

When the "Cat Woman" is Away, the Mice Will Play (or, How the Owl Saved the Mice.) -- A non-fiction incident from the travels of Malcolm Whitehead Dave Lawson*

The three of us, (the mice) had travelled by train from Pune to Goa. Here, the now late Malcolm Whitehead was to carry out one of his legendary workshops, teaching biodiversity using the zoo as a medium. The other two were R. Marimuthu, a Zoo Outreach Organisation educator and guide to Malcolm and me, David Lawson.

I had become involved in zoos and wildlife conservation some years before through Malcolm Whitehead and we had become great friends. I was in India with him as what he called his 'smudge'; officially this could be translated as his photographer and helper. Sally Walker, AKA (also known as) 'The Cat Woman', was to meet up with us later in the schedule, after Goa.

We arrived in Goa and had arranged to have a meeting with some important Forestry Department officials over dinner later in the evening. However, being in the forest and having already found a frog in our room and noticed many birds around our treetop lodge, the lure of the forest was palpable. Knowing there was a water hole nearby that obviously would be a great place to sit and watch wildlife, and anyway, there was plenty of time before dinner, wasn't there? So we walked down the track and into the forest to the water hole. We made ourselves comfortable and became absorbed by the wisdom pouring from Malcolm about our natural environment. I was sorting my cameras and film looking around for shots and anticipating the water hole's visitors. There was an owl to our right, high in a tree, but too far away for the camera lenses I had brought with me that night.

We sat, watched and waited. As time passed we could hear crashes in the vegetation, what was it, Elephant? No probably not, perhaps deer? Or possibly Gaur and that would be good. Time was passing and the noises were getting louder, so the decision, 'we'll wait a little longer', accompanied by a few more words from Malcolm about King Cobras in holes in trees that come out at night, if I remember correctly. Looking back towards the owl I could see it was now a good shot, with the moon behind it. The moon, it must be getting late! We had to be back for the dinner meeting, so maybe it was time to go. "Oh well I guess we have to" observed Malcy, not wishing to be wrenched from his contemplations, but we could not be late for the forest officers and needed to make ourselves presentable.

Marimuthu led the way. He was local, and had knowledge and experience of such places. It wasn't far up through the forest to the track. So off we set. We walked and walked, too far in my estimation but hey! ... I'm a photographer and was not that "at home" in forest in those days. We did have a guide so what could go wrong? One thing photographers do know about is light, it's our medium. When your shadow, from the moon is first in front of you, then to the right of you, then behind you and again in front of you, one has to conclude, we're going around in circles. I brought the group to a halt and said, 'we're lost aren't we?' I remember to this day Marimuthu's reply, 'Oh my god!' Madam will kill me'. Visions of explaining to Sally how he had let us get lost in the forest prior to an important meeting must have been flooding through his mind. This was assuming we got out without bumping into one of the many creatures Malcolm had talked about, some of which were not to be stepped on or alarmed.

Well, what really to worry about? We would be late for dinner, people would be sent to get us, we wouldn't be there, a search would be carried out, and the Forestry Department would be activated to find the three of us, lost in the forest. The repercussions, especially for Marimuthu and Malcolm, would be serious. That was what to worry about. We decided, therefore, to follow a river bed which must take us back to the water hole and try to get a fresh bearing and start again. However, this didn't seem to be working, as after a while of staggering about all we achieved was to get deeper into the forest by which time we were relying entirely on moonlight. Malcolm's solution was to stop walking around and sit and await our fate, although as stated the repercussions of this would be severe, whatever happened. My solution, which was accepted by the group, came from my observations at the water hole.

The owl in the tree with the moon behind it had come into my mind. While sitting and waiting I had noticed that the owl was at ninety degrees to me and we had walked almost directly to that place. The light of the moon behind the owl was casting shadows directly towards the path we needed to find. So if we walked and kept the moon directly behind us we should reach the path, shouldn't we? It was agreed we would try this theory. So holding my monopod aloft to cast a shadow, we were able to walk in a straight line and back to the path! Then hastily back to the lodge, shower, and dress and amazingly we made it in time for the dinner. I was the only one aware of why Malcolm was wearing a long sleeved shirt at the dinner; explaining the many scratches on his arms would have not been a good idea. It was with a great sense of relief we returned to the lodge for a good night's sleep.

The workshop went ahead without any problems, although there was the occasional wry smile of relief we shared with each other, remembering our walk in the forest. There are many stories we all have about Malcolm and his travels. Marimuthu has asked me to tell this one, which I am pleased to do.

As a photographer one of my favourite descriptions of me in action, was Malcolm's description of me as "Crawlin like a king snake", down Southern Boulevard in the Bronx to photograph an incident, before we went into the Staff entrance to the zoo, is the one I treasure. Not sure I did crawl like a king snake. Needless to say, this was an urban jungle incident that involved somebody that had been hit by a car, and a building in flames which according to the NYPD was probably just somebody dropping their crack pipe. When I crawled (Walked) back to Malcolm and the NYPD and they congratulated me on my determination to get a shot. I said that I wasn't bothered because I knew the police had guns. They just said "They've got better guns than us" A fact that it's better to know after the event.

Before there is a debate about snakes and crawling I'm sure the reference is from John Lee Hooker's "Crawlin King snake blues", not a Herpetology treatise. Malcy's love of animals and music combined to sum up how he saw it.

***Malcolm's best friend.**
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