

**Subject:** Bird Sanctuary

**From:** Heather Conn

Gee, even inside a 7,000-acre bird sanctuary in the state of Rajasthan, I have to fend off unwanted groping from a too-eager Indian man. But I'll get to the best part after I share the beauty. I've spent glorious days alone here, exploring Keoladeo National Park, a wetlands park and World Heritage Site near Bharatpur. I gawk at wildlife, either when I am walking or riding a rented, old-fashioned bicycle with no gears. With such warmth and sun, it's hard to believe that it's early December.

Among large clusters of mimosa trees, sprinkled with yellow blossoms, black cormorants weigh down branches, their outstretched wings drying as if pegged to a clothesline. On the top branches, farther away, storks and cranes perch, their whiteness the flush of starched laundry. I've even seen some rare Siberian white cranes: elegant birds, with long, spindly legs of scarlet and a dash of red on half their face. With only a hundred and fifty on the planet, they are the second most endangered bird in the world. Remarkably, this park has twelve; six apparently arrived the day before I saw them.

The cranes, so tall and serene within the acres of wild marsh, are a gift of silent grace amidst the brash, fluttered green of parakeets, the shrieking alarm call of a peacock (India's national bird) and the frenetic dips and darts of kingfishers shimmering in iridescent turquoise and copper feathers.

Today, a munching cow ignored me while what looked like two wild boars dashed across the road. Several others sprang away into green

thickness. Two blue bull antelopes, resembling spotted deer, stared at me, then darted away, their tall racks a poise of points. I heard the haunting howl of a jackal and saw two on the road about fifteen feet away from me as I cycled past. They, too, stared at me. I had expected them to look like hyenas, but to my unscientific eyes, they seemed more a mix of fox and dog or mini-wolf. At dusk, the sky swam with pink light, dipping clouds onto the marsh water. Before the three-quarter moon appeared, silhouettes of storks floated on trees, bobbing against the disappearing pale blue of the dusk sky.

Away from the probing male eyes of urban India, I have relaxed, lost in the discovery of wildlife. Among these park animals, I have no fear, no concern about men's wayward hands or leering grins, so common in the cities. Here, I am not prey.

Yesterday afternoon, I started chatting with a thirtyish Brahmin man who serves as a professional bird watcher and guide for western tourist groups. His latest group was cancelled due to recent curfews and unrest in neighbouring Jaipur, so he offered to accompany me for bird spotting and identification. It was wonderful to benefit from the trained eyes of such a knowledgeable person. But he quickly became exasperated when I couldn't remember the names of birds, even after he told me repeatedly. Each time I got a name wrong, he rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue as if handing me a dunce cap. Finally, I told him that I did not come here to get tested, and he stopped quizzing me.

Fancying himself a jetsetter, he has tried to impress me with names of millionaire buddies and clients such as a British Tory member of parliament. He says that he is looking for a wife (a too-familiar line here) and has been involved with a British woman; of course, he has suggested that we could be together. The mention of my Indian lover, Mukesh, has made little difference to him. We've talked philosophy; he thinks of life as a struggle. Napoleon is his hero. He has held forth on Indian men's ignorance in sex and their cluelessness in relating to western women. Obviously, he doesn't include himself in this category. Several times, he has grabbed my shoulders and leaned in close to my face. Once, he pecked me on the cheek.

"Fuck off!" I told him, surprised at my vehemence. After too many months of fending off unwanted touching from men here, I've snapped. In many places in Rajasthan, I've ended up kicking or screaming at some lustful hawker to get him to leave me alone. I know that makes me sound like some out-of-control wacko. At first, I tried to ignore the inappropriate comments and rude gestures, but I admit that the accumulative harassment has gotten to me. So much for my attempt to emulate Gandhi's path of nonviolence.

I am amazed now at how lonely I must be feeling to agree to the company of this bird guide (bird dog?). Despite his ingratiating monologues and offensive insinuations, I stupidly agreed to share a beer with him last night at the park's tourist lodge. We walked back to my tourist bungalow, following the road lit by the moon.

At the bungalow, I ate a delicious dinner of fresh vegetable *thali*, prepared by the owner's wife, while the bird guide proceeded to get drunk on rum. The bungalow owner joined us, drinking whiskey, while I had a gin and Limca, India's carbonated lemonade. When we said goodbye, the guide tried to kiss me and wouldn't release me from a tight hug. After he pinched my ass, I felt truly disgusted.

Back in my room last night, I noted a red *bindi* stuck on the wall – you know those decorative, bright-coloured dots that Hindu women wear in the centre of their foreheads (the "third eye")? I looked at that dot and thought, Who knows? Maybe it symbolizes some proud conquest. It could be the start of an ongoing series, like a notched bedpost.

Before you think I've gone squirrely from too much solo travel, let me tell you something else I've discovered in some Indian tourist bungalows. While taking a shower or undressing in one of these rooms, I've noticed obvious cracks or decayed areas in the walls. You're thinking, Yeah, that's typical of backpacker joints. I agree, and yet when I have looked at these areas more closely, I have found that some of them actually contain a peephole! Whether that's by accident or willful intention, I dunno, but it's creepy. Ever since I noticed an eyeball observing me indoors at a previous place, the first thing I do

here when I walk into any overnight room is survey the walls for tell-tale holes and cover them up.

The tourist bungalow owner lives in a large, comfortable home with a beautiful wife, two adorable children – a five-year-old girl and a three-year-old boy – a kitchen helper and a young boy who looks after the kids. He tells me that his mother chose his wife for him; he asked only to see his bride-to-be before they married, which he did from afar for about two minutes. He didn't want to get married but says that he is happy now. He wants to travel, to go to England, but his wife doesn't. She never joins our talks and seems to understand little English but appears to me to be a loving, independent-minded dynamo. The owner says that she has a mean temper, but I assume that it's probably justified in most cases.

After drinking too much whiskey, the owner confesses to an indiscretion with a married American tourist years earlier and expresses a similar interest in me. When I deflect his comments, he doesn't persist, thank goodness.

While staying at this tourist bungalow, I have learned that whiskey drinking around the fire is a frequent routine. One night, the owner's nephew summoned me to eat dinner inside his home, but when I got to the house, I saw that the owner wanted me to join the men for drinks. Since his family has shown me considerable hospitality and warmth during my few days of visit, I didn't want to offend their generosity.

As the men puffed on cigarettes, ate peanuts and scattered the shells on the floor, they talked almost exclusively in Hindi, ignoring me. I sat there, in silence, with no idea if they were discussing me; when they nodded in my direction, it seemed obvious. Here I was, supposedly one of the guys, while the rest of the family sat in another room. Why did the owner invite me to join this all-male group? Was it genuine conviviality or was he just another frustrated husband who wanted an affair and to live vicariously through our dialogue? Excluded from the conversation, I finally excused myself and left the room, feeling like an embodiment of the Other, an outsider by gender, language and nationality.

Like a magnet with shifting poles, I know that I represent a strange duality for some Indian men: a buddy and confidante *and* a sexual target. Young men who work here as outdoor guides for tourist groups, for instance, are well exposed to westerners. They're grateful to talk freely with me like an old pal, sharing frank views and topics deemed unacceptable in mixed company within their own culture. However, I have discovered that the line between such cozy camaraderie and an unwanted gesture or assault is too thin.

In the owner's home, I wondered why the woman who waited on us one night at dinner had her face covered by a veil. I found out later that she was his sister-in-law and lived there. He told me that, due to village custom, she could never speak or show her face in his presence, since he's the family's eldest brother. He has no idea what she looks like and has never even heard her voice. Before entering a room in his own home, he has to announce his arrival to give her time to cover herself. When she enters or leaves a room, she has to ensure that her face stays hidden. Meanwhile, her husband wears western clothes, speaks English and has travelled across India, Nepal and Pakistan. And I thought that gender-defined behaviour in *my* culture was limiting . . . .

When the owner drinks with friends indoors, his brother drinks alone in another room, which I find strange. I learned another village custom: a younger brother cannot drink with his older male sibling. Instead, the owner's nephew serves as go-between, refilling the brother's glass from the other room. Apparently, if two brothers move to the city, they must still continue this tradition. In the meantime, Indian women in the village certainly never drink with men.

I've been wondering if the owner is stringing me along about these customs, but his family's behaviour seems to bear out what he tells me. I can't ignore how gender has affected my treatment in India, yet I have enviable freedoms compared to the women in this village.

I envy male friends from North America who can explore India's streets alone at night without facing sexual or verbal assaults from this

nation's men. Some might say that if you think like a victim, you will be one; but the layers of male expectation and assumption here, especially towards a freckled, red-haired, white woman, underlie many conversations and experiences I have with Indian men, regardless of my thoughts or actions. I want to find connection with others here, regardless of gender, yet reminders of how men view my femaleness too often intrude.

Even with the women in India, I can't always escape stereotyping. Remember what happened when I visited the state of Sikkim in northeastern India? A female receptionist at a hotel mistook me for a prostitute, even though I had a scruffy backpack and wore a long, bulky wool sweater and hiking boots. A proud local resident, a civic official, had toured me around Gangtok, the capital, and suggested better accommodations than the dark, low-cost place I was in. When we appeared at the counter of his recommended hotel to inquire about room availability, the receptionist looked at this dignified, middle-aged Indian man, then at me, and assumed that we just wanted to have a quickie. Her assumption offended both of us, even though she apologized. When I walked alone at dusk in Gangtok, men spat at me and treated me as if I was topless, even though I again wore a thick sweater, hiking boots and long pants.

With such attitudes in India towards western women, I have pondered my possible future with Mukesh. How would my life unfold in this country, married to an Indian man who's never left the country, and living with him and his parents? Despite our differences in culture, race, nationality and age, Mukesh and I have seriously discussed what it might be like to endure daily scorn as a mixed-race, married couple within his country. Am I prepared to stay here with him? That choice does not feel right, yet I berate myself for not embracing it. *This must mean I don't love him enough.* Once I return home, we plan to have Mukesh immigrate to Canada.

Until then, can my rebel spirit endure his father's bizarrely misguided view of me as a corrupting older woman who brazenly travels unchaperoned and is bent on kidnapping his son, getting him hooked on heroin and then scuttling him off to Canada? Stay tuned.