

Kumar NS. 1996. The Cheetah question. Hornbill:9.

Keywords: 45Asia/Acinonyx jubatus/cheetah/history

Abstract: The letter proposes an interesting note on the cheetah, extracted from the Akbarnama, which is a biographical account of Akbar - the ruler of the Mughal Empire in the 16th century.

## THE CHEETAH QUESTION

This is with reference to the excellent photograph of the cheetah published on page 27 of *Hornbill* 1995(1). However the text needs a minor correction... The last authentic record of three males shot together in Korea, Bastar district, M.P. should read as Korwai and not Korea.

As most of us are aware the cheetah was once abundant in our country and Akbar, the great ruler of India had kept many of these lithe felines as pets. In the *Akbarnama*, a collection of episodes in the life of Akbar, there is a very interesting note on the cheetah — "His majesty was at this time much devoted to hunting with cheetahs and after assigning cheetahs to numerous parties, he went off himself to hunt with some special attendants. They let loose a royal cheetah called Chitrnanjan at a fleet footed deer in the hunting grounds.

Suddenly there appeared in front of them a ravine which was twenty-five yards broad. The deer leapt into air to the height of a spear and a half and conveyed itself across. The cheetah in its eagerness took the same course and cleared the ravine and seized the deer. On beholding this astonishing occurrence the spectators raised a cry of amazement and there was much surprise and delight.

The Emperor raised the rank of that cheetah, making him the head of all cheetahs.

He also ordered that as a special honour and a pleasure to men, a drum should be beaten in front of that cheetah."

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The cheetah record was taken from S.H. Prater's Book of Indian Animals, p. 27 and in fact Korea, M.P. is correct, it being listed in the Imperial Gazetteer as follows:

"Korea is a tributary state in the Central Provinces, lying between 22° 56' and 23° 48' N and between 81° 56' and 82° 47' E, bounded on the north by Rewah state and east by Surguja; southern border Bilaspur dist and west by the states of Chang Bhakan and Revah." R. E. Hawkins in *Encyclopedia of Indian Natural History*, p. 98, refers to the cheetah:-

"a possible surviving cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) population in the border region between Iran and southern Baluchistan."

Korwai is a separate entity.

— Editors.

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## SÁLIM ALI COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

In the Sálím Ali commemorative issue of the *Hornbill* 1995 (4), I had fondly

reminisced on some conversations and field outings I had had with the old man. I mentioned an anecdote he had told me how Layard, the famous expert on Sri Lankan avifauna, had discovered a flycatcher which he later named after his servant Muttu. I ended the anecdote by speculating that this interesting historical information on the *Muscicapa muttui*'s discovery was most likely spread by word-of-mouth and "is probably not in print anywhere."

Now, thanks to my good friend Priyantha Wijesinghe, I have managed to track down this precious piece of historical ornithology. Layard described the first specimen of the flycatcher (now popularly called Layard's flycatcher) in 1854 in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* series 2, 13(74): 127. After the usual scientific account on the bird, Layard writes: "I name this new species after my old and attached servant Muttu, to whose patient perseverance and hunting skill I owe so many of my best birds. This one he brought in one morning at Pt. Pedro in the month of June..." This article was from a series of papers Layard authored in the aforementioned journal in 1853-54 entitled *Notes on the Ornithology of Ceylon, collected during an eight years' residence in the island.*

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