



The Himalayan News

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A JOURNEY TO KAILASH

Romesh Bhattacharji



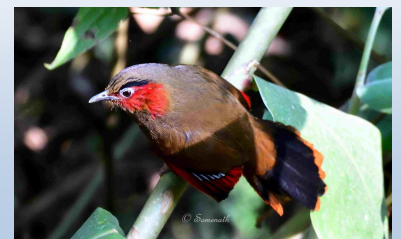
AVALANCHE ESCAPE ON KOTESHWAR

AVM (Retd) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya



THE PRELUDE – A PHOTO ESSAY

Somenath Sen & Sessa Mukherjee



LIFE IN THE HIGH HIMALAYA

Bhanu Banerjee



BOUQUETS & BRICKBATS



Dear Readers,

We welcome you to the ninth issue of The Himalayan News.

As we write this editorial, the third wave of covid which swept across both India and Nepal has now receded. Life is slowly returning to normal and mountaineers and trekkers alike are looking forward to the upcoming spring season.

Last week we learnt that Antarctica had record high temperatures for the month of March, more than thirty degrees above normal. Elsewhere in the Himalaya glaciers have been receding at a rapid rate and we seem to be reaching a situation which is looking irreversible.

In this our ninth issue, noted author Romesh Bhattacharji narrates his journey to the holy mountain, Kailash. AVM (Retd) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya pens the chilling tale of a miraculous avalanche escape on Koteswar in the Garhwal Himalaya. Somenath Sen and Sesha Mukherjee give us an enticing entry into the world of watching birds mostly around the foothills of the Himalaya with some wonderful images. The late Bhanu Banerjee writes about Life in the High Himalaya when he had accompanied Sir Edmund Hillary to Nepal on the schoolhouse and yeti expeditions in 1961-1963.

2022 is also a hundred years since the first expedition was launched to climb Mount Everest after the successful reconnaissance expedition in 1921.

We do hope to survive through all kinds of calamities without losing our rational reasoning.

Happy reading!

Sujoy Das
Rupamanjari Biswas
Editors

A JOURNEY TO KAILASH

Romesh Bhattacharji



Baldak Grazing ground

KAILASH-MANASAROVAR in the Autumn of 1981

"There is no place on earth like the Himalaya, for in them are found Kailash-Manasarovar. As the morning sun dries up the dew so are the sins of man dried at the sight of Kailash-Manasarovar." So runs a moving passage in the Upanishads. The sage goes on to add 'Not in a hundred ages of the gods can I sing to thee of the glories of Himalaya'. He was writing from personal experience, but my sins remained. My eyes, heart and mind were so overwhelmed with the majesty of nature around me that there was no time to think about my sins!

From the late 1950s this apex of the Hindu cosmos- Kailash, the lotus of the world- Pushkar, the centre of the earth- Meru, Kang Rimpoche, was closed to pilgrims from India and Nepal. In 1979 it was opened to the Nepalis and in September 1981 to the Indians. I jumped at the opportunity and got a place in the last group to visit Kailash in late autumn of that year.

Ours was a Government-managed exercise complete with an Under Secretary from the Ministry of External Affairs accompanying us on duty. We signed along the dotted line, paid up enough money to go on four such trips, and we were off in a luxury bus. The physical effort fortunately was still mine.

To make it tougher I carried a rucksack of my personal stuff weighing 30 kg. It had a heavy sleeping bag, a light sleeping bag, a three man tent with two awnings, two jackets, two changes of clothing, sixty film rolls, three cameras and lenses. My 25 kg of free allowance was used up entirely by food.

We had gun-toting soldiers and wireless sets dogging our footsteps in India. We had doctors, who were constantly declaring many of the pilgrims unfit for altitude and yet all of them made it. We had horrible unvarying badly cooked food provided by the Kumaon Vikas Mandal, but this was compensated for by the cheap mutton-on-hoof (Rs 80 per sheep) that villagers cooked for us in the Indian villages. Juicy red apples were a rupee a kilo. Years ago, numerous humble souls used to undertake this yatra without fuss.

Tawaghat, the road-head, is 257 km from Tanakpur, the rail-head.

The forest road to Tanakpur from Haldwani goes through the most dense and picturesque broad leafed sal-forested foothills that I have seen in north India. To the south of the road are agricultural fields in the plains separated from the former by a double line of mostly sal, neem and jungle jalebi trees. From the left of the road immediately rise closely packed sal trees.

About ten kilometers before Tanakpur starts the ancient, magnificent and majestic Sharda forest. The sal trees here have an average girth of 30 ft. Driving through this forest over a very rough road on a motorcycle, in 1971, I first startled a herd of barking deer and immediately afterwards was myself startled to find a herd of elephants crossing the road less than 20 m ahead.

Soon after Tanakpur the road rises steeply through many twists to 5100 ft to Sukhidang from where forests, parts of Nepal and the plains lie spread at your feet. Thence another 50 km to Champawat and 12 more to

Lohaghat, where you have very gentle rolling country dotted with clumps of fir and pine woods. The entire vista is dominated by Pancha Chuli and the Api-Nampa peaks. After another climb of 15 km to Abbot's Mount (6892 ft) another remarkable view point, the road falls to Ghat (2000 ft) crosses the Sharda river, and after another rise of 3200 ft brings you to Pithoragarh. This large village town is in a vast pleasing green bowl dominated by Pancha Chuli's needle-sharp main peak 22,652 ft. Closer to the town hover the ruins of an old Gurkha fort. From the road, before and after Pithoragarh, can be seen fleeting glimpses of peaks from Trisul, Nanda Devi and Pancha Chuli to Saipal in Nepal. There are many pine trees here.

A gradual descent to Joljibi where the Gori meets the Kali and then, trapped in a narrow gorge comes Dharchula (3300 ft). Nepal is across the bridge here. Across the Indian Dharchula is the Nepalese Dharchula and the most prominent place, surrounded by teeming bazars, is the ancient high walled jail still intact and in use! The road, along the right bank of the Kali, ends at Tawaghat (3327 ft). From here we walk.

Tawaghat is at the meeting of the foaming waters of Kali and the Darna. The distances from Tawaghat above the Kali are :

Sirkha - 17 km
Jipti - 34 km
Malpa - 42 km
Bundi - 51 km
Garbyang - 60 km
Gunji - 68 km - from here a track leads along the Kuti Yangti via Kuti and Joling-kong villages on way to Lampiya dhura & Mangshan passes (38 km)
Kalapani - 76 km
Sangcham - 86 km
Lipu Lekh - 92.5 km

From Joljibi till Kalapani, Nepal is always across the river Kali, oftentimes a half-hearted stone's throw away. For a more adventurous

trek one can take a shorter but more risky track from Tawaghat along the Kali river to Jipti. The distance is 22 km instead of the 34 km along the present route.

The distances from Tawaghat up the Darma valley to Lowe Dhura (108 km away) on the border are:

Chirkila	- 6 kms
Nyu	- 16 kms
Bogling	- 25 kms
Sela	- 33 kms
Nagling	- 38 kms
Baling	- 43 kms
Dugti	- 49 kms
Gow	- 52 kms
Rama	- 59 kms
Dedang	- 63 kms
Dawe	- 80 kms

and on to Lowe Dhura (18,510 ft)

From Tawaghat (3327 ft) the way seems to climb straight up to heaven. It is up and up all the steep way to Thanedhar (6370 ft) in a series of zigzagging *pakhdandis* crowded with flocks of goats and sheep returning from higher pastures. This face being on the windward side is bereft of trees. After Thanedhar comes the first Bhotia village of Pangu, which has the biggest oak trees I have seen in Kumaon and Garhwal. A gradual descent to a stream spreading over a wide field and thence a steep rise through a dense jungle of small Kumaoni oak to Sosha (8052 ft) which is just after an ancient Bhotia shrine. There is a yet another climb to Tithila pass (9100 ft) and then down through pretty hill country to Sridang (8118 ft), Sirkha (7920 ft), Simri (7810 ft) villages. From here you have an excellent view of Api-Nampa peaks. Except for a day's march between Binda Koti (7800 ft) and Lamari (7800 ft) these stirring peaks are always visible along the track. In early October the weather is usually clear to appreciate these stunning snow views to our hearts' content.

Beyond Simri the path turns into a lush and dense forest of oak, maple and fir trees. Near

some old ruins, is a beautiful waterfall. You climb higher, till near the Jungleghati (8800 ft) at a picturesque tea shop you pause for rest. Resuming your walk over a cobble-stone path to Rungling Top (9863 ft) then through another dense fir forest, with beard like ages old fungii and parasitical growth hanging from the fir trees, to Simkhola (8100 ft) by the Simkhola stream. Here you enter a very barren stretch. There is a gentle ascent to Gala (8600 ft). Here start the gorges and a somewhat precarious path. It becomes worse as you go along. There is no water beyond this point. From here look back and you will be stunned by the Kali's gorge - 3000 ft of barren hillside plummeting sharply down to the Kali. Above the left bank is Nepal with forests and a huge waterfall. Near Jipti (8200 ft) is Binda Koti rest house (7800 ft) where you halt for the second day's rest.



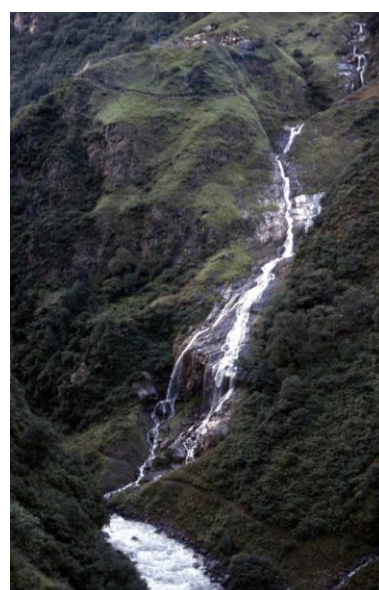
One precipitous stretch of several in India

Now starts the most trying passage of the march. There is always a 500-1500 ft drop just a misplaced foot away. At one place there are

644 steps (the sign there wrongly says 764 steps) like that in a staircase but much more steeply arranged. At places there is the comfort of a protecting wall. On the stretch there is only one resting stop under a rock overhang called Khan ka Dera. This entire stretch was known as *Kirpani* (without water) but there is a trickle at this spot. There are other difficult stretches, like the one known as Chatta falls, where to cross a short slide, we had to ascend 800 ft and descend 1100 ft. At Nejang gad there is an impressively roaring 500 megawatt size cataract, the spray of which has a rainbow as long as the sun is out. Do not miss, which you are bound to if the waterfall holds your attention, the striking rock peak known as Ladjekut, above it. A climb again to 8200 ft and a descent under a waterfall to Malpa (6800 ft). The next stage is a dream walk. There is another waterfall - Takti - under which we pass. It is so high that you only get the spray, but do not open your umbrella for it might be blown away. Then comes a hamlet of three houses called Lamari (7800 ft) which is so close to Nepal that snow avalanche spray from that country settles over it in winter. Another ascent and after crossing the Budhi river you arrive at Budhi (9400 ft) from where is a fine view of two peaks (18,910 ft and 19,980 ft) of the Byas Rikh Himal. Thus ends the fourth day's march.

Budhi is a picturesque village, and its residents also own land in Nepal across a shaky bridge. There is a steep climb over clayish soil to Chai-Lek (11,900 ft), and instead of a decline on the other side, it has a wide, wide alp. There are numerous langurs here, and some of them are bold enough to pose for close-ups, but be careful, as some might not take kindly to your aiming a camera at them. At this spot, while taking pictures, I heard a rhythmic ting ting ting. Round a bend came a figure from the 19th C. A dak runner carrying a sack of letters and parcels. He had a bell-crowned spear which he would hit the ground at every second step. That was to warn dangerous animals away that a human being was coming closer.

From here the Nampa (22,162 ft) is close at hand, across the river's divide, and to the north is the village of Garbyang (10,300 ft) and nearby to the east is the Tinker river and Tinker peak in Nepal. Garbyang, the last inhabited village on this path, is at the centre of a vast panorama of cliffs, gendarmes, needles, slashed hill sides, snow, ice, forests and rivers. There are a few blue pines here. The generally verdant fields of Garbyang are an unexpected eye-opener. Yet, as this village is sinking, the government instead of encouraging the inhabitants to settle nearby, is giving them land at faraway Haldwani in the Terai- a brainless scheme according to the residents! This village has a number of traders, engineers, and civil servants serving all over the country. With many houses abandoned, some leaning drunkenly, and some others shuttered, Garbyang is a ghost town. Across the river is the **Nepali** village and temple of Changru presiding over the sangam of Tinker and Kali rivers. This Nepali village has closer links with India than with the rest of Nepal. Charles J. Sherring, D.C. Almora in 1905, visited a cave 1500 ft above the village where he found it filled with the bodies of men, women and children. Some were remarkably well preserved.



Waterfall, the Kali river and a village

Now begins one of the most enticing stretches in Kumaon Himalaya. For a while you skirt steep gorges on a precipitous track, which in the olden days used to be shunned in favour of a track in opposite Nepal. Then just 6 km from Gunji the valley opens up, dominated in the north by Sangthang (21,262 ft) and in the south by the Nampa massif. Gunji (11,000 ft) is where the Kuti Yangti meets the Kali, and along the former is the route to Lampiya Dhura pass (18,150 ft). Here too, across the Kali, is a *chor rasta* along which people continue to tend their field and herds in Nepal. We are now in the Byas valley. An extremely beautiful valley with rugged mountains at the base of which is a pretty forest which dwindles as you go ahead. It is more so in October, when the trees and bushes before donning their winter cloak go through an extremely colourful change of apparel. Red, yellow, mauve and brown. Gunji is the last village, but not inhabited. Ahead are merely grazing grounds. Then the valley narrows down to a gorge. In this area are a myriad attractive rock-faces and ice climbs. In fact a very challenging traverse could be of the ridge around 19,000 ft to 20,000 ft from Gunji to Shimkhola, by-passing Garbyang and Budhi. It will take about 3 weeks I expect.

Kalapani. What a fitting name for a desolate post!

It is really the back of beyond. Here we have our frontier warders in full strength. Many tree stumps testify to their need for fire wood. There is a fascinating triangular-shaped vertical, sheer granite face of more than 19,000 ft dominating Kalapani's narrow confines. Kalapani still has the ruins of a dharamshala and of a market, which may yet be used again. Over Kalapani tower a couple of striking peaks of Nepal. Nearby merge three streams, from Lipu Lekh comes the Kali, one from the north of the ridge behind Kuti village, and another from the above-mentioned peaks of Nepal. Just before Kalapani there is a small spring called Kali, where a new temple has been built replacing

an ancient one. The river gets its name from this spring, though this is not the main source, which is below Lipu Lekh. At Kalapani you have crossed the great Himalayan crest, and *without* crossing a pass entered the Zaskar range. This phenomenon I have noticed only at three other places. The Akpa-Spilu stretch in Kinnaur, where also you cross the Himalaya along the Sutlej's gorge, at Phuti Run (split rock) in Lahul and near Malari-Geldhung in Garhwal.

Now an arid area begins. There are no trees, only stunted bushes. The prospect is desolate but delightful. Fantastic patterns of rock, scree and shade, bordered by snow and ice on serrated ridges bristling with pointed peaks. We are in a wide barren valley where man looks small. Preparing for Tibet's massive spaces. Soon we have even left the juniper bushes behind.

Next camp, our 7th, is at Sangchum (14,620 ft). While coming here we passed ruins of shelters, sheep pens, stables, dharamshalas and cairns for pilgrims and traders at Krim Kang, Nag Dang, Dong Gang, Nabi Dang and Chil where there's water. Sangchum is a wide oval-shaped ground near the fledgling Kali stream before it gets its first tributary from Nepal a little below Chil. The view is rough, bleak, stark and attractive. There is scree all over but the track ahead is good provided it is not covered with snow and we had snow. At Sangchum I had my first uncomfortable night on account of lack of acclimatization. I think this problem hits one here suddenly only after Kalapani (11,900 ft) as you are deprived all at once of trees.



Peak to the south of Lipu Lekh

Next day's march to Lipu Lekh pass, 16,750 ft and not - definitely not -17,800 ft as is given in some maps, was done in 1 hr 45 minutes. There is a point to the left of the pass from where can be seen Kailash and Manasarovar. I didn't get very far on account of an unexpectedly chilly wind for which I was unprepared as I had left my jacket in my rucksack on the pass. Saw the incredible bulk of Gurla Mandhata (25,350 ft) which the Tibetans call Memo-Nami meaning the 'Name for God'. Tibetan names I found more apt for giving a distinct idea of the feature so named. Gurla's white summit ridge has a broad base of yellow and brown, and rises straight above the plain. It has no peer in these parts.

Lipu Lekh pass has a rocky outcrop in its middle. This pass is near the tri-junction of India, Nepal and China. Somewhere in this knot the Zaskar range, starting from near

Kargil in Ladakh, ends.

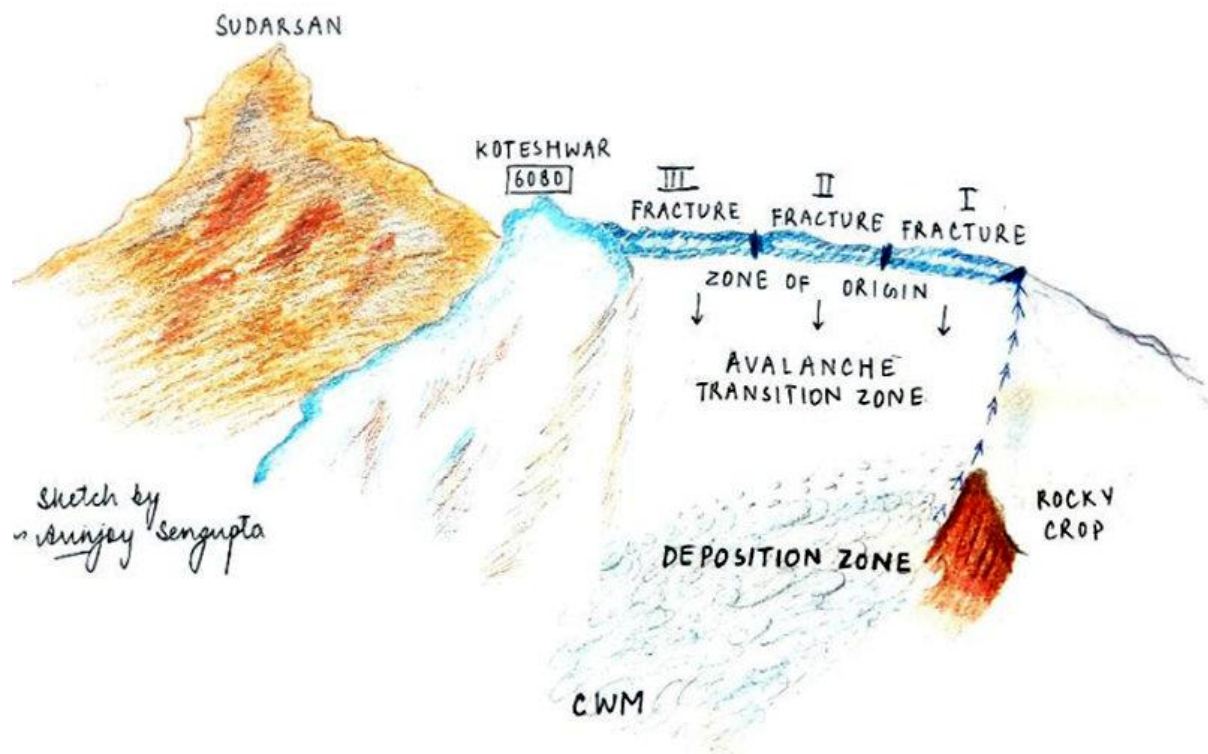
By the time the Chinese came to the pass to collect us, the porters and pilgrims were huddled next to the luggage, each other and rocks, trying to shelter from the raging wind which was hurling spindrifts into our faces. The sky was clear and the sun shone brightly on our discomfort. It could have been a climber's challenge. Here were the uninitiated muttering to their individual deities for relief. I had found a very comfortable niche about 500 ft above the pass from which I could view Gurla and the scene of misery below at the pass. As soon as the Tibetans were greeted by our Jawans with hot tea I shouldered my pack and rushed down, down, down. Didn't stop till I had cleared the last tongue of snow. We were in a U-shaped valley. Already, the ferocious jagged ridges were petering out, giving place to smooth rounded sides. You could see this age-old process taking place in front of you. Half the ridge was sharp toothed and the rest gentle. To the south, east and west were perpetual snow-covered ridges, but in the centre of this valley floor, though there was a river bed, there was no water. I was very thirsty now. Where was the water? Water was 6 km down near Palla. It came gushing out of the bed like a spring. But this was no spring. It was just the entire river emerging from its subterranean passage. This is - I believe - the done thing for rivers in Tibet. The Sutlej does it¹. The Dung Lung river on the west of Kailash does it. Some streams off Gurla's flanks do it. There are many more like that. They just go underground and emerge later.

(to be continued in The Himalayan News 10)

^[1]See 'Attempt to climb Gurla Mandhata' by T. G. Longstaff in 'Western Tibet and British Borderlands', p. 213.

MIRACULOUS ESCAPE ON KOTESHWAR

AVM (Retd) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya



Representative sketch of the avalanche on Koteswar, 1977 (above). Team was on the trail indicated by upward arrows beyond the rocky crop all the way up to the 1st fracture line of the ridge.

It may be relevant to put forth some basic concepts of avalanche for the readers before I delve into the narrative of a lucky escape from the deadly clutches of one.

An avalanche is a rapid flow of snow or ice down a mountain slope. It can be set-off spontaneously by increased precipitation, weakening of snowpack or by humans and earthquakes. Large avalanches can move ice mass, rocks, trees and even entire sections of forest areas. Avalanche occurs in two general forms. Loose snow avalanche comprise loose snow while slab avalanches consist of tightly packed snow. Slab avalanches are triggered by collapse of an underlying weak snow layer or may be due to layers in vice versa state. After being set off, avalanches accelerate rapidly and grow in mass and volume as they collect more snow. If an avalanche moves fast

enough, snow mixes with air forming devastating powder snow avalanches. Slab avalanches form frequently from snow, which are either deposited or re-deposited by snowfall or by wind-drifted snow on a ridge or on a slope. They have the characteristic appearance of a block (slab) of snow cut out from its surroundings by fractures. Elements of slab avalanches include a crown fracture at the top of the start zone, flank fractures on the sides of the start zone and a fracture at the bottom. The crown and flank fractures develop vertically in the snow delineating the snow that moves with the avalanche sweeping the existing snow on the slope. Slabs can vary in thickness from a few centimeters to two - three meters. In the narrative presented below, I estimated the snow re-deposition of approximately 45 cm due to incessant snowfall. Slab avalanches

account for most of the avalanche-related fatalities in the mountains. Recently, between 4–6 February 2022, 100 avalanches swept down in Tyrol region of the Austrian and Swiss Alps. Nine lives were lost including skiers and mountain guides in Austria and Switzerland reported two deaths. Austria declared these avalanches as unprecedented in their history (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60287621>).

I am lucky to have survived an avalanche and narrate the personal experience after nearly 44 years.

In 1975, I went on deputation from Indian Air Force to Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM), Uttarkashi as Vice Principal. I was in charge of the training curriculum for the courses offered at NIM. The Institute's policy encouraged attempts to scale mountain peaks above 6000 meter during advanced mountaineering course to offer trainees a rigorous exposure to mountain climbing in the Himalaya.

In the summer of 1977, I focused on the Gangotri glacier region and selected Koteswar peak (6000 meter+), approximately 1.5 km east of Sudarsan Parvat, & north of Raktavarn glacier for our men's advanced mountaineering course. Although above 6000 m, Koteswar peak is not technically challenging. From base camp at Gaumukh, we went up the Raktavarn glacier and established summit camp beyond the gully and close to the CWM at 5500 m. The weather deteriorated and it snowed incessantly for next three days confining us inside our tents. Once the weather cleared, the instructors as well as the trainees, tired of confinement in their small tents, were excited and wanted to make an attempt on the summit. However, I was apprehensive about going up the slope leading to the ridge, as snow condition did not appear suitable for climbing since it was fresh and soft after the heavy snowfall. I was reluctant to go ahead & tried to convince the team about the unstable

condition of the mountain slope along with its long ridge and the inherent danger of packed snow crumbling. However, seeing the bright and perfect weather, the instructors requested me to let the trainees try and attempt the summit. Ultimately, I relented but with a sense of reservation. I asked the trainees to remove their ropes, and follow the bulging slope at the end of the ridge on our right in a single file maintaining adequate distance in between.

Instructor Topkey, the Tiger Badge holder, was climbing with me and a little later, he complained that his toes were cold and numb. Topkey removed his boots and I rubbed his toeless cold feet until they were slightly warm. Topkey told me that he lost his ten toes during the Everest expedition in 1962 when he was only 17 years old and he faced the problem of cold feet in extreme cold condition. I advised him to return to the camp but he refused and wanted to go up with me. I gave him a pair of woolen stockings. Topkey donned his boots wearing the spare pair of stockings and we started climbing again.

Snow was soft and knee deep. When we were about to reach the top of the ridge, there was a cracking sound, and I saw two or three instructors flung in the air, somersaulting, and crashing down on the slope. About 100 ft of the long ridge on the right end broke away triggering an avalanche. As the slab cracked on the ridge, the central and the extreme left portion of the ridge too gave away and the avalanche swept the whole ridge. It was a typical surface slab avalanche triggered by our climbing movement. The moment I felt the sliding movement of the snow under my feet, I initiated the motion of backstroke, and the avalanche swept me down. I had read the book titled *Avalanche Enigma* by Schlesinger, where he suggested backstroke on soft snow avalanche, which might help a person breathe when caught in an avalanche. I thought of applying Schlesinger's theory to real life emergency. The backstroke motion did help me breathe for few seconds when suddenly, a

chunk of solid ice hit the back of my neck. I fell tumbling forward with my face down, and legs up the slope and kept sliding down buried under the mass of snow. The avalanche of snow and ice was flowing fast over my body, dragging me along, and I could feel the increasing weight of snow and ice above me. I thought that I was going to be buried alive under the heavy pressure of snow crushing my body. The avalanche slide stopped after a minute or so and I was suffocating under snow. Desperately, I tried to move my limbs and only my right hand, close to my shoulder, moved a bit. I tried my best to scrape snow from near my mouth to get some breathing space in front of my nose, and continued probing with my fingers to create space around my nose and mouth. Suddenly by God's providence, I felt cold air, which filled my lungs and I had a new lease of life. Fortunately, there was no hard ice over my head or face, which made my scooping of snow possible. With the sling of the ice axe still wrapped on my wrist, I could slowly clear little more snow and ice from above my body. I tried in vain shouting for help as my energy was sapping. Knocking at the door of death, I was about to give up, thinking and praying for my family and the little child, when what seemed like an eternity, someone came up looking for me. Seeing my crumpled bamboo hat nearby, instructors Harbans Singh and Nirmal Singh frantically dug snow and ice from above my body and pulled me out of my snow burial.



Lt. Yashpal being rescued by team members

I stood dazed for few moments on the debris. Once I gained a footing, my first concern was

the safety of trainees and instructors. Looking around, my wandering eyes failed to locate most of the team members who remained under the debris of snow and ice. Crampons, ice axes, sunglasses, caps, etc., were scattered on the debris. With the help of the senior instructor and few other instructors who luckily wriggled out, I started extricating the buried members. Scrambling and shoveling through the snow, we started rescuing the members one by one. Every minute counted and each rescued member participated in the search of others without wasting any time. At over 19000 ft, it was a herculean effort. Physically and mentally numb after the experience of being buried under the avalanche debris, the only thought of saving the lives still buried under snow was of paramount importance at that moment. In less than half an hour, we were able to retrieve all the team members. By God's grace, all 29 of us survived mostly with minor injuries. Students were physically and mentally shattered, traumatized without knowing what hit them.

Fortunately, instructors were remarkably alert in pulling out the trainees buried under mass of snow and ice. They showed their exceptional professional commitment in saving the lives of these inexperienced trainees, what otherwise would have been the worst avalanche disaster in the history of mountaineering training and a permanent scar on NIM and my personal life.

The avalanche had swept us down almost 200 m from its origin at the ridge, through its transition on the slope and deposited its debris near the mouth of the gully. The nursing assistant gave first aid to all the injured and we found one Lt. Yashpal struggling to breath with a gurgling sound. His tongue was retracting inside his throat and he virtually swallowed his own tongue and was on the verge of suffocation. I rushed to him and pulling his tongue out, held it stretched, allowing him to breath. Ultimately, we laid him on his belly in prone position on a mess

tent bag and kept his head on one side where his tongue was somewhat steady. Assessing the seriousness of Lt. Yashpal's condition, I dispatched instructor Nirmal Singh, the National ski champion, to rush to Gangotri with a request for helicopter rescue of the army officer.

Then we embarked upon the rescue effort. First, we brought him down sliding on the snow slope in the same prone position on the mess tent bag. Then, taking turns, we carried him on an improvised stretcher for a five hours arduous walk over the rough moraine of Raktavan glacier to ultimately reach Gaumukh by late evening. We kept vigil on him through the night. In the absence of the institute's doctor who was away with the basic course, I spent the whole night with Yashpal to ensure that he did not swallow his tongue in his sleep. I had to pull his tongue out whenever he made groaning sound while dozing off. Nirmal returned from Gangotri just before dawn with a message that the helicopter would arrive in the morning. The chopper arrived on time and after spending an anxiously sleepless night, we placed Lt. Yashpal inside the chopper to take him to Bareilly Military Hospital for treatment. Hindustan Times newspaper published the avalanche narrative of the NIM Advanced Mountaineering Course the next day.



Airlift at Gaumukh

Morning weather was fine and the students were just about recovering from the traumatic experience of the previous day. They were basking in the sun drying up clothes and boots. Farooque, a trainee from

Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department, dipped his feet in the river and apparently enjoyed the sun. There was a small snow slide on a rock gully across the river, which rolled down and stopped shortly afterwards. I noticed Farooque bleeding through his nose looking at that small avalanche. I checked with nursing assistant if he had any problem on the previous day and he confirmed that Farooque was bleeding through his nose when we rescued him from the avalanche debris. I advised Farooque that he should avoid looking up the mountain faces since such small avalanches keep rolling down throughout the day and he should preferably spend the rest of the day inside his tent. His bleeding stopped after first aid.

Before our return from Gaumukh, as I was mentally very disturbed, I decided to meet Mata Krishna Bharati who had relocated herself at the base of Manda Parvat opposite Chirbas and across the river. I went down the steep slope near Chirbas and crossed the turbulent Bhagirathi River balancing on my four limbs on a narrow log of a tree trunk bridging the two banks. Mataji kept watching my efforts in crossing the river. I stood on my two feet only after reaching the opposite bank. Mataji welcomed me with a big smile on her face. I had met her for the first time at Gangotri where she lived in a small hut on a hump on the east bank of the river close to Gauri Kund. She was from Bengal and could speak fluent Bengali, Hindi, English, and French. She was in her late 30s or early 40s and refused to talk about her past life. She stayed in an ashram in Rishikesh before moving to Gangotri. She was in her white dhoti and tonsured head with big bright eyes like Swami Vivekananda. She guided me to her small hut, which was barely 20–30 ft from the riverbank. She unrolled a mat and asked me to sit. I took out dry fruits, juice, cans of condensed milk and some dry rations and condiments from my knapsack and handed over to her. She accepted these items without hesitation and acknowledged that NIM always helped her ever since she moved to Gangotri

and NIM porters had laid the log bridge for her to cross the river.

I narrated our miraculous escape from the disastrous avalanche to her, and could not control my emotion and started sobbing. Mataji comforted me by keeping her hand on my head and said that I was a blessed person and God would always help me in crisis. She presented me a small book on Swami Vivekananda's views on Karma Yoga and a brass oil-lamp stand. On the inner cover of the book, she wrote her blessings and few nice words about me. She fed me rice and vegetables like a caring mother. After the meal, I took leave and requested her to visit us at NIM whenever she passed through Uttarkasi. She nodded in affirmative and waited near the log bridge until I crossed over the river safely. The visit to Mataji had a calming effect on me and I felt a sense of relief from my terrible anxiety due to the avalanche. I returned to Gaumukh camp in the evening. Mata Krishna Bharati visited us at NIM few months later and obliged by sharing a meal with us. Mata Krishna Bharati blessed my wife and our two-year old son before leaving. I never met her again. However, I remembered her kind thoughts, the brass lamp stand, and Swami Vivekananda's book on Karma Yoga with which she blessed me. After the graduation ceremony of the course, instructors and trainees admitted that they should have followed my advice and avoided an attempt on the mountain immediately after the heavy snowfall. I told them that it was a providential escape for us and we should thank God and our stars for being alive. I felt that removing the ropes before the ascent helped us from getting entangled and sustaining serious crampon injuries during the avalanche.

The girls' course followed the advanced course and we were busy with training schedule again. Meanwhile, Lt. Yashpal, who sustained serious injuries from the avalanche, came back to NIM from Bareilly Military Hospital after a month, apparently recovered

to collect his baggage. He walked into the library when the trainees of girls' course were watching a film on Everest and he joined us at the film show. The film had a shot of an avalanche and suddenly we heard a groaning sound and Lt. Yashpal was choking again with his tongue slipping into his throat at the sight of the avalanche in the film! Fortunately, Capt. Shabhlok, the NIM doctor was on the spot and treated him in the medical room of the hostel. After stabilizing Lt. Yashpal, Capt. Shabhlok advised him not to venture on the mountain again without doctor's advice. Years later, I narrated this story to my son, Dr. Arnab Bhattacharya, who is a Senior Psychiatrist in TATA Motors Hospital. According to him, both these cases of Lt. Yashpal and Farooque are flash back phenomenon in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and required psychological therapy for recovery.

We learned a lot from the experience of surviving the avalanche. It reinstated the need to respect nature and understand the objective hazards it poses. All nature lovers and adventurers need to learn the science of such hazards and take necessary measures without being over ambitious. Despite the physical wounds and psychological trauma, an immense sense of gratitude prevails among the survivors of this avalanche for being granted a second chance in life.

THE PRELUDE

Photos: Somenath Sen Text: Sessa Mukherjee

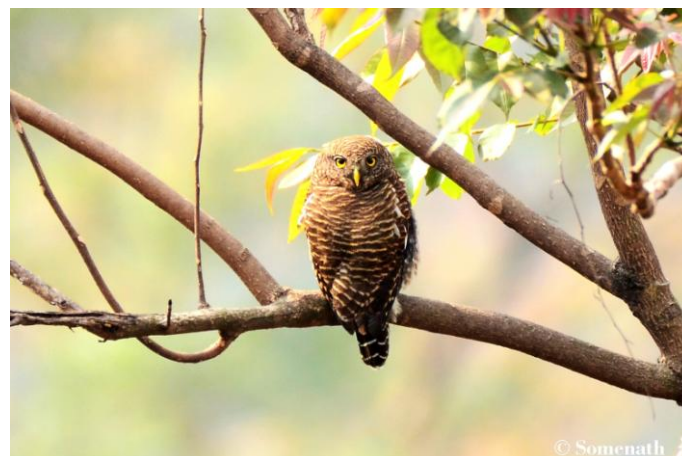


While exploring the grasslands of Assam and screening the landscape for a fleeting glimpse of a tiger amidst the tall elephant grass, we discovered a new passion in life.

We could not initially fathom what the driver cum guide was searching for in the treetops with his binoculars while certainly there are very rare chances of a tiger climbing a tree. While we watched in amazement, he caught a glimpse of the Grey headed Fish Eagle and passed on his binoculars to me with a child-like happy smile on his face. With the binoculars I could barely fathom a grey outline of the eagle's head. As I put down the binoculars, he pulled out a book and pointed out the picture of the Eagle in the book. Seeing the picture on a printed page opened a whole new dimension to the story. Now I was the one who pulled the binoculars and wanted to match the features of the bird which was

no longer a 'grey head' only and which certainly had its own points of interest. That was only the prelude. The whole safari was an eye-opener to a different world that was hitherto unknown.

Bablu Saikia of Kaziranga National Park had not only introduced us to the world of Ornithology but also introduced us to the bible of this world- The Book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali. We later came to know that chance has brought us in contact with a person who was really learned in this field. Saikia has in fact cleared some examinations/quizzes through which he has won his set of binoculars as well.



Asian Barred Owlet

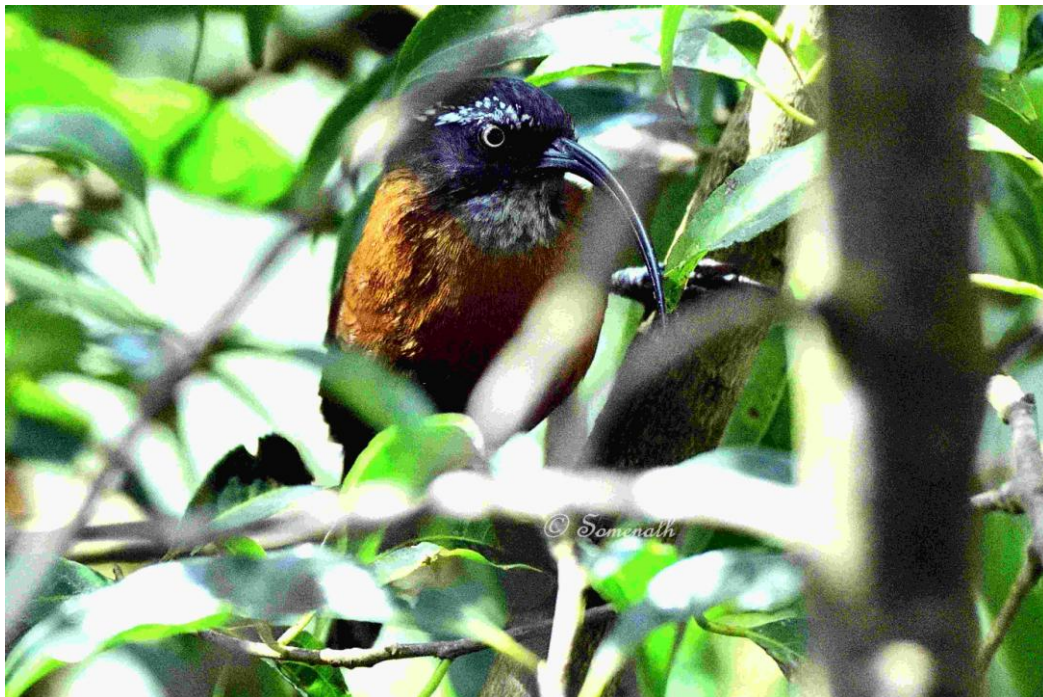


Great Hornbill

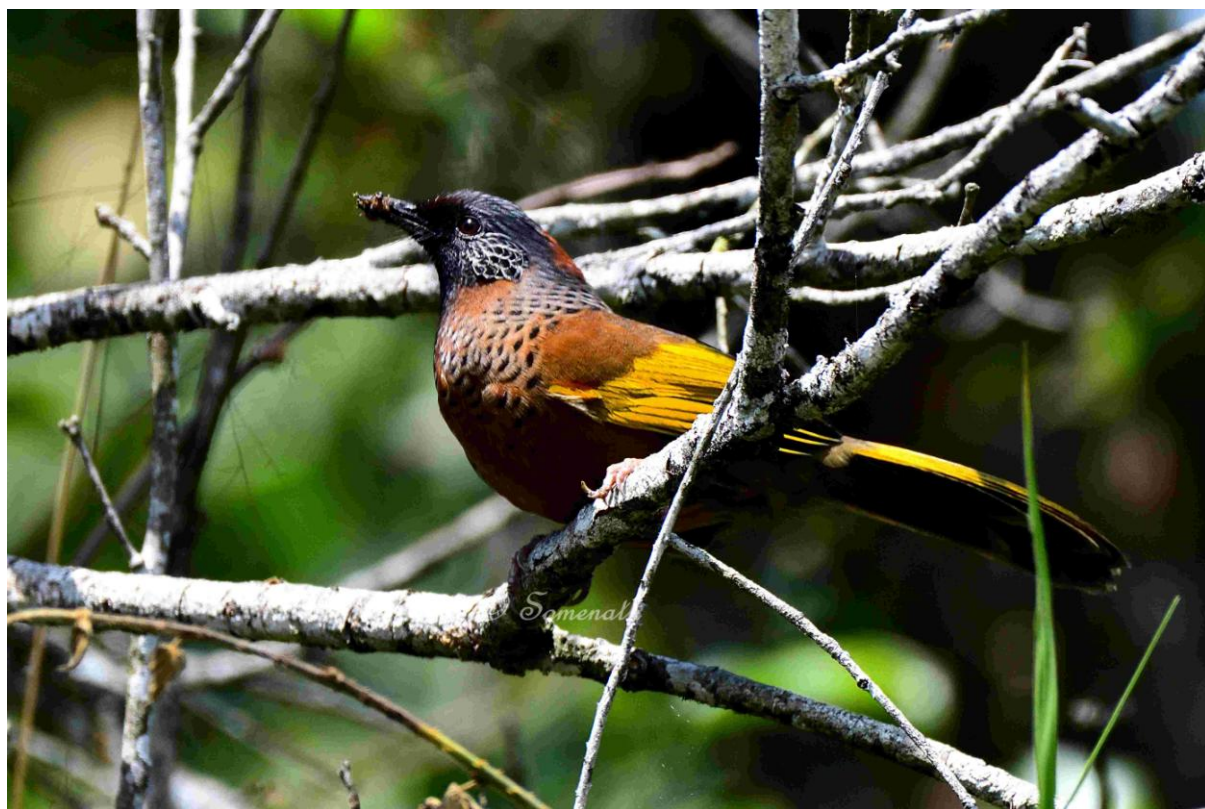
Once smitten, we would only start as avid followers of this new found passion. We have never had the chance to meet Saikia again, but what he had given us in the three hours safari of Kaziranga is something that we will cherish for the rest of our lives.

What followed was an ongoing journey into the world of avifauna and its charismatic characters. The purchase of books and guides and gradually enlarging our scope from the Himalayan avifauna to water and desert birds as well.

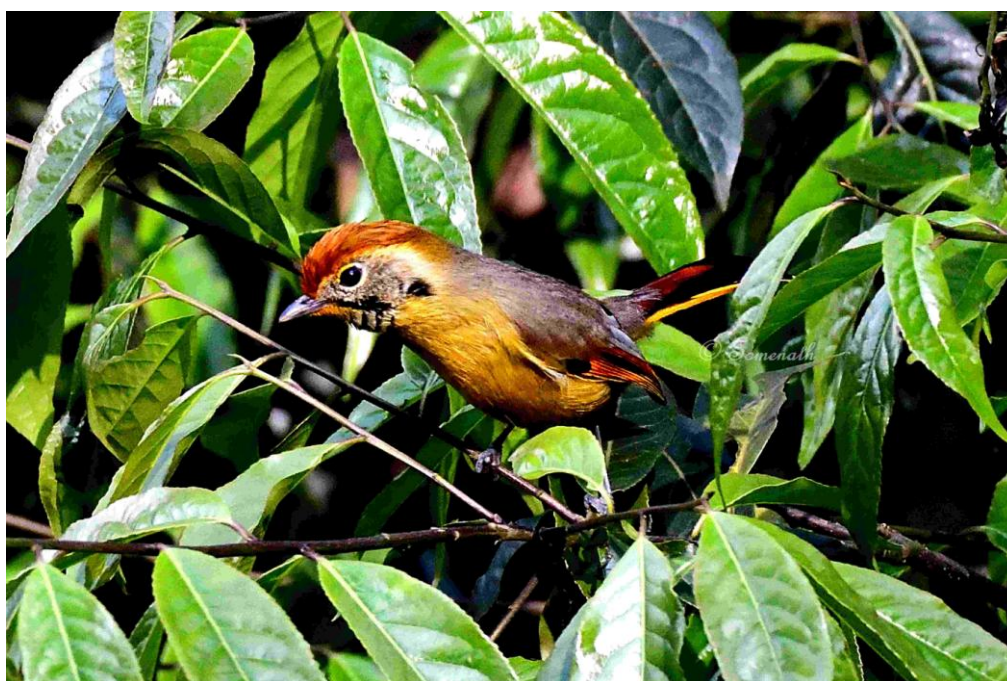
Here's a walkthrough of some of the Himalayan birds that we managed to capture on our various trips thereafter to the Himalayan foothills:



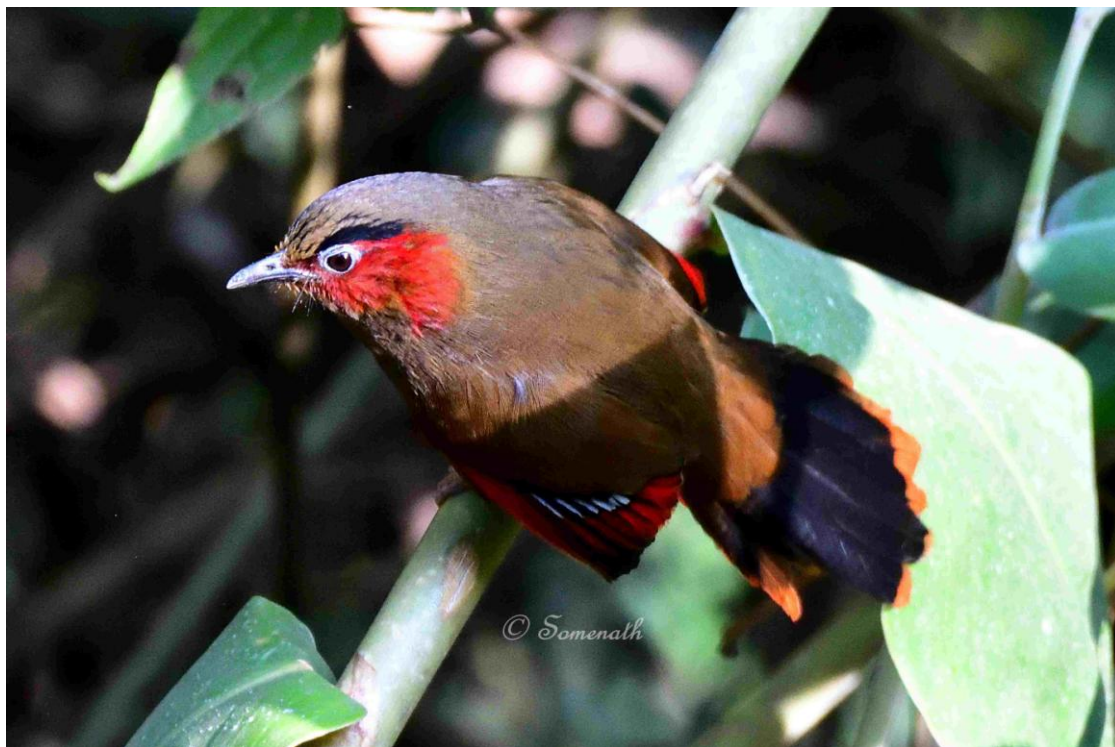
Slender-billed Scimitar Babbler



Chestnut-crowned Laughing thrush



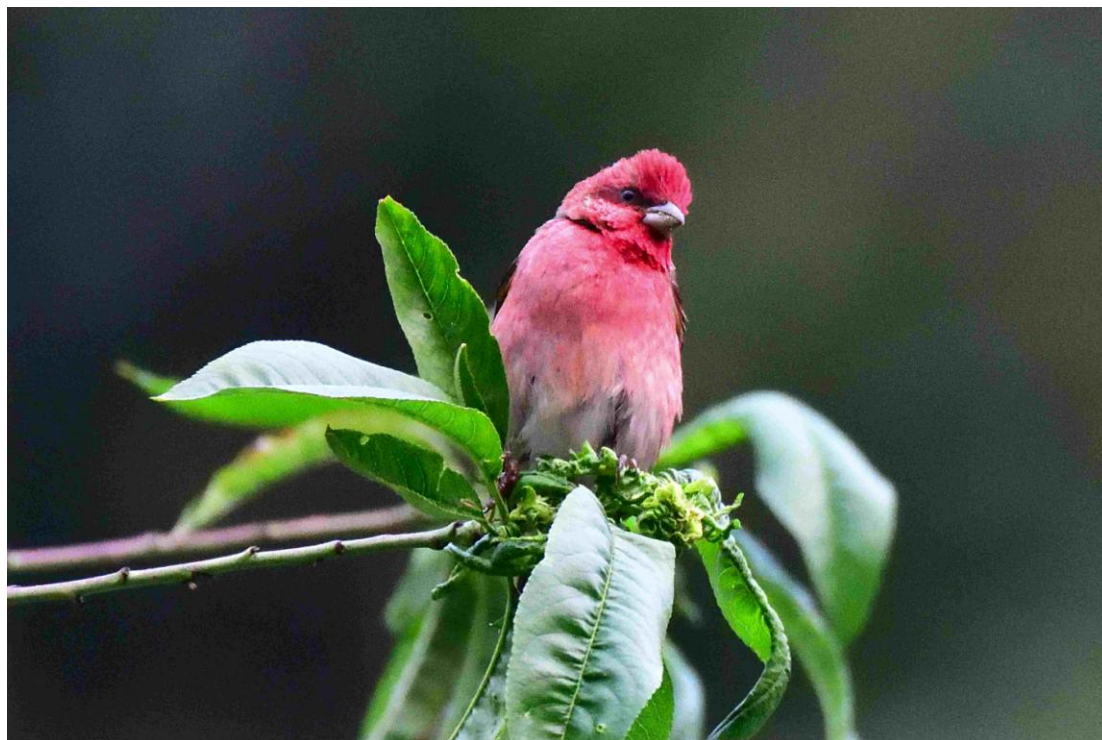
Chestnut-tailed Minla



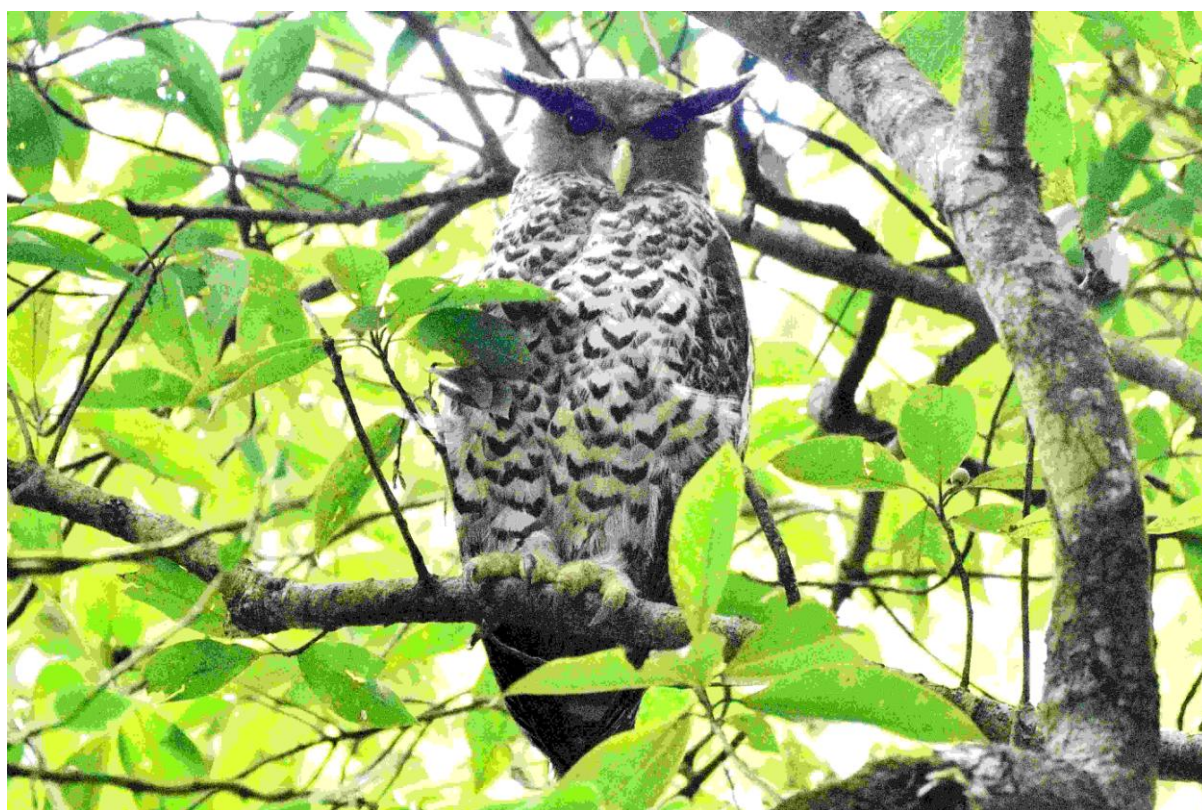
Red-faced Liocichla



Puff-throated Babbler



Common Rosefinch



Spot bellied Eagle-Owl



Wallcreeper



Kalij Pheasant



Mountain Imperial Pigeon



Streaked Spiderhunter



© Somenath

Rufous Necked Hornbill

LIFE IN THE HIGH HIMALAYA

Bhanu Banerjee

(Ref. : WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA, YEAR BOOK- 1962.

By : LAWRENCE SWAN, SAN FRANCISCO COLLEGE.)

The Himalaya holds a great fascination for biologists as well as for mountaineers. New associations of plants and animals can be found in every valley and atop each mountain.

The biological programme of our expedition, however, had to limit itself to four categories : 1) investigation of high altitude ecology, the study of the interrelation of living things and their environments; 2) studies on the distribution of animals (zoo-geography); 3) general observations; 4) investigations into the biological status of the Yeti.

The Himalaya harbour living things at the highest altitudes on earth. Dry conditions and the intensity of the sun along Nepal's elevated Tibetan frontier permit snowless zones to extend far above 20,000 ft. A few grasses, sedges, cushion-like sandworts, fluffy Saussureas and other hardy plants cling to the rocky, desolate slopes above 17,000 ft. The decaying roots of such plants provide food for springtails; and these simple insects in turn are food for small spiders. Even at altitudes above plant life the springtails manage to subsist on wind-blown organic debris such as pollen.

These simple food chains were repeated by a number of other plants, insects and ARACHNIDS (spider and mites) high on the rocks beside RIPIMU glacier. The glacier fleas were perhaps the most remarkable creatures there. They lived on the incredibly hostile barren SCREE or rocky rubble that covered the glacier ice. These insects, dark colored relatives of Silverfish, had nothing else to live on but wind-blown debris. There were no other sign of any living thing.

But at lower levels, between 16,000 to 18,000 ft a wide variety of birds and mammals thrived. Many mammals such as mice, foxes, wolves and snow Leopards were nocturnal. During the day, however, unusually tame, small grey PIKAS, or rock rabbits scampered about.

Vultures, Lammergeyers, Choughs and ravens – all competent, winged scavengers – patrolled the skies. The crow-like Choughs are the standard camp robbers on Himalayan expeditions. But in the Rolwaling valley a pair of Tibetan ravens took over the garbage watch.

In the Himalaya, the distribution of amphibians and reptiles shows zoogeographic patterns clearly. Eighteen different species were collected, a most important contribution to Nepali HERPETOLOGY, the study of reptiles and amphibians. Large number of insects, especially butterflies were gathered from previously untapped areas of Nepal.

Among our general observations were two items of biological interest : leeches and agriculture. The notorious, bloodsucking, terrestrial leeches of the wet Himalaya presented something of an enigma. They appear to have no parasites or predators. Thus their population is enormous.

Intensive agriculture is rapidly altering the face of Nepal. Nepal's population surge exerts an undeniable demand to cultivate more fields and destroy more forests. And, in light of this irreversible demand for land, the work of our expedition has taken on even greater importance.

BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS

Bill Aitkin, 9/5/21: Thanks for the brave issue in these difficult times. The night sky photographs are superb. From Kausani to Mussoorie the hills are reeling under viral fever caused by a weird weather pattern of grilling morning sun followed by demented hailstorms every evening. Prior to the criminally irresponsible folly of the Kumbh Mela Uttarakhand was comparatively free of Covid but now the bug is spreading exponentially. Stay safe. Bill

Shirish Yande, 9/5/21 : Extremely exciting Newsletter. I need to read all these books. Thanks for sharing.

Tom Nakamura, 9/5/21: I wish to publish The Himalayan News 8-Final on our forthcoming Asian Alpine E-News. If you have any objection, kindly advise thereof by return email. Thanks in advance. All good wishes,

Apurba Bhattacharyya, 11/5/21: Another excellent Newsletter by the TH. The obituary on late Bhanu Banerjee was very well written by KumKumdi. While Jim Wilson was good as ever. After Dusk by Sujoy was simply breathtaking & possibly beyond the reach of COVID-19. Keep it up & refresh us this way during the Pandemic. My respect & compliment.

Dhrubabrata Chakraborty, 12/5/21: Thank you very much for sharing the newsletter with me. I enjoyed reading the article on ascent to Tawache Peak. Spectacular night photographs of the Himalayan landscapes by Mr. Sujoy Das fill the heart with joy. Information about new books on the Himalayas is praiseworthy. Once again thank you.

Peter Hillary, 12/5/21 : Thanks for the link to the Himalayan News. I am so touched by the piece about Bhanu. What a special man and one who played a fine role in my family's history. It was especially moving for me to be reunited with Bhanu and Chandrima at the centenary event in Kolkata. Lovely to see his warmth and welcome again. Nothing is more important than the way we all treat each other - it is what makes for a better world - and Bhanu did that. He is part of our Hillary family story. Priydarshi, I look forward to seeing you before too long. I hope the pandemic that afflicts us all moves away from Bengal soon. Our best wishes.

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