

India: Birds and V.S. Naipaul

Bill Hagens
Tahoma Audubon

Earlier this year I visited India and, as a part of my tour, had some time to search that part of South Asia for some of its exotic birds. I owe such adventures to my children: last year's African trip was to see my daughter Clara, who was a project adviser with C.A.R.E. in Malawi. This time my son Nicholas was volunteering with the Experimental Theatre Foundation in Mumbai (Bombay), a street theatre project focusing on poverty, child labor, and communal empowerment.

Although this was my first visit, my interest in India dates back to high school, where as film projectionist, I annually showed sophomore English students a truncated version of Kipling's *Kim*, with the Grand Trunk Road, Khyber Pass, a red bull on a green field, and Errol Flynn as Red Beard, the great Mabub Ali, astride a white steed marching in step with the red tunic'd infantry to the tune of "Do ye ken John Peel with his coat so gay?"--all in glorious Technicolor. More recently, I've been intrigued by India's fight for independence and the roles of Gandhi, Jinnah, and Mountbatten.

Spending much of this trip in densely populated cities (Mumbai has 16 million people in an area roughly the size of King County), I was only able to scratch the surface of the country's ornithological offerings. Further, I was limited by the lack of a good reference. I mistakenly assumed I could get a better Indian bird guide there than here—not so. The only one available was *Collins' Birds of India*, written by the aptly named Martin Woodcock, who could have benefited from the work of Mr. Sibley and our own McNair-Huff's. The guide's listing were not comprehensive and descriptors unremarkable with few flight illustrations.

Despite these limitations, I found over 70 "life birds" (personal first sightings), mostly in a famous Rajasthani game preserve, aside local rivers, and on high-cliff mountains among ancient Mogul castles. The sightings ranged from the spectacular to the humorous. For example, the **Lammergeyer** is a magnificent raptor with a light-colored head and nine-foot wing span resembling a bald eagle with an overactive pituitary; the **Purple Moorhen**, a pastel chicken-like specie with long, irregular toes and a peculiar gait, might lead one to conclude it were injured or on a bender.

After Mumbai, I traveled with Nicholas north to Delhi, a city so polluted you can see the particles in the air. From there, like most first-time visitors, we traveled to Agra to view the Taj Mahal, which was surprisingly stunning despite its familiarity. The cliffs along the Yamuna River across from the monument (the Taj is not a temple) are home to the **King** and **Long-billed Vultures**, clearly the models for Disney's *Jungle Book* characters. I was pleased and surprised to find that the **Hoo Poe**, an extraordinary-looking bird, and a prize from my Africa trip, was as plentiful on the temple grounds as Scrub Jays in our neighborhood.

After Agra, Nicholas flew back to Tacoma, and I traveled on alone to Jaipur, the capital of the former princely state of Rajasthan. During my stay I visited Sawai Madhopur famed for its Ranthambhor National Park where thousands come each year in pursuit of the elusive Bengal tiger, the world's largest feline. Many leave disappointed, having seen mostly the ever-present langur monkeys, with the big cat remaining coyly out of sight. It's not so different from visitors who come to the Puget Sound from the glacier-scraped Midwest keen on seeing Mount Rainier but glimpse only the mountain's tip on the flight back to Cincinnati.

I was fortunate myself to have “bagged” two tigers—a male and female—on my first safari. But it was a taxing experience, being jostled by European elbows in our elongated Land Rover, hearing the occasional mumble of *scheisse* when wrong camera settings were used or when the tigers played hide and seek between the banyan trees and rocks. I wasn't quite as excited as others with these sighting; I was more interested in the exotic birds. Anyway, I can't think of more spectacular specimens of the *felis panthera tigris* than the two found in our own Point Defiance Zoo [in Tacoma].

A word about the improvement of American tourists' deportment: during my first trip abroad in the mid-1970s I was often embarrassed by boorish behavior of my fellow countrymen, some making the antics of the Chevy Chase character look like Alistair Cook. But in recent trips to India, East Africa, and Russia I've observed a marked reduction in our cultural imperialism. Of course, there are differences in demeanors among foreign visitors, most notably the peripatetic German, precise and often excessive in his requirements, adding credence to the Monty Python parody. Other travelers may have had different experiences.

The first day of safari, I was frustrated by our guide's reluctance to stop for bird sightings—admittedly, this was partly due to my linguistic shortcomings. But on the second day I was rescued by the overnight arrival of Margaret Bottomley, whose appearance and demeanor seemed straight out of Agatha Christie. A woman of a certain age, Miss Bottomley had lived as a child in Jaipur where her father worked in the British colonial office before independence. She was an avid bird watcher. She knew where to go, what we might find, and was fluent enough in Hindi and Urdu (two of India's 18 official languages) to give firm directions to our guide and driver. Also, I believe she was the only person on the subcontinent with a telescope. Margaret was remarkably quick to identify birds, to distinguish between subtly differences among similar species, the three major types of **Indian parakeets**, for instance—**Rose-ringed**, **Alexandrine** and **Blossom-Head**—all posing on the same branch, or between the **Brown** and **Black-headed Gulls** (to me indistinguishable) when they paid an unexpected visit to the shores of the nearby Banas River.

In addition to birding interests, Miss. B. and I had a vague connection through her cousin, Virginia Bottomley, the Tory Health Minister, whom I had interviewed in London while on a W.H.O. fellowship in 1992. However, our relationship cooled when I tried livening up the dinner conversation with a few birding puns—one of my weaknesses. Her comment about Seattle being the coffee Mecca, led me to mention that in the Puget

Sound crows don't say "**Caw, Caw,**" but "**Caw, Fee**"—a hackneyed starter, I admit (and not one of my own). But then I plied her with my best effort to-date: the recent discovery of a musical falcon on Orcas Island in northwest Washington with a remarkable ability to make several musical sounds at once; this new specie is be named the "**Orc-Kestrel.**" After a deafening silence, I took my Kingfisher (India's MGD) and repaired to my lodgings.

There were other notable sightings: The male **Red Jungle Fowl**, for example, which would be the envy of any of our barnyard roosters—with an over-large coxcomb and multi-colored feathers that subtly expose his muscular legs and shoulders, he could easily woo the most reluctant of pullets; the **Black Drongo**, a small bird that looks larger in flight because of extended feathers isolated at the end of the tail; the **Pariah Kite**, the most numerous of Indian raptors, more common there than our Red-tailed here; the **Red-headed Merlin**, which looks a lot like the American Kestrel, except for the head coloring (I was told that these falcons often hunt in pairs, which must be a sight to see); the **Indian Eagle Owl**, remarkable not only for its imposing size, but also because it's one of the few owls that regularly hunts in the daytime; and the **Black-winged Stilt**, which is a pleasure to watch take flight with its prominent red legs dangling behind. The *genus* with the greatest number of species is the **Babbler**; from my read there are at least 15 in Northeast Indian alone. The most common of these thrush-like birds is the **Jungle Babbler** (nicknamed the *Satbhai*), which gather in large flocks and babble incessantly to drive off predators.

And, oh yes, during my sightings, I developed a theory on the cause of India's population explosion (an increase of over 20 percent during the past decade alone) that demographers might have missed. I think it must have something to do with the number and variety of **Storks** in the country. Just from our own sightings we identified four types: **Open-billed, Painted, White-billed, and Adjutant**--all "storking" around, obviously up to something. [A complete sighting list is attached, if there's interest]

The limitations of time and location prevented finding more of the over 500 species in the area. I was particularly disappointed in not sighting the **Monal** and **Satyr Tragopan**, two pheasant-like species of spectacular color, and the **Indian Pitta** and **Indian Roller**, which are especially associated with the area. *Also, I must report the complete absence of Willets, who were sorely missed.*

But, as wonderful as the birds and historic sites were, they were no competition for the country's most remarkable feature, the Indian people themselves and their ability to live in a challenging land. Much is written about the prosperity of India today. Business is thriving in Mumbai, the country's financial center; Bangalore, with its "Software Technology Parks," rivals our high tech peaks and valleys (Bill Gates is a frequent visitor); and there are more films made in Bollywood than Hollywood. The press, as free as any in Asia today, exalts with great optimism India's economic future. But this "South Asian miracle" is enjoyed by less than a third of the country's population. The rest still live in villages without reliable access to utilities and modern amenities. The economic boon has drawn many villagers to the cities in hopes of a better life, but even if they find

work they're often denied decent housing and schooling for their children. Mumbai has India's largest population, but also Asia's largest slum—named Dharevi. Since it was not far from my son's digs, I had the opportunity to walk through it--the immensity defies description. In recent years its residents' misery has been increased by efforts of local politicians to demolish or reduce the size of Dharevi without providing a viable alternative. Apparently Mumbai cannot become India's Shanghai if large slums exist there.

In less crowded, more prosperous cities like Jaipur, poverty may not be as evident, but Indians there complain about the insensitivity, corruption, and incompetence of their municipal government, including the health care system where citizens sometimes have to pay bribes to access services. It was particularly troubling to me to learn that such malfeasance extends even to academic health centers, where clinical faculty often require patients to buy expensive and unnecessary medications as prerequisite to treatment.

Despite these constant trials, I found India's people friendly, helpful, and possessing a delightful curiosity. Their amazing faces, constant smiles and colorful clothing were compelling. For this trip, I bought a digital camera with a card capacity of over 300 exposures. When I returned home to view my pictures, I was amazed to find that over half were simply people—sitting, working, smiling, and inviting.

Touring India is taxing, even for seasoned travelers. It has its share of pickpockets and con artists, and a history of violence attributed in recent decades to partition and related border disputes. But in my experiences of rushing through train stations with pestering touts, or walking crowded streets with their hawking peddlers and swarming autorickshaws and ever-present beggars, I never viewed a single instance of violence or road rage or felt a sense of personal danger. Also, I was amazed to find a religious harmony in India far beyond western comprehension. Throughout cities and villages Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and (in Mumbai), Catholics seem to live side by side in crowded neighborhoods without incident. Gandhi was correct in saying that religious strife is not natural to India but brought about artificially by politics. Again, these observations are based on the limitations of my trip, but I believe them valid.

Finally, in Jaipur I was intrigued to learn of laughing clubs, a phenomenon I believe unique to India. Members gather in parks, usually early in the morning, and commence to laugh, giggle, and hoot. Passers-by on their way to work in factories, as domestic help, or other stressful jobs stop by and join in before heading off for a day's toil. The origins and purposes of these clubs may be debatable, but to me it's a unique way of adding pleasure or comfort to difficult days in a country facing enormous challenges. We Americans have our own problems, of course. How would it be, I've started wondering, if I began to show up mornings on the bowling green in Wright Park [Tacoma] and just hooted and laughed? Would the mayor and city council join me? Any other takers?

Bill Hagens' India Bird Sightings

Mumbai, Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, and Sawai Madhopur
(February 10 to March 15, 2005)

Babbler: Jungle, Large Grey, Common, Yellow-eyed, Rufous-bellied, and Black-headed
Black Drongo

Bulbul: Red-vented and Black

Bunting: Black-headed

Common Snipe

Curlew: Stone (aka Thrust Knee)

Dove: Collared, Red-turtle, Spotted, and Blue Rock (Pigeon)

Egret: Large, Little, and Cattle,

Finch-Lark: Ashy-crowned

Flycatcher: Grey-headed

Gull: Brown and Black-headed

Heron: Reef and Little Green,

Hoo Poe

Ibis: White

Kingfisher: Common, Pied, and White-breasted

Kite: Black-winged and Pariah

Lammergeyer

Lapwing: Red-wattled

Magpie Robin

Merlin: Red-headed

Myna: Brahminy, Pied, and Common;

Oriole: Golden

Owl: Indian Eagle and Spotted

Oystercatcher

Parakeet: Rose-ringed, Alexandrine and Blossom-Head

Partridge: Grey and Painted

Peafowl

Plover: Little-ringed, Great Sand, and Lesser Golden

Purple Moorhen

Quail: Rain

Red Jungle Fowl

Ruff

Stilt: Black-wing

Stork: Open-billed, Painted, White-billed, and Adjutant

Swallow: Cliff and Red-rumped

Swift: House and Alpine

Tit: Grey

Tree Pie: Indian

Vultures: King and Long-billed

Wagtail: White

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