

BEASTS IN HER BELFRY



Ashwika Kapur caught the wildlife bug early. She just made the best of it – in the form of a great set of documentaries

SHARMISTHA CHAUDHURI

Ashwika Kapur's first pet was a duck. As a four-year-old, who wanted a dog and was denied, a duck was the only other animal she could think of.

"For some strange reason, my parents agreed. My mother probably had a vision of a little duckling in the bathtub," Kapur says with a laugh as she talks to SEEMA from her apartment in Kolkata. "While my friends took their dogs out, I took my duck for walks." That was the beginning of a long association with nature for the award-winning wildlife filmmaker, environmentalist, and educator.

"I began getting animals home that needed rescuing," Kapur says. "At one point there were two rabbits, a squirrel without a tail, baby chicks... But my parents firmly drew a line when I wanted to bring home a goat from a holiday in north Bengal. They probably regretted not getting a dog four years earlier." She laughs again. In her words, the apartment where she lived with her family, right in the heart of urban Kolkata, became a mini farm.

"You know a funny thing? I have no pets at home now because I am constantly traveling for the work I do," Kapur says. "But, I do have two lovely wild black kites who come flying to me when I whistle. They live nearby my apartment." Called Lucifer and Sin, the kites do not respond to anyone else's whistle.

ON THE MAP

In 2014, Kapur became India's youngest and only woman to

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Ashwika Kapur with Sir David Attenborough

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Ashwika Kapur with a gibbon on her head

win the Wildscreen Panda Award, the ‘green Oscar,’ winner for her quirky, rags-to-riches documentary on a celebrity kapako called Sirocco. The critically endangered nocturnal, flightless bird, endemic to New Zealand, has been brought back from the brink of extinction, and the latest population count (June 2010) records 210. Kapur shot it on a shoestring budget as a part of her graduation project from the University of Otago where she studied natural history filmmaking. The story focused on one bird who thinks he is a human. Sirocco even has a government post as the ‘Official Spokesbird for Conservation.’

“I have an instinctive love for nature,” Kapur explains, and she credits her undergraduate background in English literature for her love of narrating an interesting story. “English literature is not just about the text, but a rigorous training of the mind in storytelling. It is not different to what you need in an engaging wildlife documentary. You need a story to narrate first, and then comes all the technology.”

While the award helped Kapur make a mark, getting work was not easy. “I was grateful but the struggles did not stop. It was difficult to convince people about my credibility, especially as a girl in the field. It is a small industry and competition is fierce. The biggest disadvantage is where you are based,” she says. “There are such amazing stories to tell the world but the work does not usually come from your region.” Most of Kapur’s work comes from international outlets, including Animal Planet, Discovery, and the BBC.

NEW PROJECT

Kapur’s latest project, Planet Defenders, a six-film show that follows young environmentalists and filmmakers across the world, premiered on BBC in late March 2021. Kapur’s film focuses on India’s only ape species, the hoolock gibbons. While working on a documentary, she had met a gibbon called Kalia who had adopted a human family in a remote village in northeast India.

“Working on that project was heartwarming,” Kapur says. When the BBC approached her for a new project in last October (a home-shot audition video of a rescue owl won them over), Kapur knew what she wanted to focus on.

“We drove as much as possible, took tests and precautions of all manners before and at the remote village near the Indo-Myanmar border where I shot,” she says. Since hoolock gibbons spend their time in the canopies, deforestation threatens their habitat. Kapur focused the film on a village where gibbons and humans have co-existed peacefully for centuries, addressing the loss of habitat and interviewing a scientist trying to save the species with local help.

“It is primarily a children’s program, a series to help the young learn about conservation,” Kapur says. She also speaks at schools and to children about science communication and protecting the environment.

KAPUR IDOLIZES DAVID ATTENBOROUGH.

“He gets us to love nature,” she says. “He gets us to protect what you love. He has inspired a whole generation of zoologists, filmmakers, photographers and more, to fall in love with the wild world.” Kapur

has worked with her idol on a short elephant documentary.

“People say never meet your heroes, but they are all completely wrong,” she says. Earlier this year, a colleague suddenly put her on the phone with someone who wanted to be sure of the Hindi pronunciation of a word. “I couldn’t believe it was David Attenborough, and that for five minutes on a mundane Thursday we kept saying ‘Himalaya’ back and forth to each other!”

DO WHAT YOU DO

Kapur tends to tell a story about overlooked, unchampioned heroes. From an Xmas frog in Shillong, a species endemic to the region and so tiny it is about one-third the size of a thumb, to the batagur baska turtle in the Sunderbans, a rare species extinct in the wild and limited to a captive life in a wetland ecosystem that is a natural barrier against disasters, her films are fascinating.

For Kapur, getting into wildlife filmmaking was a leap of faith. “I was starting blind. There was and still is no industry in India. My work is dependent on the West,” she says. “Before studying filmmaking, I did internships and also went to South Africa for about six months to see if I was cut out for the path I wanted to embark upon. Wildlife filmmaking may sound glamorous from the outside but is anything but. It is about waiting, painfully extreme temperatures, staring at grass for hours, get bitten by insects, no connection with home... But at the end of the day the experiences you have make it all worth it. To be able to put out a message of conservation; to touch people’s lives, to help people do their part, no matter how big or small; is what and why I do what I do.”