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In memoriam: S. M. Osman (1925–2013)



Undated photo of S. M. Osman. Photo courtesy: Raghvendra Singh.

Sirdar Mohamed Osman passed away in Dehra Dun at the age of 87 on 12 January 2013. A keen naturalist, his life was spent studying the Himalayan foothills of the Doon Valley, and in pursuing his passion for falconry, a legacy that was passed down to him through generations of his family, for whom it was a royal sport. Osman was a descendant of the erstwhile emperor of Afghanistan, Amir Dost Mohamed Khan. Exiled by the British, his family came to live in Dehra Dun where Osman grew up, studying at St. Joseph's Academy. Though he went to Afghanistan for a few years in the interim, he came back in 1953 to Dehra Dun, where he later worked as a geophysicist at the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited.

In Dehra Dun, Osman and his father kept up with falconry. With their birds on their fists and their dogs beside them, they were a recognised part of the life and landscape of Dehra Dun, and a source of great curiosity to generations of children of the many schools that dotted the then green and quiet neighbourhood of their home at Dalanwala.

In many ways, his life was marked by overwhelming changes. He saw the changing and passing away of many things, both in his personal life as well as in the social and natural environment around him. But the one constant that accompanied him all along was his love for the “monarchs of the air,” as he referred to raptors, and the art of falconry. He had a great love for nature and his deep study of raptors and knowledge of falconry was tremendous.

His love for falconry was underlined by his first and abiding love, that of the birds themselves, and his awe of them and the splendours of nature. He would remember with great affection

the different species he observed closely in the wild and birds he trained with over the years—from Eurasian Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus*, Northern Goshawks *A. gentilis*, to Merlins *Falco columbarius*, and Peregrine Falcons *F. peregrinus*; Changeable Hawk-Eagles *Nisaetus/Spizaetus cirrhatus*, vociferous birds yet which would flit past noiselessly as “shadowy ghosts” of the forest, Bonelli's Eagles *Hieraetus fasciatus*, a majestic Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* named “Monarch,” “Kohistani,” a beautiful Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis* he encountered in the hills near Mussoorie, and “Kali Rani,” a ‘shaheen’ Peregrine Falcon he had for several years.

He had an intimate knowledge not only of the birds he kept but also of birds as they were in their natural environment. He often described with deep feeling, the Doon Valley, its rich wildlife and its many rivers, forests, and grasslands where he spent thousands of hours quietly observing and marvelling at birds of prey on the wing and at rest, hunting, feeding, courting, and nesting. He recorded in detail, aspects of their behaviour, moulting, plumage, hunting habits, and the styles and speeds of different species in the wild and in captivity.

He would explain in minute detail how to differentiate one species from another, point out what was special in its behaviour in the wild and elucidate its form and function. For those who had a chance to observe the birds he trained with, it was a great opportunity - especially in those days, before the advent of the digital and super-magnification age, to see at close quarters what the ‘tomial tooth’ or notched beak of a falcon was, compare ‘moustachial’ stripes of a falcon to the heavy ‘eyebrow’/supraorbital ridge of an eagle, witness the astounding accuracy and velocity of the stoop of a Peregrine or just observe the varied plumages and patterns of different birds.

In the minds of the people of Dehra Dun, he was firmly associated with birds and would often be sent an SOS by friends and local residents to help rescue a buzzard, a Black Kite or an owl, and at times even a Peregrine Falcon that had been shot at or had fallen injured.

After the death of his father and the decree of wildlife laws and regulations, he gave up falconry while he recognised both, the role that knowledge of falconry played in the understanding of raptor biology and conservation, and its possible perils. Falconry was last year recognised by UNESCO as an ‘intangible cultural heritage’.

He may have given up keeping falcons, but Osman continued to write about them. He was inspired to write down his experiences after meeting Sálím Ali in 1965; Ali himself had lived in Dehra Dun for several years in the 1930s. He wrote many articles for the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History*



S. M. Osman c. 2001 with his friend P. N. Onial in the western Doon. Photo: Malvika Onial.

Society, and *Cheetal*, the journal of the Wildlife Preservation Society of India in Dehra Dun. Amongst the books he wrote are his autobiographical account *Falconry in the land of the sun: memoirs of an afghan falconer* (2001); *Musings of an Afghan Falconer* (2005); *Hunters of the air: a falconer's notes* (1991). He also liked to sketch and illustrated some of his books himself.

There is much in his writings that would be of interest to anyone curious not only about raptors, falconry, and natural history but also for a peek into some aspects of life in the Himalayan foothills and in Afghanistan as it was in those days.

Osman was a man with wide-ranging interests. He was equally adept at wielding the pen as he was at wielding tools to fashion the hoods and gloves he used in falconry. He also had a keen interest in optics and he would make cameras and telescopes by hand with remarkable ease.

He had a sharp wit and a keen sense of humour, which he conveyed fluidly through each of at least six languages he was fluent in: Hindustani, Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Farsi, and English. He had a great interest in literature, particularly in Farsi, and English. His conversations were rich in imagery and were laced, not just with quotes from and references to literary works, but with delightful proverbs and idioms in Pashto, Hindustani, and Farsi.

The passing of Sirdar Mohamed Osman has not only left a void in the lives of his friends, in some ways it also marks the end of an era. As Prof. Tom Cade of the Peregrine Fund said of him, he was "James Cooper's Mohican—the last of his tribe."

Fortunately, Sirdar Mohamed Osman's sharing of his knowledge and experience with those with a persevering interest in raptors and his writings will ensure that some of his vast repository of knowledge of the "monarchs of the air" survives for future generations.

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—Malvika Onial

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Farewell

May I be permitted to say a few words in memory of Sirdar Mohamed Osman. As a falconer myself, I am deeply grieved that perhaps the last of the true falconers of this part of the world is no more. I was introduced to him first by reference to some of the articles he wrote in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society. In those days I was a keen student of raptors and some of the notes written by Osman sahab (as I soon started to call him), enthralled me with their devotion to detail and minute observations of the behaviour and habits of the birds described. Somewhat timorously, I wrote to him and introduced myself. With his characteristic generosity, he immediately replied and we kept up our correspondence even when I was pursuing higher studies abroad.

In one of his articles on the Peregrine in the Journal of the Wildlife Preservation Society of India, *Cheetal*; (incidentally, this article is perhaps the last word on the status of the *calidus* subspecies of Peregrine in Northern India), he describes how, while engaged in land-reclamation and surveying in the Doon Valley, he was able to observe the goings-on of a wild female Peregrine that had taken over the area where he flew his own trained bird. That note is a bible of information on the behaviour and habits of the wild Peregrines.

When his first book "*Hunters of the Air; A falconers notes*" was brought out by WWF-India, he sent me a personally autographed copy for my collection. His attention to detail, his love for the birds he wrote about and his minute observations on their habits and behaviours were evident on every page of this book that I devoured, and still continue to refer to from time to time.

Falconry is an art that is very demanding of its devotees. Osman sahab himself used to say how much he owed to his father (Prince Azim) while training his birds. This filial affection is evident throughout his writings, and I do not doubt that part of the reason he gave up falconry was because there was very little congenial company for him when he took the field. In his classic article on the Mountain Hawk-Eagle (*Kohistani*) in the Journal of the BNHS, he freely admits that without the help and perseverance of his father, the bird would never have been trained. I was myself never a patient person but Osman sahab encouraged me and gave me many valuable tips on the subject. We often discussed the possibility of meeting up but unfortunately this could never materialize and now it is only his letters and postcards that I have to remember him by.

With his passing, the era of falconry in India is at an end. The other great Indian falconers of the age, K. S. Dharmakumarsinhji of Bhavnagar and C. H. Donald are perhaps waiting for him at the Happy Hunting Grounds. There too would perhaps be waiting his favourite hawks "Kali Rani" and his beloved "Kohistani". Long may they all hunt together in the Valhalla of the Falconer!

—Humayun Taher

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