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 air crash 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
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