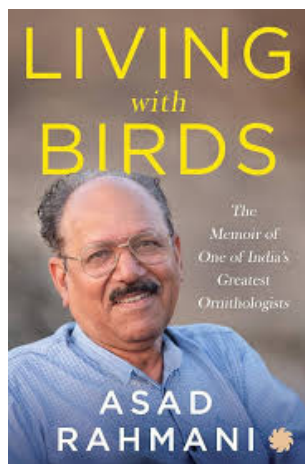


Book review



Living with Birds
By Asad Rahmani

Published by Juggernaut Books
2024. Rs. 599/-

Pp. 1–350.

I first met Dr Rahmani in 1981, but a December 1983 incident, when he was a guest of honour on a Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh's field trip to Manjira Reservoir, remains fresh in my mind. "In an informal discussion after birding that day, he spoke of his work on the Great Indian Bustard in Maharashtra and also cleared many of the members' doubts" [*Mayura* 4 (4): 79 (1984)]. I had been reading Elliot Howard's classic *Territory in Bird Life* (John Murray, 1920), borrowed from the Bombay Natural History Society's (hereinafter, BNHS) fabulous library and, while sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of him (along with some other 'youngsters'), asked a convoluted question about territoriality in Great Indian Bustards. I only remember the beginning of his answer, "That is a very good question!"

Since then, our lives have criss-crossed innumerable times all over India, especially in the BNHS. There are so many incidents from his time with the BNHS, which are narrated in this book, that are also part of the history I grew up alongside; so many people he speaks about with whom I too have interacted, that reviewing this work sends me down a rabbit-hole of ricocheting memories. It would not be wrong to presume that there are innumerable Indians who have had similar experiences with the genial Dr Rahmani, as have I.

There is no doubt in my mind that the ornithological history of post-independent India can safely be divided into two distinct periods. The first of the diminutive Dr Sálím Ali (1896–1987), who strode across the ornithological landscape like a colossus, and his larger-than-life achievements in collating our knowledge of birds and making them the most popular of natural history subjects through his books. The second of Dr Asad Rafi Rahmani who spearheaded a conservation movement based on widespread public networking, documentation, and synthesis, simultaneously engaging country-wide with every type of government agency responsible for administration and policy. Both worked from 'Hornbill House,' the haloed precincts of the BNHS. The former strengthening its reputation of being the primary custodian of ornithological knowledge / information, while the latter leveraging its scientific temperament, its public outreach, image, and connect, and its international exposure to garner field ornithological data to support, inform, propose, and fructify government policy and sustainable, on-the-ground conservation. Whatever they achieved

and how their ways of working overlapped in all facets of the game, they had just one common goal, that of protecting, preserving, and popularizing the ornithological diversity of India. Ali wrote about his life in *The Fall of a Sparrow* (Oxford University Press, 1985), and now, Rahmani has written about his.

If you are a birder, an ornithologist, a naturalist, a conservationist, or even one who aspires to lead or build institutions, or work with people selflessly, then *Living with Birds* is for you. It is full of stories about people and places and animals and birds. It is soaked in Rahmani's rare subcutaneous quiddity ingrained from a lifetime spent in the field, working close to the life sustaining Earth. It is replete with tales of his fellow travellers who have, wittingly or unwittingly, enriched his life—and he makes those moments and episodes central in the telling of his own evolution. It's countrywide canvas is astounding; so too the emulatory humbleness that shines in his spontaneous responses to situations involving all types of people. It is deeply introspective and scorchingly frank in self-censure, and Rahmani's capacity to make amends to those he felt he'd wronged, is endearingly special. The sensitive portrayal of friends he has lost is deeply felt. His support and encouragement of students is a masterclass in the art and science of andragogy.

The poignancy and frailty of human relationships are dealt with great tenderness in many places in the book, but the most cathartic for me are: Dr Sálím Ali mourning the assassination of Indira Gandhi (pp. 84–87); Rahmani's bonhomie with the late Ravi Sankaran, recorded with heart-breaking brevity (pp. 95, 162); his bond with BNHS's iconic chowkidar, Uma Pratap Singh (p. 135); and his deep respect for the unique and legendary bird trapper, Ali Hussain (pp. 188–192).

Some of Rahmani's pithy observations that I take away include: "...fieldwork is not for everyone" (p. 56); "We generally see what we want to see. Similarly, people who are not interested in birds often do not hear a bird's song, while a keen birdwatcher may hear it even against a noisy background" (p. 66); "Teaching was hard work but also a great way to gain knowledge" (p. 108); and "India is so tiger-centric that, sometimes, it looks like no other species matter" (p. 114).

I have deliberately not mentioned details from the book, be they about institutions, people, or conservation issues. This is because there are so many, and readers will relate to or take away whatever is relevant or impressionable to them. Also, if I were to do so, it would distract from what Rahmani has to say, and that would be a disservice to an amazing tale, from an extraordinary era in India's conservation history, told by a key player of the times. Rahmani's inscape is filled with his love for reading and books—he laments "the crumbling of reading habits in India" (p. 25); India's wild heartland; and people who care about the world and its creatures. *Living with Birds* is an enjoyable, educative, and inspirational deep dive into a life lived for India's wilderness. It is moot whether it sufficiently covers the prodigious achievements of Rahmani—his scholarly output, his mentorship, his institution building, his endless enquiry in the lives of non-human life, his lifelong bond with "books...landscape or species" (p. 291). It is, undoubtedly, a must read!

If there is one thing that would augment a second edition, it would be a detailed index, so vital in a book that goes beyond personal history to being a chronicle of India's conservation history of the past six decades and is full of people, places, institutions, and the other index-populating paraphernalia.

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