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Sarus spotting through a train window

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The February 2016 issue of *Indian BIRDS* launched me on an instant memory trip. The very attractive painting of the Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*, by Kokay Szabolcs, reminded me of my first introduction to this avifaunal curiosity, way back in 1954. The Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun, had a well-stocked library with an exclusive section devoted to books authored by Indian Army Officers, and among the new arrivals was the *Breeding birds of Kashmir* by Lieut Col. R. S. P. Bates and E. H. N. Lowther (1952). Surprisingly, I found the text as engrossing as that of any other genre of leisure reading. And where the script on the Ibisbill was concerned, I was particularly glad to come by this field observation by Major R. W. G. Hingston: “The reason why this bird has a bill with so peculiar a curve is disclosed by observing its behaviour. It runs about on the water-worn boulders... thrusting its long bill under the round stones in the hopes of finding insects beneath them... it is curved in such a way that it fits neatly around the boulders when the bird is probing for food”.

Hingston had been the Medical Officer with the ill-fated Second British Mount Everest Expedition, 1924 (during which Mallory, and Irvine, had perished), and he had sighted the bird not far from the Base Camp, in a stream going by the Rongbuk Monastery. However, what Bates & Lowther did not mention in their book, was Hingston's claim, that he was the first to have ever seen the Ibisbill parents with two chicks in tow, in the wild! Before the Mount Everest Expedition, Hingston was posted to

Dharamsala (in the Kangra Valley) where he compiled the first comprehensive check list of the birds of the region (Hingston 1921), which Hugh Whistler (1926a, b) used later. Hingston had earlier also published, *A naturalist in the Himalaya* (1920), and later perhaps his seminal work, *A naturalist in Hindustan* (1923).

I had also made a mental note of what Bates & Lowther had called the Ibisbill Island in the Kashmir Valley but my efforts to spot one there in 1960, were futile. However, I had my lifetime's first encounter with it on the Indus River, while fishing for snow trout, opposite the Hemis Monastery in mid-1968. And yet again a few months later, in a tributary of the Shyok River that emanates from Chang La near Darbukh, not far from Chashul.

But where had Szabolcs sighted the bird which he painted? Surprisingly the proud owner of that painting when contacted, professed ignorance [Editor's note: On enquiry, Szabolcs said it was painted from a sighting near Leh]. Surprising yet again, though Otto Pfister, in his seminal book *Birds and mammals of Ladakh* (2004), has a good image of the bird, he too gives no clues to the photo-click site.

Now, coming to the Uttar Pradesh Bird Festival 2015 and its iconic location, aptly named “Sarus Village”, I had on many occasions looked out for Sarus Crane *Antigone antigone* in the same general area, between 1994 and 2004, but under altogether different circumstances. My wife and I had set up home amongst the Adivasis, on the Chota Nagpur Plateau, but made three trips to Punjab each year (in the age of slow trains,

no telephone connectivity, the nearest STD booth 60 km away, etc.) to visit our ageing mothers; the only convenient train then was the Muri Express. It was a journey of a day and two nights, and to liven up the ordeal, I took to spotting birds through the window of the train compartment by jotting random observations, regrettably, on scraps of paper; all that remains traceable today, is reproduced in the succeeding paragraphs.

Remembrances of rural landscapes between Ferozabad–Etawa–Kanpur

The burnished brown-gold of ripe wheat fields stretched like a placid ocean, dotted with human figures, some in white garments, others in the robust colours of green, red, blue and yellow. Flights of parakeets streaking across the sky like streams of darts, and on the ground, Rock Pigeons *Columba livia*, Eurasian Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto*, and House Crows *Corvus splendens*. And Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, crows, more crows...one Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, seven Intermediate Egrets *Ardea intermedia* on the crest of a tree canopy that resembled a lime green parasol, patterned with bold white dots. Pigeons and doves feeding off the wheat grain scattered on the ground in the harvesting process. Parakeets plucking grain from the ears on wheat stalks. Because the stalks are thin and cannot take the weight of parakeets snapping at the grain pods, so the stalks bend and the birds appear hovering like feeding hummingbirds. Village dogs sniffing for, and ferreting field rats, and other rodents. Peaceful, like it must have been on the first dawn of creation!

Drongos, many clusters of Intermediate Egrets, some feasting off the grain which inevitably scatters during the harvesting process, others following in the wake of a ploughing tractor. Puddles of water, big and small, some remarkably clean, others layered with green slime. One Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, several Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*. Acres of harvested wheat—neat piles arranged in neat rows all so identical and symmetrical, matching the perfection of mechanical harvesting machines. A girl in scarlet red garments herding goats having varied chequered coats, mostly chestnut-and-black, many dappled liver-and-white, and others black-and-white.

Two young girls, and two boys, sitting in a circle, around a fire in an open field under an open sky; girls patting and shaping chappatis, and boys tending them over charcoals, all heads bent down in concentration. Two wizened old men, winnowing wheat grain from the crushed wheatears piled in a basket: each holding his basket aloft with both arms extended fully above his head, gently tipping the aggregate in a steady stream to the ground and the grain steadily piling in a heap at his toes. And the husk-flakes carried by the breezes, forming another pile a few feet downwind. Nothing seems to have changed in the rural lives of Indians over so many centuries.

One Black Kite *Milvus migrans* glides over a village, scanning for food. A whole lot of Intermediate Egrets feed in a shallow ditch, draining the village effulgent. Many Black-winged Stilts search food in another effulgent pond on the outskirts of Ferozabad Railway Station, their pink legs striking in sharp contrast against the dark grey slime of the pond. Two camels tethered to each other, tails bound to heads by a rope, carrying firewood pickings in large bundles on either side of their humps, led homewards by their keeper. Another Black Kite in a tight spiral.

One Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* in flight, displaying the Cambridge and Oxford colours in broad bands across its wings. A solitary Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*. One

young lad bathes his buffalos in a pond while another sings as he rides astride his buffalo; five boys playing truant from school. One Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*; his alternative name, Pharaoh's Chicken, sounds much more dignified. First flush of the flame of the forest, about a dozen trees in a close huddle. Hundreds of Intermediate Egrets feeding in a sheet of water, as also some distant and bigger birds, not identified. A Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* runs up to the water, as though relieved from brooding by a partner.

At long last, the much anticipated sighting of Sarus, two birds close to the Shikhoabad Railway Station! Women carry bushels of harvested wheat homewards while a solitary egret flies leisurely alongside. One meditative Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*. After ages, witnessed a strong gust of breeze creating a dust-devil, swirling in a tight circle, like a dervish at the peak of his frenzied dance-prayer (Tables 1–2).

It is quite likely that I would have missed some Sarus in the time taken to note what I saw; the train would have covered half a kilometre. So another 20 Sarus to the above count would be a fair guess. And perhaps an equal number of Sarus on the other side of the track, as well?

The 06–15 m wide strip of land, parallel to, and on both sides of the railway tracks, is periodically excavated for mud to plug erosion beneath the tracks. As a result, over time it has created a series of disjointed, shallow ponds rich in aquatic life. At places, where the water collection is substantial, there is a lush growth of bull-rushes and other reeds. And agriculture stretches almost to the rim of these water collections, altogether an ideal for a variety of bird life.

Due to the speed of the train, and the dust coating on the glass pane of the window, the identity of miscellaneous birds was problematic; up to a distance of about 50 m the game of counting was fun! The following tables record what I could jot down (Tables 3–5).

Table 1. 27 November 2000

Time	Location	Sarus	Miscellaneous notes
0915	Aligarh		Very large congregation of Black-winged Stilts and Cattle Egrets
0954	Hathras	4	
1020	Jalesar Road	2	
1024			4 blue bulls, and lots of egrets
1045	Tundla		Railway station crowded with Bank Mynas—exclusively.
1208	Balrai	2	
1215	Jaswantnagar	1	
1245	Etawa	1	3 Black-headed Ibis; 6 Black-winged Stilts
1300	Bharthra	2	Lots of Cattle, and Intermediate Egrets; 3 Woolly-necked Storks
1310	Ghasara	3	Lots of Black-headed Ibis
1318			2 Woolly-necked Storks; 5 Painted Storks; many Great Egrets; 3 Woolly-necked Storks; several Black-headed Ibis
1325	Phaphand	2	
1344	Kanchasi	1	
1415		3	one sub-adult
A total of twenty-one Sarus spotted.			

Table 2. 22 February 2001

Time	Location	Sarus	Time	Location	Sarus
0945	Firozabad	2	1112		2
1000		4	1130	Phaphand	1
1017		2	1133		6
1025		2	1217		2
1032		2	1230		2
1035		2	1235		2
1037	Etawa	7	1330	Kanpur	2
1044		3	1345		4
1048	Bhathana	4	1347		4
1054		2	1400		3
1102		2			

A grand total of 60 (Oh yes, sixty!) Sarus spotted in a mere span of four hours and forty-five minutes.

Table 4. 12 July 2001

Time	Location	Sarus	Miscellaneous
0715	Aligarh		2 Indian Peafowl females, 5 Blue Rock Pigeons, 10 Cattle Egrets, 3 Egyptian Vultures
0745	Jalasar Rd		Drongos, House Crows, 4 Egyptian Vultures, 1 Common Kestrel, 4 Red-wattled Lapwings, Parakeets, 1 Indian Roller
0855	Firozabad		1 Great Egret, Lots of Common Mynas; House Crows, Eurasian Collared Doves, Laughing Doves, Intermediate Egrets, Cattle Egrets, 7 Egyptian Vultures
0915	Shikhoabad		Congregations of Cattle Egrets in irrigated cropped fields.
0938		2	
1040	Bharathana	2	1 Black-necked Stork
1055		2	
1058		4	
1120			4 Indian Peafowl, 1 Purple Heron
1127			17 Indian Peafowl females
1135			1 Woolly-necked Stork
1152		2	4 Black-headed Ibis, 2 Egyptian Vultures, 1 Lesser Adjutant, 1 Asian Openbill, 1 Great Egret, 1 Painted Stork

A total of twelve Sarus spotted.

But where have the Sarus vanished?

There have been no rains this winter (2001). All depressions along the railway tracks, which hold water normally for most of the year, are bone dry. So are the agricultural fields. The standing bumper wheat crop is nurtured on canal and bore-well irrigation. So, maybe the Sarus have shifted to areas closer to the rivers Ganges, and Chambal.

At the peak of mid-day heat, a young lad rides astride his buffalo, his sunburnt, dust-powdered, naked torso only a shade dimmer than of the beast's. They head for the pond and upon entering it, keep going till the animal gains buoyancy; its head, from nostrils upwards, and the region around the arch of its

Table 3. 28 April 2001

Time	Location	Sarus	Miscellaneous
1437	Jhinhik	1	1 Woolly-necked Stork
1455	Phaphund	2	
1500		1	
1505		2	
1545	Etawa		30 Cattle Egrets
1559		2	1 Grey Heron
1604		3	
1624		2	
1625		1	
1627		4	
1633	Shukhoabad	5	

A total of twenty three Sarus spotted.

Table 5. 20 August 2001

Time	Location	Sarus	Miscellaneous
1430	Kanpur		1 Black-necked Stork, 1 Eurasian Spoonbill, 15 Egyptian Vultures feeding over a carcass, 2 Common Kestrels
1610		2	3 Blue bull (Wheat crop & all else harvested, few Water puddles; sealing summer, food scarce).
1640			7 Indian Black Ibis
1640	Jhinhak		2 Blue bull
1700		2	3 Woolly-necked Stork, 3 Painted Stork
1710	Kanchausia		2 Black-necked Stork, 1 Black-headed Ibis, 8 Intermediate Egret
1715	Phaphund		20 Cattle Egret
1750	Bharthana-Etawa		6 Woolly-necked Stork, 11 Painted Stork, 40 Black-headed Ibis

A total of only four Sarus spotted.

spine and hocks is all that remains above the water surface. In the manner of a loving mahout with his elephant, the boy slides forwards and backwards, splashing water, and giving a good caring rubbing all over the upper body of his buffalo. This beautiful picture moves out of the frame of my train window, all too soon.

However, this silent introspection ended with a rude judder as in the far distance, between Etawa and Kanpur, I noticed a Sarus, with chick(s), being chased by several groups of people. I was puzzled, as Sarus had cohabited peaceably with India's rural folks down the ages.

Banding of Sarus Crane

The clue to that treasonous chase of the Sarus was revealed in a pompous piece in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*, by Rajeev Chauhan (2001), reading which I was quite horrified. So I sent a rejoinder (Singh 2001), in which I reasoned that,

"Though acceptable it is in the pursuit of scientific enquiry, nevertheless the act of shooting and or trapping of birds and mammals to meet the needs of science is at best

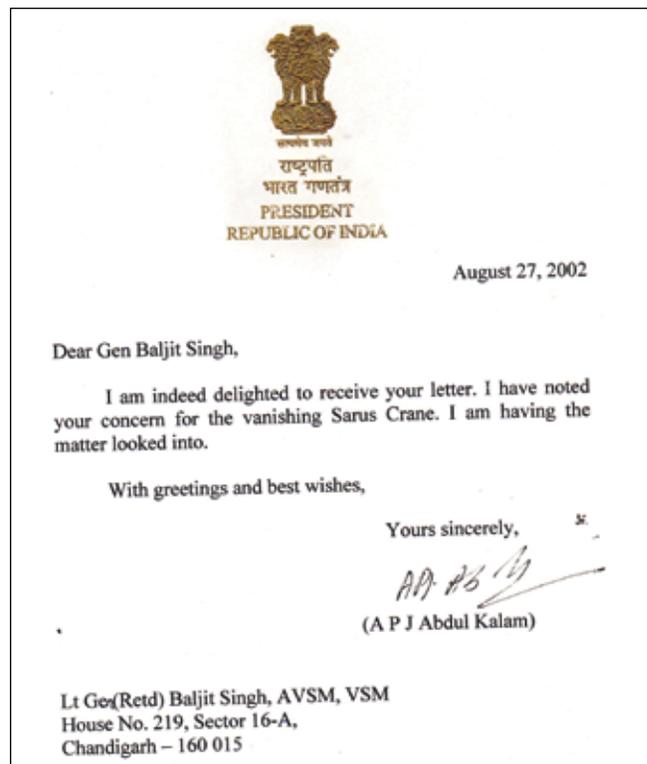
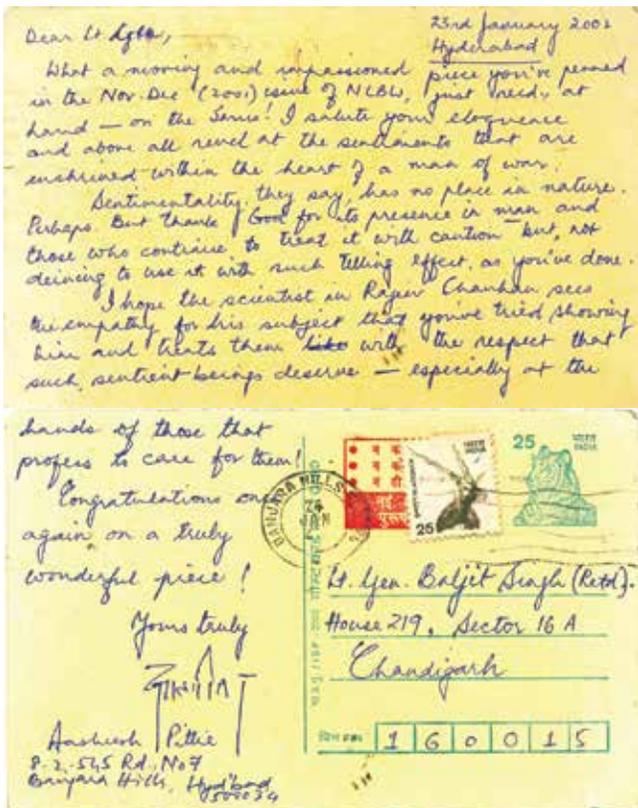
an agonizing necessity...Will someone please tell me as to how the data so gathered in the instant case will further strengthen our brief for the conservation of the wetlands, the habitat of the Sarus? Don't we already have adequate database to build our case?..."

"All this aside, where was the need for the rapturous description of the art of closing with the family of Sarus, giving chase, separating the parents from their progeny, keeping up the chase, tiring the infant bird to the point of total exhaustion and ultimately two human hands grasping and lifting ("capturing?") the hapless chick?..."

"No, Mr Field Scientist, I do not object to your pursuit of science but in the act let us not intrude into the zone of inner sensitivities of birds, animals and fellow human beings. Yes, I admit that there will always be banner photographs of soldiers atop the Tiger Hill exulting in victory let us never allow transgression in any form, the brutal imagery of the thrusting of the bayonet into living flesh. We have to understand that difference and not transgress the invisible line..."

"Would Rajiv Chauhan and his colleagues please do everything that is possible to wipe out the 'fingerprints' of the act of 'capturing' the Sarus chicks lest they are patented by the villagers, turned trappers, poachers, and ultimately another source on the bird trader's inventory. It is not my intention to start a controversy or a slanging debate...but I appeal for an immediate damage-control strategy and action on ground. I know for a fact that Sarus...pine for the wilderness all the while and seldom survive long in captivity."

Through a postcard, Mr Aasheesh Pittie was most supportive of my plea for the Sarus, and thus began a long association with a kindred soul.



122. President Dr A. J. P. Abdul Kalam's response to the author.

But my fears that the banding of Sarus may have unwittingly introduced the unscrupulous among the village folks to the idea of Sarus as another prized object for the bird trade came true, and was reported in detail by *India Today*, with photographs of Sarus young, on sale in Lucknow, Bareilly and Kanpur markets. I was at the time on the Board of Trustees of WWF India, but regrettably, I failed to arouse that august body into urgent action.

As a last resort, I requested Dr A. J. P. Abdul Kalam, the gentleman-President of India, for intervention, and received a positive response [122]. So what a pleasant surprise to read Ms Pujja Sharma's very interesting account of the festival, and in particular of their sighting of "23 Sarus in a single field". May they prosper and enter the twenty-second century!

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