

lagoon along the coastal strip (9.23°N 79.34°E). I scrutinised the flock through binoculars for 20 min. They were medium sized gulls with a long neck, thin dark red bill, light grey upper-wings, and pale legs. The most striking feature was their pinkish breast and belly. They made harsh *kraaah-kraaah* calls. The flock was large, and I estimated more than 500 gulls by counting in blocks. At the same location there were few Brown-headed Gulls *C. brunnicephalus* for comparison apart from several Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*.

While the Slender-billed Gull is considered regular on the western coast of India, only a few birds are considered to occur on the east coast of India and Sri Lanka (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012, Burger et al. 2020). Grimmett et al. (2011) mentions that this species is 'probably under-recorded in India'. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) considers the species as 'rare; except in the north-west and straggling in winter along the western and south-eastern coast coasts of India. According to the State of India's Birds, Slender-billed Gull is a resident and within-India migrant, and its key states are Gujarat, Goa, and Daman & Diu; though the accompanying map does show its occurrence on the east coast as well (SolB 2023).

An online search revealed that such flocks have occurred on the south-eastern coast of India in recent years. Vinod Sadhasivan saw a 'huge flock' of Slender-billed Gulls in 'beautiful pink plumage' at Dhanushkodi in 2022, at the same location and the same month as this report (Vinod 2022). Ajay R has reported 300 from Odiyur lake, Tamil Nadu on 08 February 2018 (Ajay 2018). Geetha Mani has reported 150 from Siruthalai Kadu, Tamil Nadu in January 2022 (Mani 2022). Venugopal S. has reported 320 roosting in Kodiakkadu, Tamil Nadu in February 2019 (Venugopal 2019). A decade back, Mike Prince has reported a flock of 700 from Point Calimere Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu in November 2009 (Prince 2009). Based on this sighting, and others mentioned above, it may be concluded that good numbers of Slender-billed Gulls winter on the south-eastern coast of India.

I am grateful to the two young researchers from Pondicherry, who guided me to this site.

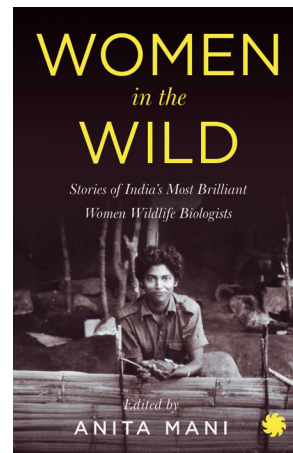
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Book review



*Women in the Wild.
Stories of India's
Most Brilliant Women
Wildlife Biologists*

Edited by Anita Mani.
2023.

Published by Juggernaut,
2023.

Pp. 1 –271

In February 2015, I watched with great intrigue a pair of Painted Spurfowl *Galloperdix lunulata* synchronise a dance step of short backward shuffles as they foraged in Pant Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajgir, Bihar. My remit was to prepare a management plan for Rajgir, and I was trying to cobble together a wildlife history of the area. I remember thinking then that there was a dearth of information on the birds of Rajgir. Even species like the Orange-headed Thrush *Geokichla citrina*, appeared to be new records, at least according to the bird books and checklists of the day. I did eventually find an old British gazetteer that rather quaintly described the wildlife of the Rajgir hills, including its 'game birds.' But I was left wondering how this tiny, 36-square-kilometre sanctuary had come into being. Imagine my surprise to discover while reading *Women in the Wild*, an anthology of women ecologists, that it was a female ornithologist—Jamal Ara—who had a hand in its creation! If only I had known earlier, her name would have found pride of place in the management plan. After all, how many protected areas in India owe their existence to an Indian 'Birdwoman' who once went in search of the Pink-headed Duck? Perhaps I should have dug deep to ferret out this prized nugget of information. But my glossing over of her role is emblematic of the fate of many female wildlife biologists and ecologists—then, and perhaps even today.

As a child, I had seen Ara's booklet on *Watching Birds*, but it probably never dawned on me that this was a book by a woman—a rarity for the time. Perhaps we were conditioned into automatically assuming that most well-known ecologists and naturalists were male. The closest I had come to hearing about female ornithologists was the fabled Usha Ganguli, whose Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area was a veritable bible for the Delhi birder of yesteryear. Much later, I came to know of Tara Gandhi and then, in college, about Usha Lachungpa, who also features in *Women in the Wild*. But while names like Salim Ali, Zafar Futehally, Lavkumar Khachar, et al. tripped off our tongues, Jamal Ara's name was lost in the mists of obscurity. Arguably, she had led one of the most interesting—and least privileged—lives amongst her peers. But it took Raza Kazmi, in a masterful piece of sleuthing, to resurrect Ara and ensure that her legacy

is now here to stay. His portrayal is a poignant tale of a prolific, multi-faceted, self-taught naturalist who overcame a lifetime of struggle to achieve great heights. And Anita Mani's edited volume on some of India's foremost wildlife biologists seeks to rectify the historical injustice done to so many of these pioneering women by finally letting their stories take wing.

The women that this book celebrates are as diverse and unique as the landscapes they work in, and the questions and issues they address. Yet they are united by their gender, and sometimes perhaps even scarred by it. And society certainly does little to ease their path, dissuading them at every turn. Divya Mudappa, who studied seed dispersers of many hues, including hornbills and civets, is a prolific seed disperser herself, scattering seeds to help reseed entire forests of the Western Ghats. But, as Shweta Taneja, Divya's chronicler, perceptively points out, Divya has inured herself from the overt sexism she faces by literally and figuratively retreating into the forest to focus on conservation.

The reality is that many of our generation had only male wildlife biologists as role models. Some of us learned early to eschew our feminine side, working hard to embody all the characteristics universally touted as defining 'maleness.' God forbid if we were labelled sentimental or emotional or if we revealed any chinks in our armour. I remember once, when I extricated myself from an "I shouldn't be alive" situation, I was complimented for being "just like a boy." Science—especially wildlife—as a largely male-driven bastion further buttresses the injunction to remain emotionally detached from our subjects. Each woman navigates this quagmire in disparate ways. Divya takes refuge in the safe spaces of nature, while Uma Ramakrishnan defiantly chooses to both "wear her heart on her sleeve", as Purna Bindra puts it, while also marching headlong into the very male preserve of tiger conservation and genetics (but she also works on a range of other fascinating subjects, such as on sky islands and sholalilis with V V Robin).

I'd like to believe that it is the ability of women to listen, connect, and empathise that often lends heft and meaning to the work they do. Ananda Banerjee recounts how Vidya Athreya set out to understand why leopards were terrorising a rural community located far from the forests. The turtle girl, J Vijaya, whose tragic story is exquisitely brought to life by Zai Whitaker, made so many of her discoveries because of her respect for traditional knowledge and recognition of tribal communities as mentors and gatekeepers of the natural world. Divya Karnad draws upon the strength of traditional fish resource management systems and institutions to illumine her work. Several of the

women featured now venture far from science and research to engage in conservation praxis. For them, research is futile unless it engages with communities and drives practical solutions and change.

The fact that these women figure in the pages of this book is a tribute to their indomitable spirit and love for nature, science, and conservation. I would often say that only women could weather the thrilling but very taxing conditions of a wild landscape like Pakke in Arunachal, dusted with elephants at every turn—where a phone call meant an 8-kilometre trek through forests and occasional hotbeds of insurgency. And Pakke forged many women ecologists including Aparajita Datta with her pioneering work on hornbills and Nandini Velho, marching to the beat of her own drum, skilfully combining art, ecology, community engagement, and activism.

Barring two chapters written by men, the stories, science, and communities formed by these women biologists are narrated through the lens of the many, very talented, women writers who flesh them out with sensitivity and care. Pellucid writing embellishes the vignettes. Neha Sinha's delicate pen paints word pictures of an oak forest in the rains and its scintillating cast of birds—especially woodpeckers—from which a portrait of the woman who studies them—Ghazala Shahabuddin—slowly emerges. The deft editing of Anita Mani melds the chapters in this anthology so that they flow together seamlessly as a river.

For many of these towering women, there was often a defining moment that inspired them to take a walk on the wild side, forever altering the course of their lives. But every so often, all it really takes is a book. A book that fires one's imagination and inspires change. The moment I read *T. C. Whitmore's Tropical Rain Forests of the Far East*—sitting in crowded Delhi—it transported me to a world with a bewildering diversity of trees, insects, and birds, filled with intricate connections and skeins of mysteries to unravel. I was hooked, and I knew then that somehow, someday, somewhere, I too would work in a tropical rainforest. For Uma, it was John Avise's *Molecular Markers, Natural History, and Evolution*.

Women in the Wild too is the kind of book that will inspire future generations of women ecologists to traipse across the wild landscapes of India, solving whatever wildlife mystery catches their fancy. One also hopes it will motivate them to stay strong and true at a time when the #MeToo movement is rocking the Indian wildlife sector.

— Pia Sethi

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