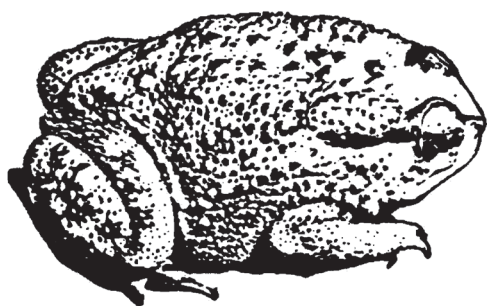


# Living with nature

When I first came to India with my family in 1973, we spent five weeks living in a dilapidated semi-open thatched hut in the horticultural nursery of the Auroville international township near Pondicherry. Being two adults and two children it felt quite crowded, but we soon discovered that we were also sharing it with numerous other occupants. Chief among them were some 18 toads, who lived under the kitchen cupboards and in various other cool spots around the house.



*Drawing courtesy of Bombay Natural History Society*

When we first moved in we decided to ‘shoo’ them all out, and with a concerted effort we almost succeeded, but as we scrabbled about trying to get the last three or four to leave, we turned round to see the first dozen or more hopping back in again. Twice we tried, and twice they all came back within a space of 10 minutes. We then gave up, and settled down to our first experience of living in the tropics, namely living with nature.

That hut was an unforgettable introduction. Not only was it full of toads at ground level, but the roof was a veritable wildlife park. Frogs hid in the palm-leaf thatch, and snakes went up there to find them. A feeble cry from above usually heralded the end of a frog, but the snakes were not always successful. Sometimes the frogs would escape by jumping down onto our beds – on one memorable occasion immediately followed by the snake, which fell onto a mosquito net I was putting up. There was a frozen moment of shocked confrontation, before we each jumped back in opposite directions.

In the world of that hut and its thatched roof, the above and shrews were the big game species. But there were also many other creatures up there, from cockroaches and geckos to ants and spiders, plus termites by the thousand. We had only to touch the roof and the whole structure ‘rattled’ with the latter’s synchronous vibrations. When the time came for departure after our five week stay, it was like saying goodbye to a familiar zoo.

When I finally returned to live in India in 1977, one of the first friendships I made was with an American woman named Dietra, living in the Auroville settlement of Gratitude, who was brilliant with injured and fledgling birds. She also later did something else now widely appreciated by Auroville and the surrounding area, which was to initiate a programme to introduce peacocks into the local environment. At first she was unsuccessful, but the programme finally succeeded when her partner Thomas took over and began using chickens as surrogate mothers. Today they are seen all over the Auroville area, and are breeding successfully in the forested regions. (Some years ago I had 14 walk across my garden in a single awesome parade.)

Most of my memorable confrontations with nature, excepting those in and around my own residence, have been in connection with Gratitude, where I lived while waiting for my own place to be completed. I remember one evening, while there, going out to a nearby communal dining facility for my evening meal, and coming back to a semi-nightmare in my room. I didn’t know it at the time, but the place was riddled with termites, including in the wooden roof beams, and it was their mating-flight night. As I approached the room I couldn’t make out what was causing the heavy rustling sound I heard coming from within – until

I entered, and walked into a cloud of fluttering insects, trapped inside by the screened windows. It took nearly two hours to clear them all out.

Not long after I had moved to my own place, I found a dozen small eggs in a pile of builder's sand being removed from outside my house. I carried them down to Dietra for her opinion. "Could be lizard eggs," she said, and then suggested I leave them with her to see if they would hatch. They did, that same night, but instead of harmless lizards out popped 12 snakes, which then proceeded to escape and hide all over her house. The following morning my popularity rating was zero.

Dietra levelled scores with me not long after, however, through her dog. In a moment of weakness, I had let it share my room after it turned up whimpering and drenched at my door one night during a prolonged monsoon downpour. It smelled strongly of wet fur, but settled quietly for the night. The next morning, after I had sent it on its way, I was puzzled to see some small, grey, pebble-like objects on the floor, each nearly a centimetre long. On closer examination I found they were huge ticks, engorged to bursting point on the dog's blood. It had generously left five of them, which seemed poor payment for the night's lodging, but adequate repayment for the snake eggs.

Dietra also scored via a young Kite she had reared and released, which used to swoop down on me and other unsuspecting visitors to grab objects we were carrying. It was a special menace at the nearby tennis courts, where it delighted in occasionally catching lobbed balls in mid-air and flying off with them.

Of all the fascinating creatures in this part of the world, perhaps most likeable are the frogs. During monsoon time they can be intrusively noisy, especially the bullfrogs with their "*kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi*" calls on and off all night long after big rains. But they can also be very endearing.

At one point I had five Tree Frogs living in my letterbox. They would tuck themselves safely away inside by day, and then emerge to sit in the letter slit in the early evening, watching the world go by and snapping up passing insects. Later they no doubt visited my pond, where they frolic'd and "*quark, quark'd*" on and off all night, or occasionally indulged in massive mating orgies. Once I had 22 of them at it at the same time in and around the pond, even though it was little bigger than a grand piano.

One male I've witnessed was either just plain stupid, or totally confused. It seemed he was under the impression that a 'mail' box was a 'male' box, and instead of going down to the pond and joining in the frenzy, did all his mating calls from inside the letterbox. I doubt he ever passed on his genes.

Later Gratitude became like a multi-faceted barnyard, with cows, a bullock, peacocks, chickens, geese, guinea fowl, turkeys and dogs meandering around the place. But it continued to be the place where



Aurovilians brought injured birds or abandoned fledglings. At one point a variant was also brought, in the form of a young Flying Fox (India's largest bat), which can have a wingspan of up to 1.2m when fully grown. This one was an adolescent with wings still under 60cms in spread, but he? she? (most thought 'he') was still large by most bat standards. The problem was that Dietra was overloaded at the time, with her Doberman bitch and nine puppies in her bathroom; her parrot, an owl and a woodpecker she was nursing back to health in her kitchen; the whole farmyard of animals outside requiring attention; and her own, her partner Thomas', the workers' and visitors' needs to keep in mind. She decided to seek a 'Batman' for the 2-3 weeks she had been asked to look after him, and who more convenient than nearby nature-lover and friend you-know-who?

'Squeaky', as I called him, was fascinating. He was very puppy-like and curious; chewed his 'blanket'; flipped himself upside down (right way up for us) any time he wanted to relieve himself; clambered around his hanging

cloth day and night flapping his wings for exercise; ate only ripe fruit and a little milk; had no odour about him; and enjoyed having his velvety neck area or tummy tickled. I was quite sorry when the time came for me to return him to his original rescuer-caretaker.

My worst experiences have been with scorpions: I've been stung four times now. Locally we have no species considered to be deadly, at least where most healthy adults are concerned, but about ten minutes after first being stung by the commonly seen small brown variety one might be excused for doubting that. I would describe the pain of the first six hours as 'excruciating', something like being plugged in to an electric current; the next six hours as 'extremely painful'; the following six as 'very painful'; and the last six, of what is normally a 24-hour period of trauma, as just 'painful'.

Worst was the time I trod on one in my room just as I was heading for bed, too late to call anyone or do anything but lie sleeplessly all night sweating it out. The following morning brought some light relief, however, when a friend arrived and offered to stop the pain "the village way." This consisted of filling a bucket with water, placing the wires from a bicycle dynamo in the water, and then pedal-charging the dynamo while the luckless victim held his limb in the water for a supposedly neutralising shock. Somewhat to my relief, after what I thought was his rather-too-eager offer, we found that his dynamo was rusted and no charge came through. The laugh we had was a far better cure.



My own experience of scorpions has been pretty unpleasant, but pales when compared with that of a Latin-American Aurovilian many years ago. This unfortunate fellow put on his shorts one morning without looking, and a scorpion stung him in the most agonising spot one can imagine for a man. Witnesses say he could hardly talk for the pain, and just sat on the edge of his bed all day long, literally pouring sweat, and exclaiming "madre mia" at intervals. Poor fellow, but he survived to tell the tale.

I'm now somewhat ashamed to say that I used to always kill scorpions, though one day I hit on what seemed at the time to be a reasonable compromise. I decided to take a pair of scissors and snip off the venom-loaded barb at the end of the tail, reasoning that that would allow them to catch prey as usual with their pincers and generally go about their business, but would prevent them from stinging humans. Finally I stopped even that practice, and now just catch them for release some distance away.

Perhaps the trigger for this particular non-interference-with-nature behaviour came from the time I watched a beautiful moth hatch from a chrysalis I had brought into my room, and my decision to keep it there until the evening. When it was finally dark and there was no danger of birds spotting it, I carried it out carefully, threw it up into the night air, and stepped back to watch its maiden flight. It can't have gone more than a metre or two, however, when 'swoosh... zapp.' a passing bat caught it and carried it off into the night. To this day I'm sure that moth died muttering "thanks a LOT." Anyway, it gave me the feeling that I should henceforth try to minimise my interference with the natural world.

There have been – and continue to be – many other interactions with nature. To give some examples, I have...

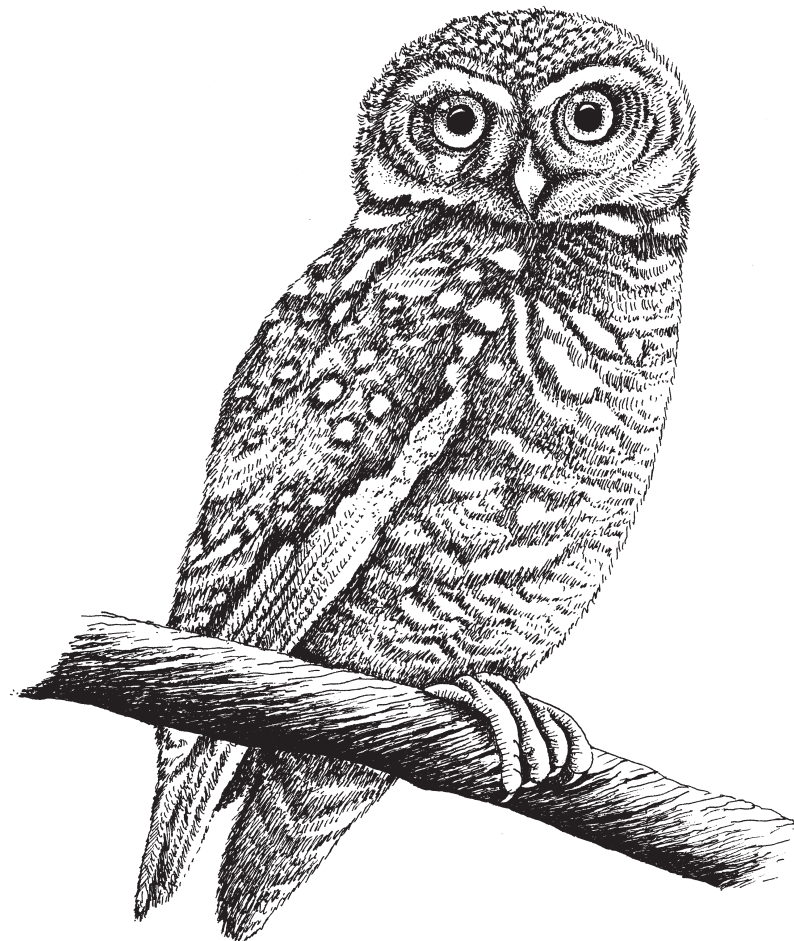
- had a Rat Snake slither over my foot, and nearly trodden on a Krait – one of India's most venomous snakes – while walking to Gratitude in the dark;
- had a semi-wild cat urinate on me through the mosquito mesh of my open window as I slept below;
- had a rat run over me one night while sleeping in a friend's house, and several times had mongooses dig up my potted plants, or shrews nest in my storeroom;
- been bitten by a venomous centipede as I slept (nowhere near as bad as a scorpion);
- had countless problems with ants, ranging from stings of well named 'scorpion ants' and multiple bites from columns of small ants that occasionally get into one's bed, on one's towel or into the open jampot, to invasions of a 'night-marching' variety that come during the night in battalions to occupy some dark place in one's house, usually the clothes cupboard;
- rarely had less than a dozen-or-so gecko lizards in my rooms, constantly challenging, chasing and mating with each other, and then laying their eggs in hidden places;
- more than once been driven half mad with itching, and on investigation found a tick digging into me for a meal;

- encountered freshwater crabs walking across country during the monsoon rains, and once briefly played host to a freshwater turtle;
- several times had difficulty getting into my residence at the end of the day, because a predatory wasp had stuffed the lock with rolls of cut leaf full of caterpillars;
- had a nest of five mice in my motorcycle seat, who poured out one after another at a mechanic's place in Pondicherry when I called in for servicing. One of them got so panicked as it fled across the hot street in blinding sunlight that it decided to bolt for the first dark hole it spotted. Unfortunately it was the 'rear end' of a reclining bullock.

To a typical town-dweller or foreign visitor, unaccustomed to the profusion of wildlife we experience in the Coromandel region's rural areas, life here may seem a bit bizarre, and perhaps it is. But when I reflect how I have delighted at the discovery of all-gold chrysalises hanging in trees or seeing so many beautiful butterflies; have marvelled at the splendour of peacocks in my garden, or birds like the Paradise-Flycatcher flying past my window; have lain in bed at night enjoying the calls of crickets, frogs, owls and jackals; and have seen flocks of flamingos in flight over nearby Kaluveli Lake or watched spellbound as skein after skein of what appeared to be wild duck has flown overhead in the pre-dawn semi-darkness, I cannot also help thinking how lucky I am to have such an abundance of nature all around me.



*Photo by Lalie Sorbet*



To end this opening article and part-justify the title of the first version of this book, let me relate one final experience at Gratitude, involving a feisty young fledgeling owl that Dietra was rearing to release, named Cardigan (so called because he reminded us of Lord Cardigan of Light Brigade fame, charging unhesitatingly at any food he saw offered).

We were having lunch, when Cardigan, who was standing on the table with us, spotted something of interest on the far side of the table and set out to investigate. He strode forward, reached the edge of my plate, and stepped up onto the rim. For a moment he hesitated, then proceeded to walk straight through the lettuce and sliced tomato, circumnavigate two boiled potatoes and some cucumber, place one foot in the mayonnaise, another on the far rim, and step down to continue to his destination. Dietra seemed completely unperturbed; I was dumbstruck.

That was many years ago. Nowadays, like Cardigan, I tend to

take such things in my stride, realising as I do so that it is a rich and wonderful natural world that we are surrounded by here in the Coromandel, and there is much more to be enjoyed than to complain about or fear in our constant interactions with it.