

CO-EXISTING WITH ANIMALS IN INDIA

By Joe McGowan

I arrived in New Delhi in June of 1965, ready to begin my assignment as Associated Press chief of bureau for South Asia. As I walked into the airport terminal in the pre-dawn hours, weary from a flight from Hong Kong, I was greeted by a screeching mob of monkeys.

That was the start of three years of having to co-exist with animals in a predominantly Hindu country where killing of any animal, including rats, was largely taboo.

The monkeys had moved into Palam International Airport, and made it their home. They would swoop down on unsuspecting travelers, stealing hats, handbags, or anything vulnerable to their quick grab-and-flee technique.

Because of the tremendous human overpopulation in India, animals have had to learn to survive in urban surroundings.

We leased an apartment in a suburb called Jor Bagh and soon were amused by the daily visit to our front yard by a mongoose. The mongoose would slip under a gate, walk across the lawn, and stand up with his front paws on our air conditioner. After surveying the inside, something that enchanted my young son, he would stroll off and meander down the street.

We were pleased to have the mongoose because he likely kept the yard clear of snakes.

One of my most horrible experiences occurred when I was taken by an Indian newsman on a tour of a Jain Buddhist temple outside Bombay. The Jains took animal worship to an extreme. They wore gauze masks over their mouths and noses so they wouldn't inhale an insect.

They walked with their eyes focused on the ground in front of them so they would not step on an ant or other bug.

As we reached their temple, we had to take off shoes and socks and leave them outside. We walked inside the very dark temple and soon I was aware of something crawling over my feet. I still can not describe the feeling I had when I realized the floor was teeming with rats!

The Jains worshiped the rats and fed them, encouraging them to inhabit their temple!

On the busy streets of big cities as well as on country roads, you would see two emaciated and obviously half-starved oxen pulling a heavily loaded cart. The driver would repeatedly whip the oxen, urging them on. It was okay to abuse them, but it would be strictly taboo to kill them.

Only once in my three years in India did I take a day off to go golfing, and that was because the president of AP was visiting and he was a dedicated golfer.

As we strolled onto the first tee, a group of young boys took off down both sides of the fairway. The AP president, an expert golfer, told me to wave them off because he didn't need any ball boys.

I had to explain to him they were not present to find any errant golf balls. But they would protect the balls we hit from being stolen by mongooses! At first he didn't believe me, but after seeing several of the critters rush out from the rough to try to grab a ball, he accepted the necessity of the lads.

Though most Indians would not kill animals, the government issued hunting permits to foreigners. The permits were good for nilgai, a huge member of the antelope family, as well as for ducks and geese.

I joined the American Rod and Gun club and groups of us went out regularly during the fall season to shoot ducks. Because no one else hunted them, there were greater numbers of the birds than I have ever seen anywhere.

We always got our daily bag limit within an hour or two after sunrise each day.

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