Stork sagas! Encounters with some stork workers

Abdul Jamil Urfi

Abdul Jamil Urfi, Department of Environmental Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi 110007. E-mail: ajurfi@gmail.com
Manuscript received on 05 September 2019.

In public perception, storks are regarded as having something to do with the birth of babies, which makes us think of obstetrics and gynaecology. Storks are often depicted on greeting cards carrying a baby wrapped in a bundle in their beak. In many European countries, when a baby is born, the family puts outside their house a model of a stork carrying a bundle in its beak, with a doll in it. Philip Kahl, one of the leading stork researchers, whose work is outlined below, quipped about this largely western tradition, ‘a cute and convenient way to avoid early sex education’ (Kahl 1971).

The list of scientists who have worked on storks, perhaps not a long one, includes many names from the Americas. This is because the Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*, a denizen of the southern parts of USA and some South American countries, has received considerable attention from ornithologists with respect to its ecology, genetics, behaviour, etc. Here I do not intend to give a comprehensive list of all the stork workers, but restrict myself to only those whose work has interested me and those with whom I have had some degree of personal association.

The one person who made a seminal contribution to the study of storks was Philip Kahl (1934–2012) [201]. Focussing on the Wood Stork—America’s only stork and in serious decline since then, Phil started his graduate studies in the 1960s working in the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, on the largest Wood Stork colony in the United States. His experiments with captive-reared Wood Storks led to significant papers on bioenergetics. His most famous work was the discovery of the ‘bill-snap reflex’ mechanism which was published in the journal *Nature* with L. J. Peacock in 1963; a discovery that was reported in the science section of *Time* magazine.

It is common knowledge that storks and other long legged birds urinate on their legs in hot weather. Another of Kahl’s landmark papers (Kahl 1963) described ‘urohidrosis’—a thermoregulatory mechanism to prevent hyperthermia, by excreting urine on their own legs, in some species of birds. Due to this behavioral adaptation they get rid of excess body heat as the water in the excreted urine evaporates.

After completing his PhD from the University of Georgia in 1963, Kahl went on to study storks in Africa and Asia and from 1959 to 1969 studied the breeding behavior of all 11 of the then-recognized species of storks in the world (Hill 2014). In this context he also visited India and made observations at several sites, and it was largely on the basis of his researches that stork taxonomy underwent major changes. Interestingly, after such path breaking work on storks Phil changed track completely and concentrated on the African elephant *Loxodonta africana*.

The second stork person whom I must mention was James Hancock OBE (1921–2004; Kushlan 2006). Having served in British India he belonged to that vanished tribe of Englishmen who had the old colonial connect. Along with James Kushlan, and Kahl, Hancock wrote the well-regarded book, *Storks, ibises and spoonbills of the world* (Hancock et al. 1992).

The third stork scientist who matters a lot, in context of my own studies on the Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, is Dr J. H. Desai, one time Director of Delhi Zoo and perhaps the only person, or one of a few people from a non-IFS background to have been a Director of the Delhi Zoo.

Desai’s PhD was on the Painted Storks in Delhi Zoo. He was affiliated to the esteemed research group of animal morphologists and physiologists headed by Prof. J. C. George (Rosser & Vishwanathan 2006) at the University of Baroda’s Department of Zoology. During 1966–1971 Desai published a series of papers, mostly in the journal *Pavo*, on different aspects of the Painted Stork population of the zoo. His impressive body of work covered the general biology of the Painted Stork, its nesting ecology, diet and foraging, and growth and development of nestlings in the Delhi zoo (Urfi 2019). Being the zoo’s Director, I suspect, it would not have been difficult for him to have had easy access to the free ranging storks nesting in the zoo premises.

Although these ornithologists belonged to a generation considerably older than mine I had some degree of interaction with them. I wrote to Phil a couple of times and he always responded. The last was in 2009 (or somewhere near to that) when I was working on my book on the Painted Stork (Urfi 2011). His delayed response seemed a bit disjointed; but he wished me luck in my book-writing project. Phil passed away in December 2012, 78 years of age. A tumor in his brain burst (Hill 2014).

While I was in England as a student in the 1990s, James Hancock once invited me home for tea, when he learnt that...
I was a visiting ornithologist from India. During the hour long meeting at his house, where I spent a very pleasant afternoon with him and his wife, we talked about India, birds, and storks. He was quite interested in the widely speculated possibility of hybridization between the Reef Heron *Egretta gularis* and some other herons (Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*) in the wild.

Then a very British tea was served, along with plates of extremely thin cucumber sandwiches, and cakes.

When I was leaving James Hancock gave me a present—a proof of the page with the Painted Stork painting from his forthcoming book. He said that the background scenery would remind me of the typical agricultural landscape of north India. He had given inputs about the Indian countryside to the illustrator when the picture was being made.

It is indeed a very realistic portrayal of the Indian agricultural landscape—a farmer ploughing his fields with bullocks, a line of trees in the far background, green fields all around and in the sky a pair of Painted Storks flying. The sort of scenery, maybe of the flat Indo-Gangetic plains, one would see through the window of a train [202]. I have had the picture mounted and it hangs on a wall in my office.

In the Indian context there are several others who have worked on storks including workers from different southern Indian states and other regions who have described nesting colonies of storks in their regions. For instance, Dr Asad Rahmani, who published extensively on the subject (see Urfi 2019).

Professor R. M. Naik (George’s student), who worked at the University of Rajkot, was another. He mostly published on related species, and on the ibis. I met him on several occasions and he came across as a very gentle soul. Since I was doing PhD on muscle histophysics at the University of Delhi (Urfi 2019) at that time, and my supervisor, Professor C. L. Talesara was also one of George’s students, there was a common thread binding us; the common ancestor in our phylogenies was J. C. George. Over the years I came to know some of his students quite well: Taej Mundkur, Rishad Parvez, and B. M. Parasharya. I think that his most relevant work was the description of storks’ and Reef Heron colonies in the city of Bhavnagar (Parasharya & Naik 1990).

A birdwatcher of the old school, though not exclusively specialized on storks but who nevertheless played an important role in guiding me about stork colonies while I was in Gujarat, was Lavkumar [203]. This was during my days with Centre for Environment Education (henceforth, CEE) Ahmedabad, when I was heading its experiencing outdoors programme ‘Sundarvan’.

And lastly, Dr Desai. I met him in 1996 (though I had seen him in the Delhi zoo once before, when he was its director) when I participated in an ‘Endangered Species & Zoo Management Course’ that was sponsored by the Central Zoo Authority and conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India, at Nandankanan Biological Park, Bhubaneswar. He had come as an instructor. During a coffee break, we discussed about his work on Painted Stork.

![Image of Painted Stork](image1)

**202.** Painting of Painted Stork from Hancock et al’s (illustrated by Alan Harris & David Quinn). *Storks, Ibises and Spoonbills of the World.*

![Image of Lavkumar](image2)

**203.** Lavkumar Khacher delivering a speech at Sundarvan.
Since its foundation, Sundervan Nature Discovery Centre & Snake Park, a facility of CEE, had seen a number of illustrious directors: Vijayraj Jادة, Anil Patel, and others. The last among them was the well-known ornithologist and nature educator Lavkumar Khacher who had been at Sundervan for a long time. CEE, the parent organization, headed by its charming and affable director, Kartikya Sarabhai, was looking for a fresh face to manage the place and coordinate its activities. I was the one they selected to step into Lavkumar’s shoes.

Lav Bha was a legend with many accomplishments to his credit. He was a well-known name in wildlife circles, besides being the scion of a royal family. He was both the co-author of the well-known book *Sixty Indian birds* (Dharmakumarsinhji & Lavkumar 1981). His name had appeared several times in Usha Ganguli’s book on birds of Delhi (Ganguli 1975). I had grown up reading his articles in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* and the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*.

Meeting Lavkumar for the first time was quite a memorable experience. I was standing talking to someone when I felt a hand on my shoulder and heard a voice saying, ‘So you are Jamil? I have heard about you.’

I turned around and encountered a large face with thick spectacles, well-set features—moustaches and a thick mop of curly hair pushed backwards revealing a large forehead.

‘So Jamil, you are from Delhi University?’ LavKumar asked. Before I could answer, he went on, ‘I was at DU too. I am from St. Stephen’s.’

The reminder that he was an alumnus of ‘the college’ … well hardly surprising—The prestigious St. Stephen’s College. Who hasn’t heard of it? Over the years I have become quite accustomed to being gently reminded by alumni from this institution, after the preliminaries are over, that they graduated from ‘Stephen’s’. The information is generally slipped in casually and usually within the first few minutes of the meeting with a sense of familiarity about it.

Over the years a special bond developed between us. Being the ex-director of Sundervan, LavKumar had plenty of advice to offer. He used to write to me quite frequently, sometimes weekly, on a variety of topics, including birds. I enjoyed his letters, which were written in beautiful hand writing, in the type of English which people belonging to an earlier generation (pre-1947) used.

The amazing thing about his letters was that he mostly used a black ink fountain pen and wrote on whichever surface he could find and wherever he could find space. Sometimes he scribbled in the margins, many a times he used the blank side of a used paper, or the clean inside of a paper envelope by ripping it open (being a true conservationist he advocated recyling of resources, especially paper). Those were the pre-Internet and pre-mobile telephony days and letter writing (snail mail) was the only offer. He used to write to me quite frequently, sometimes weekly, for many years spent at CEE and in Gujarat were the happiest years of my life and LavKumar’s company and knowledge about birds was the icing on the cake.

Alas, he is no more. LavKumar passed away in 2015 (Sahgal 2015).

References


