

An Afghan Falconer once lived in Doon!

By **Garhwal Post** - November 25, 2018

SIRDAR MOHAMED OSMAN
(1925-2013)



By ANJALI NAURIYAL

Falconry, considered a pastime of kings, was his passion. Sirdar Mohamed Osman lived during a time when Doon was at the peak of its natural grandeur, and had great tales on Falconry to tell!

He has left behind a huge legacy on Falconry:

Sirdar Mohamed Osman died an octogenarian, having lived a thrilling life, devoted to one of the oldest recorded sports of mankind, namely Falconry, considered a pastime of Kings. But, before that, he packed into his life fairy-tale proficiencies and capabilities related to the art and practice of Falconry!



Not many falconers in the world have delighted in the privilege of living a life dedicated to "rearing, training and flying birds of prey, such as falcons, hawks and eagles to catch wild quarry," just as it was done in olden times.

He travelled widely through India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in his pursuit of falconry and was a keen member of the Falconry Association of Northern America.

He authored some of the most astonishing and authoritative books on the subject and also produced over forty scientific papers on birds of prey and wildlife in general, and was working on '*Lore of the Shivaliks*' at the time of his demise, even while his last book, '*Birds from Afghanistan*' was under print with the Western Sporting Publication, US.

Osman first communicated his knowledge of falconry in his book, titled '*Falconry in the land of the Sun*'. The book was in effect a celebration of the memory of the Afghan falconers in whose distinguished company he spent many adventurous days in camp and the hunting field.

He followed up his first book with '*Musings of an Afghan Falconer*', which covered many aspects of falconry, including treatment and prevention of ailments. Osman gives his readers many holistic remedies mentioning the use of velvet-leaf, black mustard oil, poppy seed, snake meat and other ingredients that are little known to most of the practitioners of the sport. This sport may not be as popular in India, today, but has great value in the US. Osman once mentioned that the US Army had a mandatory course for its officers on falconry. It was not without reason that foreign publishers, who knew the value of this sport, published most of his books.

His Ancestry traced back to rulers of Afghanistan:

In his first book, Osman offered an opportunity to his readers to learn about Afghan methods of hawking. Osman had descended from a distinguished family of falconers who traced their ancestry back to the rulers of Afghanistan. He was the great-grandson of the last Amir of Afghanistan. His great-grandfather was Amir Sher Ali Khan, and his grandfather was Amir Mohamed Yaqub Khan. His father, Prince Azim, introduced him to Falconry and was his keenest hunting companion. Political upheaval compelled the British government to banish Osman's immediate ancestors from Afghanistan and relocate them in India. This development led to Osman spending his formative years in family lands in Dehra, and soon began his falconry training under the tutelage of his father. In the Doon Valley, during the tail end of the Raj, when falconry was still practiced in basic bravura by the *maharajas* and *rajahs* of the Indian princely states, Osman developed a deep love and kinship with birds of prey.

Post the Raj, Osman continued hawking and hunting along with his father. Later, the time came when the sport came to be frowned upon. But Osman continued with his passion and became a keen naturalist.

Conversing with him was pure delight. He regaled one with many vignettes about the natural history of the Doon Valley. Towards the end of his life he nursed a deep sense of loss about nature giving way to pressures and encrustations of civilisation.

Tinged with sadness and resignation, his conversation, without fail veered around to birds, his chief passion. He reiterated, "I have trapped, trained and hunted with them. I have trained then to catch antelopes, etc. In Doon, I have hunted assorted birds with the help of eagles. It is a lengthy process, but I learnt from the family. And, significantly, I have done it not merely as a field activity, but as a science." Osman studied at Doon's St Joseph's Academy and, later, retired as a Geo-Physicist from the ONGC.

It had been a principle with him to follow a certain code of conduct. "After catching, training and hunting, I have ensured what in falconry parlance is called 'hacking back to nature'. I let them go."

Talking about the current absence of interest in the sport, he reiterated, "Very few people are captivated by these things today. Birds have perished and we have invaded their territory appallingly. A paper in the Art of Falconry is set for every officer in the American Air Force. They have to hunt to qualify as officers. This is an art that requires a lot of patience, dedication and love of birds you are dealing with. This art also involves training dogs in tandem. It requires a lot of knowledge and experience. Like human beings, birds too have moods and tendencies."

Osman was hardly discouraged about the fact that not a single book of his sold in Doon, "I have written because there was an impulse and desire to write and leave behind an inheritance. I have put into my books a lifetime of firsthand experience. And I have shared a rare bond of attachment

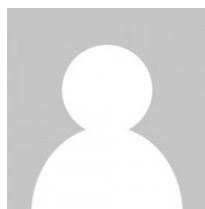
with these birds, which at times has proved very painful.”

This birdman lived during an environmentally rich time, in a splendid valley called the Doon; he studied in-depth his surroundings, collected data and had great tales to tell.”

From the annals of history:

Osman has compiled interesting details on falcons. In his Short History of Falconry, he states that Ghengis Khan and Pope Leo X delighted in the practice of falconry. “In England, Falconry was a mark of respect. Many literary figures, including Chaucer, have conspicuously appeared in the annals of falconry. Shakespeare’s plays are enriched with many references to falconry. In addition, Muslim saints and mystics, as well as Sikh Gurus, are known to have practiced the art. Pepys, in his chronicle, mentions the Russian Ambassador bringing falcons from the Tsar to the King of England. During the World Wars, falcons were used by the British Intelligence Service to intercept carrier pigeons delivering vital strategic information to the enemy. Today, falcons are being employed in ever increasing numbers to clear airfields all over the world of what is commonly known as ‘bird strike’. Millions of dollars of damage to aircraft and crews, as well as lives of hundreds of passengers, are being saved every year by this means. The United States Air Force Academy, trains cadets to handle and fly falcons.”

Sadly, this wonderful bird today is gravely threatened, and Osman’s life and books convey a strong conservation message!



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