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## The Sons of Salim Ali: Avian Care in the Western Ghats of South India

Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning.  
—Donna Haraway<sup>1</sup>

Since 2006, I have been doing ethnographic research in the Western Ghats of South India, studying the histories, politics, and ethics of wildlife conservation at a time when species extinctions and human-wildlife conflicts are rife. My work mainly takes place at the border of a wildlife sanctuary in Wayanad, Kerala, where an authoritarian, state-led conservation regime prioritizes the protection of the country's most iconic species: the tiger and the Asian elephant.

During my fieldwork, I encountered a group of loosely connected individuals who care about a variety of less charismatic avian species that live in vulnerable anthropogenic environments and transgress the boundaries of India's protected areas, national parks, and wildlife enclosures. Most of these human caretakers are largely self-trained scientists who have drawn inspiration from the work and writings of India's most famous "bird man": the late ornithologist and conservationist Salim Ali (1896–1987).<sup>2</sup> Ali is well known for the beautiful 10-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, written together with his American colleague Sidney Dillon Ripley between 1964 and 1974. This volume, which publicized the diversity of avifauna in India, has inspired people's passions for birds and bird photography all over the subcontinent.

Here I present the untold stories and (literally) silent practices of these bird lovers and photographers who are, at least in spirit, the "sons of Salim Ali." I aim to make visible the ways in which these individuals contribute to avian conservation and the processes of gathering knowledge on bird species in times of their steady loss and disappearance. The "sons of Salim Ali" watch out for their winged friends in landscapes that receive little attention in state-led conservation efforts, such as paddy fields, coffee plantations, and patches of marsh and grassland that lie in the midst of intensively used agricultural land. Since their

1 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 36.

2 Salim Ali and Sidney Dillon Ripley, *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, 10 vols. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1968–1974).

practices of care take place in environments with long colonial histories of unequal access to forest commons and exclusionary environmental governance, I also follow recent scholars in feminist science and technology studies by asking the questions: What are the benefits and costs associated with avian care, and for whom?<sup>3</sup>

### Taxonomic Care: Listing the Endemic



**Figure 1:**  
Survey team in the  
Western Ghats.  
Photograph by C. K.  
Vishnudas.

When I first met him in 2010, Vishnu had just returned from a four-hundred-day hike through the rugged landscapes of South India's Western Ghats. Seventy-five years after Salim Ali had conducted his renowned Travancore-Cochin bird survey—the first systematic and scientific study of birds in the region—Vishnu and a team of six other scientists had been meticulously following Ali's trail, starting their hike at exactly the same day of the year and walking the exact same route across the mountain range as Ali had done. Their goal was to find out what species were left of the avifauna communities first recorded by the famous ornithologist in 1933.

3 On feminist studies see Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things," *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 1 (2011): 85–106, and on technology studies see Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, *Critical Perspectives on Animals: Theory, Culture, Science, and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Equipped with binoculars, telephoto lenses, and camping equipment, the men walked 282.35 kilometers through various habitats and ecosystems, identifying and counting 77,547 individual birds belonging to 338 species. They found out that many of the birds endemic to the Western Ghats described as abundant by Ali, such as the grey-breasted laughing thrush or the Nilgiri wood pigeon, are now rare and threatened with extinction. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has categorized 19 of the region's avian species as globally endangered. Among them are four critically endangered species of vulture that were once common in the region but have now disappeared almost entirely. Huge numbers of them were poisoned by scavenging on domestic cattle that had been treated with the painkiller diclofenac, a drug that is fatal for the birds.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2:  
White-rumped  
vulture nestling  
in Wayanad  
Wildlife Sanctuary.  
Photograph by C. K.  
Vishnudas.

The scientist's special research permit enabled them to reach places deep within the fragile ecologies of protected areas, where tourists and the general public are not allowed to enter. As trophies, they brought back carefully composed close-up photographs of elusive birds, like a black and orange flycatcher bathing in a stream, or a small sunbird, just eight centimeters long, feeding on the nectar of a plantain flower.

"Beewee, beewee"—Vishnu imitated the characteristic call of the white-bellied shor-twing (*Myiomela major*), a rare endemic songbird who lives at high mountain altitudes.

4 C. Shashikumar, C. K. Vishnudas, S. Raju, and P. A. Vinayan, "On Sálím Ali's Trail: A Comparative Assessment of Southern Kerala's Avifauna after 75 Years," *Indian Birds* 9, no. 2 (2014): 29–40.

The small insectivore is hard to locate with human eyes and ears. It hides in the undergrowth of evergreen *shola* forests (*shola* is a Tamil word for “thicket” or “grove”) and remains silent throughout most of the year. Only during the breeding season, when the male bird calls its female partner, can its distinguishing song—a “series of shrill whistles and buzzing”—help bird lovers to find and follow the animal more easily.

Vishnu’s team was excited to distinguish a “new” species on their trip: the rufous-bellied shortwing, *Myiomela albiventris*, which, formerly considered a “subspecies” and conspecific of the white-bellied shortwing, actually lives on the other side of Palghat Gap, a deep valley cutting the southern Western Ghats into two parts. Older classifications based on physiological similarities grouped these birds as subspecies in the genus *Brachypteryx*. By catching them in nets, taking blood samples, and sequencing their mitochondrial DNA in a lab at the National Center for Biological Sciences in Bangalore, the scientists decided however that according to what they call the animals’ genetic barcode, both birds are better classified as two different species.

Discovering new endemic species is an important strategy in today’s politics of conservation, since doing so can potentially “upgrade” a region’s protection status. The more endemic and endangered species there are to be found, the higher the potential for claiming stricter protection measures, such as the restriction of tourist access, a ban on construction activities, and the appointment of more forest staff to prevent poaching or other illegal activities. Taxonomic listing, in this case, becomes not only a scientific but a political practice.

### **Affective Care: Mourning Extinction**

Curiosity for previously unknown avian song, feeding, and nesting behavior motivates the “sons of Salim Ali” to follow their feathered companions. Yet, above all, their care for birds is driven by anxiety and grief about the loss of so many life-forms from the places of their childhood. Unregulated tourism development, quarrying, and construction have fragmented Wayanad’s forests and wetlands. Many small-scale cultivators have converted rice paddies into plantations of cash crops like banana, ginger, and areca nut—crops that demand higher inputs of agricultural chemicals. People report that human cancer incidences have increased since the use of fertilizers and pesti-

cides became widespread. The green revolution has left its toxic marks on a wide variety of species. DDT, Furadan (Carofuran), or endosulfan—which farmers readily applied on their fields until the early 2000s<sup>5</sup>—have poisoned and killed many sensitive plants and animals and caused others to lose their habitat and have to move to more favorable or remote places.

The Indian rice frog (*Fejervarya limnocharis*), for example, and the giant toad that was a source of protein especially for the indigenous *Adivasis* of the region, have disappeared in large numbers from Wayanad's streams and paddy fields. Flying frogs (*Rhacophorus malabaricus*), who used to be a common sight on the cool walls of deep wells near people's houses, are rarely seen now, and freshwater crabs have become scarce in the rice beds. Birds that live in these cultivated wetlands and feed on the small animals have disappeared alongside them. Greater painted-snipes (*Rostratula benghalensis*), for example, have not survived the chemicalized agricultural practices and are almost extinct now.

Wayanad's bird-lovers share a deep concern for these vanishing life-forms. Many of them, mostly men in their forties and older, regularly meet as part of the local environmental group *Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshana Samidhi* (WPSS), translated from the Sanskrit as "Wayanad Nature Protection Group." Some of them are retired forest officials, teachers, farmers, or veterinary doctors. Most of them have been influenced by Gandhian philosophy and have read the books of Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Masanobu Fukuoka.

Mr. Badusha, the founding member and spokesman of WPSS, has been an active environmentalist since Kerala's Left movement of the 1960s. Together with his followers he has ignited and fought for many of the region's environmental campaigns: in the 1970s the WPSS successfully rallied against the building of a dam in the famous Silent Valley National Park, and in the 1980s they built human chains to embrace huge old-growth forest trees as part of South India's Appiko (embrace) movement, to prevent them from being logged. Presently, they organize protest marches against the continuing use of pesticides, they file cases—at state- and national-level courts or India's Green Tribunal—against illegal quarrying in ecologically fragile landscapes, and

5 Daniel Münster, "'Ginger is a Gamble': Crop Booms, Rural Uncertainty, and the Neoliberalization of Agriculture in South India," *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 71 (2015): 100–13.

they are demanding the enforcement of a night-traffic ban on the NH-212, a highway running through the core area of the Bandipur National Park and Wayanad's wildlife sanctuary.

Their combined appreciation for the beauty of avian life and sorrow for its loss became visible during an exhibition that WPSS organized in 2014 in Manandavadi, a small town in Northern Wayanad. At a public library, the birder-environmentalists displayed avian photographs taken from their own forest gardens, farms, or field trips. They invited school children, local intellectuals, and politicians to contemplate a selection of beautiful close-up photographs of birds: a mother brown hawk owl (*Ninox scutulata*) feeding her nestlings, a lesser grey-headed fish eagle (*Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*) holding its prey, or a shiny crimson-backed sunbird (*Leptocoma minima*) sitting on a flower, and many more. As a symbol of mourning for all the species that have already vanished from this planet, they had placed a picture on the floor in memory of Martha, the world's last passenger pigeon, with a red rose in front of it and distributed flyers informing visitors about Wayanad's fragile ecologies and the current age of mass extinction.



Figure 3:  
Picture of Martha  
with red rose. Photo-  
graph by author.

### Silent Care: The Multispecies Arts of Noticing

To cultivate what Anna Tsing calls the “arts of noticing,”<sup>6</sup> Wayanad’s birders need to practice silence. As Jacob Metcalf argues, many species are best cared for through “a separation from most human activities.”<sup>7</sup> To observe most birds and their behavior, the watcher needs to remain distant, make him or herself unheard and unseen, and patiently sit, quietly, for many hours. Knowing nocturnal birds, like a mottled wood owl (*Strix ocellata*), means staying

6 Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom,” *Manoa* 22 (2010): 191–203.

7 Jacob Metcalf, “Intimacy without Proximity: Encountering Grizzlies as a Companion Species,” *Environmental Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2008): 99–128.

up all night to witness its hunting and feeding behavior and to differentiate its different calls and songs. Finding out how birds care for each other—which parent feeds the nestlings; if they are brought maggots, frogs, lizards, or snakes; who builds their nests and how; who teaches them to fly—sometimes means building a hide near their nest, many meters up in the dense canopy of trees, watching them from dusk till dawn.

Avian care means being attentive to a diversity of multispecies communities. It calls for noticing the multitude of organisms that a bird depends on and could not survive without: flowers, seeds, fruits, nuts, beetles, butterflies, spiders, worms, snakes, frogs, carcasses of mammals . . . the list goes on. Caring for the rufous woodpecker (*Micropternus brachyurus*), for example, means caring for shady coffee plantations where the bird likes to breed in the nests of acrobat ants (*Crematogaster* spp.), an arboreal ant genus that uses its venom to hunt other insects such as wasps. As Vishnu has observed, the rufous woodpecker “hammers” these ants’ nests in order to “conquer them, warding off the attacks of agitated ants” and consuming their eggs.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the survival of the rufous woodpecker is threatened; plantation owners try to eradicate the *Crematogaster* ants on which the birds rely because the ants help mealybugs (*Planococcus* spp.)—insects which suck the juice of coffee plants—to flourish on the plantations by protecting them from predators, carrying them from one plant to another, and fostering them in their nests.<sup>9</sup> The application of toxic insecticides, however, not only kills the ants but takes away the rufous woodpeckers’ prey base and nesting sites. Vishnu and his ornithologist friends have thus initiated a campaign to promote organic coffee cultivation in Wayanad, so that complex multispecies communities can continue to survive together on the plantations.

### Naturalcultural Care: Compromises and Costs

Caring for birds means having to overcome the convenient but limiting distinctions between “wild” and protected places, forests and fields, jungle and domestic space—between nature and culture—that have persisted in the South Indian landscape since

8 C. K. Vishnudas, “Crematogaster Ants in Shaded Coffee Plantations: A Critical Food Source for Rufous Woodpecker *Micropternus brachyurus* and Other Forest Birds,” *Indian Birds* 4, no. 1 (2008): 9–11.

9 *Ibid.*



colonial times. Some birds, like many species of goose and duck, travel on long migration routes through a diversity of landscapes. Other species, including raptors, live in territories that include a wide range of habitats such as fields, plantations, and less disturbed forest regions. This highlights the importance of trying to know and understand the true breadth of our interconnected worlds; as Donna Haraway reminds her readers: knowing (and caring for) others is a relational practice that opens up new possibilities for coconstituting and living together in a shared world.<sup>10</sup> In South India, caring for birds is also a collaborative project, one that crosses cultural borders and the boundaries of caste and class. To find avian habitats and nesting places, the birders often rely on local experts, mostly indigenous *Adivasi* watchers and trackers, to guide them through unfamiliar forest landscapes, to report sightings of rare birds, and attune scientists to the dangers and particularities of a place: the trackers show them which paths to avoid so that a tiger remains undisturbed in its territory. They safely lead the researchers around herds of grazing elephants at a distance and they guide them to the spots where the leopard has left its prey, so that the birders can observe vultures feeding on the fresh carcass.

Many of the people that Wayanad's birders rely on belong to the community of the *Kattunaika*, a former hunting and gathering group, who were relocated from the wildlife sanctuary during colonial times to be employed as timber workers for the Imperial Forest Department. Today, they have rights to collect tubers, bamboo rice, wild honey, and medicinal plants from the sanctuary and to sell them to Ayurvedic pharmacies, tourists, and government-run NGOs. Their traditional practice of hunting birds and collecting eggs, however, is prohibited. Avian care in South India is thus never innocent; it makes visible vulnerabilities, hierarchies, and exclusions.

One day, when I was walking together with Vishnu in the forest near the sanctuary's boundary, a few *Kattunaika* boys came running up to us, proudly presenting their daily catch: they had killed four rare songbirds with their slingshots and were ready to prepare them on a fire. I was relieved when Vishnu took these feathered animals into his hand, and kept silent. In the context of South India, caring about avian conservation then means being attentive to these situated histories of imperialism and colonization that deprived forest-dwelling people of their access to the forest commons. It means confronting the

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.



questions of who benefits (and who potentially loses out) from relationships of care, as well as making careful decisions on how to grapple with a multiplicity of opposing claims, both human and nonhuman.

When practices of care overlap, leading to conflicting interests and divergent needs of the human and other species involved, no easy, fast, and unconditional measures are appropriate. Rather, careful practices go beyond a singular, species-specific focus in order to consider the complex and vital multispecies relations inherent *to* our world.

Figure 4:  
Dead songbirds in Vishnu's  
hands. Photograph by  
author.