

The Hornbill's Lament

What do you photographers see?
And what do your photographs tell?
Do you only see a bird on a tree?
Are you just glad the images came out well?

Do you only care for a good vantage?
And do you ever feel for our daily grind,
Or even see how far we fly to fetch
Some figs and just whatever we can find?

By now I think you should know -
That it takes three hours (could be four) -
For us hornbills to fly to and fro;
And we always have to go back for more.

If only there were some fruit trees nearby,
We'd come rushing back to our nests.
But there aren't any - and that's no lie -
So our foragings are no less than quests.



Each day I soar down to the valley,
And to the woods beyond the river,
Where I came upon a few fig trees recently
That the others have yet to discover.

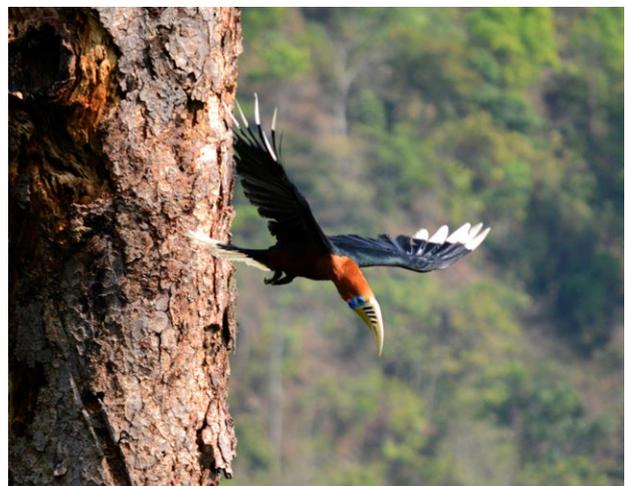
Sealed inside that birch tree is my mate
And so will she remain till May.
For she has her clutch of eggs to incubate -
And she'll do the age-old way.

I've got two beaks to feed now,
So I'm up and away at the crack of dawn.
All through the day I keep at it somehow,
And as dusk falls my day is done.

We eke out a living, but just barely -
But the villagers don't bother us none.
We do see the odd woodcutter, but only rarely,
And they leave as soon as they're done.

Our forbears came from the west -
Fleeing from man - so the old ones say.
It's said that here they stopped to rest -
And then this is where they decided to stay.

This has been our sanctuary, our home,
And it's a safe haven for others too.
But there are also predators that roam -
Martens, hawks and eagles, to name but a few.



Times are getting harder each year
In this here neck of the woods.
And each day could be the last, we fear -
For the lot of us and for our broods.

As the season changes in spring
The woods turn into battlefields for the gods.
And thunder and lightning will they bring
As their spears, shields and their swords.

Then the howling wind becomes a gale,
Rain batters the trees all through the night.
And as darkness reigns over the vale
We all hunker down to wait for first light.

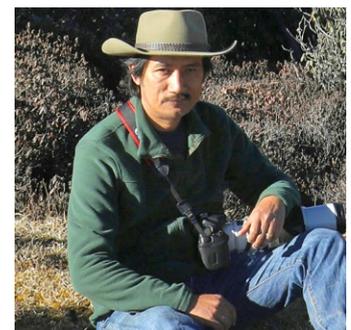
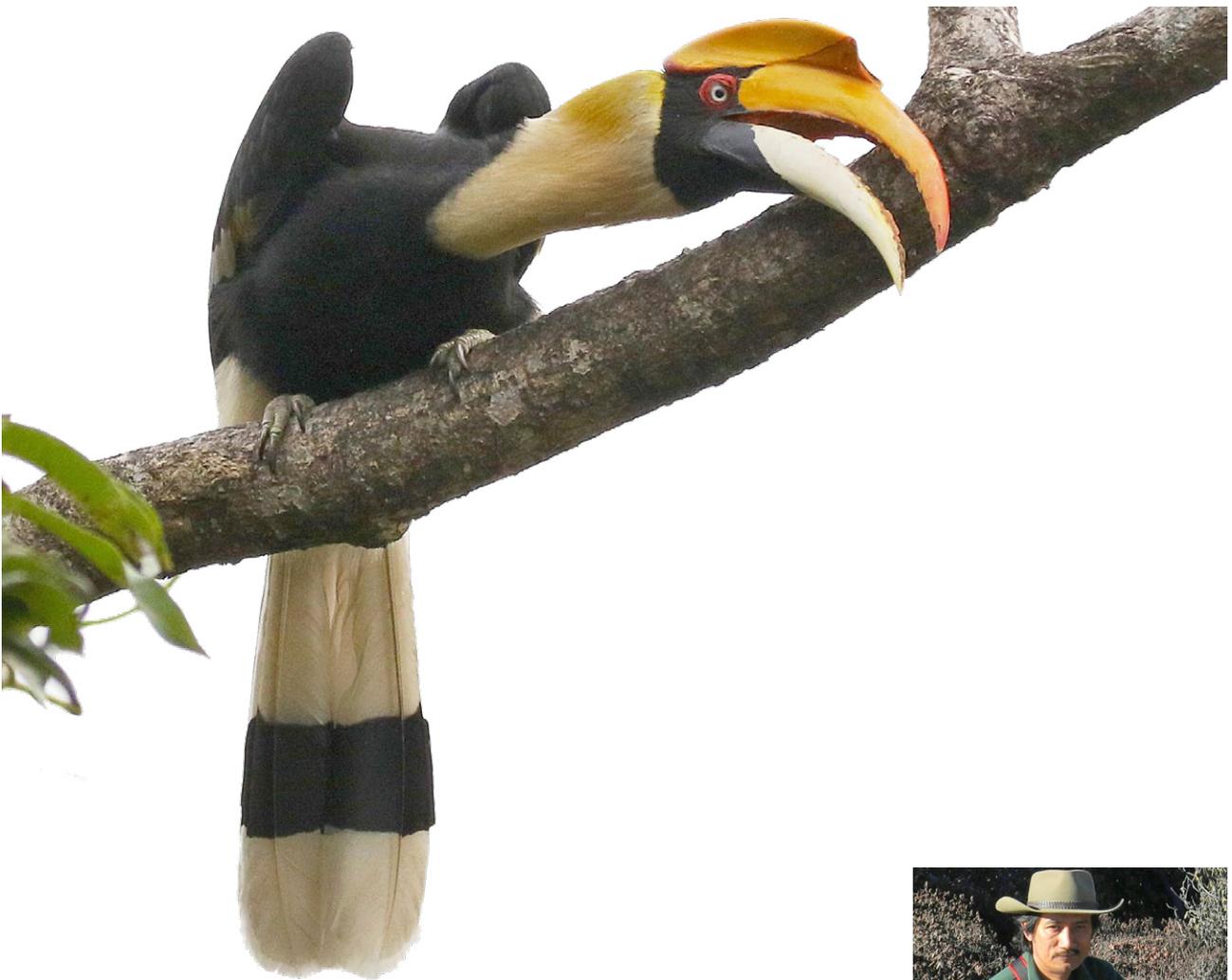
The forest counts its losses in the morn,
After the battling gods have long left.
And it's never clear who's won -
But the demise of a few leaves us bereft.

A tall needlewood, aged and gaunt,
On that ridge like a sentinel had stood.
The tree used to be a favourite haunt
And home for many a bird and their brood.

The old giant was among those that fell;
And some of us will not be there
To tell the night's harrowing tale -
But the forest will move on - as if unaware.

Did nobody tell you about our ordeal?
That some of us didn't survive?
Maybe your photographs won't reveal -
You're here only for those that are alive.

Will your photographs ever reveal?
And will no one ever stop and ask -
If there's more to a hornbill
Than its feathers, beak and its casque?



Suraj Gurung (hillrivers@gmail.com) is a Gangtok-based travel writer and bird-photographer. He is with the Sikkim State Civil Service, currently posted as Managing Director, Government Fruit Preservation Factory, Singtam in East Sikkim.