

NOTES, NEWS AND COMMENTS

World Pheasant Association—India

The WPA—India has recently been formed, and invites those among our members who may be interested in Galliformes, specially the Pheasants to support them. They are planning to carry out status surveys in the various parts of the outer Himalayas and desire various nature clubs to consider holding their Nature Camps in these areas. In this way they hope that participants will not only enjoy their trip to the Himalayas but help them in determining the status of the pheasants which are gravely endangered.

The Second International Symposium on Pheasants is due to be held in September 1982 in Srinagar. About 150 foreign participants are expected. Indian workers are invited to consider submitting papers for the Symposium. A number of excursions are also being planned mainly for the benefit of the foreign delegates though any member of the WPA/WPA-India can join.

Address your correspondence to

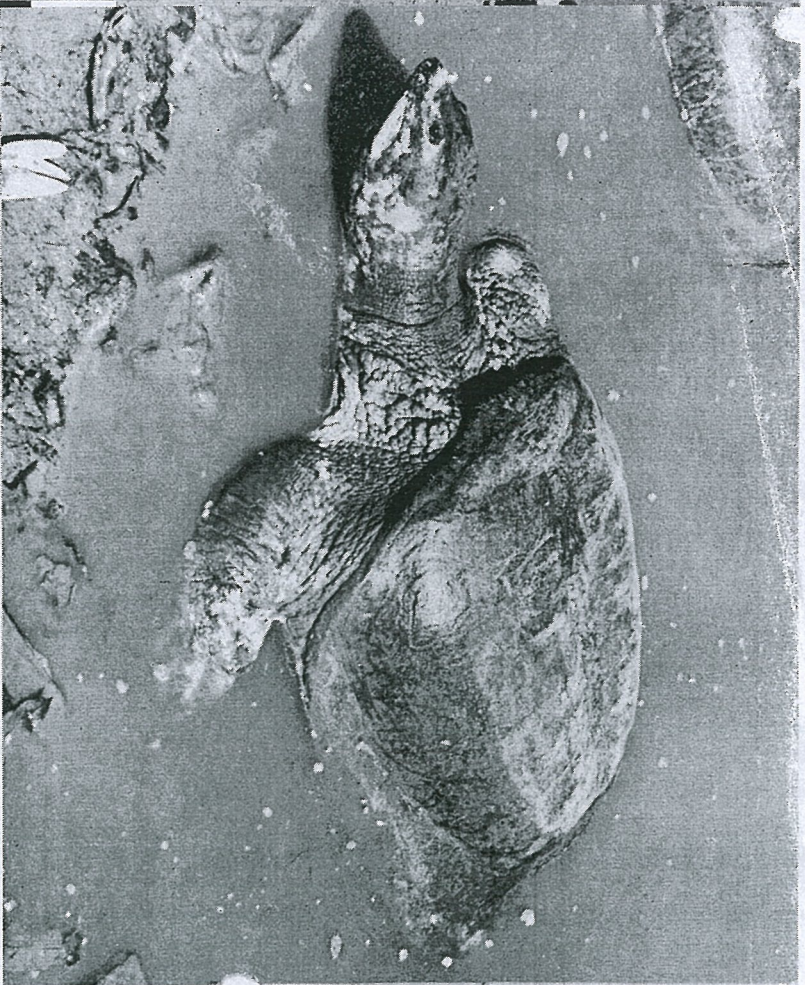
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Snakes alive

The Society's exhibition of live snakes organized by H. K. Divekar of the Society's Executive Committee and P. B. Shekar, the Society's Chief Technical Assistant proved to be an enormous success. The main objective was to dispel the many myths and fallacies on snakes that are firmly believed by people in India. 31 species of Indian snakes were exhibited in cases and pits.

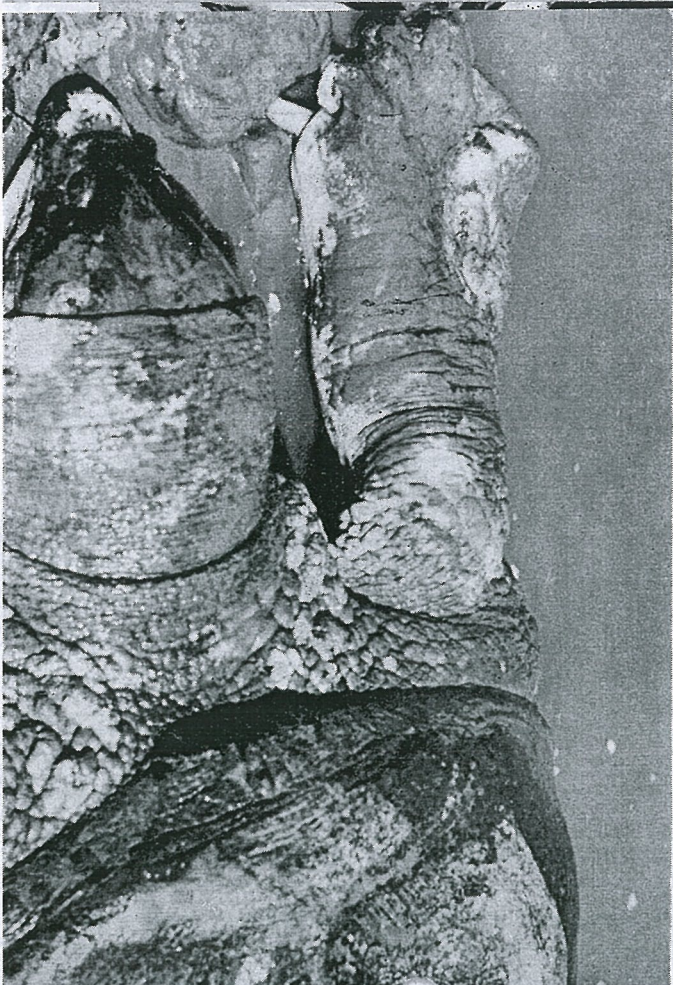
The star of the show was the large King Cobra, over 15 feet in length whose vibrant personality drew fascinated visitors again and again to the glass case he lived in. We had, at the beginning planned to keep him in one of our large pits, but when he went from the tree stump in the pit straight up like a band of shining blue steel, towards the light fixture, a good seven feet above, we prudently moved him into a large glass fronted cage.

A demonstration lecture was held every half an hour when the Society's librarian, Isaac Kehimkar, gave an able presentation on snakes and people were permitted to touch snakes and dispel some of their fears. The exhibition had an unusually good response and over 200,000 people including 20,000 school children went through in the 45 days the exhibition was open.



A large turtle approaching feeding area

Photos: Author



sent to the turtles, which are accustomed to snap at the tip of the stick and swallow the food. As they often hold the stick firmly between the jaws both food and broken pieces of the stick go inside the gullet. The poor turtle has a very hard time trying to regurgitate the stick. The visitors who are scared to offer food with the skewers just throw it on the water and the turtles grab it.

I have estimated the population of the Bostani Turtle as between 150 and 200 in the Bostani pond. The East Pakistan District Gazetteers, Chittagong, 1970, reported several hundred in the same pond. The population that I have estimated had some 30 to 40 young, 60-90 juvenile above 20 cm in shell-length and about 60 to 70 adult and old animals. The old turtles appeared to be diseased and most had warty wounds on skin of the shoulder and at the base of the forelimbs. They had some skin disease on the neck and head region. The oldest ones were the most sluggish and were reluctant to leave the bank where food was offered. The juveniles feed by opportunistic visit to the food offering area. The young ones possibly supplemented their dietary requirements by feeding on the floating pieces of lung, fishes and slices of plantain. These young were too shy to even remain floating for a minute or so in the middle of the pond.

The turtles do not leave water

and climb up the hill to retire for the night as was told to Annandale. Previously they might have left the pond and climbed the hill for egg-laying only. Now they probably lay eggs on the eastern and southern sides of the pond and the neighbouring areas.

An interesting account of the turtle and the saint is available in the East Pakistan District Gazetteers, Chittagong, 1970: 'There is a shrine of this famous saint (Hazrat Sultan Byazid Bostami) on a hillock at Nasirabad, formerly an idyllic spot of panoramic beauty about four miles to the northwest of the town. He was born in 777 A.D. at Bostan in Iran. He came to India and it is said that he visited Chittagong. There is no *mazar* of the saint in the shrine. It is an *astana* and *chilla* associated with the name of the great saint. Khan Bahadur Hamidullah Khan in his Jawarikh-e-Hamidia strongly asserts that there was a Buddhist *stupa* at the spot where the present shrine stands.

'A mosque built during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb stands on the bank of a big tank at the foot of the hillock on which the shrine is situated. There are several hundred tortoises in the tank. Tradition has it that these animals are the descendants of the evil spirits (*djinnis*) who were cast into this shape because they incurred the wrath of the great saint who visited the place about 1100 years ago.'

MD. ALI REZA KHAN

top of which has the shrine of Hazrat Byazid Bostami. The pond has been excavated and expanded many times and currently it is about 50 by 100 m, rectangular in shape in a north-south direction.

The Bostami pond is a 2-tier one, the first one having a 3 m high wall on the west and north, the other sides having no walls. The top of this wall is level with the metallated approach road of the shrine. The east side has an earth bank above which there is the boundary wall of the shrine. There is a small wall on the north and an opening on the SE. corner through which the turtles may climb up the hill, if they want to do so. There are two well-laid rows of steps on the south and west sides of the first tier which allow visitors to offer food to the turtles.

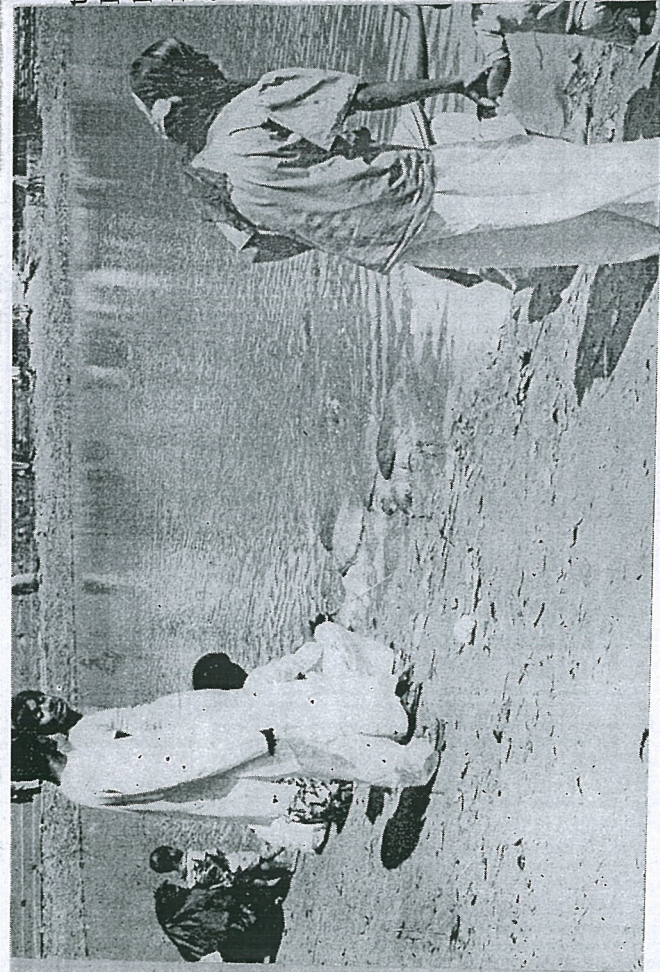
The second tier of the pond starts from the last step of the first tier and has no wall. But its sides are slanting, the slope leading to the bottom of the pond and the gradient is so good that the turtles can easily climb. The height of both the first and second tier is about three metres each. During the monsoon the water level of the pond may go up to about 5 m or so, which drops down to about 2.5 m before the onset of the monsoon. In the dry season the entire first tier dries up. The water is less muddy when the water level is high during the rains.

Otherwise the pond water remains turbid throughout the year and

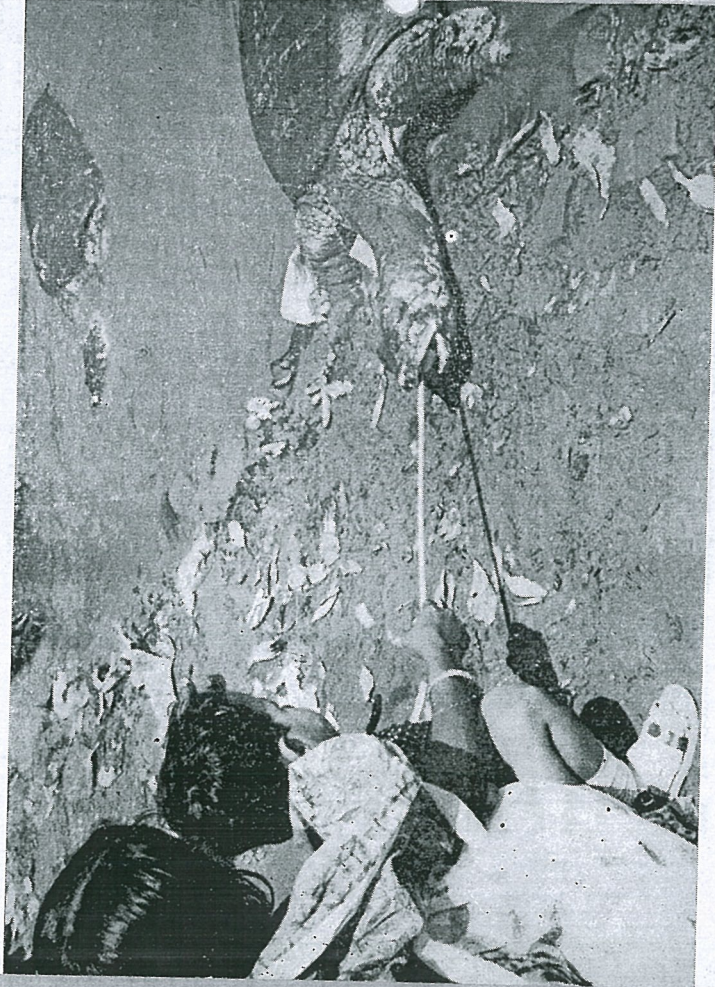
hence it is not a productive pond. It is literally devoid of any vegetation and possibly does not support any plankton except algae. *Tilapia nilotica*, *Labeo* spp. and other carps have been introduced into the pond which are often harvested. Crabs, prawns, *Channa punctata* and some smaller fishes are possibly natural.

It appears that the pond was dug centuries back with a view to storing rain water from the hill. This water was used both for drinking, cooking and for washing parts of the body—a religious pre-requisite for offering prayers in the mosque attached to the pond or for that matter at any other mosque. It is learnt that the Bostami Turtles were introduced into the pond. One section of the people believes that the turtles are 'related to the saint' as has been reported by Annandale. Another group believes that they are sacred and *djinn*s who were brought by the saint from his native place. Still others believe that the turtles were once 'human beings' associated with the saint and as they disobeyed the saint they were cursed to lead a 'turtle life'!

The Bostami Turtle is almost entirely dependent on artificial food supplied by human beings. There are 10 to 15 cubicles keeping a huge stock of cattle lungs and liver, plants, prawns and fingerlings of many fishes. Bits and pieces of these are purchased by the visitors to the shrine and are offered to the turtles. Pieces of meat, fish fry or slices of plantain are pierced with thin bamboo sticks or skewers and are pre-



The Bostami tank and the turtle feeding area



The author's son feeding a turtle

Photos: Author