

Spectacled Owl



The artwork of Gamini Ratnavira

*He Contributes to Wildlife Conservation
and Education through the Artist's Brush*

*by Dale R. Thompson
Canyon Country, California*



Rufous-tailed Jacamar

There was almost instant magnetism when first meeting Gamini Ratnavira at the AFA's National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona in August, 1989. Not only was I taken by this man's personality but I thoroughly enjoyed his impressions of the many types of wildlife he had observed throughout the world. Having personally been in Ecuador and in the Panamanian jungles, I could relate so well to Gamini as he discussed the intricate behavioral details of many Central American bird species. From the majestic coloration of the Hawk Eagles to the distinct clapping sound of the mannikins, Gamini's observations were exciting. An added surprise was to find out that this energetic man was also a superb wildlife artist. I was immensely impressed to see how he could put his feelings and detailed observations of many species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians so magnificently onto the canvas.

It was at this first meeting with

Gamini in Phoenix, that many of us were able to observe first hand his portfolio of Sri Lankan birds. These original paintings included a great variety of native species including the rare and beautiful Emerald-collared Parakeet (*Psitaculla calthorpeae*). The birds in his paintings seemed so active and alive whether they were flying or working on the bark of a tree looking for insects. Although Gamini uses several media in his paintings including oils, most of his recent art work is done with water colors.

Born in 1949 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Gamini Ratnavira was attracted to the world of nature very early in his life. The jungle was just outside his home and he began to appreciate the many animals and plant life he encountered. This interest was to influence the rest of his life.

Although not always welcomed in the house by his parents, as a young boy Gamini housed a great variety of wildlife creatures including tortoises, frogs and snakes as well as more com-

Photo by G. Ratnavira



Toco Toucans

Red-headed Barbets



Photos by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson

Photo by G. Ratnavira



Gorilla family



Royal Flycatcher



Gamini Ratnavira
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mon pets such as parrots and fish. Gamini developed a lifelong love for these creatures and early in his adult life his house became a nursing home for many exotic animals. These animals were mostly sick or injured and were rehabilitated to the point where they could be released back into the wild. They included Grey Langurs (a member of the primate family), civet cats, mongooses, monitor lizards, pythons and a great variety of other reptiles. Birds were always around and these included cockatoos, lorikeets and other parrots.

Gamini's late father, Sardha Ratnavira, encouraged both of his sons in the love of nature and they spent many hours observing the wonderful wildlife in the forests of Sri Lanka. Gamini's father was also in the art field and is famed as the first qualified gemologist in that part of the world. He initiated an interest in shell craft and feather craft and work with sea weed and driftwood as well as many other handicrafts with nature in Sri Lanka.

Although Gamini's father wanted Gamini to follow in his footsteps, Gamini chose a different type of artwork in which to excel. As a young boy, Gamini would sketch drawings of flowers and other types of nature. Later in life, these became fully colored and brilliantly blooming flowers. Since his great love was wildlife, it was natural that wildlife subjects would become the center of his artistic talents. Gamini is a self-taught artist who puts his passion for wildlife, the natural environment and his interest in conservation to visual splendor for many people to enjoy.

Gamini, having spent many hours in the jungles and forests of Sri Lanka, became very familiar with its many exotic inhabitants. He learned many of their secrets through observation. Nature became his world and it taught him well. His great attention to detail becomes evident as he sketches his subjects. He paints exactly as he sees his subjects living their lives. Much of his artwork depicts the natural interaction that occurs in the wild. He portrays his subjects against their natural background using native species of plants, vines and trees. Through self-training, Gamini has intensified his natural ability to remember exact details and colors with almost photographic accuracy. He has applied this ability to his artwork with superb results.

Because of his great knowledge of

Sri Lanka's jungles, Gamini became a naturalist tour guide in 1978 for international tourists. Because of the rigors of the jungle, he took only those visitors who were genuinely enthusiastic about nature and Sri Lankan wildlife. Prior to this, Gamini worked as a field technician for a Smithsonian project collecting entomology specimens in Sri Lanka.

Gamini Ratnavira was awarded the great honor of being commissioned to paint many different forms of Sri Lankan wildlife to be used on postage stamps for his country. In all, his artwork was used for 34 stamps. These included a great variety of flora and fauna including butterflies, marine mammals, flowers, the Sri Lankan elephant and, of course, many native birds. These stamps were used to popularize the individual plant or animal among the Sri Lankan people and, through education, helped preserve each species in its natural habitat. Of interest is the set of stamps on the Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*). This endangered species is found only on Sri Lanka (an island found in the Indian Ocean below the country of India). The set of four stamps, when placed side by side, depict a herd of elephants with each stamp showing a different set of elephants. The first is a famous tusker (a male now believed to have been shot by poachers). The second shows a cow elephant with her baby, the third a single female and the fourth depicts three elephants drinking at a waterhole. The first day issue card shows two youngsters intertwining their trunks.

Gamini became a professional artist in 1976. He held two major one-person exhibitions of wildlife paintings in Brussels, Belgium in 1979 and 1980. He also had eight major exhibitions in Sri Lanka between 1978 and 1987. Forty paintings of Sri Lankan wildlife have been reproduced in *Serendib*, the inflight magazine of Airlanka including paintings of birds and coral reef fish. In 1984 and again in 1986, President J.R. Jayawardene (of Sri Lanka) selected one of Gamini's paintings for his personal season's greeting cards.

One of the largest of Gamini's paintings is an 8 ft. by 16 ft. canvas of Sri Lankan parrots painted for the new airport terminal in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This large painting of parakeets and other parrot-type birds gives the airport travelers a look at the country's lush green forests and

brings it to life within the steel, concrete airport structure. The birds seem alive as they fly through the treetops and one can almost hear their squawks.

In 1981, Gamini met his future wife Kathy Healy of St. Louis, MO. when she came to Sri Lanka with an American nature tour company. She fell in love with both the country and the tour guide and they were married the following year. Kathy shares a love of nature and together they began breeding birds, especially those threatened and endangered. In 1986, they successfully bred the Green-winged Macaw which was a first in Sri Lanka.

Because of civil unrest in Sri Lanka, Gamini and Kathy moved to the United States in April, 1987 and settled in Fallbrook, California. Gamini started his studio and continued his artwork in earnest. His first one-man exhibition in this country was in La Jolla, California in August, 1987. This exhibition was repeated in 1988 and again in 1989. Other highly acclaimed one-man exhibitions occurred in the San Diego Museum of Natural History in December, 1987 and in Hamilton, Bermuda in 1989.

Gamini has participated in several other exhibitions that were major juried shows. They include the Los Angeles Audubon Society Wildlife Art Show in 1987, the Del Bello Gallery Miniature Art Show in Toronto, Canada both in 1988 and 1989, the Del Mar Fair in 1988 and 1989, the Vermont Institute of Science Wildlife Art Show, 1989, and the Flat Rock Brook First Annual Wildlife Art Show in April, 1990.

Gamini was awarded third place in the San Diego Zoological Society "Wildlife Needs You" art competition and his painting of a California Condor with baby appeared on the cover of *Zoonooz* in September, 1988. He has won several awards through the Fallbrook Art Association including the Popular Vote in the fall of 1987, the spring of 1988, the fall of 1988 and the spring of 1989.

Now known throughout the world for his exquisite paintings and for his interest in endangered species and preserving wildlife habitat, Gamini has donated many of his paintings to private and governmental conservation agencies. Of special interest to aviculturists will be his exquisite paintings of lorries and lorikeets to be printed in an upcoming lory book authored by John Vanderhoof. ●

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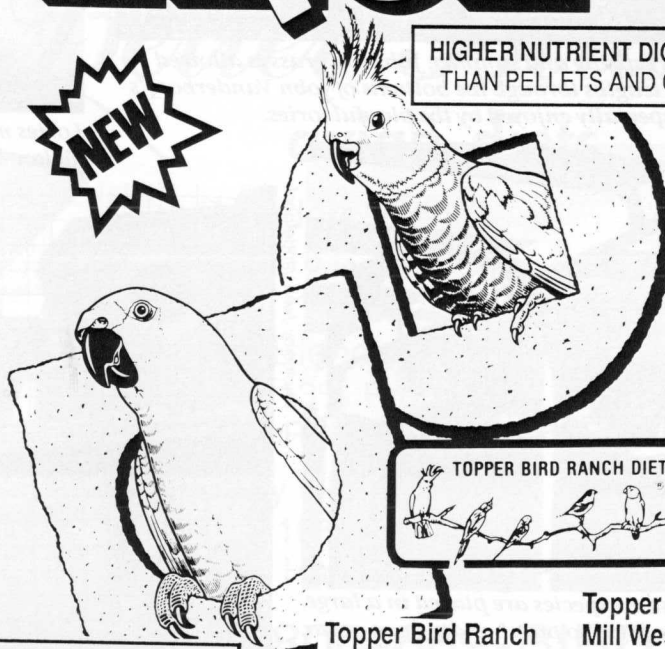
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