

Review



Birds in my Indian garden

By Malcolm MacDonald

Hardback (13 x 19 cm), pp. 260

Price: Rs. 299/-

A classic on a few common Indian birds reprinted

As I read the brief review, of the reprint, of Malcolm MacDonald's book "Birds in My Indian Garden", in the Sunday supplement of *The Tribune* (Spectrum, 22 November 2015), my memory flashed back to a most pleasant, and totally unanticipated encounter in May 1962 with an affable diplomat who was an avid bird watcher, too. Although the Indian Subcontinent had evolved with a rich bounty of avian species (almost 1,300), our bird-enthusiasts had remained starved of illustrated guides for ease of pinning the identity of the bird spotted, till Sir Malcolm MacDonald's arrival as the British High Commissioner to India, and moving in to a bungalow in Lutyen's Delhi, with spacious lawns, fringed by shrubs and screened by flowering trees, which together constituted an ideal habitat for the roosting and breeding of birds in that locality. Of course, we had had since long the "Popular Handbook of Indian Birds" by Hugh Whistler (1928), followed by Salim Ali's "The Book of Indian Birds" (1941), but they were essentially textual narratives supported by few sketches, whereas Sir Malcolm's was among the first (perhaps, the first in the genre of photo-guides) in India to break fresh ground (a) by providing a full page black and white photograph of most resident birds figuring in his book, and (b) more importantly, a narrative so vivid and lively that birds literally hop and flit off the book's pages as opposed to mere taxonomical entities; it became an instant favourite.

My meeting with Sir Malcolm was simply a lucky chance as he happened to be transitting to Laos (on a mission to persuade the three estranged princes to put aside differences, and conflicting ambitions, to cobble up a liberal government so that the extremist Khmers could be kept at bay), with a brief stop at Delhi. On my part, I had at that moment returned after leading a successful mission to forestall Chinese incursion in the Barahoti plain (the disputed alignment in the Central Sector), and in the course of a debriefing at South Block, it was decided that I should attend the reception scheduled at Prime Minister Nehru's residence that evening (for felicitating the Indian team that had attempted to summit Everest, albeit unsuccessfully), where Mr Sarin, the Defence Secretary (also the President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation) would introduce me to the PM, and

also discreetly whisper about the success of "Showing the Flag" mission to Barahoti.

Surprised by the proposal, I was full of trepidation, but not for long; the warm handshake, and genial smile of Mr Nehru, and the effervescing presence of Smt Indira Gandhi by his side, at once revived my self confidence. Like other invitees, I too drifted to pick up a drink and noticed Lieutenant General Sir Harold Williams, OBE, the erstwhile Engineer-in-Chief of the Indian Army in an animated conversation with a gentleman whom he addressed as 'Malcolm', and their talk centred on bird-life in and around Delhi. General Williams was a man of many parts; besides being a distinguished soldier, he was an accomplished yachtsman (Founder President of Okhala Sailing Club, Delhi), keen mountaineer (leader of the successful first Indian ascent of Kamet, scaled by Major Nandu Jayal of the Sappers), and a dyed-in-the-wool ornithologist who had joined hands with Mr Salim Ali to call on Prime Minister Nehru, and have the extensive marshes of Bharatpur notified as the Koeladeo Ghana Water-birds Sanctuary, for posterity.

Shortly, the General was crowded by the Everest team when I summoned courage to walk up to Sir Malcolm, and tell him as to how much I had enjoyed the account of his teaming up with Loke Wan Tho for photographing the White-Bellied Sea Eagles, from atop a 120 foot high tower, especially erected inside the compound of the British High Commissioner's Residence at Singapore. And that High Commissioner too was none else but Sir Malcolm MacDonald!

Sir Malcolm appeared amused, and proceeded to recount how fearfully that tower had swayed in the breeze, and his wife had warned Wan that, "*If anything happens to my husband when these crazy things are going on, I shall have to blame you!*" Wan was perhaps the richest man of South-East Asia, as he was the sole owner of his family's monopoly over all rubber plantations, and tin mines in Malaya, but his passion, and chief relaxation lay in bird photography, almost always in the company of his wife, Christina, who too was an acclaimed avian photographer. And they possessed cameras that were custom-built to their demands by the world's best manufacturers—Hasselblad of Sweden. Wan's scouts scanned the outskirts of Singapore daily to report bird sightings, and once a bird caught his fancy, the couple spared neither money nor effort (despite demands of his business) to handle their cameras. However, in the instant case, it was Wan, and Sir Malcolm who had paired up, and persisted over ten consecutive days to obtain five images which became "viral" hits, the world over.

Sir Malcolm was in his element now, and enquired whether I had come across his book "Birds in My Indian Garden". and chuckled when I mentioned that I had a copy, and that I admired the manner the book opens with a gallant expression, "*This book is made beautiful by the illustrations by Christina Loke. They adorn my poor prose with lovely touches of poetry...I believe this volume will establish her securely in the front rank of those who practice the extremely difficult but brilliantly rewarding art of photographing wild birds.*" Of course the 'poor prose' was typical of British under-statement as becomes evident by his inimitable descriptions; take for instance that of the Golden Oriole's plumage, "*No Emperor was ever more regally robed*".

The diplomat that he was, Sir Malcolm restrained his pen from telling his readers that Christina would have been a permanent Miss Universe, only if it had entered her mind to simply once step upon that pageant's stage! At another occasion, and in another book, Sir MacDonald had written, "*such activity by any woman would have aroused curiosity amongst the incorrigibly inquisitive Indians, but that she should be a Chinese female greatly magnified their astonishment. The peasants were amazed that an exquisite, sylph-like girl with strange, slanting black eyes and an ivory complexion should climb the rickety ladder to a lofty hide and sit all day alone there, contemplating only a bird's nest a few feet away – like some particularly eccentric and unusually beautiful Sadhu. Her fame spread and in bucolic gossip she became a sort of legendary figure...*"

But her temperament was as fiery as her figure was beautiful, and that marriage had ended in a bitter divorce; Wan having to pay her alimony of over one thousand pounds Sterling. Of course that did not diminish Wan's love for ornithology, as shortly after he had sent a hefty cheque to his dear friend Salim Ali to buy a station wagon to help with his field surveys in India, accompanied with a note, "*do let me know if this will suffice because there is more credit, where this came from*". In hind-sight, I think this is what philanthropy was truly meant to be.

The affable diplomat then mentioned how gracious Mr Nehru had been to permit Christina unlimited access to photograph a white-eye nesting in his compound, "*where the little bird sat hatching two eggs while the Prime Minister sat in his study a hundred yards away conducting the highest affairs of state*". And he elaborates, "*One of my favourite birds is the white-eye. It is a dapper little creature measuring only four inches long from the tip of its beak to the end of its tail, and its colouring is pleasing. Its upper body is golden-yellow tinged with green, parts of its wings are dark brown, its chin and throat are bright yellow, its breast is light grey, and the yellow motif is repeated on its abdomen. But its most distinguishing mark is a white ring round each eye, which gives it the appearance of wearing a pair of white horn-rimmed spectacles*". And the current reprint's cover is adorned by an outstanding colour photograph of a white-eye. Regrettably, the reprint is in the "economy" class, sans any other visual, and I am particularly disappointed that readers would not see another species which occupied "*the domain of my good neighbour, General Thimayya...*".

The reception ended after forty-five minutes, to the dot, but imagine my joy when Sir Malcolm walked up to me and invited me to travel with him to the British Embassy's guest suite where he was lodged, and have a look at (a) his album of Christina Loke's great many, eye-catching bird photographs, and (b) his soon to be released second book "Birds in the sun", a sequel to his first, but with a huge difference, that is, illustrations by Christina in breath-stopping colour photographs. And that is when I also learnt that during that single assignment, Christina had shot more than four thousand images, of which, the pick (about eighty in black and white, and over fifty in colour, only!) were used by Sir Malcolm in his two bird books. As I turned the album-leaves, he talked of many related details. I had never known such courtesy, before. 🐦

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Letter to the Editor

Sightings of Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* from Ranthambhore area, Sawai Madhopur District, Rajasthan, India

The Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* is an endemic bird of the Indian Subcontinent. It is a fairly common winter visitor to peninsular India (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011) but has been rarely documented from Ranthambhore or its adjoining areas in Rajasthan. Andheria (2000) has reported the Tickell's Thrush as 'rare' from Ranthambhore.

On 07 November 2012, a myna-sized grey bird, similar to a *Turdus* thrush, was sighted foraging in the leaf litter under the manicured shrubs of *Putranjiva* sp., in the garden of a hotel touching the boundary of Ranthambhore National Park (26.01°N, 76.38°E; c. 277 m asl), at a distance of c. three to five metres from PP. The bird was observed for around 15 mins, and was photographed [61]. It had a uniform olive-grey back, with slight scalation on the mantle, and a white belly, with light streaking on the throat, chest, and flanks. The bird also featured a yellow-coloured eye-ring. The beak was blackish, with a yellow gape. The legs were pale pinkish. The next day, an individual was seen at the same location, with similar features, and was probably the same individual. Based on its yellow gape (vs black), shorter tail, and olive-greyish back (vs plain grey), this bird was separated from the similar Black-throated Thrush *T. atrogularis*.

On 29 January 2013, another individual was sighted at the same location by PP [62]. This time it was initially confused with a female Indian Blackbird *T. simillimus*, but our doubt was eliminated by the presence of a clear white vent on the bird, indicating a Tickell's Thrush.



Photos: Pranad Patil

61. Tickell's Thrush on 07 November 2012. 62. Tickell's Thrush on 29 January 2013.

These two sightings, in successive years, indicate that the bird might be a regular, albeit uncommon, visitor to the Ranthambhore area.

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