

Living with Birds

Living with Birds

Asad Rahmani



 **juggernaut**

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2024

Copyright © Asad Rahmani 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 978-93-5345-415-9

E-ISBN: 978-93-5345-217-9

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own. The facts contained herein were reported to be true as on the date of publication by the author to the publishers of the book, and the publishers are not in any way liable for their accuracy or veracity.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

*Dedicated to my teachers, parents and family,
students, colleagues and BNHS family.*

Contents

1. Prelude	1
2. The Early Years	6
3. At Home in AMU	29
4. Early Conservation Struggles	43
5. Joining BNHS	53
6. The Bird That Changed My Life	57
7. Changes Come Calling	78
8. The Florican Project	88
9. Desert Tales	97
10. AMU Revisited	105
11. Back at BNHS	120
12. The BirdLife Partnership	137
13. The Spirit of BNHS	144
14. 125 Years and Counting	160
15. Across International Lines	166
16. The Power of Partnership	172
17. The Legendary Ali Hussain	184
18. The Vulture Crisis	193
19. Field Visits	209

20. More Feathered Friends	222
21. For the Love of Students and Science	243
22. My BNHS Colleagues	260
23. Field Assistants	266
24. The Forest Job	279
25. Colleagues in Conservation	292
26. The 'Babu' as Conservationist	302
27. Moving on From BNHS	310
28. The Corbett Foundation	317
29. Looking Ahead	327
<i>Notes</i>	340
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	347
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	349
<i>About Indian Pitta</i>	351

1

Prelude

A small advertisement in the *Times of India* in 1980 altered the course of my life significantly. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) was looking for young field biologists with a degree in zoology or botany for their research projects. The advertisement appeared on a day (16 February 1980) when much of India was gripped by the fear of the impact of a total solar eclipse. For a few weeks before, newspapers were replete with articles on the effect of a total eclipse; mostly alarming, with some bordering on hysteria. I would argue with friends in Aligarh, saying there was nothing to fear because this natural phenomenon had been happening since the solar system came into existence 4.5 billion years ago, and would go on till our solar system died, in another 7 billion years. However, the frenzy was so huge, particularly in local newspapers and radio broadcasts, that even those with a scientific mindset entertained apocalyptic thoughts. Some scientists rightly suggested avoiding outdoor activities during the eclipse and specifically warned against looking at the sun with naked eyes; however, it was safe to watch the sun through a filter made of

black-and-white photographic film negatives. Since I had a camera, I had accumulated many negatives and I distributed some of these to my more rational friends, who were keen to view the rare event. But my objective at the time of the eclipse was not really to see the spectacle, but something entirely unrelated.

Accompanied by a young Abdul Jamil Urfi, who is now a professor in Delhi University, I decided to go to Sheikha Jheel to watch birds during the total solar eclipse. With the eclipse scheduled for 2.30 p.m. in Aligarh and northern India, we set out around 10 a.m. from the bus stand. Abdul had arrived at my hostel room (at that time, I lived in Aligarh Muslim University's [AMU] Habib Hall) early in the morning, brimming with excitement at the prospect of witnessing and documenting abnormal bird behaviours during the eclipse. Laden with sling bags weighed down by cameras, binoculars, notebooks and provisions, we pedalled towards the bus station on our cycles. An eerie silence greeted us; the usually crowded and noisy streets of Aligarh were empty. The shops were shut, cycle rickshaws were conspicuous by their absence, cars were off the roads and even the dogs were sulking in corners; it was only the presence of an occasional human being that confirmed that there was life in the city. When we reached the bus stand (where we were planning to park our cycles), idle buses seemed to tease us with their immobility. When I asked the lone manager, he said, '*Aaj koi bus nahi chalegi, sooraj grahan ke karan* (No bus will run today due to the solar eclipse).'

Undeterred, Abdul suggested that we cycle down to the Jheel, some 16 km away. Despite the age gap – he was 15 and I was double his age – our shared excitement propelled us forward. Determined to document our observations for the

Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS) – we envisioned significant findings on bird behaviour during the period of the solar eclipse – we pedalled through deserted roads, encountering only two villagers along the way, and eventually made our way to Sheikha Jheel.

We arrived at the Jheel around midday, and almost immediately immersed ourselves in its vibrant bird life. After a brief rest of about 20 minutes, and some nourishment, we decided to sit separately and note the behaviour of birds. The time of the eclipse arrived, and darkness slowly crept into the sky. The birds remained unperturbed by the darkening sun and continued their usual activities of foraging or resting. Seconds later, despite the brief period of total darkness, none exhibited any noteworthy strange behaviour – there were no sudden flights, unusual calls or any other remarkable reactions. What a contrast to some cowardly humans! I remembered my classmate (whom I had visited that morning), who was huddled up in his darkened room, wearing dark glasses bought specially ‘to avoid the bad impact of the solar eclipse’. I decided then that living in the company of birds and wildlife was much more rewarding than engaging with such irrational people.

My rationality and scientific temper had been tested a year previously too, in 1979, when a huge ruckus was created by the media over the falling of debris from the disintegrating Skylab space station, a predecessor to the currently operational International Space Station. Everyone thought that the debris would fall on their head, but I maintained that the likelihood of it landing in Aligarh was one in a billion. One practising Muslim, knowing that I did not believe in God or prayers, conspiratorially advised me, ‘*Qayamat aane wali hai, ab to namaz padho.*’ (The world is going to end, at least start praying

now).’ In the end, some of the debris fell into the Indian Ocean, and other parts landed on land, in a remote part of western Australia! Fortunately, there was no *qayamat*. Until I left Aligarh in 1980, I would jest with that devout individual, asking him about the fate of his anticipated *qayamat*; the only response was a stupid grin.

That solar eclipse day in February 1980 marked a turning point in my life. While the sun disappeared for a few minutes that day, I could see bright light ahead, shining on my own future – I could be joining BNHS if my application in response to the advertisement published that day was successful. In 1973, after completing my MSc in Zoology at AMU, I had written to J.C. Daniel, the curator of BNHS at that time, and expressed my desire to pursue a PhD on birds under Dr Sálím Ali. He promptly wrote back, saying that while they did not have any scholarship or stipend for researchers, I was welcome to join BNHS. A few months later, I obtained a scholarship from the Department of Science and Technology, but the modest sum of Rs 300 per month was inadequate to support a life in Bombay (now Mumbai). I reluctantly dropped the idea and instead enrolled for a PhD in the Zoology Department of AMU to work on the olfactory organs of fish. Meanwhile, I continued to nurture my passion for wildlife through putative fieldwork (such as going to the University’s Qila or Sheikha Jheel for bird watching), reading and writing. I remained in communication with J.C. Daniel and Dr Sálím Ali, and kept them updated on my activities. Later, in February 1980, when J.C. Daniel reviewed my application, he expressed his delight. I was called for an interview in March and the much-awaited appointment letter from the BNHS arrived in the mail in April.

I start my memoirs with this prelude, as it brings together three very important themes of my life – the importance of a scientific temper, my interest in conservation and BNHS. These have mingled and defined my entire life and career; the pages that follow join these very large dots. How successful I have been in drawing the picture, I leave the reader to judge.