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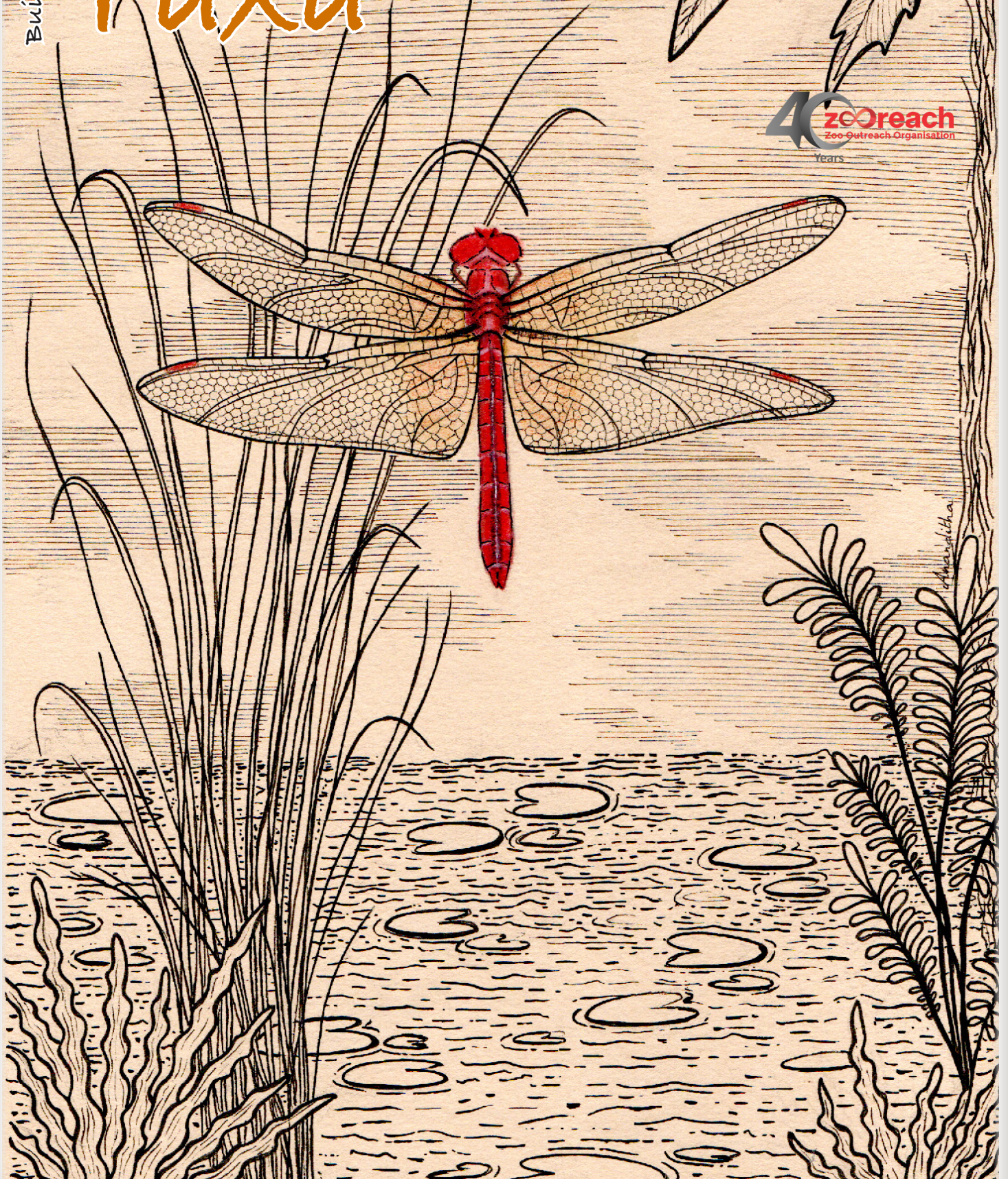
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Cover: A male Scarlet Skimmer perching on vegetation by the banks of a waterbody. Ink and watercolour illustration by Ananditha Pascal.



Crab eating crab: first record of the Horn-eyed Ghost Crab *Ocypode brevicornis* preying on the Mottled Light-footed Crab *Grapsus albolineatus* in Visakhapatnam, India

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One of the classic studies by Paine (1966) demonstrated how the keystone predator, the Ochre Sea Star *Pisaster ochraceus*, regulates species composition and maintains diversity in rocky intertidal communities. Similarly, in sandy intertidal zones, ghost crabs (genus *Ocypode*, family Ocypodidae) act as important keystone predators by influencing benthic invertebrate populations and sediment dynamics, thereby shaping the ecological structure of these habitats. These sand burrowing crabs are called ‘ghosts’ for their pale sand blending colour, their swift movement to escape threat, and their predominant nocturnal activity (Lucrezi & Schlacher 2014). All ghost crabs are morphologically characterised by their box-shaped carapace, long eye stalk, and unequally sized claws. They are distributed all across the tropics and temperate zones, from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to the eastern Pacific Ocean and the Indo-west Pacific Ocean (Sakai & Türkay 2013). Along the Indian coast, there are at least six recorded species of ghost crabs – *O. brevicornis*, *O. ceratophthalmus*, *O. cordimana*, *O. macrocera*, *O. pallidula*, and *O. rotundata* (Sakai & Türkay 2013; Lucrezi & Schlacher 2014). Of the six, we have observed at least three species in Rushikonda

Beach, Visakhapatnam – *O. brevicornis* (Image 1), *O. macrocera*, and *O. cordimana*.

Ghost crabs play a key role in the intertidal ecosystem. The burrowing activity of crabs on the sandy shores causes bioturbation, mixing sediments and thereby influencing nutrient cycling and overall ecosystem functioning (Dubey et al. 2013; An et al. 2021). Moreover, ghost crabs serve as a key link in intertidal food webs, functioning as apex invertebrate consumers and scavengers while also serving as prey for vertebrates. Their diet ranges from the microscopic organic materials, to macroscopic dendrites of seaweeds and seagrass, animal carcasses beached on the shore, and live invertebrate & vertebrate prey that the crabs can catch and handle (Lucrezi & Schlacher 2014; Vale et al. 2022). Initially, assumed to be predominantly scavengers, there is increasing evidence that ghost crabs are significant apex predators that hunt and feed in the intertidal zone (Wolcott 1978; Kwon et al. 2018; Yong & Lim 2019). They are known to actively prey on clams, gastropods, annelid worms, isopods, shrimps, various kinds of insects, and eggs & young ones of nesting birds and turtles (Lucrezi & Schlacher 2014). They are also known to prey on other crabs such as hermit crabs

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Image 1. Horn-eyed Ghost Crab *Ocypode brevicornis* at the sandy section of Rushikonda Beach, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. © Harish Prakash.



Image 2. Mottled Light-footed Crab *Grapsus albolineatus* at rocky section of Rushikonda Beach, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. © Harish Prakash.



Image 3. *Ocypode brevicornis* handling *Grapsus albolineatus* (side view) at Rushikonda Beach, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. © Harish Prakash.

(family Paguroidea), mole crabs (Hippidae), fiddler crabs (Ocypodidae), box crabs (Calappidae), portunid crabs (Portunidae), sentinel crabs (Macrophthalmidae), and ghost crabs (Branco et al. 2010; Chartosia et al. 2010).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first documented observation of the *O. brevicornis* actively handling a *G. albolineatus* (family: Grapsidae) (Image 3 & 4). This observation made at Rushikonda Beach, Visakhapatnam, on April 2025 is unique since the *O. brevicornis* is usually found only on the sandy section

of the beach, while the *G. albolineatus* is found in the rocky section (Image 2). This natural history observation highlights the sand-dwelling ghost crabs' possible foray into the rocky sections of the intertidal zone as a part of their nocturnal foraging activity. Such predator-prey interaction might be restricted to areas of the beach where rocky and sandy habitats co-occur within the intertidal zone.

Ghost crabs are generalists and opportunistic feeders, with their diet depends on local prey availability and seasonal variation (Vale et al. 2022). Given the wide geographical distribution of *O. brevicornis* along the Indian coast, dietary patterns likely vary spatially. Such differences in marine predator-prey interactions might also arise from the impact of disturbance to the intertidal ecosystem in the form of pollution (Johnston & Roberts 2009) and climate change (Harley 2011). Studies in the future, should systematically examine the diet of apex invertebrate predators like ghost crabs. Such studies will improve our understanding of predator-prey interactions and their spatio-temporal variation along the coast. It also helps infer the impact of such interactions on intertidal community dynamics and broader marine ecosystem functioning.

Ethical statement: This observation was based solely on animals in their natural habitat. No manipulation or disturbance was caused to them during the observation except for the brief headlamp light and flash from the camera. Therefore, no ethical approval was required.



Image 4. *Ocypode brevicornis* handling *Grapsus albolineatus* (top view) at Rushikonda Beach, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. © Harish Prakash.

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