

Obituary: Sálim Ali, 1896 – 1987

Dr. Sálim Ali was born in Bombay in 1896 and died in that same city in the third week of June 1987 at the age of 90. In the introduction to the ten volume 'Indian Handbook', he described Alexander Hume as 'the father of Indian ornithology'; if that is so then Sálim Ali himself can truly be described as the 'builder of Indian ornithology', who through his numerous books largely created the present body of our knowledge about the subcontinent's avifauna and, as the 'Great Instructor', made millions of people in that most populous country aware of and interested in birds. If anyone doubts this, they should witness the number of small regional nature clubs and wildlife societies now existing in India and, sadly, not paralleled by a similar proliferation in neighbouring countries of the region.

In his autobiography (*The fall of a sparrow*, 1985), he describes how, as a boy of about 12 years of age, he shot a Chestnut-shouldered Rock Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* and, realising that this was something different from his usual House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* targets, was persuaded by an uncle who was a member to take it to the Bombay Natural History Society. There the Honorary Secretary took both time and trouble to foster the young boy's interest in further study of birds and natural history.

Though possessing no university degree and originally starting out in the sphere of commerce, in a family mining and timber business enterprise in Burma, he left this at the age of 27 during the depression to take up a course in ornithology at St. Xavier's College in Bombay. As a result of this and his proven aptitude, he obtained a post as Assistant Curator at the Prince of Wales Museum. Later he studied under Professor Erwin Stresemann at the Berlin Museum, and on returning to India became involved in detailed studies of the breeding behaviour of the Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* as well as many regional ornithological surveys under the patronage (vital in those years of economic hardship between the two world wars) of various princely states. The Hyderabad State, Nilgiri Hills, Travancore and Cochin, Kutch and Bahawalpur ornithological surveys ensued, during which he built up his extensive first-hand field knowledge of many regions. His first major publication was *The birds of Kutch* (1945), followed by *Indian hill birds* (1949), *The birds of Travancore and Cochin* (1953) and *The birds of Sikkim* (1962). Besides revising and enlarging these earlier works in recent years, he published his findings on the behaviour of the Baya Weaver (*J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 53, 54).

In 1944 he met Sidney Dillon Ripley, then serving in Sri Lanka with the U. S. Army, and from that chance encounter there developed a most fruitful partnership involving several joint ornithological expeditions to the little-known north-eastern Himalayan regions (the Mishmi Hills and the Naga Hills). Ripley collaborated with Sálim Ali in the compilation of the ten

volume *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan*. Sálim Ali started writing this in 1964 and the last volume was published in 1974 on his 78th birthday.

Over this period his natural gift for informative writing, often combined with evocative and amusing descriptive phrases, attracted the attention of persons living all over India as well as in Europe and the USSR (to single out two regions that recognised his contributions with honours). He was awarded the prestigious Padma Vibhushan by Indira Gandhi in 1976 and received honorary doctorates of science from several Indian universities, starting with Aligarh Muslim University in 1958. In 1967 he was awarded the British Ornithologists' Union Medal (the first non-Briton to receive this), and in 1976, from World Wildlife Fund International, the Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize, worth \$50,000. Typically, having sought funds all his life to support various field expeditions, he gave all this prize money to his beloved Bombay Natural History Society, with which he was closely associated for over 50 years. In the 1920s he became Honorary Secretary of that Society and later President, and it was largely through his leadership that the Society carried out many valuable research projects including bird migration studies, the ecology of endangered bird species, and successful campaigns to save vital ecological regions, especially the preservation of the now famous sanctuary of Bharatpur and the last remnants of evergreen rainforest in the Nilgiri Hills.

Though I had corresponded with Sálim Ali from 1964, when I sent him a calendar I had painted of hill birds, I did not meet him until the IUCN Delhi conference in 1969. At that time, a mere 73 years of age, he was still an extremely wiry and active person, who charged around Delhi driving his own Land-rover and leading early morning birdwatching trips before we settled down to the morning's conference agenda. It has been my privilege to receive much help and encouragement (as a neophyte ornithologist) from him over the years, and as recently as May of this year he wrote me a most helpful letter from his hospital bed discussing material I had written for a book on the birds of Pakistan.

Besides his writing skills and encyclopedic knowledge of the subcontinent's birds, Sálim Ali was an excellent field man, accustomed to the discomforts and rough conditions associated with studies in remote areas, and he was rigorous in his discipline of making everyone benefit from early morning starts. Whilst I was working in the Bombay Natural History Society's Museum in 1980, Sálim Ali (only 84 years old!) attended the Society's offices almost daily, and on one occasion my wife spotted him preceding her up the broad flight of stone steps to his first floor office, not wearily dragging his feet, but running up two steps at a time! I would hasten to add that despite increasing deafness, he was a sociable person and enjoyed talking to people, and during that 1980 sojourn in Bombay he often stopped to chat to my wife and was unfailingly courteous to her.

He could, however, be quite peppery in dealing with incompetence or what he considered to be uncivil behaviour, and I also recall the celerity with which he successfully dispersed an accumulating crowd of local urchins

when he was trying to show a small newly created bird sanctuary on one of Bombay's creeks to some visiting Dutch ornithologists.

He was not only, in his own words, a lover of birds, who actively enjoyed the thrill of birdwatching, but he was a dedicated conservationist and his contribution to saving India's wildlife heritage will endure for many generations after his passing. The further researches of some half-dozen of his young protégés, who started their careers with the Bombay Natural History Society, will also continue his lifetime work of adding to our knowledge of Indian ornithology.

T. J. Roberts

Guidelines for contributors

Forktail publishes original papers in the English language (also, in certain cases, English translations of papers in Oriental languages) treating any aspect of the ornithology (e.g. distribution, biology, conservation, identification) of the Oriental region, i.e. the region bounded by the Indus River to the west, Lydekker's Line to the east (i.e. the eastern boundary of Wallacea), the Chang Jiang (Yangtze Kiang) basin to the north and the Lesser Sundas, Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands to the south; the Japanese Nansei Shoto (islands south-west of Kyushu) are included, and indeed material concerning any part of China or Pakistan may be published. Submissions are considered on the understanding that they are being offered solely for publication by the Oriental Bird Club, which will retain copyright. Referees are used where appropriate; all submissions are reviewed by the *Forktail* Editorial Committee, and those accepted are normally published in order of receipt. (Some further indication of the type of material appropriate for the journal is provided in the inaugural editorial, 'The scope of *Forktail*', *Forktail* 1: 3-5.)

Submissions should be in duplicate, typewritten on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. The approximate position of figures and tables should be indicated in the margin. Papers should be concise and factual, take full account of previous relevant literature but avoid repetition of established information as much as possible; opinions expressed should be based on adequate evidence. Titles of papers must be accurate and concise, and (for the benefit of abstraction services) include any relevant scientific (taxonomic) name. To facilitate revision, the use of a word processor is strongly advised.

Whenever possible, authors should consult an issue of *Forktail* for style and layout. Spelling follows *The shorter Oxford English dictionary*, except that external features of birds are spelt and hyphenated in accordance with the entry under 'Topography' in *A dictionary of birds* (1985). Spelling of place-names accords (unless another source is specified) with the most recent edition (currently seventh, 1985) of *The Times atlas of the world*; we use 'South-East Asia' and 'Viet Nam'. Localities with well-known other spellings or older names should have these placed in parentheses after their first mention. For localities too small to be in the *Times atlas* a source of the spelling adopted should preferably be indicated and the precise geographical coordinates provided (these should be double-checked where possible). It is appreciated that authors will not always have access to the above sources; in such cases the editor will seek to introduce conformity.

English and scientific names of birds should preferably follow those provided by King *et al.* in *A field guide to the birds of South-East Asia* (e.g. Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike, White-browed Bush-Robin). Birds not mentioned there should be named in accordance with a recent standard work, e.g. White and Bruce's *The birds of Wallacea*. On first mention of a bird both English and scientific name should be given, thereafter only one, preferably the English. Scientific trinomials need be used only if subspecific nomenclature is relevant to the topic under discussion. These recommendations also apply for any other animal or plant species mentioned.

Underlining (= *italics*) is used for all words of foreign languages, including generic and specific scientific names. Metric units and their international symbols should be used; if it is necessary to cite other systems of measurement, these can be added in parentheses. Temperatures should be given in the Centigrade (Celsius) scale. Numbers one to ten are written in full except when linked with a measurement abbreviation or higher number, thus 'five birds' but '5 km' and '5-12 birds'; numerals are used for all numbers above ten, four-figure numbers and above using the comma thus: '1,234', '12,345'. Details of experimental technique, extensive tabulations of results, etc., are best presented as appendices. Authors of papers containing statistical analysis should observe the provisions of the relevant section of 'Notice to contributors' in a recent *Ibis*. Dates should be written 1 January 1985, times of day as 08h30, 17h55 (24-hour clock;), etc. When citing a conversation ('verbally') or letter ('*in litt.*'), the contact's name and initials should be included, preferably with the year of communication. A full-length paper must include a summary not exceeding 5% of the total length.

Any figure, diagram, line-drawing or map should preferably be in black ink on strong white or translucent paper; it should be called a Figure, numbered appropriately, and fully captioned.