII into the foremost capacity building cradle for wildlife managers, biologists, and socio-economists; not only for India but also for South Asia, and regions beyond. Panwar foresaw that wildlife protection, conservation, management, and research are integrated, and multidisciplinary, and would require ecologists, sociologist, traditional biologists, and wildlife veterinarians, besides hardcore managers with a disciplined and committed forestry background who would not forget to include communities living in and around the forested landscape in their plans. Within a decade, he not only transformed WII into a world class institution, but brought in a momentous shift in India’s approach to wildlife conservation, which was also reflected in the neighbouring countries of India, where he worked later on behalf of global conservation organisations.

Writing about the Late Shri Panwar in an ornithological journal, one may just wonder about his take on bird conservation. The foremost was his recognition and respect for Dr Sálím Ali and the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) as the torch bearer for bird conservation. He made sure that the grand old birdman of India was in the Governing Council of the Wildlife Institute of India. He ensured that the BNHS would take the lead in formulating

India’s avifaunal conservation policy. At the same time, he encouraged committed avifaunal projects to be made operational at the WII by its team of young faculty and researchers.

What must not be forgotten is the monumental collaborative work that he began with Dr W. A. Rodgers in 1985, no sooner he took charge of the Wildlife Institute of India. The Biogeographic Classification of India that they delineated in their two-volume work, *Planning a Wildlife Protected Area in India* (1988), was one of the first—and still remains a masterpiece—that classified India’s landscape into ten biogeographic zones and 27 biogeographic provinces based on physiography, vegetation, drainage, and eco-climatic regions. In essence, the exercise planned a network of protected areas in India to representing at least ten percent of each of the biogeographic zones and provinces of the country. The vast network of protected areas that India boasts of today owes a lot to this pathbreaking work of Rodgers and Panwar. A large number of Important Bird Areas, bird sanctuaries, and Ramsa sites are located within these identified zones and provinces. The work of Rodgers and Panwar has, perhaps by default, created destinations that are a delight for both, global, and national birders.

The WII campus is a testament to Panwar’s commitment to comprehensive landscape management. During its construction, he made sure that all natural vegetation and landforms within its boundaries were protected and monitored. The lower canopy in the largely *Sal* dominated landscape was not disturbed. A plethora of avifauna and smaller vertebrates benefitted, exemplified by the large groups of Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*. He also created a pan-campus nature trail within which was a well-planned, inundated lake that supported resident and migratory waterbirds. The nature trail and the wetland served as monitoring transects for all wildlife studies within the campus. He encouraged the faculty, researchers and student to initiate a campus biodiversity monitoring exercise that still continues. Even after 42 years (the construction of the WII campus at Chandrabani was initiated in 1984), the WII boasts of supporting possibly one of the largest number of bird species amongst the larger institutional campuses in Dehradun.

Besides the Padma Bhushan (2013), Shri Panwar received several awards during his lifetime, a testament to his commitment and zeal for India’s wilderness: Government of Madhya Pradesh Gold Medal (1981), Prime Minister’s Memento for Project Tiger (1992), Fred M. Parker International Parks Merit Award, World Conservation Union (WCA-IUCN) (1996), Tree of Learning Award, World Conservation Union (WCA-IUCN) (1996), Rajiv Gandhi Wildlife Conservation Award (1998), and The Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Medal, WWF International (2002) (Wikipedia 2026).

Though he was not a birder, when short-term capacity building refresher courses for senior forest officials of the country were being conducted in select Protected Areas of India, one of their first early morning exercises used to be a birdwatching and identification session. Shri Panwar often led the group with a pair of binoculars around his neck—to ensure that all officers participated! How many different identifications were given to the same bird by this group, is a different story altogether!

References:

- Panwar, H. S., 1982. What to do when you’ve succeeded: Project Tiger ten years later. *Ambio* 11 (6): 330–337.
 Wikipedia. 2026. Hemendra Singh Panwar. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hemendra_Singh_Panwar. [Accessed on 3 July 2026.]

– B. C. Choudhury