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ational Air Traffic Control Day celebrates the unsung heroes who ensure that our air travel is safe and efficient. These skilled professionals juggle thousands of flights daily, coordinating everything from takeoff to landing. Their efforts keep the skies safe, making them vital to both public safety and our economy. Today, we celebrate their dedication and their critical roles in managing the complex airspace above us. Celebrating National Air Traffic Control Day can be as entertaining as it is educational. Visit an air traffic control center today. It's a fantastic way to see the wizards at work, managing the skies and keeping flights smooth and safe.

#WORLD ORDER

The Fall of Nicolae Ceausescu

How a Defiant Speech led to the end of a Brutal Regime!



Thirty years ago, Romanian leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, and his wife, Elena, were executed by firing squad after a hasty one-hour show trial.

In late December 1989, the world watched as one of Eastern Europe's most repressive communist leaders met a dramatic and violent end. Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's dictator for over two decades, was

executed alongside his wife, Elena, in a televised firing squad just days after a public speech intended to demonstrate his control. This shocking conclusion to his rule was the climax of a revolution fueled by years of political repression, economic hardship, and growing unrest.

A Legacy of Repression and Hardship

Nicolae Ceausescu rose to power in 1965 as General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, and later, became President in 1974. His early years in power saw some attempts to distance Romania from Soviet control, earning him a degree of popularity, both domestically and internationally. However, as the years went on, Ceausescu's regime grew increasingly authoritarian and isolated. He imposed harsh policies, including strict censorship, a ruthless secret police (the

Securitate), and severe limitations on freedoms of speech and assembly. The Romanian people also endured extreme economic austerity in the 1980s as Ceausescu prioritized paying off the country's foreign debt. This led to widespread shortages of food, electricity, heating, and basic goods. The quality of life plummeted, and many Romanians suffered under harsh living conditions while the Ceausescu family and political elite enjoyed extravagant lifestyles.

The Sparks of Revolution

Inspired by the wave of anti-communist uprisings sweeping through Eastern Europe in 1989, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of regimes in Poland and Hungary, Romanians began to rise against their own dictator. The immediate spark came in mid-December when protests broke out in the city of Timisoara following the attempted eviction of a

Hungarian pastor, László, who had spoken out against the regime.

These protests quickly escalated into nationwide demonstrations demanding Ceausescu's resignation. The government's attempts to crush dissent with force only intensified public outrage, as security forces opened fire on demonstrators in several cities.

The Fateful Speech and the Rapid Collapse

On December 21, 1989, Ceausescu made a critical decision to address a massive crowd in Bucharest's Palace Square. The speech was designed to reaffirm his control and quell the unrest. Instead, it backfired spectacularly. The crowd responded with loud jeers, boos, and chants against the regime, an extraordinary and unprecedented display of defiance

broadcast live on state television. The moment revealed the depth of his isolation and the regime's waning grip on power.

Within days, the military and key political figures abandoned Ceausescu, siding with the revolutionaries. On December 22, the dictator and his wife fled the capital but were soon captured by the army.

Trial and Execution

Ceausescu and Elena were subjected to a brief, summary trial on December 25, 1989, accused of genocide, corruption, and abuse of power. The trial, lasting less than two hours, was marked by its swift verdict. Both were found

guilty and sentenced to death. Their execution by firing squad was carried out immediately and broadcast on national television, a shocking event symbolizing the violent end of one of Europe's most brutal regimes.

Aftermath and Legacy

The execution of Ceausescus marked the definitive end of communist rule in Romania and the beginning of the country's transition towards democracy. However, the revolution was far from peaceful, resulting in hundreds of deaths and lingering political instability. Today,

the events of December 1989 remain a powerful reminder of the risks and costs of authoritarianism. Ceausescu's downfall underscored the profound desire for freedom and justice among Romanians and symbolized the broader collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe.



Indira Gandhi and Nicolae Ceausescu.



The large Eastern imperial eagle.



The Indian Wild Ass is a herd-living endemic equine species. Its population recovery from about 400 in the late 1990s to more than 6000 individuals is one of India's celebrated conservation success stories.



Anjali Sharma
Senior Journalist & Wildlife Enthusiast

The Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) is a vast desert and a seasonal salt marsh near the northern frontier of Gujarat. It is the last remaining stronghold of the Indian Wild Ass or Khur, which roams the ~5000 sq.km. Wild Ass Sanctuary is situated in the *Rann* (desert in Gujarati). A popular tourist destination, LRK, attracts wildlife photographers from across the world to shoot the wild ass and the scores of migratory birds that flock here during the winter season. The internet holds witness to the striking landscape and portrait shots of this unique terrain and its charismatic wildlife. The wildlife in these photographs stands out against a seemingly barren and monotonous background, which adds to its appeal. My understanding of LRK and its wildlife has predominantly been shaped by these images.

This was until I visited the Wild Ass Sanctuary in person for the first time in the summer of 2024. Desert summers are incredibly harsh, and yet, I timed my visit during this particular period for two reasons. First, the wildlife here has evolved unique adaptations to survive the peak desert heat, and it is only during the summer that one can contextualise and appreciate them. Second, very few tourists and photographers visit LRK during the summer months to avoid the heat, which means fewer crowds and an overall better experience.



Majestic flamingoes.

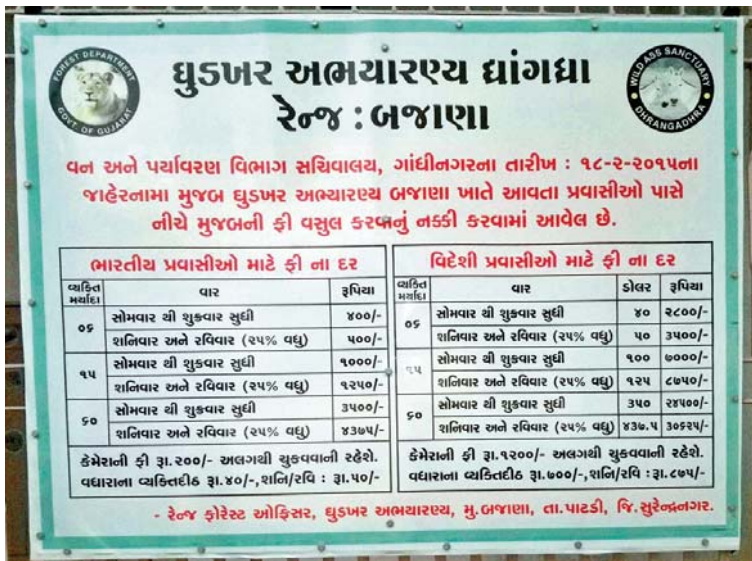
My trip to LRK completely changed my perception of the Wild Ass Sanctuary and the surrounding Rann. This photo story is my attempt to showcase the reality of the Indian Wild Ass and its co-inhabitants.

A herd of Indian wild asses should have been a common sight in India but that is not the current scenario as they were in very less numbers. So, I had to travel thousands of kilometers to see a herd of these gorgeous Indian wild asses in Wild Ass Sanctuary, Little Rann of Kutch.

After spending some good time in the waters of Nalsarovar, I headed to Little Rann of Kutch, part of the Gujarat Road Trip. I had booked a hotel in Patdi which is located around 70 kms from Nalsarovar. My plan was to visit Wild Ass Sanctuary in Little Rann of Kutch and do some casual birding outside the sanctuary. When I reached Patdi, I saw at a temple with many unique sculptures and there was a small pond next to that temple with lots of water-birds. I decided to come back to that pond after some quick refreshment in the hotel as I had crossed many dusty roads. I was not very confident about the hotel I had booked, so, I felt reassured when I saw many other guests with full wildlife gear. After drinking some tasty *lassi*, I went back to the pond. In the evening light, I saw Ruddy shelducks, Greylag geese and few other waders.

While watching the birds, I heard some loud crackers from the temple. Out of curiosity, I decided to visit that Shakti Mata temple. The temple was full of lights and the statues were very different from other Indian temples. The goddesses were holding handbags. A child god was drawn with lots of birds, so, I have to say it was quite an interesting evening for me.

#SWEET WILD ASSES



Gujarati sign board.

Wildlife Safari in LRK

Next day, very early morning, I headed to the ticket counter of Wild Ass Sanctuary. It was cold and very dark and there was no sign of opening the gates anytime soon. So, I just waited in car and watched a petty shop which was opened even at that time. After few minutes, the shopkeeper closed the shop. I was confused like 'why did he open so early and why did he already close it.' He went inside his house which was behind his shop and came back with a small watercan. Few others also joined him and each with their own cans. Then, I realized they were going to do 'Swachh Bharat.' I couldn't stop laughing to see this methodical early morning. By this time, two more cars joined us.

Finally, the door was opened and I was the first one to get the tickets. I knew guide is mandatory in the park and I thought they would be waiting near the ticket counter for the forest officials to pick and assign like in Velavadar. But I didn't seem to find anyone there, so, when the forest official asked me who is our guide, I had no answer. The other two people in the queue had come down with their big cameras and pre-arranged guide. So, they all got their tickets and started off. The forest official then called a guide and that guy was already booked, so, he arranged an amateur guide for me.

The problem with birding guides nowadays is commercialization. Most bird photographers cannot spot a bird on their own, so, they need spoon feeding. But for birders without a bird guide, nothing can be done. So, I take a guide only when the park mentions it as mandatory and am happy if they looked more beautiful in this terrain. I drove on and stopped when I saw Wild Asses. They were just standing without doing anything and I had no clue what they got to eat in the barren land. Later, I learnt that they feed on saline vegetation and pods of *Prosopis juliflora*. They are one of the fastest animals in India. Once they lived throughout Northwestern India, but now they are only in this Wild Ass Sanctuary. That is pretty sad to



their own, so, they need spoon feeding. But for birders without a bird guide, nothing can be done. So, I take a guide only when the park mentions it as mandatory and am happy if they looked more beautiful in this terrain.

So, when a small boy came with us as a guide to Wild Ass Sanctuary, I didn't complain. I went back to the main road and drove into the Wild Ass Sanctuary with a big board at the entrance. Once we entered inside the sanctuary, we were treated with total change in the scenery.

The Wild Ass Sanctuary is spread across and there is no well-laid path inside the sanctuary. This gave all the tourists an



Plover, Little Rann of Kutch.



A surprising sighting of the Merin.

opportunity to drive around the park in all directions. There were zigzag tracks everywhere. Initially, there was a small waterbody with lots of water bird activities. I got tempted to stop there but since that was the right time for raptors, which I didn't want to miss, I just drove across.

I did make a lot of unnecessary stops though, as I imagined all the small mud rocks were some raptors. The place was just wide open barren land with just few bunds here and there. Occasionally, I saw a shrub where shrike and drongo were sitting on. After some driving, I spotted a raptor sitting on a *Prosopis juliflora* and everybody was very enthusiastic to see the raptor. When I went closer, I realized it was the Common Kestrel. This happened few more times and when I was about to lose hope, another visitor spotted a tiny speck on a bund. He was very confident that it was a Peregrine Falcon, and surprisingly it was.

I had seen the Peregrine Falcon in few other places but it looked more beautiful in this terrain. I drove on and stopped when I saw Wild Asses. They were just standing without doing anything and I had no clue what they got to eat in the barren land. Later, I learnt that they feed on saline vegetation and pods of *Prosopis juliflora*. They are one of the fastest animals in India. Once they lived throughout Northwestern India, but now they are only in this Wild Ass Sanctuary. That is pretty sad to

know these very innocent species (asses are so cute) are Near Threatened status.

Like I always say, we don't feel elated when we see a rare species. Instead, we feel guilty that these beautiful, innocent wild creatures were pushed to Near Threatened, Endangered categories because of human activities.

By this time, the sun was blazing, but unlike my expectations, the weather was considerably okay. That was a big plus in my Gujarat Road Trip as I was able to stay outside the entire day. I drove a bit more and spotted Eastern Imperial Eagle. He looked very majestic in that morning light and muddy ground. I had a direct eye contact with him but he was not bothered about our presence. After I had a good look at the Eastern Imperial Eagle, I decided to return back to the waterbody inside the sanctuary. I saw few more wild asses before reaching the waterbody.

The waterbody was buzzing with activity and I saw Lesser Flamingos flying here and there. I had missed Lesser Flamingos in Pulicat Lake, so, I was glad to see them here. The Pied Avocets were also in good number but I had seen them very closely earlier in Chennai Pallikarandai Marsh area. The Lesser Flamingos were as graceful as the Greater Flamingos and I really enjoyed watching them. Flamingos can never bore you.

I decided to come for evening safari, but maybe, on a different route. It was around 11 AM when we finished the morning safari, so, I dropped the guide and just roamed around to see the birds on the roadside. I had many interesting sightings on the electrical wire itself. I was hopeful that in the evening safari, I could sight more raptors as I now had a good look on the terrain. I started off to the Wild Ass Sanctuary in the



Never expected to see an Eurasian Wrenneck on an electrical line.



The Peregrine Falcon.

evening, and on the way, I had a surprise sighting. I was delighted at the sighting and excitedly continued the drive for the evening safari. But the evening turned out to be a disaster as there was slight drizzling and lightning too. I could not drive inside the sanctuary while it was raining.

So, I skipped the evening safari, and next morning, I went around the neighbourhood waterbodies. The roads were very good in few places, but suddenly all the roads disappeared and just mud paths appeared. I didn't continue with the drive, where by the looks of it, only cattle can use. This happened few times in our Gujarat Road Trip where the Google Map showed us a perfect route but there was no road in the final stretch.

So, I stuck to the proper roads and was not sorry for it. I had good sightings of Eurasian wry-neck, Humes whitethroat, Wire-tailed swallow and many other small birds on the roadsides itself. So, I explored few other roads and then started the long drive to Bhuj.

Good

Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary is spread across 4954 sq.km, which is quite big in the cadgers of Indian Sanctuaries.

Bad

Exploitation of natural resources in the form of mining.

Ugly

While exploitation of natural resources can be temporary, the damage done by water management is permanent. That will ultimately change the terrain. Even though these lands look barren, this land supports wide variety of wild beings. This water management could change everything.

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#TECHWONDER

Hydraulic Fracturing and Shale Gas

Although the controversy with fracking and shale gas is new, the technology is quite old. It was first developed by well engineers after the Second World War.

t goes by a number of names, 'hydraulic fracturing,' 'shale gas extraction,' 'hydrofracturing' or 'hydrofracking.' Not to forget the name beloved of headline writers around the world is 'fracking.' But what exactly is fracking, and why has it become such an environmental hot potato? Is it helping to save the world, or condemning it to climate chaos, or is it just perhaps a scam, stoking up a fossil-fuel financial bubble?

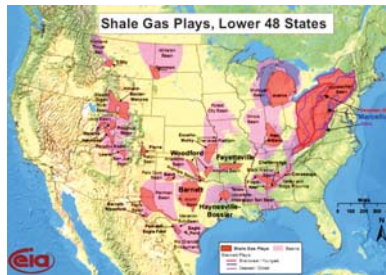
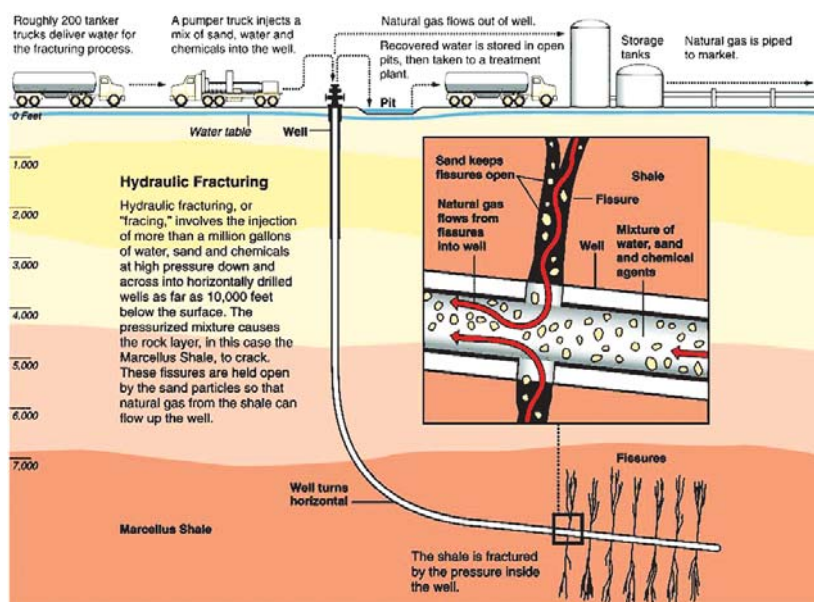
Hydraulic fracturing is the name given to a way of squeezing gas and oil out of tight rock reservoirs, places where these hydrocarbons just won't flow out naturally. So far, most of the oil and natural gas man has extracted comes out of the ground on its own accord, so called conventional plays.

It gets pooled in deeply-buried reservoirs, sponge-like rocks where it has been trapped, unable to move any further. Down there, it is also under a lot of pressure. Simply drill a well into these conventional reservoir rocks, and that pressure drives out the fossil fuels, into the well and so up to surface, such wells are understandably called 'gushers.'

But there are plenty of rocks that hold onto their gas (and occasionally oil) in tiny fractures, rather than larger pores. These 'unconventional' reservoirs are usually mudstones, buried and compressed into a hard rock that geologists call 'shale.' Drill a well into them, and nothing happens, the shale gas is locked up too tightly.

Although the controversy with fracking and shale gas is new, the technology is quite old. It was first developed by well engineers after the Second World War. It helped to get to more hydrocarbons out from some reservoirs, even using the vertical wells that companies drilled at the time. What has changed over the last decade is that new drilling technology allows long horizontal wells to be drilled, for miles along the rock layer. That and the fact that energy prices have shot through the roof.

That's particularly true in the US. Large areas of the country are underlain by thick shale deposits, including the Texas Barnett shale formation, and the Marcellus Shales stretching under New York, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. An



outbreak of shale gas fever has pockmarked swathes of these areas with thousands of wells, and boosted shale gas production from 0.4 trillion cubic feet in 2000, to nearly 5 trillion cubic feet, just 9 years later.

But whilst gas companies have eyed plentiful new resources, which have ballooned to 980 trillion cubic feet in the US, and over 6,000 trillion cubic feet worldwide, many living near to hydraulic fracking wells have simultaneously watched their water quality plummet. The num-

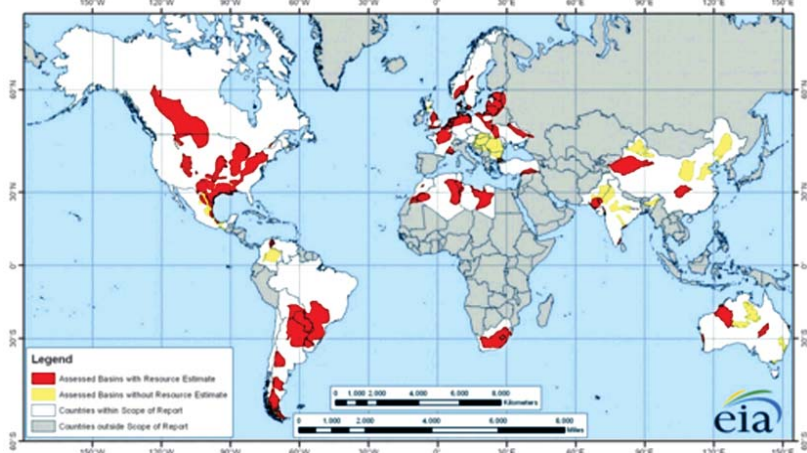
ber of environmental problems for locals has multiplied worryingly, pushing the United States' EPA into conducting a thorough review of the whole industry. Problems reported include flaming tap-water, due to methane contamination; leaks of fracking fluids into water-wells and aquifers; chemically-contaminated waste water spills into rivers; and even earthquakes. Fracking operations also use vast quantities of water, so, worries about the drawing down of scarce water resources have been expressed in places like Texas.

These local problems are magnified by more global concerns, shale gas has been marketed as a relatively clean fuel because the CO2 emissions from burning it are so much lower than for fossil fuels like coal and petroleum. Many gas companies have put forward shale gas a clean 'bridge fuel' to help ease the move to a wind- and sun-powered future. The problem is that gas is leaky, and shale gas may be doubly so. That matters because shale gas is mainly methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

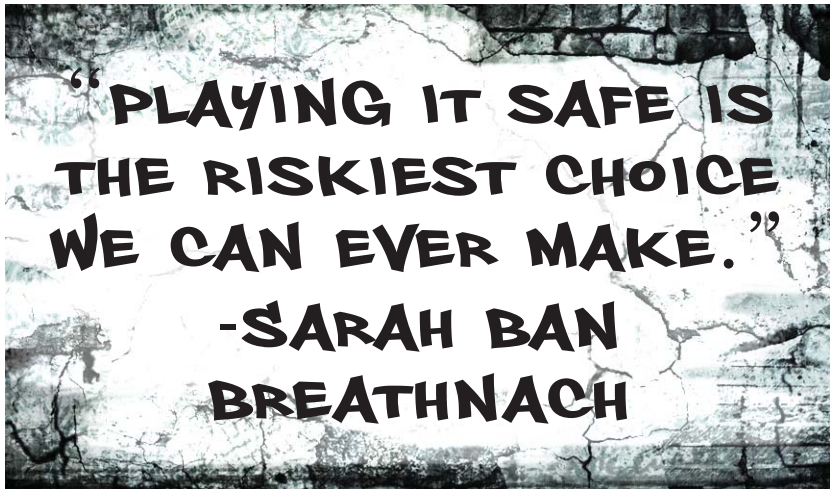
From the time the well is drilled, methane is leaking into nearby rocks, and escaping to the surface; not all of it is captured at the well-head. And gas pipes, taking the shale gas from wellhead to homes, are notoriously prone to escapes. That may put the carbon footprint of shale gas on a par with dirty coal.

Finally, there are concerns over whether the whole 'shale gas revolution' has been blown out of proportion, with the gas industry exaggerating the potential to attract investors. Many wells fail to produce anything, and even the best wells show a dramatic decline after a year, requiring more and more wells to be drilled. Because shale gas is more expensive than conventional gas to produce, a collapse in gas prices could eventually prick the shale gas boom.

So, poor economic fundamentals could come to the rescue of worried residents, and a warming planet, well before the regulators decide on how best to handle fracking, and the shale gas explosion.



THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman