

4 April 2020

After a long time and with much encouragement, the inspiration has probably caught up with me to finally collect some words and put some paragraphs together.

Unlimited time, thanks to a virus that has changed life for everyone on the planet simultaneously, hopefully for generations to come. The story will only survive if it survives in the annals we leave behind for posterity, like those before us.

It was probably sometime in the 7th standard that I became a member of the World Wildlife Fund. In those days schools encouraged us to connect with nature. I grew up in a family where animals have been constant members and pampered as animals and not as children of the family, as is common now and very alien to me.

The family orchard and nursery, was a huge influence in our love for nature, flora and fauna. This is where we trooped around the land and investigated birds' nests, discovered large toads, ran for our lives from earthworm sized snakes and watched fascinated when we came across one with a frog half way down its gob.

In the house we shared bathrooms with flying frogs, moles that stole hand soap at night, carpenter beetles and colonies of ants.

On the farm you had to be wary of the red ants, if they bit, it was difficult to get them to give up without ripping them apart. Mosquitoes and fleas were a given and the cause for a daily routine post bath to apply lacto calamine lotion to each other's bites. Sleeping under mosquito nets was fascinating, but extremely inconvenient when the electricity went off at night and the summer night buzzed in your ears with invisible pests.

Before, I was born, my parents kept company with a performing macaque, named Chhabili. My grandmother had a grey parrot called Popsie. I did meet both these lively, caring creatures, but most of all grew up with the stories of their antics and my grandmother was a quintessential story teller.

During my teenage years, I raised many a puppy born in our home, potty training them and making them independent till homes were found for them. Like most of us in our family, our pets have also all been mix breeds and some have been really quirky results.

When I moved to Amsterdam, a whole new lot of wildlife opened up to me. Water birds mostly and canal fish. But the zoo and botanical garden were my go to place, to see exotic animals that I had only read about or to visit the familiar ones in the tropical pens when homesick. The botanical garden also had a tropical greenhouse where I went to smell the jasmine.

We kept an aquarium in the house with salamanders and turtles alongside typical tetras and guppies. Once the parakeets flew away, we started keeping a pair of orange beaked finches. I developed an unusual relation with one of these little birdies that flew around my home freely and kept me company while watching TV and also doubled as my morning alarm.

I became a member of the zoo and the botanical gardens, so could walk in when I wanted and spent many a summer afternoon at one or the other unable to concentrate on the book in hand, observing the animals and visitors.

The world in which we grew up, lizards and squirrels, sparrows and bats, monkeys and donkeys had all but disappeared.

The menace of pigeons has ensured that the balconies and windows are netted down or kept shut. Yet, I can't help watching the soaring kites, twittering and flitting sun and weaver birds, peacocks, parrots, warblers and swallows. New to the neighbourhood are the black ibis. They were never part of the natural fabric of our city and roost in trees that in my childhood would have had vultures.

Their arrival has been fascinating and in the early days I watched them and looked out for them. Mostly you will see one or a pair. They are not really pretty but a bit sinister to look at, all black with a red bishop-like skull cap. They come down to the fields to feed and this is done silently. But twice a day they hold conferences on the high telecom post. The cacophony then is loud accompanied with much flapping of wings and jumping around and re-perching on the circular ring. This perch also doubles as their dating hangout and dating is a very loud affair. The peacocks on the other hand make noise to attract their mates, but the deed is quietly carried out in the bushes.

There is one crow that I regularly observe pestering a kite, they chase each other about and perch on a street light and then just like that the play and fun is over and they head in their own directions. Before the anti-pigeon net was fixed, a kite regularly took a swipe at my head, quite nerve racking.

Luckily the net is large enough to allow for the occasional swallow, weaver or sunbird and even bulbul to get through. They are busy hopping around, checking out the flowers and twittering incessantly.

The lockdown of spring 2020 has suddenly made people realise that birds have been chirping while they have been too busy to listen. It has also made the birds appear in numbers that have rarely been seen in the last 30 yrs.

When I drive around during normal times, though my eyes are on the road, they will always catch flashes of birds and animals along the roadside, co-passengers are always taken aback when I hesitate, slow down and then pick up speed pointing animatedly at something they obviously do not see.

How can we have disregarded nature for so long? The current generation has no idea about birds or bird calls, they have never observed their behaviour and I wonder how they will create something for their environment if they have no clue about its beauty and the learning it offers. Understand colours and camouflage so that you don't end up with a house looking like a sore thumb but in sync with its environment. My excitement at discovering 50 hoopoe in the rear field was received grudgingly by my students, for they had no idea that seeing one or two was already a big deal. The curiosity of Da Vinci and his inventions is not discussed enough.

The lockdown has got me excited and hopeful as videos trickle in from around India of wildlife returning to areas that it had long abandoned. Those who have followed David Attenborough will at least be able to discern a species or two, even be aware of their numbers. If we can keep our fear at bay there is still hope to continue life and not just survive on this wonderful natural phenomenon that also gave birth to our species amongst many other wondrous things.