

The Painted Stork – Exploring Ecology and Conservation in India by Abdul Jamil Urfi. Pelagic Publishing, London, 2024.

Prologue

Some of us fascinated by this planet's magnificent biodiversity face the dilemma of choosing one out of the so many organisms on offer to adopt as our life-long subject of study. In *To Know A Fly*, a little 1962 classic filled with wisdom, humour and artful prose, Vincent Dethier made the following prescription: 'The answer is simple', he said. 'Let the species choose you.' But having selected a species or being chosen by one, how does one go about studying it? In his inspiring 1994 memoir *Naturalist*, the reading of which I have described elsewhere as 'the most pleasurable way to learn, reflect and shape one's career in science', E.O. Wilson remarks: 'Love the organisms for themselves first, then strain for general explanations, and, with good fortune, discoveries will follow. If they don't, the love and the pleasure will have been enough.'

With or without reading Dethier and Wilson, Abdul Jamil Urfi appears to have heeded both pieces of advice, and with much success. Urfi's is an all too familiar story. As a young boy, he was attracted by the outdoors and fascinated by animals. It should be logical, should it not, that he would choose to study zoology? He did, but the zoology taught in the classroom was worse than uninspiring. Urfi describes his experience in moving terms: 'My chief regret was that few people seemed interested in zoology itself, especially behaviour and ecology which appealed to me. The [Zoology Department] buildings seemed like molluscan shells piled on the seashore – looking beautiful from the outside, with their intricate carvings and patterns. But the animal that once inhabited them had died long ago. Alas, the truth was that nobody was interested in zoology.'

I know many a wildlife enthusiast whose love of animals was irreversibly extinguished by studying zoology! But Urfi is made of sterner stuff. He escaped to the outdoors at every opportunity and, in his own words, 'discovered zoology through birdwatching'. Echoing India's most famous Ornithologist Salim Ali's sentiment that 'Birdwatching is like measles. You have to catch the disease', he reflects: 'I had caught that disease long ago, and when I began

to tire of the dull and boring indoor lectures and practicals in the Zoology Department, it came to my rescue.'

One of the many outdoor places Urfi hung out was Delhi Zoo. Just as he was more interested in looking outside the classrooms of the zoology department, so was he more interested in looking outside the animal enclosures at the zoo. It turned out that a wild colony of the Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* had been nesting every year in the trees planted on the little islands on the zoo premises. What a wonderful use of this space, a true interpretation of the 'zoological park' epithet! As if that were not enough, the then Director of Delhi Zoo, J.H. Desai, had also showered his benevolent attention on the wild birds 'encroaching' his territory. Desai published a detailed account of the zoo's Painted Stork population, prompting Urfi to pay tribute with Issac Newton's quote, 'If I have seen further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.'

It is here that the Painted Stork appears to have chosen Abdul Jamil Urfi as its chief documenter and spokesman. Over the next 35 years, Urfi researched this and other populations of this species with the love for the organism prescribed by Wilson – and he has not failed to strain for general explanations. And as Wilson predicted, success has followed. Conducting field studies in Delhi, Rajasthan and Karnataka, Urfi and his students have broken much new ground in investigating the foraging ecology, nesting habits, evolution of sexual size dimorphism, mating patterns, coloniality and genetic diversity in the Painted Stork.

Urfi synthesised all his discoveries and placed them in the context of the international literature on this and related species in his 2011 monograph *The Painted Stork: Ecology and Conservation*. That book was aimed at a scientific scholarly audience. The present work is a more personal and accessible account of his research, aimed especially at students who may be developing a similar fascination for some particular species. An equally important goal of this book is to encourage students to engage with the problems and prospects of nature conservation, not merely as ideological or moral commitments but as a scientific endeavour.

This book covers much territory, introducing the Painted Stork and its relatives in a zoological context, providing interesting snippets about its perception and depiction in folklore around the world, and discussing many aspects of its behaviour and ecology – all broadly mapping onto Urfi's research interests. The three final chapters on the impact of urbanization, the role of local peoples in shaping this bird's survival and distribution and, finally, complex issues of conservation, are especially valuable. Furthermore, their worth goes beyond solely the conservation of the Painted Stork, as they

contain general lessons for any conservation effort in the face of the inevitable forces of development, invasive species, the complex dynamics of monsoons and ongoing climate change. Coming at the end of a detailed study of the behaviour and ecology of a single species, these three chapters showcase the critical role of science in conservation.

I am pleased to recommend *The Painted Stork: Exploring Ecology and Conservation in India* to a wide range of readers all over the world and especially in India. There is a great dearth of role-models and books that inspire and inform us about the potential for conducting first-rate science that can be combined with a passion for the outdoors, a love of wildlife, the spirit of adventure and freedom from the need to procure large grants and laboratory facilities. Urfi's life and work fulfil this need admirably and have the power to produce a new generation of role-models and books that carry forward the spirit of science embodied in them.

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