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## Urban animal warriors

The heroes who foster injured bats, save turtles from slaughter and rehab snakes in their bathrooms

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In our cities, where animals have to deal with new obstacles every day, there are a few individuals whose lives revolve around them.

The phrase animal lover gets thrown around a lot. Anyone who doesn't mind getting his face licked by a dog claims the title. But in our cities, where animals have to deal with new obstacles every day, there are a few individuals whose lives revolve around them. They open up their homes to injured squirrels, convert their terraces into

havens for ill birds, or feed lost baby bats with their own hands, ensuring that among the spread of concrete and neon lights, life, of all kinds, continues to have value.

The six rescuers featured here, spread across five cities, all bemoan the lack of facilities for rescuing and rehabilitating animals in cities. But they don't look upon their own efforts as heroic in a time of crisis. They are not doing the animals they save a service, but entering into relationships with them, ones that yield love that they cannot survive without.



Pradeep D'souza with one of the many birds he rescues. Photo: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

## **PRADEEP D'SOUZA,**

### **40, Mumbai**

On a roof in Mumbai's Fort area, reached via a dizzying, narrow spiral staircase and then an upright ladder through a loft, you will find cages upon cages of kites, owls, pigeons and all kinds of other birds. This is Pradeep D'Souza's informal avian medical care unit, which he has been running for almost 20 years.

The D'Souza family, which has seven members including Pradeep, rents six rooms around a communal terrace in the building and dedicates a large amount of the space to injured or ill birds. The family starts its day at 4.30am. D'Souza's sister-in-law, Joanita, and brother, Donald, head to the market to buy fruits for the fruit bats and owls. A man comes by in the evening with 20-30kg of chicken heads for the kites and eagles, collected from butchers in the area. D'Souza spends 3 hours a day cleaning the cages and medicating the birds, assisted by his 16-year-old niece, Vanessa. Since the

trip up and down the stairs is so treacherous, baskets have been left near the door for people to drop off injured birds. Twice a day, the family makes the trip down to collect them; there can be up to 35 birds in one day.

Last month, about 200 birds were brought into D'Souza's care. The city can be a hazard zone for birds, as D'Souza explains. "Baby kites and owls can fall from a nest because of weakness, when their parents can't find enough food for them," he says. "In the monsoon, old birds can't fly against the rain and wind and fall down. Owls and black hens' nails are used for black magic and they are rescued during Diwali (when the birds are sacrificed to appease the goddess). Kites, parakeets and pigeons can get cut up by *manja* (kite string)."

D'Souza began by volunteering with the non-profit Welfare of Stray Dogs, in 1997, where he learnt how to vaccinate dogs. He would also pick up injured birds and take them to the Bai Sakarbai Dinshaw Petit Hospital in Parel for treatment. He then began reading up on how to cure avian diseases, borrowing books from the Bombay Veterinary College library. Soon, people in the area heard about his efforts and began bringing injured birds to him, and his operation gradually grew into the big one it is now.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say the ecology in the lanes around Fort and Colaba is protected because of D'Souza. He keeps meticulous records of the birds in his care, and his 9ft-tall release cages, kept on the topmost level, have holes for the birds that have been nursed back to health to fly away. To shut out the many calls he gets from bird rescuers, he keeps his phone switched off from 11am-6pm, and you can reach him only through a complicated system of codes.

He gets some financial aid from religious bodies, but the family still ends up spending Rs.15,000-20,000 a month on the birds. D'Souza does this full time and is financially supported by his brother, who owns a cable business. "It isn't possible to do a job," he

says. “I wouldn’t be able to do it. This is too much work.” Ask Joanita if it pinches the family that they have to care for so many birds, and she replies practically: “What to do? We are so used to them. They are like family now.”



Devna Arora, a veterinarian and animal rescuer, feeding elephant calves. Photo courtesy CWRC/WTI

## **DEVNA ARORA,**

### **31, Pune**

Devna Arora had moved to Scotland to pursue a master’s degree as a wildlife biologist and was working as an assistant ranger with the Scottish Wildlife Trust when she decided to move back to India to care for her ageing dog, in March 2009. “Debby (a Labrador retriever) was 13 and had cancer. She needed to be carried up and down the stairs, and my ageing parents would not be able to cope. I got a good five months with her,” she says. Since then, she has tried out different jobs, but since 2011 has been working solely on rescuing, reuniting and rehabilitating urban wildlife, including squirrels, birds, bats, owls, snakes and parakeets as well as dogs and cats.

She lives with her parents, in an apartment in a green colony meant for retired army professionals, and cares for the animals in her bedroom. Since there wasn’t too much information available about Indian species, she learnt by trial and error. For example, she experimented with goat milk, human infant formula and kitten/puppy formula to find the right mix for bats.

Arora is also a source of information and knowledge for other animal lovers attempting to rehabilitate animals. She documents her protocols as a rescuer and

publishes them on a website she runs named Rehabber's Den. She also conducts workshops on caring for infant urban wildlife. "We have several checks to screen out people who just want to play with animals," she says. "It's a life, not a plaything." The stress is on returning animals to their natural habitats or reuniting infants with mothers. She explains that you have to help the animal in-situ and try not to touch it, so its mother will reclaim it.

But Arora does have her "babies", who spend time in her house. The last was Drakie, a baby bat who lived with her for more than a year before it died. "We slowly realized that he had a broken shoulder and couldn't be reunited with his natural surroundings," she says. Currently, she has a babbler, a parakeet and a dog. "The hardest part," she says, "is losing a life you wanted to save. Then there is a vacuum because of a loss of routine, which is filled up by the next one."

*Mitali Parekh*



Shravan Kumar wants to change people's attitudes towards snakes. Photo: Nathan G/Mint

**SHRAVAN KRISHNAN,**

**25, Chennai**

"There were 50 snakes in my bathroom last year during the Chennai floods," says animal welfare activist and wildlife conservationist Shravan Krishnan, grinning. "I was out rescuing so many that I had no time to release them."

Little wonder then that the domestic helps at his apartment in Thiruvananthapuram never stay long. “I am forced sometimes to house rescued animals at my place for a day, before handing them over to the forest department or releasing them,” he says. “I don’t understand why people are so antagonistic towards snakes. They are small and shy, and it is not like they chase and attack you.” He tries his best to dispel the notion that snakes are dangerous. “I try to educate all the people who surround us during a rescue. I even encourage children to hold the snake if it is non-venomous, like a rat snake.”

Krishnan was all of 10 years old when he first handled a snake. “I used to volunteer every summer at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (an herpetology research station on the outskirts of Chennai), and that was where I started developing an interest in snakes.” Now 25, he has rescued over a thousand snakes.

He has been interested in animals for as long as he can remember, and his first rescue was a puppy he brought home when still in school. In his teens, he began to read extensively about animals, even dropping out of college, where he was studying commerce, to focus on this passion. While in college, Krishnan and a partner started running a boarding facility for dogs. After Krishnan dropped out, he decided to go solo and now runs Hotel for Dogs, a pet-boarding facility with centres in both Chennai and Bengaluru.

But he is as keen on rescuing wild animals—his menagerie has grown to include leopards, jackals, pangolins, deer, slender lorises, barn owls, monitor lizards and, of course, snakes. “I work closely with the forest department and have got permission to attend to rescue calls if they come in,” he says. Once he rescues an animal, he takes it to the forest range office in Velachery. In case rehabilitation is required, however, he heads to the Arignar Anna Zoological Park on the outskirts of Chennai.

“There are not enough rehabilitation centres and veterinarians in Chennai who can handle wildlife,” he rues. “I am working on establishing one myself, but it will take some time.”

The increasing instances of man-animal conflict bother him. “I used to see flamingos in the Sholinganallur marsh while I was growing up. Now there are only buildings there,” he sighs.

*Preeti Zachariah*



Gayatri Sarang with Athena, a fruit bat she rescued and is rehabilitating in her Mumbai home. Photo: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

## **GAYATRI SARANG,**

### **34, Mumbai**

Jon Snow still visits Gayatri Sarang from time to time. A black crow, he is recognizable by the small tuft of white hair on his chest. “He comes, talks, but doesn’t accept food,” she says. “That’s a good sign. It means he has learnt to fend for himself.” Last year, she fostered Jon Snow for four months, teaching him to forage and fly.

Sarang operates a baking service, called Bombay Baker, out of her two-bedroom apartment in Prabhadevi, but she also feeds stray cats and dogs, provides medical care to accident victims and ill animals, and helps with the rescue and rehabilitation of stricken urban wildlife such as squirrels, bats and crows. She once studied at the Bombay Veterinary College, Parel, but gave up midway because she felt she wasn’t learning enough to justify the cruelty meted out to animals under the curriculum—deaths of animals were manually expedited so that students could observe the deterioration of the animal or dissect the cadaver.

Now, she makes space for one-two animals at a time, depending on their size, in her home. She bears the expenses of caring for them herself, except on the rare occasions when they exceed Rs.30,000—she then reaches out to a network of well-wishers on social media. The hardest part, according to Sarang, is “teaching them to detach. To be only humanized enough to let you care for them, but not think of you as permanent.”

It’s what she’s doing right now with Athena, a fruit bat she’s fostering. Some children found Athena and took it to Sarang after efforts to reunite it with its mother failed. It’s under a month old, and work is on to switch it to a nocturnal cycle. “There will be more frequent feeds at night, which will slowly be replaced by fruit feeds. Every 10 days, we’ll drop a milk feed,” says Sarang. She is also careful not to set a pattern of dependency and will slowly teach Athena to look for food, so that after release “she doesn’t just hang on a tree expecting food to appear”.

Sarang lives with her husband, Mihir Patkar, and his parents. Their bedroom is used as a quarantine room for the animals. There is frequent washing and sterilizing of towels or wash cloths, feeding every 3 hours and sterilizing of hands and changing of clothes whenever they go from one room to the quarantined one. She has help in the form of veterinary physicians, biologists and avian experts.

Since Athena has been around, work has been on hold, as has their social life. “My hairdresser, Avani Yashwin, lets me bring animals to her studio, and if we have a dog or cat, we’ll take them to pet-friendly places, but it’s difficult with someone as small as Athena,” she says. “Honestly, the choice between saving a life and a night out is not a hard one.”

She knows Athena plays a larger ecological role than just becoming a city pet. Plans are afoot to build netted enclosures around fruit trees so that Athena can learn to fly and gather fruit on her own. This could mean moving to Pune for a while, where some

friends have a bungalow, fruit trees and the enthusiasm to daily tutor a bat to become a bat.

*Mitali Parekh*



Anoopa Anand with her two dogs, Lily and Mai. Photo: Hemant Mishra/Mint

**ANOOPA ANAND,**

**34, Bengaluru**

Her parents don't know this, but when Anoopa Anand was five years old, she would hurl stones at a bullock-cart driver who whipped his animals as he passed her house every afternoon. "Kids, don't do this at home," she warns, but her actions, even at such a tender age, stemmed from her tremendous love for animals.

When she moved out of her home, where there were always dogs, feral cats, fish and birds that her father would feed, Anand, now a freelance writer and editor, began to feel the absence of animals. "I started a weekend pet-sitting facility from my home, called Nanny Woof, and would take care of a couple of dogs every weekend, if their humans needed a holiday," she says. What started off as a paid boarding facility around four years ago turned into a foster home for homeless dogs within a matter of weeks. She started keeping rescued homeless puppies in her one-bedroom apartment.

For a brief period starting November 2013, Anand worked at a shelter, called Simba's Run, on half an acre of land off Devanahalli Road. The shelter was run by a trust that

she helped found and funds were raised through donations. The trust still exists, but she is no longer a part of it.

At capacity, she lived with 34 dogs and little or no electricity. “One fine day, one of the puppies discovered that a large flower pot made for a warm, comfortable bed,” she says. “As puppies often do, the others followed suit. One morning, I found every flower pot decorated with a tiny, sheepish puppy. I really enjoyed ‘growing’ homeless puppies in my shelter.” Besides dogs, she has also housed cats, the occasional crow, and a parakeet that was rescued from a fortune-teller.

For several months now, Anand has been volunteering with Cupa (Compassion Unlimited Plus Action) in Bengaluru, focusing on the rehabilitation and rehoming of abandoned and abused dogs. A communications and literature graduate from Mount Carmel College, she is also a certified canine behaviourist and uses her Nanny Woof Facebook page to share information about lost dogs as well as those that are up for adoption.

While some of her rescued and adopted dogs live with her parents, she has two dogs of her own. Lily is a 10-year-old Terrier-Pomeranian-Indy mix—one of her most troubled wards at Cupa, whom she fell for hard and adopted last July—and Mai is a seven-year-old St Bernard, a breeder discard whom she adopted early this year. “I do my best to take a third dog into my care,” says Anand. “These are often dogs who have an especially bad ailment or injury and need very specific, intensive care.”

Anand bemoans the fact that building associations and societies often raise objections to residents living and working with animals. “Be a responsible citizen, clean up after your dogs, leash them in public spaces and make sure you live in a clean house that doesn’t stink up the entire street,” she advises. “That’s your responsibility. But don’t be bullied by people who don’t understand what you do.”

*Akhila Ranganna*



Arjan Basu Roy with a rescued jungle cat, which was later released in the wild in the Sundarbans. Photo courtesy Arjan Basu Roy

## **ARJAN BASU ROY,**

### **40, Kolkata**

Recently, when 65-year-old Radhika Goyal donated a brand new Maruti Alto car to an organization of nature and wildlife lovers in Kolkata, it touched the most important coordinates of her life—her deceased husband and son; her pets (her dog and cat died recently); and a lifelong kinship with nature and wildlife.

Goyal is a regular donor to similar organizations, and the donation of a car was the biggest endowment of her life, “a continuation of the legacy” of her nature-loving husband and son and one that, in many ways, filled the void.

Nature Mates, to which she donated the vehicle, was formed by a group of nature-obsessed individuals who came together in 1994. It’s a registered non-governmental organization and the standard workday includes rescuing animals. Members of Nature Mates use the Maruti Alto to rescue distressed animals in Kolkata and surrounding areas.

In the 22 years of its existence, Nature Mates has rescued civets, turtles, jungle cats, monitor lizards, mongoose, snakes such as the King cobra, the Monocled cobra and the Russell’s viper, and birds such as vultures, kites, the Bronze-winged jacana, barn owls, even sparrows and crows. “We have focused on the rescue and rehabilitation of non-pet animals in Kolkata since we don’t have an adequate vehicle for large animals

such as dogs. Besides, there are many organizations working towards the rescue of pets,” says Arjan Basu Roy, secretary of Nature Mates.

“They stood out with the dedication they reserved for all animals, for every animal deserves rescue,” says Goyal. She remembers a civet cat in danger of being killed by her neighbours. A call to Nature Mates elicited an immediate response. Basu Roy was at her door within an hour.

Nature Mates revolves around the zeal of 40-year-old Basu Roy. In 1994, he was one of the six people who came together to form the club. Except their founder president, Shakti Ranjan Banerjee, who retired as a lieutenant colonel from the army, none of them had previous experience in the area of wildlife, but they shared an enthusiasm. “We knew that to study wild and natural life, one doesn’t necessarily need to visit a forest. Even studying the working of ants at home could suffice,” says Basu Roy.

Nature Mates has gained a reputation as an organization working for the preservation of flora and fauna, their operations focused on research as much as fieldwork. Among their first rescue missions was one to save turtles from getting sold as meat at a bazaar in Bengal’s South 24 Parganas district. “I remember it especially for getting chased by a large, knife-wielding illegal seller of turtles,” Basu Roy says, laughing. Since then, he personally answers calls about an animal in distress. Nature Mates handles the post-rescue stage too: looking after the animal, treating injuries, administering medicine when required, and then handing over the animal to the state’s forest department for rehabilitation in the wild.

The main challenge, says Basu Roy, is the post-rescue process, a phase that has to factor in their own meagre resources and funds, and the abject lack of medical infrastructure for animals, other than pets, in the city. Team members have often slept with rescued animals close to their bodies to keep them warm, administered medicine themselves and helped the animals eat, burp and excrete. Basu Roy once earned his mother’s ire when he flooded the bathroom of their house to provide stop-gap relief to a rescued turtle. “Other than a small wildlife sanctuary, there are few places where these animals can be rehabilitated in the city. The space crunch is a huge challenge for the forest department,” says Basu Roy.

We meet at the Eco Park in New Town, a recently created, 480-acre green zone. Nature Mates runs a butterfly garden there. Earlier in the day, they had handed over a Yellow-footed Green Pigeon to the forest department, having saved the injured bird from the fierce attack of crows in a south Kolkata neighbourhood. The regularity with which their help is sought for rescue missions is proportional to the ceaseless building activity and concrete expansion.

“Development, as it has come about, is a completely human-focused activity. We have a situation now where parks are being concretized; bright lights are getting installed,

which are detrimental to animal life; and water bodies and empty spaces are getting filled up,” says Basu Roy. “These animals bear the brunt.”

*Shamik Bag*

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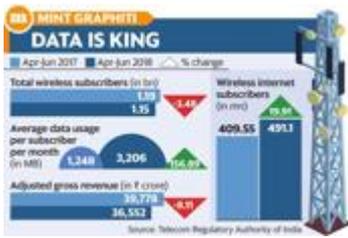
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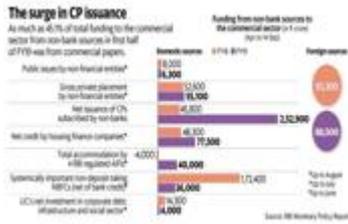
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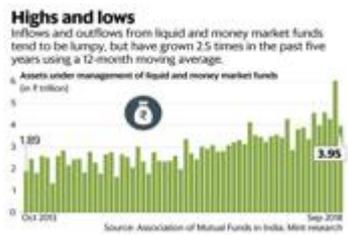
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