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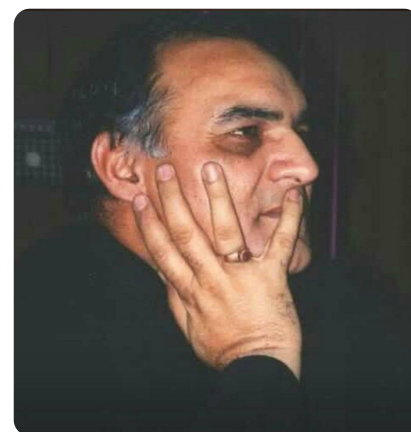
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Remembering Vinod Rishi, IFS (1946–2026)

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The passing of Vinod Rishi, IFS, closes a chapter in the conservation history of India. A 1969 batch officer of the West Bengal cadre, he was among the tallest names in what I call the second generation of wildlife managers that inherited the legacy of the first generation of independent India's conservation-focussed officers such as Kailash Sankhala, SR Choudhury, PD Stracey, SP Shahi, and others.

The first IIT engineer to become an IFS officer, Vinod Rishi was an out-and-out naturalist at heart. An old-world field officer who was much more at ease walking and camping through the forests than being in an office, he served with distinction in both field postings in West Bengal and the highest offices influencing policy at the Union level. As a manager of some of the most important Protected Areas of West Bengal, namely the Sundarban Tiger Reserve, Buxa Tiger Reserve, Singalila National Park, Neora Valley National Park, and Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, he left each of these PAs stronger than he found them. Few know that the novel experiment of having Sundarban's fishermen wear face masks on the back of their heads to protect them from tigers was his brainchild. Given his engineering background, it was perhaps unsurprising that he pioneered the use of satellite imagery for forest mapping in India. As the Director of the Darjeeling Zoo, he was among the first officers to highlight the importance of transforming zoos from mere captive wildlife viewing places to institutions for conservation breeding of endangered wildlife. This led to the first captive breeding programme for snow leopards in Southeast Asia, and the Red Panda Conservation Programme in Singalila National Park.



Vinod Rishi, IFS
(18 December 1946 - 29 July 2026)

In the later years of his career, he moved from field conservation to steering wildlife policy in Delhi. He served in the Central Zoo Authority, became the inaugural Director of Project Elephant and served as the Additional Director General (Wildlife). He was also instrumental in establishing the Wildlife Institute of India's forensic wing. Equally important was the pivotal role he played in securing India's ban on the harvesting of sea cucumbers, demonstrating a willingness to stand up even for the least celebrated of species when conservation demanded it.

However, beyond being a legendary forester, Vinod Rishi was one of the finest teachers I have ever known. He would often recount to me that one of his gurus was the remarkable naturalist-teacher and author Srinidhi Siddhantalankar, and it was walks undertaken in the Shivalik forests with the old Srinidhi during his college years that convinced him to apply for the Indian Forest Service. Some of his other gurus were pioneering forest officers such as SR Choudhury and Kailash Sankhala. And so, when the time came, he became a generation of foresters and wildlife biologists what these gurus were once to him. He became the founding faculty member of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and then went on to serve as Director of the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy.

Vinod Rishi retired in 2006, but his love for wildlife and the great outdoors continued to grow, as did his passion for encouraging and guiding youngsters. He settled in a

modest house close to the forests in Dehradun, and often delivered guest lectures for students at the Wildlife Institute of India and the Forest Research Institute. He would welcome any interested youngster with open arms.

I first got to know him around 2011 as an engineering student, and in a strange coincidence of life coming full circle, a senior Rishi had now taken on the role of guru to another young engineering student. He shared all his incredible wealth of knowledge with me over the past fifteen years. We would discuss everything under the sun, from the nitty-gritties of studying tiger pugmarks to stories of foresters from another era, and from the behaviour of elephants in the wild and snow leopards in captivity to the lost world of field forestry, forest bungalows and so on. His encouragement meant the world to me. He would read everything I wrote with fatherly enthusiasm, and was always gracious and generous in his feedback. This continued right until his last days, and one of our last exchanges was in fact about an article I had written. Given his love for elephants, he was especially excited about this monograph, and would tell me how much he was looking forward to it. I only wish he were here to read it. This monograph is dedicated to his memory.

A gifted footballer who played in the Durand Cup, he was also a talented painter, musician, and writer. His prose carried the distinct old-world charm of the forester-writers of yore, underpinned by a deep understanding of natural history and a profound love for the forests. I would implore everyone with even a remote interest in our wildlife and forests to pick up a copy of his book *Whispers from the Wild*, which was published just a few months before his passing.

His sudden passing has left hundreds of foresters, students and wildlife lovers across India shocked and heartbroken. I am one of them. Yet I take solace in the fact that he did what he loved the most until his last days. Moreover, men like him never really die. They live on, becoming part of what he used to call *Whispers from the Wild*.