



The joys of bird watching

Winged Fire: A Celebration of Indian Birds

Edited by Valmik Thapar

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BRINDA DATTA

For a birder, receiving a copy of *Winged Fire: A Celebration of Indian Birds* is an invitation to a covered feast, both for the eyes and the soul — a smorgasbord of scrumptious photographs, archival paintings and etchings and delectable tidbits of bird lore from five centuries of watching birds.

The third in a trilogy on Indian wildlife edited by Valmik Thapar after *Tiger Fire* and *Wild Fire*, *Winged Fire* is a befitting celebration of the 1400 bird species — about a sixth of the world's birds — that inhabit the subcontinent. The anthology is a mix of original writing and photographs and a selection of published writing and illustrations presented in three sections: 'Bird Quest' comprising an Introduction by Thapar and an overview by ace bird photographer Ramki Sreenivasan of the richness of Indian birdlife and what threatens it; 'Encounters with Birds', which forms the bulk of the book, includes extracts of the best writing and art on birds and 'Winged Fire', a gallery of exceptional photographs taken by some of the country's best photographers.

The reason why the subcontinent is blessed with such a multitude of bird species is its array of habitats, which both Thapar and Sreenivasan give us a taste of in their birding forays: from rainforests in Kerala to cloud forests in Arunachal Pradesh, from the arid swaths of the Thar desert to the mangroves of the Sunderbans ("the largest mangrove ecosystem in the world"); from less than five metres above sea level in the Rann of Kutch to the dizzying heights of the Himalayas; from wetlands like Bharatpur and Chilika to the grasslands of Kaziranga and lush forests of the Anamalais and Nagaland.

Thapar talks about his growing enchantment with birds from his childhood in Delhi when white-backed vultures, now driven to near extinction, nested in the silver oaks in his garden, to an unforgettable trip to Bharatpur as a teenager and later watching the amazing birdlife in Ranthambore as he waited for elusive tigers. It was here that his fascination for crows developed, because their cawing was indicative of a tiger kill and led to tiger sightings, including one of *nine* tigers feeding on a nilgai.

Sreenivasan takes you on an exhilarating journey to some of his

favourite birding haunts in India, recounting his most cherished birding moments involving some of the rarest birds in the country. It is no surprise that the majority of these are in the biodiversity hotspots of the Northeast. So in Assam you have him photographing the elaborate mating display of the rare Bengal florican in Manas; the vulnerable black-breasted parrot bill in Dibru-Saikhowa; the endangered white-winged wood duck of which only about a thousand survive in the "holy grail for birders" Nameri. On to Eaglenest in Arunachal Pradesh and Sela Pass, which he ranks his "single best birding trip", famous for

some of the most colourful birds — tragopans, pheasants, flowerpeckers, yuhinas and the "most colourful bird in the country" Mrs Gould's sunbird. It is here that Ramana Athreya had discovered a new bird in 1995 named *Bugun liocichla* after the Bugun tribe of the area.

What adds to Sreenivasan's account, told in an easy, conversational style, are the little details he gives you of how he photographed the birds ("My standard rig for the Northeast bird photography is a lighter 500 mm lens mounted on a monopod.") and insights that reaffirm how difficult taking that perfect bird picture is. In pursuit of scimitar

babblers at Eaglenest he says, "after a 45 minute cross-country chase in dwarf bamboo, I finally got a few frames at close range."

In 'Encounters with Birds' you get a history of recording birds in India from the time of the Mughals who wrote "the first narratives of hunting, observing and rearing of birds", to the coming of the British in the 18th century and their love for shikar, through to the 20th century where the narrative changed to conservation and living with birds with evocative pieces of writing from naturalists and birders like Allan Hume, Douglas Dewar, EP Gee, Hugh Allen, Malcolm MacDonald, Salim Ali, M Krishnan and Zafar Futehally, among a host of others.

Here's a lovely anecdote from the ornithologist and writer Frank Finn (1868-1932):

Some years back, a new Viceroy was being shown the wonders of his temporary kingdom, and among these the Taj at Agra held, of course, an important place. Arrived before the glorious monument of Eastern love and pride, 'the articles Aide-de-Camp was mute; the gilded staff were still' as Kipling says, in anxious expectation of the comment of His Excellency. But this, alas! When it came was merely the remark: 'What are those funny little birds?' The shock must have been greater for the fact that the mean fowls thus honoured were, it seems, of that singularly disreputable species which is commonly known in India as the 'Seven Sisters' or 'Seven Brothers', or by Hindustani equivalent of *sat-bhai*. In books it gets called the Jungle Babbler, the first part of the name being inappropriate, for it is to be found everywhere, and the last singularly happy, for it does babble with a vengeance.

Contributions from Akbar's chronicler Abu'l-Fazl talk about 'Ishqbazi', the art of pigeon flying, feeding hawks and falconry. While the Mughals were passionate about rearing and training pigeons and raptors for hunting, the Brits, it seems, preferred parakeets. There is a delightful account of Hugh Allen's pet parakeet Plumleigh who was taught to say "sonofabitch" and J Moray Brown mentions "...they were a great favourite with British soldiers. When I came home from India with my regiment we had 900 parakeets on board, and the row they made at times was deafening." I remember being startled by screeching parakeets in London once — were they the descendents of those immigrants from a century ago?

A practice that seems to have survived through the ages from Akbar's time to the 1900s is a method of catching ducks which involved a trapper getting into their midst neck-deep in water, wearing an earthen pot with holes or a decoy duck made of skin over his head, seizing the unsuspecting duck by its legs and dragging it under water.

Much debate rages within these pages on which bird is the best for the table. William Rice feels it is the florican "being decidedly as game in taste as they are in look". Frank B Simson claims the black-breasted khalij is "the very best upon table of all Indian game; it beats the floriken (sic), and surpasses the Scotch grouse"; and Monica Martin says, "At the top of our list went green pigeon and jungle

murghi (wild chicken). Green pigeon stuffed with olives and served like wild teal with port wine sauce was a dish for the gods."

Accounts of royal shoots do leave you quite sickened by the sheer numbers massacred. During the Maharaja of Bikaner's two-day State Shoot in February 1929 "4,781 imperial grouse were shot in the first day and 5,709 birds on the following".

I do have a few grouses of my own. The only reference given on the page with the extract is the year of publication of the book it was taken from. So a passage from the *Baburnama* on catching birds in Babur's empire has the year 2002. Quite odd and misleading! The reader would have been much better served if information on the author and his lifetime were given instead, so that one did not have to constantly refer to the back of a 486-page book for it. One also misses captions to many of the photographs in the opening pages and indeed to all the wonderful art in the book which go without attributions throughout.

The last section has some truly spectacular photographs capturing all sorts of bird behaviour. There are action shots: various raptors going in for the kill; Indian darters about to swallow their catch; a great hornbill about to land. There are close-ups of birds that bedazzle with their plumage like the male fire-tailed sunbird, pheasants, silver-eared mesia and the mangrove pitta. There are unusual pictures like the bronze-winged jacana



A coppersmith barbet and a jungle myna face-off. Photograph by Ramki Sreenivasan

carrying her chicks in her feathers, with only their ungainly legs showing, and my favourite — an underwater shot by Kiran Poonacha of Wyanaad mahseer swimming past the legs of a mallard.

Aleph has set the benchmark for illustrated books with elegant design, judicious picture selection and excellent

printing, and in *Winged Fire* they have produced another gem — though gems, as we all know, are expensive.

When dreary daily national headlines drive one to despair, books like *Winged Fire* remind us of just how lucky we are to live in a country with such natural wealth. To quote the naturalist and

photographer FW Champion: "What more can we want to complete the perfect picture of India as she really is to those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to get away from the teeming cities...What more can anyone to whom the lure of the jungle has any real meaning desire?" ■



The great hornbill. Photograph by Shefiq Basbeer Abammed

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