

Rising Stars Special on Wildlife Competition

In Search of Peace

by Afreen Khan

AFTER the dangerous and never-ending journey across the seven seas, facing storms and blizzards and other perils, destiny was finally before us.

Before our very eyes lay a beautiful blue lake surrounded by green foliage which was bordered by some purple mountains. How my eyes had longed to see that sight! How my heart had trembled to see the warmer lands! Oh, it was paradise!!!! The lovely landscape was a welcome sight to us after all the perils we had faced during our long journey.

I live in the north, where it snows most of the year and is bitterly cold. When winter starts knocking all the doors, we birds of the north stretch out our wings and set off on a long and perilous journey across the seven seas to warmer lands in the south. Here we build our nests, raise a family and stay till the winter is over. The lake is just the place for staying for the winter.

Our flock soared and skimmed over the blue waters, calling to each other and then landed among the water plants and other bushes. Everyone looked very happy and contented.

My friend asked, "wont you build a nest," I nodded. "Let's build our nests among those bushes." I followed her to some comfortable bushes.

Night came sooner than I

expected. I was safe in my nest, at last I could rest my weather-beaten wings. The moon came out from behind the tall pines. The lake looked like a mystery under the bluish moonlight my friends were singing the song of happiness under the open sky. I looked up and thanked God. Peace was all around us.

Clouds hide the moon and all became dark and quiet. Suddenly the night's calm was broken by the sound of bullets. It was the humans!

They had come to kill all of us who had the dream of living happily beside the lake. The lead bullets hit everyone who tried to fly to safety, taking their lives out of them. My friend in her impatience flew and a bullet hit her on the neck. She landed near me. Her pale, still eyes were focused on me; her blood was soaking me. It was horrible! I thought the world would turn red with all my friends' blood.

In my desperation, I flew. All I wanted was to get away from all that violence. They fired but missed me. Soon I left the lake far behind, which was supposed to be my home. I flew on and on far away from the humans in search of peace. I wanted to live and not be counted as a dreadful victim of the murders committed by the humans. All migrating birds like me want to live! We don't want to be the targets of the humans weapons!

THE image of bats has become a lot more appealing since the founding of Bat Conservation International (BCI) in 1982. Many myths have been largely debunked — the bats are blind, will tangle in people's hair, and are usually rabid.

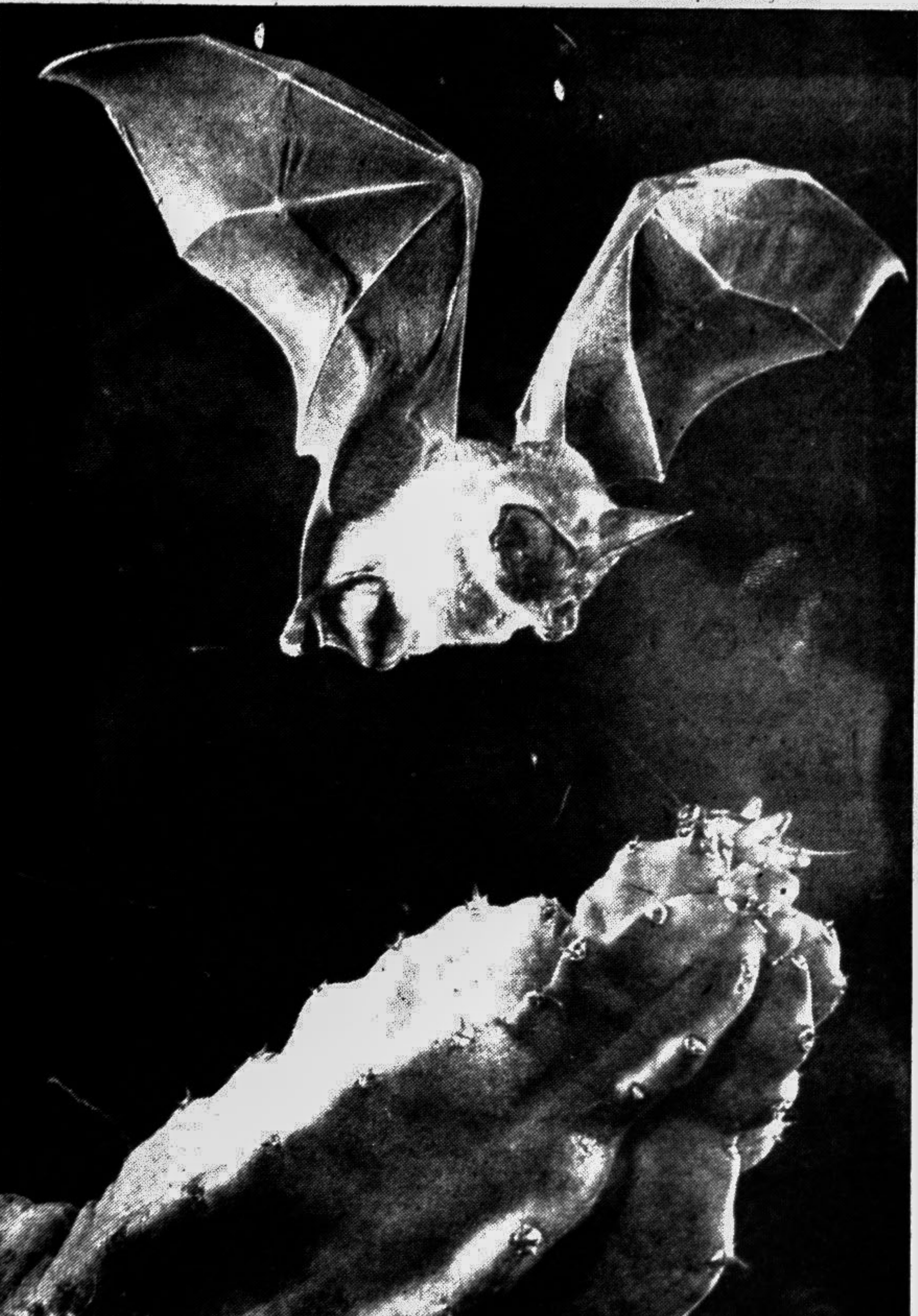
None of these statements is true. In fact, the odds of contracting rabies from bat are extremely remote for anyone who simply leaves them alone. Even sick bats rarely attack people or pets, although they may bite in self-defense, like any wild animal, and should be handled only by experts. Increased awareness of bats' beneficial nature has stimulated some protection.

Not All Bats are Vampires

Yet serious threats remain, including outright killing of bats, destruction or disturbance of their cave habitats, and, recently increased closing of abandoned mine. Six bat species in the US are endangered and 18 others are candidates for addition to the endangered species list.

Bats are essential to keeping populations of night flying insects in balance. Individual bats can catch hundreds hourly, and large colonies eat tons nightly, including countless beetles and moths that cost farmers and foresters a fortune, not to mention mosquitoes in our backyards.

No stealth aircraft could be more sophisticated than this California leaf-nosed bat. It swoops so quietly through the desert night that it is called a "whispering bat." Its eyes can spot a sleeping insect, and its huge ears can pick up the sound of a caterpillar's munching jaws. Only on the darkest of nights does this bat activate its ultimate detector: Through its nose it emits high-frequency, low-intensity echolocation signals created by contracting muscles in its larynx. Sound waves return to its ears after bouncing off doomed prey.



Super Predators: "O death where is thy sting?" A carpenter has a poisonous bite but still meets death in the jaws of a pallid bat. Courtesy, National Geographic Aug. '95

Wildlife Special

ENOUGH is enough! The cruelties of humans have tarnished the nature in many ways. In particular our wild life is in jeopardy. For so many years we have been over fishing, over hunting, devastating tropical forests and what not? All these wicked activities have significantly affected our wild life; many have become extinct, and many are on the verge of becoming exterminated.

Ironically, we claim ourselves to be the superior of all animals. Is it not so then that we have a moral obligation to preserve our wild life?

This week's Rising Stars is exclusively on wildlife. Here, we have accounts of eight animals, and we hope that a glance at them would enrich you awareness of wild life. After all, you are the people of next generation and much of the endangered animals' protection will depend on you.

The text has been compiled from National Geographic issues.



We don't want to be targets of human weapons — a sketch

A Frog Can be Lethal

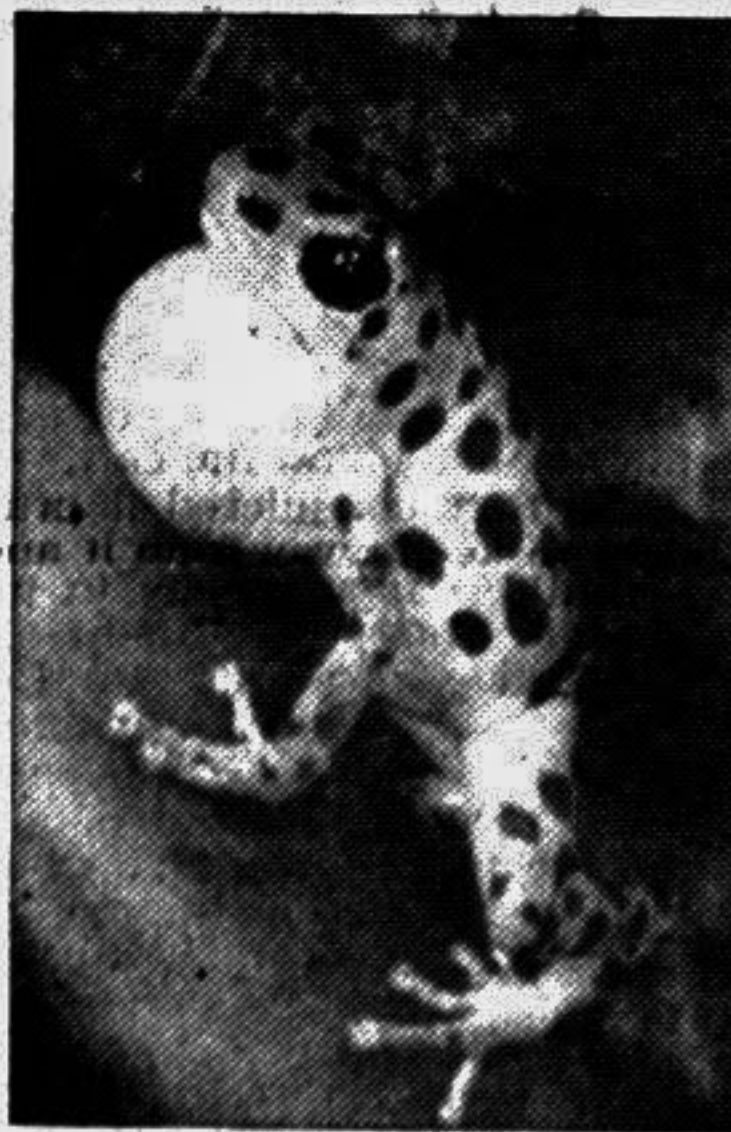
PHYLOBATES (terribilis) (right), a frog found only in a small area of lowland rain forest in western Colombia. The frog can be lethal even to the touch.

King of the frog, in its stream side Ecuadorian habitat, Epipedobates tricolor (above) exudes epibatidine, a chemical with analgesic qualities. Two hundred times as powerful as morphine, the substance shows great medicinal promise, especially for patients who do not respond to painkillers derived from opium poppies.

D. Auratus may be bad news for tarantulas, but the pumillotoxin in which may someday have a useful application as a cardiac stimulant for heart attack patients.

Tasting the skin of a wild P. terribilians would be foolish in the extreme. Through minute skin pores it secretes batrachotoxins that cause irreversible muscle contractions, leading to heart failure. Indian hunters, though, do taste in indirectly. Upon killing an animal, they lick its flesh to find the part of the carcass affected by the toxin and cut in away.

After fertilization, the female is left to guard her batch of 2 to 16 eggs hidden in leaf litter on the forest floor. When the tadpoles hatch, she backs in among them, and one wriggles up onto her back. She seeks little pools of water cupped in the leaves of certain plants. Into one of these pools of water cupped in the leaves of certain plants she deposits the first tadpole. Then she goes back for another. And another. After her tadpoles are scattered in leaf pools, a D. Pumillo mother returns to the canopy every few days to tend her scattered brood. On her arrival, she lays unfertilized eggs rich in nutrients to nourish the tadpole.



All puffed up: a male Dendrobates pumillo courts a female with a song of insect-like chirps. Courtesy, National Geographic May '95.

Octopuses are Actually Shy

THE giant octopus once inspired tall tales of a monster that ravaged ships and plucked terrified men from the decks like canapes.

Octopuses are actually shy, intelligent animals with a strong parental instinct. Octopuses have eight arms; most other cephalopods, which include the squid, cuttlefish, and nautilus, have ten or more.

The octopus exhibits a variety of characteristics: territoriality, aggression, fear, curiosity. Most biologists consider it to be the smartest of all invertebrate animals, with about the same intelligence as a house cat.

No one knows exactly how big the giant octopus gets. Mature males average about 23 kilograms (50 pounds), females about 15 kilograms (33 pounds). Arms span average 2.5 meters (about eight feet). One octopus found off western Canada in 1957 was estimated to weigh 272 kilograms (nearly 600 pounds) and have an arm span of 9.6 meters (just over 31 feet), setting a widely acknowledged world record for the Pacific giant.

The giant octopus is less a scavenger than a predator, sustained by a wide variety of sea life, especially crabs and other shellfish. Behind the eyes droops the bag like mantle that houses the internal organs and is the means of its locomotion. After sucking water into the mantle, it expels it through a siphon and jets across the seabed. As a result it glides along.

To evade foes, the octopus squirts a blackish ink as it retreats. Once thought to be merely a smoke screen, the ink may have a more sophisticated purpose. Some say the cloud takes on the shape of an octopus, leaving a phantom drifting in the water to confuse the predator while the real octopus makes a getaway.

With strength comes dexterity. Octopuses easily open screw-top jars and stoppered bottles to get at food placed inside. An Octopus seldom lives more than four years. For a creature so surprisingly strong and tenacious, the octopus tires quickly.

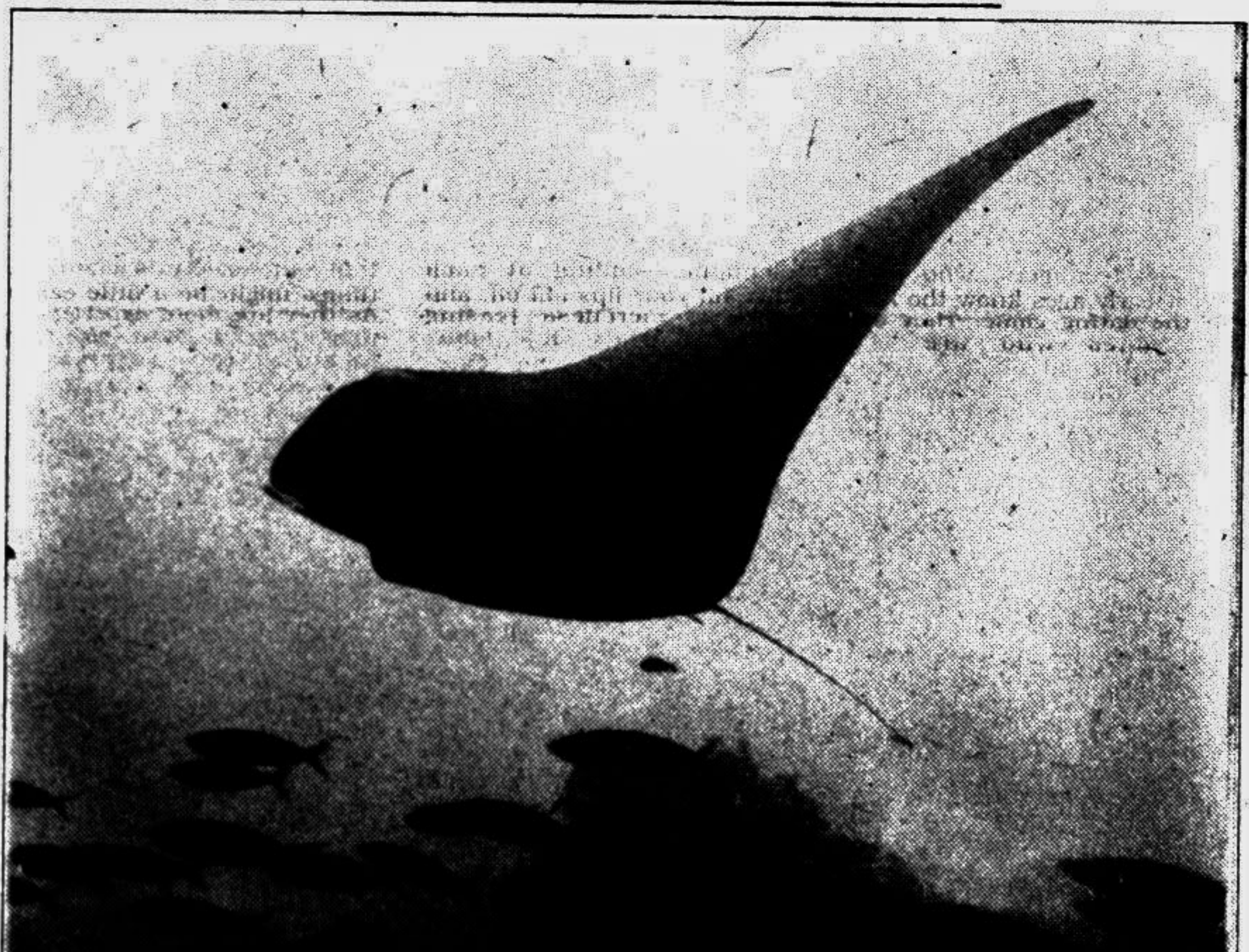
Bowhead: The Most Wonderful Animal

TAlmost erased by commercial whaling, bowheads have been protected since 1935.

The bowhead, so called because of its great arching head, lives today in two separate populations — a western group of some 7,500 animals ranging from the Beaufort Sea of the Sea of Okhotsk and an eastern group of about 500 inhabiting such icy fingers of the North Atlantic as Baffin Bay.

In "The Origin of Species," Charles Darwin called the bowhead the "Greenland whale." It was, he wrote, "one of the most wonderful animals in the world." And "rightful wonder it remains to this day. An adult bowhead can span 80 feet in length and weigh 80 tons, with a up to half of its weight vested in a blanket of blubber and as much as a third of its length taken up by that huge head with the cavernous mouth. The mouth is equipped with multiple plates of fine-fringed baleen.

Some of these characteristics proved to be responsible for the bowhead's fate at the hands of commercial whalers. It blubber rendered more oil than that of any other cetacean, as much as 6,000 gallons from a single adult. It feeding habits inhibited speed; its temperament precluded aggressive behavior. Thus did the bowhead whale become an easy mark — and a profitable one.



Out of the Blue Gloom: A manta materializes at dawn with a company of jusslier fish parading the Goofnuu inlet in the Yap islands. Courtesy: National Geographic Dec '95

Moth: Nothing to Cry About

SMALL ANNOYANCE to a big animal, a moth pokes its proboscis into the eye of an Asian elephant and irritates it. "The eye secretes fluid; then the moth sucks the fluid," says Hiroshi Inoue, who identified Hypochrosia baenzigeri in 1982.

This little flier seeks moisture and salts, as do a hundred other moth species that feed on the eye fluids of mammals, including — occasionally — humans.

Inoue named the Asian insect for Hans Baenziger of Thailand's Chiang Mai University, the authority on tear-drinking moths. Baenziger reported that after one moth clung to his eye-lid, sucking his tears for two minutes, "I could bear it no longer and caught the tormentor." — Boris Weintraub



Juvenile Bowheads bask off Canada's Baffin Island. Courtesy: National Geographic.

The Kakapo Climbs Back

by Armeen Khan

IN the far south-east is Australia, the home of the world's most remarkable and peculiar plants and animals which do not exist in any other part of the world.

These animals and plants flourish throughout this land and in the neighbouring islands. Many of these animals have become extinct due to the hunting and trapping of animals for their fur, meat, skin and feathers.

The Kakapo is a strange and peculiar bird of New Zealand, an island to the south-east of Down Under. It is the size of a duck. The downy green and yellow feathers cover the fat body. The Kakapo abandoned flight millions of years ago and use their claw to climb trees to nibble at leaves and flowers. New shoots and roots are also on their food menu. A hearty female Kakapo may weigh 4 1/2 lbs while a strong handsome male 7 lbs.

The Kakapo breeds in summer. It has a bizarre way of attracting females. A male Kakapo gets ready to mate by clearing off a wide track by removing debris and cutting off overhanging vegetation with its sharp, curved beak. This leads to his excavated bowl-like "lek" (display area) where he will try to attract females. Then he starts booming, the mating call which occurs when he inflates a well-developed sac in his breast which can be heard for about 3 miles. After 'booming' for about a week, a female turns out to see what the fuss is

about. Then the male goes through a dance routine, spreading his wings and displaying his feathers to attract the curious female. After mating, the male goes away and the female lays about 4 eggs which hatch in late summer.

These birds, a wonder of nature is now very few in New Zealand. About 1000 years ago, Polynesian people went to that island taking dogs and rats with them. The Kakapos were defenseless against these predators and the polynesians who prized the birds for their meat and plumage. Very few Kakapos survived. But when the English settled there and cleared the land the poor birds had no escape. They become extinct by 1970. Then in 1977, conserve officers found some Kakapos in Stewart Island. But the birds were in danger as feral cats where eating them up. In 1982, the cats were trapped and 22 birds were moved to Little Barrier Island. In 1987, 29 birds were transferred to Cod Fish Island which was clear of any natural enemy. Thus the Kakapo is climbing back, gradually. Scientists have set up radio transmitters, tape recorders and cameras to observe this creation of nature much more closely.

The Kakapo is one the world's most remarkable animals and has a special place in our heritage," says Don Merton, the head of the Kakapo Recovery Group. "We must bring it back from the brink". The writer is a Student of Scholastica, Class: VI

Notice

The Winners of the Wildlife Essay competition and the sketch or story writing competition on Migrating Birds are Armeen Khan; Afreen Khan and Prathama Komal Nabi. Please come and collect your prizes from the Daily Star office on 28.3.96 around 3.00 pm. Congratulations and thank you for participating.

Out of the Blue Gloom

ONCE known by the nightmare name of devilfish, these huge distant cousins of sharks seem dream-like — as elusive and harmless as shadows in the sea, they are giant manta rays.

These are creatures seen along the edges of reefs, where ebbing tides pump rivers of eggs, larvae, and tiny crustaceans into the open sea. The rays follow the tides, feeding nonstop.

Found worldwide across the equatorial belt, mantas are seen regularly by divers in the Yap Islands, off the Kona coast of Hawaii, and at San Benedicto, one of the Revillagigedo Islands, 250 miles south of Mexico's Baja California.

Much about giant mantas — their breeding, birthing, and life span — remains poorly understood.

The oldest classification, Manta birostris, the smaller mantas are classified in nine species of the genus Moubia. For all their placid ways, giant mantas were a threat in the days when divers wore helmets with air hoses connected to shipboard pumps.

For mantas, being cleaned is more than just a soothing act of grooming; it may be critical to life itself. Excessive marine growth such as algae can start a chain reaction of infection that could ultimately lead to death. Sometimes manta rays will leap entirely out of the water, possibly to clear themselves of parasites.

Adult mantas face few natural predators; perhaps only large sharks and killer whales.

Return of the Lonesome Male

TWENTY tons of male sperm whale glides past a film maker in the clear waters off Dominica. Like elephants and great apes, sperm whales are sexually dimorphic adults. Males dwarf females, particularly because of their massive, blocky heads. Much of the brain in both sexes is reserved for the spermaceti organ, a conical sac filled with fibrous gel. Researchers guess that its function is to transmit and amplify the whale's powerful clicking sounds. Whalers in the past hunted sperm for the high-quality oil in the head — as much as 500 gallons in a mature male.

Males lead segregated lives. Around age six they leave the family unit and migrate to colder waters, where they live alone, occasionally traveling in small schools. Not until the age of 27 or so do they may clash with rival males, as evidenced by teeth scars on their foreheads. Sperm whales may live as long as 70 years.

Jonathan Gordon, who conducts research in Dominica for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, expected some violence when a male confronted a resident family. Instead Gordon was astonished to find that "all the whales seemed delighted to see the male. They rubbed and rolled along his body."