



## Loke Wan Tho A Tale of Friendship

### **Loke Diary 1955**

*On Sikkim Expedition, Kewzing-Pemionche trail:*

*"The man who wrote that 'it is better to travel than to arrive' clearly had never walked a Himalayan mile! Every time we do a march, I am always happy to arrive."*

Originally from a wealthy family in Singapore, Loke Wan Tho landed in Mumbai with his mother and sister after fleeing his home, leaving behind a flourishing business, in anticipation of Japan taking over Singapore. Loke Wan Tho was passionate about bird watching and bird photography, besides English literature and writing.

J.T.M. Gibson, who knew about Loke's interest in birds, promised to acquaint him with his ornithologist friend, Sálim Ali. Gibson's dinner meeting proved to be beneficial for both the guests, saving Loke from impending boredom while in exile and giving Ali a great companion for

his birding trips. This meeting marked the beginning of a close friendship that grew with time, given their similarity in outlook and interests.

Sálim Ali invited Loke Wan Tho on a birding expedition to Kachchh in 1943 and Loke happily grabbed the opportunity. In the days that

followed, he revealed his capacity for spartan living during the four months of the camp. Loke passed the initial test at Kutch (now Kachchh) with flying colours, and Sálim Ali found in him a dedicated co-worker. Despite being used to an aristocratic lifestyle, Loke never complained about the food or living conditions and was always ready to pull his weight under all circumstances. In his obituary in *JBNHS* (Vol. 61: 418-421) to Loke who died in a tragic aircrash in 1964, Sálim Ali fondly writes, "His unfailing courtesy and quiet good manners, friendly disposition, and capacity to mix at all levels and to remain cheerful and unruffled under a leader not reputed for sweetness of temper were other qualities that made him a welcome adjunct to the field camps."

Loke loved being in the field, and the bird surveys with Sálim Ali gave him ample opportunity to indulge his passion for natural history, the outdoors, and photography. Some of his photographs of Indian birds



White-bellied Sea Eagle at its nest, from  
*LOKE WAN THO'S BIRDS*, published in 2008



Loke Wan Tho and Sálím Ali poring over a volume on birds



Black-naped Tern, from LOKE WAN THO'S BIRDS, published in 2008

appeared along with a note on bird photography in the *JBNHS*. Ali again observes in his obituary, "He soon proved an exceptionally

enthusiastic observer and collector of birds, and later also a capable assistant in the taxonomical studies on the collections, acquiring in

the process a sounder all-round knowledge of Indian ornithology than is possessed by many a more seasoned amateur."

Finally, Japan had lost the war and refugees were being herded back to Singapore to bring trade and industry back to normalcy. Loke was one of the first businessmen who chose to return and was pleasantly surprised to learn that his business had not only survived but that he was one of the richest men in Singapore. He wrote about this in a letter to Sálím Ali, in which he also recalled a survey in Madhya Pradesh where they had to push a bus uphill. "I enclose a cheque: buy yourself a suitable station wagon; and remember there is more where this came from in case this much doesn't suffice," he wrote. Thereafter, on numerous occasions he funded surveys for BNHS, and also participated in some of them personally. His diaries of the surveys are replete with evocative anecdotes which recall many revealing incidents and details.

Loke Wan Tho and Sálím Ali shared an unfailing friendship for 22 years till his tragic death. In a gesture that befitted their friendship, his sister Lady Yuen-Peng McNeice donated among other things his field diaries and the entire set of negatives of his brilliant photographs of Indian birds and bird habitats. These were published in a premium quality volume by BNHS in 2008, *LOKE WAN THO'S BIRDS*, for which again Lady McNeice generously sponsored the cost of production. ■

In our area, the first phase of ornithology – the collection of specimens – is beginning to pass, and the study of ecology begins to take the place of systematics. It is a healthy sign. My photographs, therefore, represent not only the results of many happy hours spent in close company with the birds; they represent, too, the belief of one who holds the truth to be self-evident that a bird in the bust is worth two in the hand.

... Loke Wan Tho – A COMPANY OF BIRDS