

Sinning by a bird book

Lt. General (Retd) Baljit Singh

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I recently chanced upon a book in the headquarters Western Command library at Chandimandir—‘*A company of birds*’, by Loke Van Tho, published in January 1958. It was the type of find you quickly want to take home, drop down on your favourite reading chair and then open one page at a time, deliberately.

But in the instant case I remained glued to the title page itself, which carried a citation, “Col Baljit Singh, with kind regards”, in the hand of and signed by the world-renowned “Sálim Ali. 12.xi.63.”

Sálim Ali was known to be most frugal with money and gifts. So obviously his inscription would only be in the nature of a very special autograph. And the recipient of that generosity had to be at the least, a congenial bird-watcher to have so won Sálim Ali’s esteem.

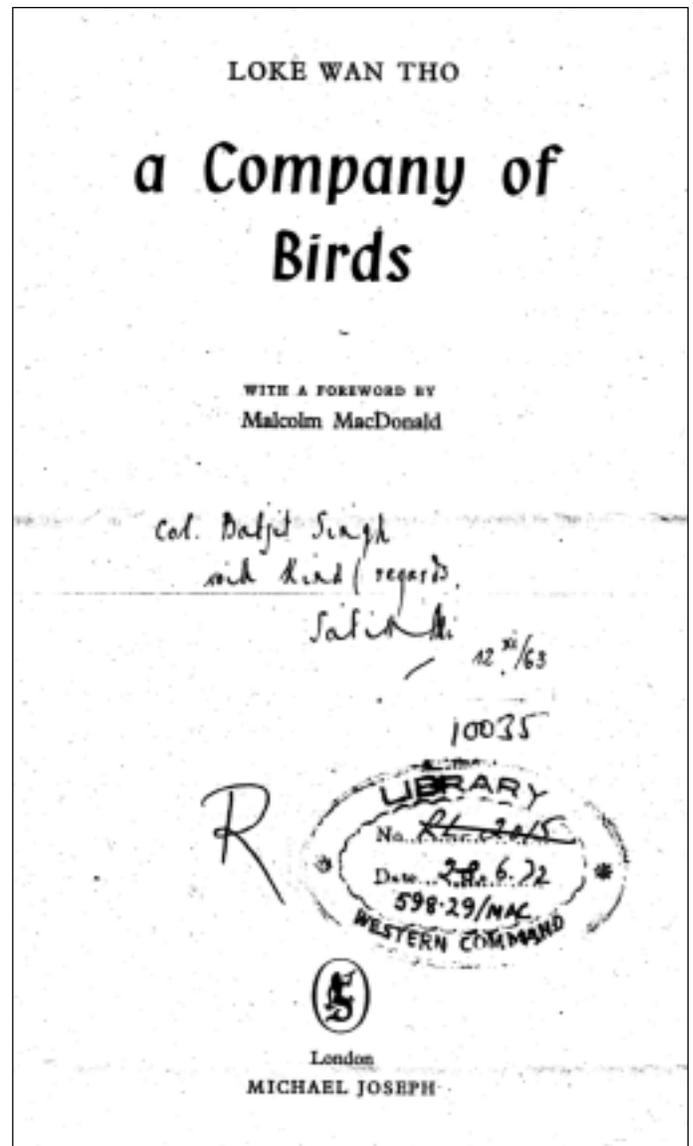
So far so good, but then who was this colonel? The thought nagged me for days. And then an evil thought crossed my mind: “why not claim the book ostensibly lost in 1972?”

It was a sinful thought, no doubt, but the very next moment, I did summon courage and command, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”

The book has since been shifted to the reference section, never again to leave the sanctuary of the library!

The title, ‘*A company of birds*’, leaves nothing in suspense about the subject matter; except whether the presentation be in the narrative or visual format? Happily for the reader, it presents a perfect blend of the two crafts. The upper half page is given to a photograph followed by description and at times an anecdote relating to the bird or to the travails of bird photography. For instance the temperature inside a ‘hide’ could be touching 45°C and humidity at 90 per cent; or driven to play mind games with an inquisitive cobra that chooses to climb up the camera tripod just when it was time to capture the bird on the film! And on offer is some of Loke’s best output from regions as far apart as Kashmir, Singapore and New Guinea.

Bird photography by Loke and, later, his wife Christina, was to place them among the world’s outstanding photographers. Loke’s black and white images of the nesting White-bellied Sea Eagles in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* will remain the finest ever. And Christina’s coloured, full page images to support the text of ‘*Birds in my garden*’ by Sir Malcolm Macdonald (the British High Commissioner) in his residence at New Delhi was an instant best-seller in the 1960s.



This passion for and perfection of photography would be understandable from a person whose life’s calling it was. But it would place a practitioner of this art form in the class of ‘Great Masters’ particularly when the product was “the result of the holidays and leisure hours of a businessman”(!), as stated by Loke in the introduction.

Loke was the scion of the family that owned large rubber-plantations and tin-mines in Malaya. He was schooled in Switzerland from where he moved to the Cambridge

University. He fled Singapore barely hours before the Japanese occupation in 1942. Unfortunately, a day later, the Japanese targeted the ship and Loke suffered sixty percent body burns. A doctor told him, "I want to put Atropin in your eyes; you will certainly go blind if I do not but there is still a chance if I do" Loke could muster just enough strength to say, "Go ahead and put the stuff in." And in the spirit of the Biblical injunction "Let there be light," a week later, his vision began mending as also the body skin!

By now he was a refugee in India. As luck would have it, his school teacher from Switzerland, Jack Gibson, was also teaching in India. One evening Gibson invited Loke to a dinner where Sálím Ali was the other guest. They took to each other at first sight and as they say, "the rest is history"!

When the war ended Loke Van Tho returned to

Singapore, resurrected the family business and on the sidelines also created some of the finest avian photo-art, and also moved into the exclusive club of the world's billionaires—all in his own lifetime.

I have at last succeeded in tracking the enigmatic 'Col Baljit Singh' to the 8th Light Cavalry Regiment. He was an instructor at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla, when in 1963 he befriended Sálím Ali to help inculcate among the cadets the love of the outdoors. The colonel's daughter (the wife of a fellow General Officer) has vividly recollected Sálím Ali's visits to their bungalow on the NDA campus. And the Colonel's widow gifted some of his books to the HQ Western Command library.

Hopefully, the Colonel, the Van Thos and Sálím Ali have formed a bird-watchers club in Valhalla.

— Correspondence —

Sighting of a partially albino Red-wattled Lapwing Vanellus indicus in Udaipur, Rajasthan

We would like to report the sighting of a partial albino Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* from Udaipur, Rajasthan. On the 27th of July 2007 we saw a strange white-coloured plover on the edge of a flooded field on the outskirts of Udaipur,

Rajasthan. On closer observation we realised that it was a partially albino Red-wattled Lapwing (Fig. 1), which had white on its upper parts and breast, instead of bronze-brown and black, respectively.

We believe that albinism or partial albinism has not been reported for this species from India earlier.

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Fig. 1. Partially albino Red-wattled Lapwing.

Errata

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Please read Indian Bushlark *Mirafra erythroptera* instead of Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra affinis*, on p. 68, column one, line 3.