

Lee Durrell India tour of 2017: Recreating Gerald Durrell's 1978 India tour



**Lee Durrell
in Alipore
Zoo with
Emu**

Mrs. Lee Durrell, wife of Gerald Durrell and Honorary Director of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, visited India from 2 April to 21 April, 2017. This was her first visit to India and during the course of her travels she visited Delhi, Assam, West Bengal and Jharkhand. Mrs. Durrell's visit began in Delhi, where on 3rd April, 2017, she met several graduates of the Durrell Academy (formerly International Training Centre). Mrs. Lee Durrell met Dr. Brij Kishor Gupta, Evaluation and Monitoring Officer, Central Zoo Authority, Dr. Ajit Kumar Bhowmik, former director, Sepahijala Zoo, Tripura and former Joint Director, Delhi Zoo, Ms. Payal Narain, education officer, World Wildlife Fund, filmmaker Himanshu Malhotra, environmental journalist, Bahar Dutt and independent zoo investigator Shubhobroto

Ghosh and his wife, information scientist, Payel Biswas. Ms. Durrell discussed various aspects of zoo and wildlife conservation with the guests who also recalled their memories of their time spent at Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. Thereafter, Mrs. Durrell, along with her partner Colin Stevenson and guests of a travel company named Steppes Travel, traveled to Assam to visit Orang National Park and Potasali, where they saw Pygmy Hogs that have been bred for release to the wild with help from the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust has had a long association with the Pygmy Hog ever since 1971 when the animal was rediscovered by Captain Tessier Yandell in a tea estate in Assam. Subsequently Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (then known as Jersey

Wildlife Preservation Trust) officials Jeremy Mallinson and William Oliver came over to India to assess the status of the species in the wild and conduct research projects. Gerald Durrell himself came to see the species in Assam in 1978 and he saw the animal in Guwahati Zoo. During that trip he also visited Kolkatta and went to Shillong and toured Kaziranga and Manas National Parks in the company of an animal welfare worker named Alexandra Mayhew. The first Pygmy Hog captive breeding project started in the late seventies and early eighties was a failure but the second Pygmy Hog captive breeding project started in 1996 and resulted in 100 Pygmy Hogs being released from captivity to the wild. Ms. Lee Durrell also visited the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme in Basistha in Guwahati. She met Jersey Zoo trainees Dr Goutam Narayan and Pygmy Hog project veterinarian Parag Deka during her visit to Assam. Kaziranga National Park was also in Lee Durrell's itinerary whilst she was touring Assam.

Mrs. Durrell arrived in Kolkata on 11 April, 2017 and on 12 April, 2017 she visited Alipore Zoo. She noted several aspects of the zoo, including the newly constructed aviary, the elephant enclosure, the new small carnivore enclosure and the hippo enclosure. Mrs. Durrell was also shown the Burdwan House, which was the site of the controversial big cat hybridization experiment in the nineteen seventies. Mrs. Durrell had a discussion with Jersey Zoo trainee Shubhobroto Ghosh on the biological significance of Cubanacan, the Litigon, [Lion X Tigon (Tiger X Lion)] who had been recorded as the world's largest big cat in captivity in the Guinness Book of Records in 1985, weighing approximately 363 kg and standing 4 ft 4 inches at the shoulder. Since the Litigon was born of a fertile Tigon (Tiger X Lion), there was a discussion on the fertility of hybrids. The merits and demerits of such hybridization in captivity compared to hybridization in the wild was also discussed



Lee Durrell in front of Ram Brahma Sanyal portrait in Alipore Zoo

with examples like chimpanzee and bonobo hybridization during evolution, evolutionary hybridization in big cats and hybridization between Neanderthals and humans. Mrs. Durrell also saw the non native species displayed in the zoo, including zebras and chimpanzees. Lee Durrell paid a visit to the photographic memorial of Ram Brahma Sanyal, who, as curator of Alipore Zoo, wrote the world's first zoo management handbook in 1892, 'A Handbook of Management of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal'. Among Mrs Lee Durrell's other engagements were speaking engagements at the Indian Museum on 12 April and a visit to the Botanical Garden on 14 April, 2017 in the presence of ornithologist Kushal Mookherjee and naturalist Basav Bhattacharya.

Mrs. Durrell also walked in the Tollygunge Club and saw free living jackals in the company of ornithologist, Kushal Mukherjee on 13 April, 2017. Kolkata has India's first public zoo, the Marble Palace Zoo, started in 1854, and Mrs. Lee Durrell visited Marble Palace Zoo on 13 April, 2017 in the company of Jersey Zoo trainee, Shubhobroto Ghosh and naturalist Basav Bhattacharya. Mr. Tapendra Mullick, owner of Marble Palace Zoo, took Mrs. Durrell around the facility and explained the history of the zoo to her.

Mrs. Lee Durrell and Colin Stevenson visited Jamshedpur from 14 to 17 April, 2017.

This was a visit to Gerald Durrell's place of birth where he was born on 7 January, 1925. During their stay in Jamshedpur, they visited the house where the Durrell family lived when Gerald Durrell was born and they also attended events at different schools. A highlight of the Jamshedpur visit was Lee Durrell's visit to the Gerald Durrell Initiative started by local Rotarian and hotelier, Ronald D'Costa. Lee Durrell paid a visit to Jamshedpur Zoo and made observations on the conditions in which the animals were housed there. On her return to Kolkata on 17 April, 2017, Mrs. Durrell had a short local sightseeing tour at Kalighat in Kolkata, the sight of the famous Kali temple. On 18 April, 2017, Mrs. Lee Durrell attended a function organized by Nature Mates, a conservation NGO at the Butterfly Park in Rajarhat. She interacted with Nature Mates members including founder Arjan Basu Ray and Anirban Chaudhuri, herpetologist. This was followed by a presentation at the Indian Statistical Institute, where she met ecology reserachers Dr. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Dr. Anjana Dewanji. At Indian Statistical Institute, he also interacted with the stalwart biologist Professor Ratan Lal Brahmachary, who has researched pheromones in tigers and other animals for more than fifty years.

On 18 April, 2017 evening, Lee Durrell addressed a large gathering of around 450 people at the Tollygunge Club where Gerald Durrell had spoken in 1978 during his trip to Kolkata. The theme of the lecture was 'Gerald Durrell and his global influence on conservation.' A visit to Kolkata includes Victoria Memorial for most tourists and it was no exception for Mrs. Durrell who delivered a presentation there on the morning of 19 April, 2017. St. Xavier's school and college was the venue for a trip



Lee Durrell at Marble Palace Zoo

in the afternoon of 19th April, 2017. British Council had hosted Gerald Durrell in Kolkata in 1978 and it was no coincidence that they hosted Mrs. Lee Durrell on her last speaking engagement on 19 April, 2017 evening.

The final event saw the broadcast of the film, 'How Jersey Zoo evolved into Durrell' and Mrs. Lee Durrell was felicitated by British Council (Eastern Region) director, Debanjan Chakrabarti. Her final lecture was attended by 110 people and a fitting tribute to Gerald Durrell the author, who commanded and still commands a large fan following in Kolkata. With the end of the final engagement, Lee Durrell and Colin Stevenson thanked everyone concerned with her visit that included her interacting with several Durrell Academy graduates, trips to zoos and Protected Areas and presentations at many institutions of public interest. Lee Durrell hopes to return to India and keep the flame of Gerald Durrell's memory alive in this country, the country where he was born and the country where his interest in natural history first blossomed.

Shubhobroto Ghosh

Shubhobroto Ghosh is the author of the Indian Zoo Inquiry. He was trained at the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in 1999 and wrote a book, 'Dreaming In Calcutta and Channel Islands' on his experience at Jersey Zoo.