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– Aasheesh Pittie



Thomas Hardwicke was a lad of nineteen, when in 1778 he disembarked at the Princep Jetty, Calcutta, as an Artillery cadet in the Bengal Presidency Army. Like the average British school boy, Hardwicke may well have indulged in the hobby of collecting bird's nests and eggs but nothing could have prepared him for the impact that the rich chorus of bird-song and the gorgeously plumaged birds make on the first "arrivals" to Indian shores. That cadet Hardwicke was certainly smitten by Indian birds for life becomes abundantly clear from the fact that the first ever book, devoted exclusively to India's natural history, stands attributed to him. The *Illustrations Of Indian Zoology: chiefly from the collection of Major General Thomas Hardwicke*, published by the British Museum of Natural History, in 1830–1834 in two volumes, was a tribute to the abiding empathy that soldiers develop for flora and fauna around them. Now almost two hundred years later, the 19 Infantry Division stationed in the Srinagar Valley since 1947 (commanded by the likes of the Late General Thimmaya, D S O), has published a large format pictorial guide show-casing the symbiotic relationship between soldiers and the birds in their vicinity.

Fortunately for Indian natural science, Hardwicke's legacy became a passion with six other Indian Army officers who followed in his wake, and in particular with Major T. C. Jerdon, a surgeon in the Madras Presidency Army. Jerdon's *Birds of India* (2 vols., 3 parts) published in 1862–1864 covered 1008 species, and remains an incredible achievement, earning him the sobriquet, 'Father of Indian Ornithology!' In the manner of Hardwicke, Jerdon also employed the most accomplished artists from Bengal for illustrating his collection, in watercolour, with fetching results. One Jerdon folio of 50 Indian Birds is rendered in such exquisite colours and minute detail that it is simply beyond monetary reach today!

Some 70 years later, when compact cameras suited for outdoors photography became available, Lieut Colonel RSP Bates of the 1st Royal Jat Regiment would use one extensively and with good effect, resulting in his book, *Bird-Life in India* (1931), the first of its kind! Bates next shifted his focus from the plains to the

Kashmir Valley and the fruit of his efforts was the excellent book, *Breeding Birds of Kashmir* (1952), covering 211 species, as also a few breath-taking landscapes. Both books are all times classics, and most deservedly, Bates emerged as the 'Father of Indian Bird Photography!'

Through a providential coincidence, another 70 years would elapse before Lieut Colonel Rohit Gupta, a Corps of Engineers Officer, would arrive in the *avatar* of Bates. However, unlike Bates who spent 12 months of leave spread over six years in the Valley, in pursuit of his objective, Rohit mostly chanced upon birds randomly, as he soldiered through 2010 into 2011. For instance, I received a compact disc once, with five images of the Himalayan Woodpecker, two of which are spread on pages 54 and 55 of the book under review. I was amused when over the telephone he told me with a chuckle, "I was talking to my Commanding Officer, when I heard the "tap-tap-tap" sound from the tree above us. I excused myself, looked up, and got these photographs!" My compliments to his Commanding Officer for indulging Rohit's passion. Be that as it may, both enthusiasts exhibited ample sensitive understanding of bird behavior and extraordinary skills to freeze the image where the bird's personality appears at its best. Where Rohit may be faulted is for including in the book, the images of the fledglings of the Yellow-billed Blue Magpie and of the Blue Whistling Thrush, which were yet to acquire their full adulthood plumage. I find no other blemish.

The book follows the accepted format, used by the leading practitioners of this discipline the world over in recent times; a glossary of terms used and a concise descriptive text of each species. But unlike the contemporary publications, this book carries the visuals of the male as well as the female where their plumage differs from each other distinctly. Yet another interesting feature is the historical peep into the days of wildlife abundance in the Valley, a brief on the five wildlife sanctuaries in the region, and a chapter on the gradual shift from trophy hunting to wildlife conservation, and from the sporting-gun, to the camera.

The bibliography shows how well the text was researched which will surely merit the book's inclusion among the current ornithological literature. And Lieut Colonel Rohit Gupta emerges as an outstanding, amateur Naturalist whose sensitivities reach out to the birds he encounters. This quality is implicit in including Muriel Brown's poem "Birdlife In Kashmir", 1921 and indeed in concluding the book with Robert Lynd's profound observation:

"There is nothing in which the birds differ from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before".

–Lieut General (Retd) Baljit Singh