



'Naturalist in' Series
HOME IS WHERE THE HEART SINGS
A Review by Christopher K. Starr



Photo by
Rishi Bajpai

Review of S. Theodore Baskaran 1999. *The Dance of the Sarus*. New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press 240 pp. [45th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

Theodore Baskaran was born in 1940 in the village of Dharapuram, Tamil Nadu state in southern India, where he spent a happy childhood outdoors in what was mostly an arid scrubland. As a career civil servant, he traveled on assignment to various parts of India. In addition to being a noted amateur naturalist and conservationist, he is a leading historian of Tamil-language film and writes extensively in both Tamil and English.

The book's primary pole is Tamil Nadu, and its geographic focus is unavoidably the Western Ghats. This 1600 km mountain range running up the western edge of India was visible in the distance during his childhood. The Western Ghats, with the famed Nilgiri Hills – an important tea-growing area - - at their southern end, are recognized worldwide as a biodiversity hotspot.

The book's secondary pole is Gujarat state, where Baskaran worked for three years. There is no

major tradition of hunting birds in Gujarat, and it is the state best provided with natural wetlands, so that the birdlife is rich and relatively tame. There is particular interest in courtship displays, as one expects from a true bird watcher.

Most of the 53 chapters originated as articles in *The Hindu*, an English-language national newspaper headquartered in South India. As such, each chapter is self-contained and usually just 2-4 pages long. It characteristically opens with a personal scene or



Photo of the Nilgiri Forest– Photo by Enchant Me (Flickr)

observation and commonly goes on to a more general question. In writing for a general readership, Baskaran is skillful in introducing scientific terms, such as "protective colouration" and "sexual dimorphism". At the same time, I regret that there is no index of vernacular and scientific names to direct the more-than-casual reader to comments on particular species.

The title species, the Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*), is a very large bird whose populations serve as an index of the health of wetlands. Its spectacular courtship dance that gives the book its title is characteristically followed by lifelong monogamy. It bears mention that in a chapter about ibises -- of which India has three species -- Baskaran mentions in passing that our own scarlet ibis is the prettiest in the world.

Without saying so explicitly, Baskaran's emphasis is on the kinds of observations that anyone could make. His newspaper articles and then this book, have probably served as a

recruiting medium for young naturalists. The wonderful enthusiasm of the amateur naturalist is in evidence throughout, and the author is skilled at conveying the enchantment of seeing some new bird or mammal on a misty early morning. Reading *The Dance of the Sarus*, those of us who have been naturalists for decades are likely to experience a real blast from the past. Here, let me give you a taste.

"A pair of Purple-Rumped Sunbirds began appearing frequently around our house in Sastri Nagar, Chennai. The male is metallic purple above and yellow below; the female is ashy grey and yellow. Perched on the telephone wire one morning, the male was putting up a grand courtship display, turning its iridescent head, opening and closing its wings and chirruping with great gusto. The female looked duly impressed. We wondered where the nest was to be."

The two birds did, indeed, reach an understanding and built a nest very near the house, where they reared two chicks. But then, when the nestlings were fully fledged, the nest was suddenly attacked by a small hawk, the Shikra, which killed one of them. The other nestling survived and was later seen with its parents.

In one important respect, *The Dance of the Sarus* stands apart from the great mass of naturalist-in books set in the tropics. As you may have noticed, every such work reviewed in this series up to now was written by someone who can be regarded as an expatriate. Even if the author was a long-term resident (e.g. Alexander Skutch in Costa Rica) or born in the country (e.g. W.H. Hudson in Argentina), he did not see himself as a native and wrote mainly for an overseas readership. In welcome contrast, Baskaran is very much a son of southern India, writing mainly for Indians. At the same time, he is ungrudging in his appreciation of the several British amateur naturalists from colonial times -- "empire builders with a penchant for natural history" he calls them - - who brought the tradition to South Asia, even as he regrets the horde of British hunters and their Indian imitators who blasted away at any wild creature they encountered.

Fittingly for a nature writer whose aims are partly polemical, Baskaran shows a keen sense of



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conservation and threats to species. He is well known in southern India as a campaigner for the establishment and maintenance of effective wildlife sanctuaries.

The Dance of the Sarus ends with several chapters on such policy questions as the uses of animals in experiments, the economics of conservation, and the introduction of trout for sport fishing, and three chapters on what we might call "tamelife", distinctively Indian breeds of domestic animals.



Photo of the Korakundah Waterfall in the Nilgiri Forest Photo by Indianature SG (Flickr)



NATURE IN THE NEWS

A quarterly summary of local environmental news

by Kris Sookdeo



MAY

Scarlet Ibis now an ESS

The country's national bird, the Scarlet Ibis [*Eudocimus ruber*], has been designated an Environmentally Sensitive Species (ESS). The designation, based on scientific research and observation of the species' population trend was proposed by the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) which sought to enhance the Scarlet Ibis' legal status to ensure their continued protection.

Quarry Rehabilitation Project

A project for the rehabilitation of quarries was launched at the National Quarries site in Turure on 20th May. The Integrating Water, Land and Ecosystem Management in Caribbean Small Island Developing States (IWEco) project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and is aimed at rehabilitating abandoned or exhausted quarry pits in the North-East area of Trinidad. Led by the IAMovement, volunteers planted a total of 4,000 vetiver plants and 75 trees. The groups also laid out organic material on the ground to create topsoil including grass and tree cuttings, wood chips, sawdust, Sargassum seaweed and spent grain from Carib Brewery. Over the next 4 years, members of Turure and surrounding communities will become trained and certified "Quarry Rehabilitation Champions" with opportunity for employment until 2021 to rehabilitate degraded quarry lands - targeting between 50 to 100 acres.

Waste Management

As much as 83% of the waste currently produced in T&T is recyclable according to the Environmental Management

Authority (EMA). Speaking at a media sensitisation session, the EMA also highlighted that, according to the Organisation of the American States, T&T per-capita consumption of styrofoam was 5.3 cups per person per day.

National Reforestation Programme

Speaking on the National Reforestation Programme, Agriculture Minister Clarence Rambharat said that while the programme has been in existence for the last fourteen years – providing c. 3000 jobs and costing taxpayers c. \$92 million a year, there remained a desire to create long-term, economic value out of the programme.

JUNE

In presenting the THA 2018/2019 budget statement, it was reported that the Tobago Tourism Agency's three-year Road Map for growth includes a comprehensive product audit on all tourism sites, attractions and accommodation; rehabilitation of sensitive marine areas and the pursuit of international certification such as Blue Flag; improvement of tourism-related infrastructure around Tobago: better signage; upgrades to nature trails; beautification of Scarborough and upgrade and restoration of beach facilities.

Notable budget items included infrastructural works at Pigeon Point at \$9.1 million, works at Manta Lodge at \$8.3 million, work on the Lure Wildlife Nature Park at \$7.5 million, construction of Fort King George Heritage Park at \$6.4 million and construction of beach facilities at Englishman's Bay at \$2 million.

