

Wildlife, Conservation, Forest Protection, Photography, Wildlife Tourism

VOL. 06  
6<sup>th</sup> EDITION  
JUNE 2022



# WILD UNTAMED

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FIGHT | PROTECT | CONSERVE



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*Golaka Nath*

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*Debaditya Sarkar*

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## Chief Editor's Note

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Dear Readers,

Greetings from 'Wild Untamed' an initiative of STS.

Recently, on May 23, 2022, World Turtle Day was celebrated. The theme of this issue has been dedicated to turtles. The first article itself, starts with some information about turtles.

Throughout the year there are various days that get celebrated. World Tiger Day, World Elephant or Rhino Day and many more. However, celebrating or acknowledging an animal or the environment for one day hardly creates a ripple. We, as conservationists, need to treat each day as their day. They need to be given their space, be left alone to live naturally, create their lifecycle, and exist where they are meant to be, free and in their own habitat.

This is an important part of doing what we do, keeping our wildlife and environment safe and protected.

This issue has a varied range of topics. We are grateful to the authors and photographers who have sent their work to us. Publishing your material, of you the readers and highlighting your work, not only spreads the word but is also a great way to showcase how vital and necessary every part is.

Thanks to the team of Wild Untamed, who really do an excellent job of publishing a quality product.

Please send us your feedback, we love to hear from you.

Thank you  
Your Chief Editor  
Mr Indrajit Sengupta





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## Editor's Note

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Hello Dear Readers

Let me start by expressing our sincere apologies for the delay in bringing out this issue of Wild Untamed. Unforseen circumstances which were unavoidable led to this situation however, we are out now and as they say, better late than never.

The world of conservation is so vast and the more we look into it, there is more to discover. Every issue is a learning experience, for me at least. I have gained so much knowledge, come to know

about some beautiful places, am constantly in awe of the wildlife pictures that you, our readers send us.

I have come to know of so many people who are so passionate and doing amazing work in conservation yet remain unknown. It's really a fascinating world and I think myself to be very lucky to be a part of such an initiative.

I know that this issue too won't disappoint you.

Thank you  
Your Editor  
Anupa Roy



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Hello Dear Readers

I'm indeed feeling elated announcing that finally Wild Untamed, our much-acclaimed and globally circulated venture in form of e-magazine and hard copy version has emerged through its 6th edition. By now, it has made a reckoning mark in the perspective of Protection and Conservation of Wildlife, Battling for Nature, Creating intimate bonding between Man & Nature, Securing Natural Habitat and Procuring Rights of Existence and Education. Recognisable exemplary references throughout the globe in forms of Initiatives, Personnels and Instances are gradually evolving up and taking subsequent places in our magazine.

In this edition, some fabulous and extraordinary features in terms of application, implication and magnitude have also been admirably adopted. They are as follows,

Turtle Trail, Text by Indrajit Sengupta, Photographs by Sushmita Kar, TSA, Study of Common Insects and their behaviour, Text and Photographs by

Kangkanjyoti Bhattacharya, Sikkim Travelogue Text and Photographs by Koyel Poddar, Avian Diversity in the midst of an Industrial set up, Text and Photographs by Debaditya Sarkar, Canine Patrol - the story of Dog Squads Text and Photographs by Anupa Roy, Garo Hills, Meghalaya – A Biodiversity Hotspot

Text by Raka Matchisal A Sangma, Photographs by Bhuto Marak, Lady Liuwa – The Reincarnated Mambeti, Text by Pratik Mahapatra, Green Warrior – Mr Sewaram Malik, Rising Star – Himanshu Yadav, North Bengal Travelogue

Text and Photographs by Golaka Nath & last yet most importantly the Showcase Photographs :- Dhiraj Poddar & Debaditya Sarkar.

I fervently wish, like all the previous editions you would wholeheartedly welcome, grace and greet this edition also.

Earnestly wish you all a very safe, secure and healthy life ahead.

Yours  
Asst Editor  
Indranil Sengupta



# TURTLE TRAIL

Indrajit Sengupta

Turtle are very cute creatures. They may look a bit ungainly and at a glance, you might not think that they have much use. That is not

and they also contribute differently to the environment.

23 May 2022 was World Turtle Day. India has recently started celebrating this day in a big way. Since this event happened recently, we are showcasing turtles. This is not a detailed story or article on turtles but a quick glimpse of the

most important countries in the world for turtle conservation. The Ganga and Brahmaputra River Basin drainage has been identified as the world's greatest turtle species richness area based on the co-occurrence of species in the hydrologic unit compartments. Northeast India, located in the



## *Elongated Tortoise (Indotestudo elongata)*

true though, turtles actually play a significant role in our eco system and are a necessary species in the food chain. You might have heard of tortoises, they too have a hard shell and for a layman, a turtle and a tortoise are considered to be the same thing. However, turtles and tortoises are very different species

significance of turtles and their conservation.

There are 29 species of freshwater turtles and tortoises. India is among the premier turtle diversity hotspots. Globally, India ranks sixth in terms of species diversity, while third among all Asian countries making it one of the

Indo-Burma hotspot, nestled in the Brahmaputra flood plains, houses 75% of India's twenty nine species, across several vital sites.

Unfortunately, a third of these species in this region are listed as threatened under IUCN Red-list assessments.



## ***Significance of Turtles And Their Conservation :***

As we mentioned previously, turtles are actually helpful to the environment. They serve as ecological indicators. They help to keep the environment clean by feeding on dead remains in the rivers and ponds. Also the forest floors. Forest turtles help in regeneration of forests through seed dispersal.

## ***Some Interesting Facts About Turtles :***

Turtles are the most threatened vertebrates in the world. They are on the verge of extinction.

More than 356 species of turtles are found worldwide. 34 species of turtles (29 freshwater turtles and tortoises) are found in India. Over 50% are considered threatened (CR, EN)

Turtles are largely exploited for its meat and illegal pet trade in regional and international markets. They also face extreme loss of habitats.

Turtles are ecological indicators. They keep the environment clean by acting as detritivores.

Turtles have several cultural and religious values. Kurma, considered as 2nd incarnation of Vishnu's Dashavatar.

Turtles are not harmful and are super cute.

They also help in seed dispersal and regeneration of forests. of turtles and their conservation.

Places and Organisations who are working with turtles for their protection and conservation.

## **Nature Discovery Centre, Biswanath Ghat, Brahmaputra River Landscape, Assam**

A defunct government building refurbished into a regional hub of turtle conservation, research and awareness for flagship species Black Softshell Turtle (*Nilssonina nigricans*) and the Assam Roofed Turtle (*Pangshura sylhetensis*). Successfully established traditional 'gamocha' alternative livelihood self-help group with village women.

## **Turtle Survival Alliance India**

The turtle conservation project started in 2004, and after over a decade's experience, it was

incorporated as a non-profit Section 8 company. Today, the Turtle Survival Alliance Foundation India (TSA- India) strives for state-of-the-art conservation, research and community outreach programs that bring turtles, as well as other lesser-known aquatic wildlife and their habitats on the conservation map of the country. TSA- India further aims to educate policy makers about threatened wildlife resources and extend the necessary support to conserve them. With conservation partners, TSA- India spear-heads five major projects across recognised Turtle Priority Areas (TPAs) such as the National Chambal Sanctuary, Terai Arc Landscape, Kaziranga National Park and Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, where in-situ programs, assurance colonies and breeding programs conducted are part of



***Malayan box turtle (Cuora amboinensis)***



recovery programs for iconic turtle species. TSA India further engages in strong community outreach, and rescue and rehabilitation of turtles, crocodiles and Gangetic River dolphins.

TSA - India is committed to conserving India's freshwater ecosystems. Equipped with world class research and veterinary equipments and headquartered in Lucknow, TSA India maintains a team of 24 dedicated personnel along five project locations in five states.

### **Asian Giant Tortoise Conservation Breeding Program, Nagaland**

The first successful conservation breeding program in India for the Asian Forest Tortoise (*Manouria emy sphayrei*) in collaboration with Nagaland Zoological Park. Study ongoing to document extant population and eventual release of the captive cohorts into the wild along building regional network of zoo across Northeast India.

### **Batagur Recovery Program, National Chambal Sanctuary**

Based at Chambal Conservation Centre, within the sanctuary limit near Etawah, Uttar Pradesh. This project started in 2006 and focuses on Batagur nest protection through hatchery program, survival and dispersal of reared

and released Batagur juvenile and capacity building initiative. This project was established over 30 river-side hatchery and helped returning over 15000 *B. kachuga* hatchlings back to river.

### **Northern River Terrapin Conservation Breeding Program, Sundarbans Tiger Reserve**

The only program in India dedicated towards wild population revival of the Northern River Terrapin (*Batagur baska*), classified as the second most endangered freshwater turtle in the world. An assurance colony of over 370 individuals developed from a founder colony of 13 individuals since 2008. 10 captive bred turtles tagged with satellite transmitters were released back to Sunderbans on January, 2022.

### **Laboratory For Aquatic Biology (lab), Kukrailgharial Rehabilitation Centre, Lucknow**

Set up on collaboration with the U.P. Forest Department in 2014 to develop ex-situ conservation initiatives for freshwater turtles. First and only facility worldwide to raise hatchlings of the Indian Narrow-headed Softshell Turtle (*Chitra indica*). Assurance colonies established for 12 threatened freshwater turtles and assisted

enforcement agencies in identification, triage and release over 21,000 turtles in last 6 years.

### **Rescue Operations**

Adopting an ecosystem level approach, TSA India Program expanded to include other aquatic species viz. Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*), Muggar (*Crocodylus palustris*) and Gangetic River Dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*).

### **Community Turtle Conservation, Terai Arc Landscape (TAL)**

Based at River Conservation Centre in Bahraich, this project was established in 2007. The project aims to protect turtle rich riverscape of Ghaghra-Sarju unprotected landscape. The project involves intensive population estimation through sampling, artificial oviposition, school education and community incentive program with special focus on Crowned River Turtle.

### **Citizen Science Initiative - Kurma**

The application was launched on the occasion of World Turtle Day 2020. This turtle ID and tracing application will help in supporting turtle sightings apart from enlisting the help of experts and common citizens.

**Photographs by Sushmita Kar, TSA**



# A STUDY ON COMMON SOCIAL INSECTS AND THEIR NESTING BEHAVIOUR IN BARBHAG AREA, NALBARI, ASSAM

Kangkanjyoti Bhattacharyya | Meetal Deori

## INTRODUCTION

In nature various insects constructs various nests to keep safe their young ones, their larvae and for themselves also. Almost every social insect makes nests. In many cases nest is set up by plant twigs, grasses, saliva, leaves, and sand so on. Social insects are the type of insects which lives in a colony of same species and especially division of labour is found among them. Social insects includes different species of ants, bees, and wasps. The ecological supremacy, the complication of their behaviour and life histories, and their reproductive division of labour are the most exceptional quality of these insects. Many eusocial insects which includes termites, ants,



*Plate 1: Termite Nest near Bamboo Plant*

wasps etc. manage the nest temperature within clearly defined, occasionally very exiguous, despite utmost in room temperature by making a specialized nest. Ventilation is a specialised feature of nest which provides enough oxygen for the queen and larvae present in the insect nest. The nest

of the nest and the parents/workers supplies nutritious substances to the larvae. The nest builder social insects often includes honey bee, termites, weaver ant, wasps, and hornet's etc. Honey bee, weaver ant, wasps are usually found on trees where they uses tree brunch or leaves to construct their nest. Among all insect species, some eusocial insect species are very endemic to warm and dry environment areas. The termites usually prefers places like below the ground, wood, trees, walls etc to construct their nest. Social insects like Honey Bee, wasps are found much diversified in India. These wasps are one of the social insects belongs to the order Hymenoptera. Yellow jackets and hornets are the wasps



*Plate 2: Termite Nest in the Bark of a Tree*

that are found largely in the north eastern region of India. The termites are the social insects found everywhere in India. It is classified in the class Insecta and order Blattodea and Weaver ants are also classified under the order Hymenoptera. Genus is *Oecophylla* are largely found in the India, especially in the north east India. All of these social insects uses saliva, mud, and leaves during the making of their nests. The study was conducted in Barbhag Area, Nalbari district of Assam (Latitude: N 26°22.142' & Longitude: E 091°29.061') during the time of May 2017 to June 2018.

## TERMITE

Termites prefers to live in a colony and usually found underground, often near a tree or stump (Plate 1&2). Usually all the termite nests are made by soil. The nests of termites likely to found in above or below the ground, trees, bamboos, on wood and sometimes on the walls also etc. Structurally some of the termite nest is mound like structure. The upper portion of this nest is pointed or sometimes blunt. Generally the termite nest is found above the ground, but in some cases, termite nest is also found around the wall, or trees. The lower portion of termite nest is usually larger than the upper portion (Plate 1&2). Termites have social cooperation, i.e. division of labour is found among them. This practices helps them to build nests in a microclimatic habitat and through this behaviour they continues to live. For some basic requirements like food and water



*Plate 3: Inner View of Termite Nest*

termites constructs some specific underpasses within the nest which helps them to get these basic requirements and also reproduces within the nest, go forward and finds new colonies. Through the thick wall of termite nest, they interchange gases like oxygen and carbon dioxide and these walls provides good protection and isolation also. In the lower part of the nest, there are diverse colonies are found where the termites and their offspring lives. The worker termites are the nest constructor of the colony. The basic constituents for the termite nest is soil and its saliva. Some compounds like carbon and nitrogenous compounds are important to build the nest. The

termites collect the soil from the inner side of ground and makes their nest. In some cases, nest of termite (*Macrotermes Sp.*) is more than 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> in size. During the winter and summer season, social insects like different ant and termite workers dig deeper into the ground for their colonies to be better buffered.

## HONEY BEE

Honey bee colonies are well regulated communities and popular for the production of honey which is stored in the comb in their nests. In most cases a queen, thousands of worker and



*Plate 4: Honey Bee Nest in a Building*





***Plate 5: Honey Bee Nest on a Tree Branch***



***Plate 6: Weaver Ant Nest on a Tree Branch***

few male drones together constitutes the bee colony. The nest of honey bee is mainly made up wax. In Honey bee nest, workers are chiefly involved in different functions. The collected

pollen from flowers is stored in a specialized structure “combs” made by the workers out of wax. During their nest site selection (Swarming), the scout or worker bee fly from one place to another

and aggregates in a satisfactory or suitable cavity or tree branch where they builds their nests. This aggregation helps in thermo regulation of their nest by keeping down the temperature as reduced. In comparison with European honey bee, the cavity and open nesting of Asian honey bee have similar clustering or aggregation behaviour. In the Bee colony, when the swarm settles down in avacant nest cavity, some challenges appear to build the comb and about 1m<sup>2</sup> comb is then made by the bees. Worker honey bee makes hives for the defence or security of their offspring, larvae and to store the honey. The basic unit of honey bee nest is honeycomb which is hexagonal wax cells. To construct nest, the worker honey bee masticates wax until it becomes mushy, then this wax is used in construction of bee hives. The worker bee constructs different chambers or rooms for their different members. The bee nest is generally found on the hollow tree, on the walls of a house and sometimes they are found under the ground or trees (Plate 4 & 5). The honey bee species that found largely in the study site is *Apis Sp.*



***Plate 7: Inner View of Weaver Ant Nest***



***Plate 8: Weaver Ant Nest in the apical part of a plant***

## WEAVER ANT

Weaver ants are one of the most magnificent members of wildlife because of their local habitats, large body size, violent behaviour so on and also famous their peculiar nesting behaviour by using larval silk. From India to Queensland and Solomon Island, distribution of weaver ant is very large. The colonies of weaver ant are tremendously large, round in size, fawn in colour, and with leaves and shoots adhered to the silk nests. These are nest builder type of insects that found in the trees where use leaves of trees as the raw materials for their nest construction. They live with their colonies where several workers are present in the nest. The worker ants construct their nest. They use the apical leaves of a brunch of trees and weave the leaves with the larval silk. In the colonies the female lays eggs. Furthermore, the weaver ant nest is mainly formed by the young leaves of tree brunch. Generally the nest of weaver ant is found in the apical portion of the tree brunch where young leaves are found. During the time of maturation and becoming old leaves, the larvae becomes adult weaver ant. This is why the weaver ant nest is generally found in the apical portion of the tree brunch (Plate 6,7&8). Usually in a colony of weaver ant (*O. smaragdina*) green to brown coloured queen is present. However compared to female, male weaver ant (*O. smaragdina*) is smaller in size and black in colour and compared to minor workers major workers are bigger in size. Different caste present in weaver ant nest helps them to construct their nest. For

the sealing leaves the worker ants uses the fluid (lac/silk) from unfertilized eggs of drone larva. If any external sources disturbs their colony then they begin to migrate to other places of same or different tree to construct a new nest for them young ones. The worker ant carries different food material to the colony and the queens feed up on that foods. The foraging behaviour of these ants are well developed and it is done by caste called as “foragers”.

affected by microclimatic condition of that specific domain. The adult hornet carry out different characters in nest construction and to regulation of thermo regulation of the nest by holding water droplets on the silk caps. As a result, inside of the nest remains cool. They also generates air current of warmer air through the tracheal outset. The nest of wasps is usually composed of paper like material made from masticated wood fibres mixed with



*Plate 9: Hornet Nest Structure*

## Wasp [Hornet and Yellow Jackets]

**W**asps are the type of social insects belongs to the order Hymenoptera. The most common wasps found in the study area are yellow jackets and Hornets. Spring time is the beneficial time to establishment of nest among yellow jackets and Hornets. From below the ground and tree cavities, enclosed and open nests to tree branches, wasps families always chooses different nest locations and these nest locations are

saliva. During this, yellow jacket and hornet workers collect the wood fibre from source and used in nest construction. Among hornets, young progeny and workers entails in nest construction over a period of 2-6 weeks around. During this time, one generation i.e. egg to pupa and pupa to imago grows. To prevent the production of deformed adults and keep the nest warm, hornet always regulates the degrees of heat production of the nest and produces healthy brood. Furthermore, the adults assemble in the nest, as a result nest becomes enclosed in structure and the temperature inside the nest retains.



Some species of yellow jackets excavates below the ground, while others builds their nest in the house, tree or in the leaves. In hornet nests, there are several beds are present in the hornet nest and one is connected with the other with the help of long strip like structure. The hornet nest looks rounded in structure from the outside (Plate 9&10). The nesting behaviour of yellow jacket is almost similar with the hornet nest. But compared to hornet nest number of nest is only one in yellow jackets nest and smaller in size and shape than the hornet nest.

## RED ANT

**F**ire ants or red ants are the social insects belongs to the family Formicidae. These ants usually lives in a colony made by them. Most of the ant colony is found below the ground (Plate 11). Their colonies contain various

castes like sterile, wingless female worker soldiers, drones, queen etc. All of them are involved in making their nest. These are generally found during the summer time. They burrow in the land and the burrowing soil is bringing by their worker ant as the crystal like structure.

The worker ant helps in build their nest and food search. The nurse ants generally involved in the feeding of larvae and young progeny. When the water level below the ground increases upward, the worker ant brings the larvae ants in their mouth to safe area.



*Plate 10: Yellow Jacket Nest in a Bamboo Wall*

Write up by:  
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*Plate 11: Red Ant Nest in the Ground*

# SHOWCASE

Dhiraj Poddar



*Teal*



*Cuckoosrike*



*Woodpecker*



*Black Baja*





*Bulbul*

# SIKKIM: A COOL SLICE OF HEAVEN

Koyel Poddar

After a memorable trip to the beautiful hamlet of Sattal, Uttarakhand during summers last year, the heart started longing through the second wave of the pandemic for the cold, peace and serenity of the mountains. Days went by and as we neared November, the yearning became a mission and we locked on Lachen, North Sikkim for our next photography expedition.

So came along our itinerary for 8 nights from Mumbai Bagdogra Gajoldoba Gangtok Lachen Gangtok Bagdogra

- Mumbai. But what's a plan worth if it all falls into place, late October rains made Gajoldoba out of bounds and forced us into last minute location hunting. We shuffled through birding locations to make the most of the 2 nights in hand

before we made it to Gangtok. The rains had played havoc with the local birding scene around Siliguri, and we settled for the uncharted Pakyong in East Sikkim, gained the recent birding fame because of the Spot-bellied eagle-owl.

Our plan was to fly from Bombay to Bagdogra and then take a cab to our next



*Pied bush chat female*

halt, Pakyong. We hadn't foreseen the bad roads caused by the recent terrible weather conditions and reached our beautiful homestay around midnight. It was very



*Plumbeous Redstart*



*IbisBill*

uplifting to see the hostess warmly welcoming us with warm words and meal even that late in the night. The property was large and beautiful with their own gardens, orchards and animals, a complete self-sustainable farm. The rooms were big and comfortable, and they supplied hot water to drink. Next morning we happily embarked on our first birding session of the tour.

The next couple of days were spent blissfully as the rains stopped and the weather improved, and we could successfully cover the local birding checklist. We tracked and trekked for the prime attraction the Spot-bellied eagle-owl, walked

through streams of knee deep icy cold water, climbed through steep terrain and survived the numerous leeches. But we were able to get a few good shots and the experience was so very enriching. Our morning sessions started as early as 6 AM and had our breakfast and lunch on the

field at our Guide's Homestay. Post lunch we had an afternoon session till there was enough light for photography.

We got to click a lot of other birds on our list: Common green magpie, Necklaced laughing thrush, Grey backed Shrikes, Niltava, Maroon Oriole, the famously pretty Wallcreeper,





***Yellow Billed Blue Magpie***

Warblers, Wild pigeons, Piculet, mountain squirrel etc.

Pakyong holds a lot of promise as a birding destination provided the road conditions improve. The homestays are very few and far between but very warm and welcoming, worth a shot. You will be quite pampered. I strongly recommend a visit.

With our hearts full of gratitude for a successful adventure and a very loving hostess, we started for our next halt Gangtok. Enroute, our nature loving souls soaked in the abundant beauty we saw all around.

From the cherubic faces of the local kids to the wild flowers growing in the roadside in wild

abandonment, the springs and waterfalls, the winding roads that slowly took us higher and higher, the mountain air and the further dipping temperatures, everything



***Rufous-nacked Snowfinch***

was absolutely gratifying, all of it. After spending 6 desperate lockdown months at home, we

were finally free, in open air, in the loving embrace of mother nature.

We reached Gangtok around 7 pm and boy was it cold outside!! The mercury dipped further throughout the night, but we secretly enjoyed the bitter, finger-numbing cold. Trying to get an early start, next morning we hastened through our breakfast of puri-sabji and were in the car restless for the roads and the destination, Lachen. We reached Lachen through the narrow winding roads and a 2 hour long traffic jam, at the end of day and halted for the next few days in a

hotel. Our bodies needed a little time to acclimatize in the freezing temperature and low oxygen levels.



*Blue-fronted Redstart*

The availability and choices of fresh produce and food supplies decreases with the higher altitudes, as getting things from the market or town somewhere in the lower habitable altitudes and carrying them up there is quite expensive physically and financially. The hotels are mainly for the trekkers and photographers to rest for the night after a tiring day out in the snow, and again go out early morning after tea and breakfast.

The plan was to do the local birding and photography the first day to rest a bit and get used to the climate mainly, so off we went at 5 am cold

and dark, packing enough warm clothes between us and still shivering till the bones. We loved it! The fog and cold outside was like a thick blanket one could feel with your hands. It was still dark when we got out, huddled in the car with desperate anticipation to use our beloved cameras. As we approached the birding spot the sun came up and we saw it kissing the snow-covered peaks before spreading the warmth and light.

Birding is a tough job as you need to cover difficult terrain and positions for a good or perfect shot. Climbing up places where it's all slippery with the dew on the grass and moss to see the tiny birds and capture them, was risky yet quite thrilling. Sometimes there is no path and managing yourself, your heavy gear and footing simultaneously is not an easy task to accomplish and above all that, to get some great shots. A certain amount of

fitness is required. There are always injuries like a fall, sprained ankles, hurt knees, muscle pulls, leeches, mosquitoes and bug bites, etc but the images and the experience is so gratifying that we don't bother much about them. Being prepared for eventualities helps. Always carry crepe bandages, mosquito and bug repellent, pain balms and paracetamols, band-aids and antiseptic creams, moisturisers, Early next morning we geared up for the most interesting part of our expedition, to cover one of the highest lakes in the world and India, Gurudongmar Lake (at an elevation of 5430m). Located at



*Yellow Bellied Fantail*



*White Capped Redstart*





*Robin Accentor*

17.800ft above sea level, with an oxygen deficiency of 40%, it was not an easy feat to achieve with most of the roads damaged by landslides. The gradual increase in oxygen deficiency threw us off with headaches, nausea and severe

sluggishness. The camera felt very heavy, and our hands felt weak. The smooth roads by the BRO (Border Road Organisation) were commendable, at least till 15000ft then nature took over, the frequent landslides had washed them away and left the uneven snow-covered terrain bare. Though the vehicles and the drivers were pretty much used to navigating the uneven route, the guests they carried were mostly not.

If you plan to visit Gurudongmar Lake, do take the anti-nausea meds to be



*Red Bellied Chough*



*Spot Bellied Eagle-owl*

safe, we were saved as we are not that prone to motion sickness. Also carry proper warm clothes (research about the expected temp at the time you wish to visit) as the temp goes down below freezing point and warm clothes, several layers of woollen socks, caps and gloves are your only saviour.

We stopped on our way to have breakfast around the Army base, one of the only 2 food joints at that altitude, the other being the World's Highest Dosa point. The scenery was covered in a white blanket with not much to see. The snow on the road melted with the increasing heat of the sunrays falling on them and formed tiny puddles and streams only to freeze back again after the sun disappeared at the end of day.

The Lake was half frozen and was very beautiful, peaceful and serene surrounded by prayer flags and snow-capped mountains. A few of us ventured out of the car in the snow in search of some fruitful



*Chestnut-tailed Minla*

shots while the rest of us stayed in the car breathing laboriously and feeling low. After a few hours we started on our way back. It was dark when we reached our hotel and was relieved to be able to breath lungful of cold air.

**Mammals Seen and clicked:**

Tibetan Wild Ass, Tibetan Argali, Himalayan Pika, Himalayan Tahretc. We missed seeing Tibetan Sand Fox.



*Black-faced Laughing Thrush*

**Birds seen and clicked :**

Little owl, Spotted nutcracker, Great Rose finch, White Rumped Snow Finch, Rufous-necked Snow finch, Plain Backed Snow Finch ,Tibetan Snow finch, Blue fronted redstart (male, female), Tibetan Lark, Horned Lark, Robin accentor, Hill Pigeon, Brown

Thrush, Hoary-throated Barwing, ,White browed Fulvetta, Black-eared Shrike-babbler, Black-headed Shrike-babbler, Green Shrike-Babbler, Rufous-throated Wren Babbler, Ground Tit (Ground pecker), Silver-eared Mesia, White winged Redstart, Yellow browed Tit, Ashy throated Warbler, Snow Pigeon, Red-billed Chough, Stripe throated Yuhina, Speckled wood pigeon, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Chestnut Tailed Minla, Long Tailed Shrike Spotted Nutcracker, White Capped Redstart, Common(Eurasian Kestrel), Plumbeous Redstart, Ibisbill, Collared Blackbird, Laughing Thrushes, Yellow throated Blue magpie and many more smaller birds. We couldn't see or click the very famous Grandala, Fire tailed Mizornis, sun birds, and a few more.

Accentor, Red Crossbill, Maroon-backed Accentor, White throated Dipper, Greater Necklaced Laughing Thrush, Blue-winged Laughing Thrush, Black-faced Laughing

The next day a few of us went back to the Lake and the rest of us stayed at the hotel and did some local birding. Before we could realise our short trip was over and we started on our way back to Gangtok on the car, our hearts still craving for more. So we stopped intermittently on our way and clicked some more good shots of water red start, Black redstart, blue



*Black-headed Mountain Finch*

fronted redstart, Whitecapped water Redstart, yellow bellied fantail, Blue laughing Thrush. We didn't want to leave the peaceful, cool and beautiful Sikkim but all good things come to an end and the trip did too.

Consoling that will come back again soon, we said our goodbyes and returned home, far richer with memories, experiences and of course a great collection of Photographs.



*White Browed Fulvetta*



# AVIAN DIVERSITY IN THE MIDST OF INDUSTRIAL SETUP

Debaditya Sarkar

**D**urgapur is a major industrial city in the Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal in India. It is one of the largest urban agglomerations in the state, also having a dry dock. Nicknamed the “The Ruhr of India”, it includes a wide variety of industrial developments ranging from Steel and Power Plants to Food storage and Commercial set ups.

Durgapur is located at 23.55°N 87.32°E and has an elevation of 65 metres. Its area is about 157 km<sup>2</sup> with undulating topography, having a blend of coal bearing areas to the beautiful alluvial plains of the Damoder and Ajay Rivers.

The area was deeply forested till recent times and some of the large Sal and Eucalyptus forests are still seen.

The city experiences a transitional climate between the tropical wet and dry type to the more humid type of the north. The summers are pretty hot which are followed by heavy monsoon precipitations. However the winter experiences chilling temperature which may dip up to 6°C to 8°C.

Very recently the area was densely covered with forests. Due to heavy urbanisation and human settlements they are on a continuous decline. Biodiversity of any place is obviously affected by

urbanisation as there is always a scarcity of habitat and free living space for wildlife. In addition to that pollution makes life difficult for the animals and birds which propel them to emigrate to different places. Durgapur as an industrial setup, right from its birth has always witnessed the smoggy chimneys, the drilling machines and the blast furnaces to work 24X7. This naturally has led to human settlements and pollution to grow at a geometric progression. But, as before industrial setup, Durgapur was a city covered with dense forests, so some remnants of these are still found. Continuous efforts of the Forest Department, Local people, Nature lovers, Environmentalists and other stakeholders have largely contributed to the protection of these forests and the subsequent Avian diversity.



*The Industrious City of Durgapur*

## BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOTS OF DURGAPUR

Situated between the Damoder and Ajay Rivers, Durgapur boasts some rich biodiversity hotspots ranging from Riverbeds to Dense forests. The important hotspots of the city include:

1. The large Riverbeds and surrounding areas of the Damoder and Ajay Rivers.
2. The Dense forests situated in the areas of DeulPark (Garh

Jungle), Madhaiganj and Jemua areas.

3. Open Grasslands around the Durgapur Andal Aerodrome and the old Bijra Aerofield.

These rich ecoregions support a wide variety of avian fauna throughout the year having Resident, Summer Migrants as well as Winter Migrants.

### 1. Damoder and Ajay Riverbeds

These two riverbeds and their subsequent surrounding areas are rich in avian diversity. Resident to

Migrating Species flock these areas whole round the year thereby making them suitable for birdwatching.

► Cormorants are the most common varieties that are found whole round the year and are a pleasure to watch. In addition to this the Pond Heron, Gray Heron, Purple Heron, Asian Openbill, Yellow Bittern, Black Crowned Night Heron and the Egrets are quite abundant that increases the avian diversity of the place to a large extent.



*The Great Cormorant*



▶ The most attractive species of this region is the Bank Myna which is present in huge number in and around the Damoder river. It is otherwise not found anywhere in the whole city.

▶ Raptors of this place include the Osprey, Eagle, Black Kite, White Eyed Buzzard and the Long Legged Buzzard which are mostly found in the areas of minimum human involvements and interference. The Pisces of the rivers provide them with their food source. Recently in 2021, the Common Kestrel is also reported from the area.



*The Lesser Cormorant*



*Openbill in Flight Mode*



*Coexistence of Gray Heron, Egret and Openbill*



*Osprey with catch*



*White Eyed Buzzard*

▶ The resident Plovers mainly include the Little Ringed Plover whereas the migrants that generally flock with the locals are the Kentish Plover, Greater Sand Plover and also the Lesser Sand Plover. Watching and photographing of these in the sand beds will also give you glimpse of the camouflaged Sand Larks.



*The Greater Coucal*

▶ The River Lapwing is very common around the shore. Additionally the marshy and the

more hydrophytic water bodies will give a magnificent viewing of the Pheasant Tailed Jacana and the Bronze Winged Jacana in their normal habits and also of their mating and reproductive activities.

▶ The major attractions of this place are the different types of Ducks and the water birds. The local Residents include the Little Grebe, Long Crested Grebe, Purple Swamphen and the Moorhen. However the winter season gives the beautiful spectacle of the Lesser Whistling Ducks in flocks, the Cotton Pygmy Goose



*The Little Ringed Plover and the Kentish Plover in the Damoder Riverbed*

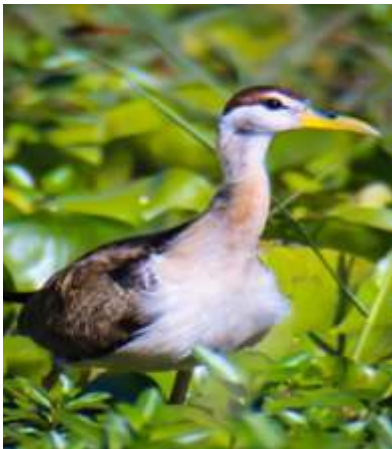




*The Pheasant Tailed jacana in breeding plumage*



*The River Lapwing*



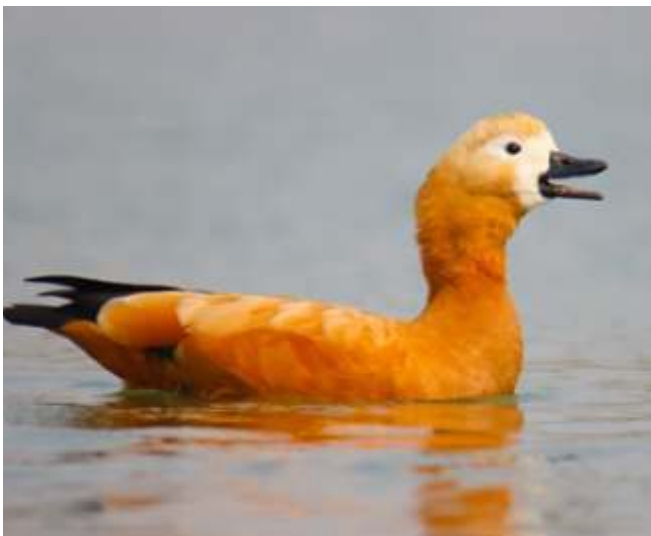
*The Bronze Winged Jacana*



*The Little Grebe*



*Flocks of Lesser Whistling Duck*



*The migrant varieties of Ruddy Shell Duck and The Brown Headed Gull*

and the beautiful Ruddy Shell Duck. Recently in 2021, the Black Headed Gull and the Bar Headed Goose have also been reported but only for a limited time period.



*The Temminck's Stint*

*The Wood Sandpiper*



*Redshank*

▶ The Temminck's Stint, the Sandpipers and the Redshanks are very common during the winter months.

▶ The Green Bee Eaters are present whole round the year. Blue Tailed Bee Eater is rare, though in



*The Blue Tailed Bee Eater reported in the summer of 2021*



2021 some of its population was visible. The Swallows include the Barn Swallow as well as the Wire Tailed Swallow to a large extent.

▶ Lastly we can observe the four prominent varieties of Kingfisher. The Pied Kingfisher can be seen regularly hovering over the beautiful waters of Damoder and Ajay rivers. In addition to this the

Common Kingfisher, the White Throated Kingfisher and The Stork Billed Kingfisher are also common in these areas.

## 2. Garh Jungle

This area is the largest Jungle Area present in the city and an important hotspot of Avian diversity.



*The Monarch Guarding its Nest*



*The Common Kingfisher*

▶ The three most significant and beautiful varieties found in this dense forests are the Indian Pitta, the Indian Paradise Flycatcher and The Black Naped Monarch. The



*The Indian Pitta*



*The IPC in the dense forests of Garh Jungle*



*The Monarch Couple*

months from March to July attracts a number of birdwatchers from adjoining areas to get a glimpse of these beautiful birds.

► Arrival of April marks the Baya Weaver to construct its unique nest. The resident varieties mainly include the Common Hawk Cuckoo, the Common Iora, the Small Minivets, the Rose Ringed Parakeet, the Alexandrine Parakeet and also the Red Rumped Parakeet. In addition to these the different types of Warblers are abundant in the dense forests of Garh Jungle.



*The Beautiful Common Iora*



*The Acrobatic Parakeet*



*The Common Hawk Cuckoo*



*The Baya Weaver weaving its Nest*



► Most recently some of the beautiful winter migrants that were spotted here include the Taiga Flycatcher, the Black Redstart, the Verditer Flycatcher, the Crested Bunting and also the Himalayan Blue Tail.

The Garh Jungle area is a conserved forest that is under the strict vigilance of the Forest Department. Additionally the area also has immense historical significance with many relics and Deul Type temples constructed during the era of Ichai Ghosh dated around 16th to 17th century. Thus this area is of great biodiversity value which needs to be explored more. However the tourists should refrain themselves from disturbing the Avian fauna as claims of undesirable actions were reported in the past.



*The Black Redstart (female)*



*The Common Woodshrike*

### 3. The Open Grasslands of Durgapur Andal Aerodrome and The Old Bijra Aerostrip

This area is a totally different geographical stretch that endows the vast open grasslands and relatively less dense forests.

► The most important Avian diversity of this area are the beautiful Munias. The red Munia, Scaly Breasted Munia, Tricoloured Munia, White Rumped Munia and the Indian Silverbill are found in abundant during the breeding months.

► The resident varieties include the Ashy Sparrow Lark, Paddy Field Pipit, Tawny Pipit, Richard's



*The Red Munia*



*The Tricoloured Munia*



*The Indian Silver Bill*

Pipit, Ashy Prinia, Yellow Bellied Prinia, Common Babbler and the Striped Babbler.





*The Yellow Bellied Prinia*



*The Stripped Babbler*



*The Ashy Prinia*



*The Common Babbler*

▶ Francolins are present in abundant but being very shy they are very difficult to spot. The Red Wattled Lapwing and the Yellow Wattled Lapwing are also major visible spectrum of the area.

▶ Winter migrants are also very common that includes the White Wagtail, the Citrine Wagtail, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, White Browed Wagtail and the Common Shrike. More recently the three



*Fig: The Red Wattled Lapwing*



*Yellow Wattled Lapwing*



*The Grey Francolin*

beautiful varieties of Siberian Stonechat, Blue Throat and the Ruby Throated Flycatchers have also been reported.

► The entrance point of this area will give you a marvellous spectacle of the Red Naped Ibis, Asian Openbill, Black Headed Ibis and the different Egrets feeding together in the open grasslands and also the empty agricultural fields. A lucky day can also help in viewing the Black Kite or the Black winged Kite with their delicious capture in some far off perching areas.





*The Wagtails are common in the Winter Months*

► It is also the most explored area for night birdwatching by different birdwatchers as regular sighting of the Spotted Owlets, the Jungle Owlets, the Barn Owl and Nightjar is very common.

This area is the most hampered region due to intense urbanisation as the open grasslands and the fields are attracting more people to procure these areas for human settlements and commercial setups.



*The Wagtails are common in the Winter Months*



*The Coexistence of the Asian Openbill And Black Headed Ibis*



*The Jungle Owlet*

Durgapur is thus a very beautiful place for bird watchers and nature lovers as it will provide everybody with its magnificent fauna and bird

activities. Around 130 species of birds were recognised from this area. Being a reputed industrial city with large scale industrial setups

and high level of pollution it may appear to many that the place is devoid of any bird activities making it a less popular birding destination.

Thus the area requires further investigations and more explorations. Ever increasing urbanisation, habitat destruction, industrial and commercial setups and most importantly poaching, hunting and caging of birds are the major threats to the Avifaunal Diversity of the region. Conservation efforts by the authorities, local people, wildlife lovers and environmentalists are very much required to save the Avifauna and animal diversity of this place.

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*Intense Urbanisation in the Grasslands of Durgapur  
which is also a cause of habitat destruction*



# CANINE PATROL THE STORY OF DOG SQUADS

Anupa Roy

India is host to the majestic, prized and precious, much sought after Royal Bengal tiger. A lot of Tiger Reserves and National Parks are home to these mighty predators and are quite prolific. So much so that there is a booming tourist trade which is a healthy boost for the economy. We also have a flourishing and quite beautiful, natural outdoor beauty, varied wildlife that can be observed in every part of the country.

This is the good part, as we know, there are always two sides to a story. While we may be enjoying the numerous and varied wildlife, flora and fauna, there is evil that makes its presence felt everywhere. If there is anything in plentiful, destruction is not far behind.

The flip side is the poaching, illegal animal parts trade and the killing of animals of all kinds for different purposes, pelt, skin, bile, claws, teeth, tusks etc. These precious



animals are hunted everyday by criminals who are only looking at making money. Unfortunately, the animal, wildlife illegal trade is an extremely lucrative business and there are international gangs who run elaborate operations to get their hands on a prized animal and its relevant parts.

Curbing and apprehending criminals who work in an organised and professional manner and who are aware of the risks is a tough job. These people move

shrewdly, they know how to monitor and move, they are clever in their use of resources. Local people are often lured with money to share location and track animals. They will use all means possible to get them to get to their main goal, capturing their target.

The Forest Department, the Wildlife Division along with various other organisations have been working for years doing their best to bring this illegal animal trading under control.







After some thought and research, it was decided that dogs would be used in the field. It is a well documented fact that dogs have proven to be highly productive in helping fight crime and drug cases. They are now becoming the most popular choice for high risk, sensitive cases, for search and rescue and even in firefighting.

All over the world, we get to see dogs performing heroic deeds, they are treated as working members of any team they are on, be it in the police, in crime patrol or in fire fighting. They are valued and respected and play a vital role in their respective job profiles.

The breed that was decided on was the Belgian Malinois. Dogs have better sensory skills than a human, their olfactory senses (smell) and their hearing abilities are far superior than a human's. They are agile, have stamina and are quick in responding. A Belgian Malinois is a highly motivated, skilled dog. They are disciplined, they are intelligent and can obey commands well and

work well in high risk, stressful work environments.

Teams were formed, each had two handlers and a dog, named the Dog Squad. They started field work after a training period along with their handlers. They were given all the relevant tools to be able to work productively in the field.

Very soon after the first dog teams were formed and started going out on field duty, cases started getting solved. Animal parts being traded

were captured, villages where illegal trade was happening, animal parts were being stored, they were caught and the materials were confiscated. Criminals and poachers were also getting caught. The efficiency and effectiveness of using dogs was showing with the success of crimes being solved. Criminal gangs who were into poaching for years were being found out and captured.

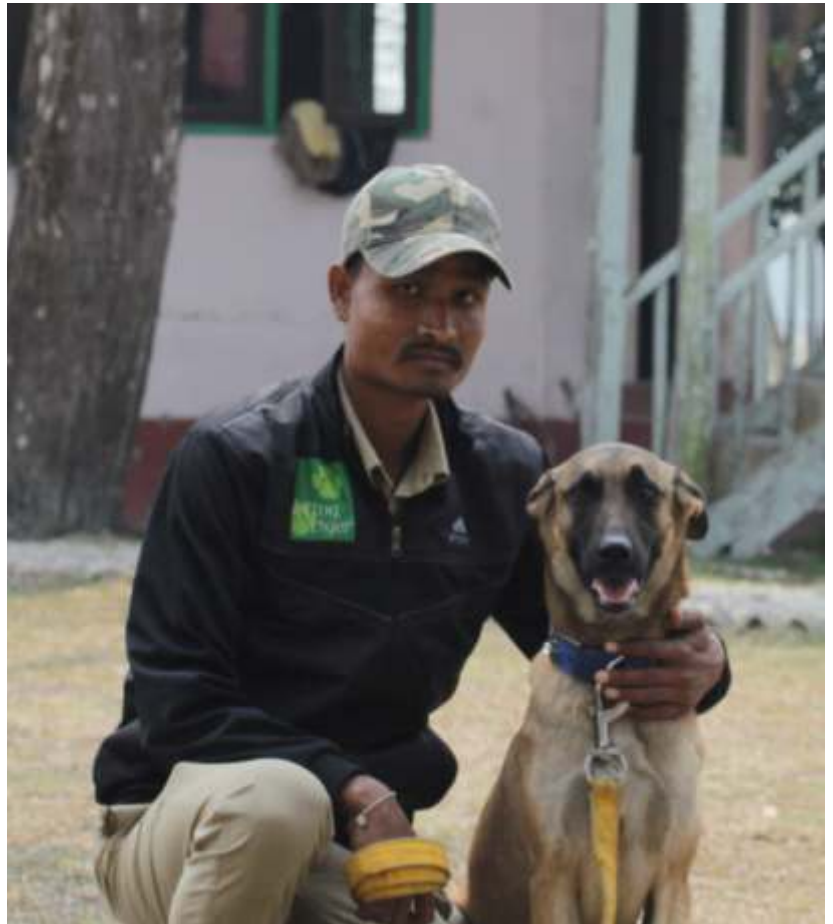




In the beginning, the Dog Squad had started with 2 dogs, which within a year or so was increased to 4. The dogs have been working in various Forest Reserves and National Parks. It's been around 7 years since the first dog teams started working and today there are around 16 dogs in various states in the country doing great work in solving crime in the forest, keeping our wildlife protected and working ceaselessly to reduce crimes against animals and poaching.

This is the first time that the Forest Department has used dogs and they have found it to be a very effective. The success rate is very high wherever there are Dog Squads posted and it only reiterates that using dogs to solve crimes is a good course of action.

Hopefully in the future we will see Dog Squads everywhere in the fight to protect our wildlife and nature and conservation of our environment.



# SHOWCASE

Dhiraj Poddar



*Asian Fairy Blue Bird*



*Pacific Reef Heron*





*Black Naped Monarch*



*Vernal Hanging Parrot*



## GARO HILLS, MEGHALAYA - A BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

Raka Matchisal A Sangma

**A**m I bi-polar, to have alternating episodes of intense joy and depressive lows? It fits the definition, but this “mixed feeling” was induced by the proposal that came out in February last year, to nominate Garo Hills Conservation Area (GHCA) in Meghalaya, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the “Mixed-Category.” The news was an ear-candy for naturalists, environmentalists, conservationists, and other bio-files. It also triggered a sense of pride in the Garo tribe and indeed it should. The Garos must be proud of their natural and cultural heritage. If it does get the tag of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, then it will be the second site under the mixed category, the only one in the country at present being

Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim. Whoever thought that there would be a 337.48Km<sup>2</sup> of area in Garo Hills that would one day make it to the tentative list of the nomination process to be considered for inclusion in UNESCO’s World Heritage List? Of course, many have admired the richness and unique biodiversity of

Garo Hills, but did you ever think that the place would have such, “Outstanding Universal Values” (OUVs) which are so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries? Notwithstanding the OUVs, there is always a ‘but’ and hence the mixed feelings.







## Looting and Plundering of Natural Heritage

Reality is cruel and ignorance is bliss. Is the GHCA getting nominated to UNESCO's list of World Heritage Site or to the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger – a step away from getting delisted? With the current trend in illegal coal mining in and around the proposed site and some within it, despite the supposed “NGT Ban” (Sometimes people get confused with the Green in National Green Tribunal, whether it is the colour symbolising nature or the colour of the dollar); poaching inside the protected areas (It is always an open season.); illegal felling of timber and the inter-state smuggling business (the irony of Protected Areas); threats from invasive alien species; deforestation, habitat destruction and fragmentation, all with the connivance, consent, ignorance or under the noses of the concerned departments, to be delisted after getting listed could be the fate of GHCA.

Gieve Patel's epic poem, “On Killing A Tree,” aptly describes how to completely kill a tree. In it, the Mumbai based poet ironically narrates man's onslaught of nature, which is symbolised in the poem by a tree. The poet tells us that it is not

easy to kill a tree, that “the mere act of hacking and chopping is not sufficient to kill a tree.” In a nutshell, the poet is sympathising with nature against the cruelty of man. That although nature is resilient against accidents and minor blows, a continuous and

aspects of the nominated site, approve of its induction? How can IUCN evaluate, when there is nothing left to evaluate?

Let me romanticise poaching so that its horror stays in your mind. Let this send a sense of urgency to



deliberate act of man, driven by the spirit of greed and selfishness can and will totally annihilate nature. How then will the International Union of Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), which is the Advisory Body mandated by the World Heritage Convention to evaluate the natural

immediately curb the menace of poaching. This is my experience, during one of my hiking expeditions to the Nokrek National Park.

An ominous crack heralding death and destruction pierced through the thick foliage and broke the slumbering music of nightfall.

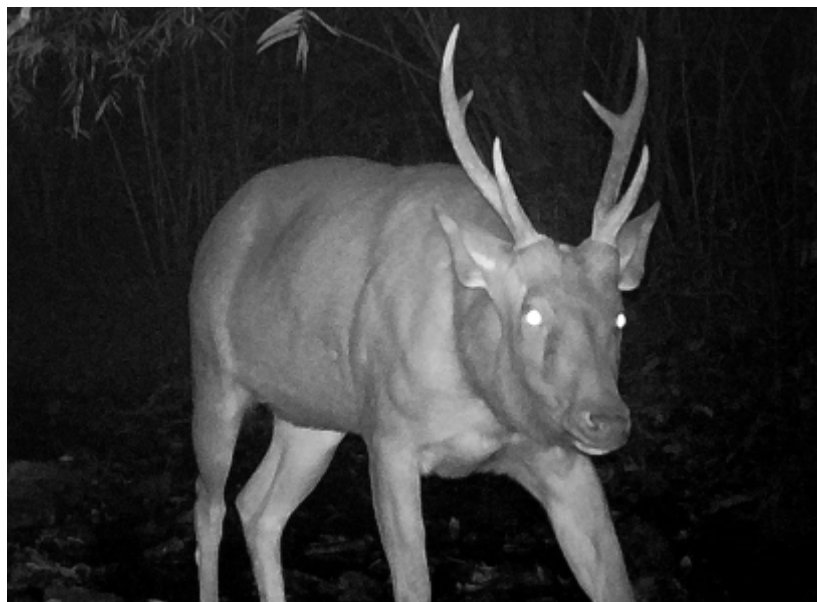


## Disappearing Cultural Heritage – The elephant in the room

“I’m clothed, yet I still feel naked.” This was what one elderly lady from the village of Kemragrein West Garo Hills had to say. She felt naked in the sense that she missed wearing the ornaments like earrings, bangles, necklaces and other personal adornments that she used to wear before converting to Christianity. It is the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about. It is not a mere identity crisis. Our culture and our indigenous traditional knowledge (ITK), that has since time immemorial guided our way of life, is disappearing in the fast pace of life and disregarded as folklore. The dominant Christian community has stigmatised the way of life of the Songsareks, which has a history of living intimately with nature. The word Songsarek now has a negative connotation attached to it. The word when used

Petrified as I was, I gaped at my three companions, demanding answers from their expressions lit by the dim sliver of twilight filtering through the canopy. Before I could utter a word, frantic calls of a Barking deer resonated through the woods, preventing me from making any conjecture and true to my anticipation, another gunshot cracked, sending a chill down my spine. With one last frail note, the deer was hushed, and along with it, the forest which was seconds ago teeming with courtship songs of insects and frogs. All fell into silence. The poor animal was probably dead before the second gunshot reached our ears. Under such circumstances, can we still hope that GHCA will fare well in IUCN’s evaluation? Not to mention the make-shift camps of the poachers that we stumbled across inside the core area of the national park! In the camp’s premises, there was a skin (probably of a palm civet) impaled on a stick, and partly scorched feathers of birds, scattered where they had conjured their fire. Such audacity of the poachers clearly sends a message that there is no law

in the jungle. It was a complete mockery of the authorities who have been tasked to protect the wild dwellers of the so called protected areas. Also another infuriating encounter in the periphery of the national park, were the number of illegally constructed sawing platforms and the scores of aged trees felled for timber. Given the foregoing discussion, the last four categories under which the OUVs will be evaluated by IUCN appears to be at a rather weak stance.





in many contexts is derogatory and often expresses the discontinued way of life in the forgotten past.

The threat to the cultural heritage of the Garos is not one external but is from within. Nature is resilient. It can bounce back through the process of succession. But the indigenous traditional knowledge once lost will be a folklore and a relic of the past. So how can we nominate something that is non-existent? How can we nominate the traditional values that we ourselves do not value? The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the two Advisory Bodies which respectively provides evaluation of the cultural criteria

and provide expert advice on the conservation of the cultural sites, will not have much substance to work on.

## Way Forward

Not only did modernisation in its myriad ways caused the extinction of many floral and fauna species, but its effects have also impacted the survival of indigenous knowledge and practices. The Garos already have a history of losing their own script as relayed in the book “The Folk-Tales of the Garos,” authored by Dewan Sing Rongmuthu, in the first content of the book, titled, “The A’chik Script.” Let us all be wary of our diminishing traditional values and preserve what is significant. Let us not leave behind another history of

loss. Let us pass on our rich natural and cultural heritage to the next generation.

On the bright side and enough of the vice, I firmly believe that GHCA will soon be in the list of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites. The future is not that bleak, provided our existing and surviving natural and cultural heritages are insulated from abrupt and detrimental change to the environmental conditions, intrusion of religion, mainstream developmental activities, policies that undermine the traditional authorities and regenerative capacity of the environment.

**Pictures By: Bhuto Marak.**



# LADY LIUWA

## THE REINCARNATED MAMBETI

Pratik Mahapatra

"Every animal, bird and insect has found its grace in the African 'circle of life'. The circle would be complete if it wasn't for one tiny flaw - 'the king is dead.' - This is how the story begins. Rich vegetation, embellished with vast grazers would seem to be an ideal habitat for lions to thrive, but when the settlers and poachers take out all fellow lions, giving the chance to a robust population of hyenas, surrounded by smattering villages, it suddenly turns out to be a gruesome place to live in. Within Liuwa Plain National Park in Zambia, there are few safe havens for lions for their long drawn naps and resting and at the end of the day, the notorious clans of hyenas are ever ready to intimidate and snatch away the hard-earned meal. This was the horrifying predicament, faced on a daily basis by Lady Liuwa, the "Last Lioness" of Liuwa Plain. Lady Liuwa was an icon, and a symbol of survival and resilience. Due to years of poaching and illegal trophy hunting, lions were completely eradicated from Liuwa Plain in the 1990s, except for one lioness – Lady Liuwa. Her presence was first confirmed in 2002 and since then she roamed the plains for years as the sole survivor in the park. Yesterday happened to be her fourth death anniversary. How can the wildlife enthusiasts, especially,

the big cat lovers, forget the anecdote of Lady Liuwa? On the occasion of World Lions Day, The Wild Tales is feeling privileged to share her story. Let us reveal the pages of her memoir, renovating the story of the extraordinary lioness, coupled up with the strong plot of a successful conservation story — a resurrection of the lion kingdom.

For so many years, Lady Liuwa, the last beacon of an erstwhile massive lion pride, happened to wander the plains alone. The modern-day realities of wilderness caught up the lion prides of Liuwa, including Lady's own pride, and before anything could be done to save the day, Lady became alone – completely on her own amidst the vast habitat of the reserve. Liuwa Plain National Park is an 3,369 sq km (1,301 sq mi) national park in Zambia's Western Province. "Liuwa" means "plain" in the local Lozi language, and the plains originally served as a hunting ground for Lubosi Lewanika, the Litunga (king or paramount chief) of the Lozi people. The area was designated as a protected area by Lubosi Lewanika in the early 1880s, and as a national park in 1972, when Zambia's government took over management. The nonprofit conservation organization African Parks (AP) Conservation has managed Liuwa

in partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife and the Barotse Royal Establishment since 2003. In a patch of ground with no family and friends, and with endless adversaries, she battled every day for her survival. Lions and hyenas are born rivals, regularly throwing down in violent clashes of tooth and claw, and the hellish predicament of breakdown. Less powerful than lions, hyenas must win with the upper hand of numbers if they are to steal a kill from a few cornered lions. Without a pride to support her, Lady expended precious energy taking down and defending kills, only to ultimately lose it to hyenas anyway. Here in the African savannah, the real king is one who goes to bed with a full stomach. The odds were not just stacked against her, they were veritably falling on top of her, crushing her to death, but Lady happened to be the true queen with all her singularity despite the unlikeliest atmosphere of survival. She learned not just to survive, but to thrive, reaching the age of seventeen years, proving the ultimate testament of her time. Every scar on her gracious face eventually tells a story of a life hard-earned, where being conniving was not enough, she had to be extremely aware to survive. She learned to hang on the periphery of the bordering



villages, conspicuously taking the advantage of the hyenas' tendency to avoid the humans. Neither entering the settlements nor killing their livestock, she was accepted as a benevolent presence by the villagers and herdsman. It was widely believed that Lady was eventually the reincarnation of the spirit of Mambeti, a beloved daughter of the king's favourite game warden. Every day lady would rest at Mambeti's burial site, solidifying her reminiscence in the villagers' hearts. It was this love and appreciation that protected her.

With no lions to be found, she looked to humans for companionship. Her extraordinary story of survival, as well as how African Parks helped give her a pride of her own, became one of the most moving wildlife films ever produced. "Lady Liuwa was a truly exceptional lioness, so much so that it is impossible to do justice to her in words," said Peter Fearnhead, CEO of African Parks Conservation (AP):

**Oftentimes she would lie just five meters away from our campfire in the middle of the park. When it came time to go to bed, she would follow, walking parallel to the path and then fall asleep in front of one of our tents. In the mornings, we would find her in a tree, just watching but never threatening us. After years of being solitary, and after several reintroductions and careful management, we were finally**

**able to unite her with her own kind. While her passing saddens us all, she leaves behind a legacy of survival in the small but growing pride in Liuwa Plain.**

Ace wildlife cinematographer, Herbert Brauer, had spent years in the presence of Lady Liuwa, and had always been cherishing a dream of a pride in Liuwa in his mind. With the ecosystem incomplete, African Parks decided to reintroduce lions to the park, as a part of their environmental management plan to restore the welfare of the region. After over half a decade of lonely wandering and calling into the unanswering abyss, Lady was finally going to have some companionship and much-desired backups. Lions are social felines, relying on the bondage of pride mates and depending upon their solidarity in the hard times of survival. Even the solitary males too interweave their time alone with a pride or another wandering nomad, seeking for his luck. Finally, Lady would be reunited with her own kind. When she would be calling out across the plains, her call would, at last, be responded to; when she would be lifting her head to the breeze, there would be the scent of another lion to meet her sensation.

The efforts to find Lady Liuwa her own family were not without setbacks. After five years of waiting for lions to return to Liuwa from the larger landscape, and after securing the park through improved law enforcement and

working with local communities, African Parks reintroduced a male lion in 2008 to join Lady. Sadly, he died during the translocation process. In 2009, a year after a failed initiative, the Zambian Carnivore Program (ZCP) and African Parks (AP) collaborated to transfer two young adult males of nearly three-year-old from nearby Kafue National Park. It was hoped that they would eventually win the affections of Lady, and produce the next generation. Three years after this translocation operation, the filming crew came back, hoping to catch up with their known lions with the first flicker of new arrivals. Sadly, no cubs were resulted from the copulations attempted. Evidence said that Lady was getting gradually old, and becoming unable to conceive, but Innocent Tembo, King Lewanika head guide, believed that it was not age or infertility that was rendering fruitless results. "She's the queen of the plains," he emphasised, "She wasn't interested in these boys from the east. They weren't worthy, so nothing came of it," he mused over in an afternoon coffee break of the crew in the bush.

After stumbling endeavours to re-estimate a pride in Liuwa, African Parks Conservation, a conservation NGO that manages national parks and protected areas across Africa (and has been managing Liuwa Plain in partnership with the Zambia Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) and the Barotse Royal Establishment since 2003), made the risky decision to

reintroduce females that could mate with the existing duo of the males. The team did not risk bringing forth adult lionesses since dominated by their vitality and spirit, they could hard Lady. This is how in 2011, two twenty-month-old adolescents – Sepiwa, a brown-collared lioness, whose name means 'hope' in the local dialect, came to live with Lady, with her white-collared sister Sepo, meaning 'short' from Angola National Reserve in the west to Liuwa Plain National Park. Inexperienced and now exposed to an unfamiliar territory, these sisters were more vulnerable than ever before. It was not sure how the males would react in their presence. Lady, however, had already estimated her supremacy. Now, though the power of balance seemed to be shifted, she was still in charge. The young females were safely kept in an enclosure so that any confrontation with the males might be reduced. Lady kept her vigilance. Eventually, the gate of their enclosure was opened and they were set free. A new chapter began. But, this happened to be an initiation with harsh nightmares. No sooner than the newcomers managed to grab a kill, hyenas surrounded them. Two adolescent females were nothing in front of a clan of more than twenty bone crushers. Their sounds, grunts and snarls had attracted the attention of far more dangerous adversaries. For the first time, Sepiwa and Sepo were exposed before the adult males. This time, Lady was not around the corner to protect them as a shield. Sepiwa managed to

avoid the seeming danger, while Sepo was caught between the males. They immediately charged and ensured their dominance. Sepo's assertiveness only could save her day from those massive rulers. At the right moment, she crouched in submission. The males moved away. Soon after the incident in 2012, Sepiwa went missing. Her collar stopped giving signals, making the indicating point into a stagnant position. A nasty discovery was made when her collar was found in a marshland, segregated from her decomposed body. It was assumed that she probably caught the hold of livestock, and had to pay the price at the cost of her life. One of the first shocks that the re-establishing project suffered. Furthermore, after a few weeks, Sepo, fled towards the Angolan boundary. In a dramatic rescue mission, Sepo was darted, flown back to the park by helicopter and placed in a boma for safety along with Lady Liuwa to encourage Sepo to bond with Lady, critical for the young lioness' survival. And this time it worked. After two months, they were released back into the park, and were inseparable from that point forward. One of those males were collared, assuming the chance that they would never depart. The growing pride suffered another setback when the two males left the park and entered Angola. The experts started a countdown for the males to return, but to add on yet another massive blow, only one of the males, the collared one, had returned to Liuwa. His ally was shot and killed by villagers, but the

other, the collared one, made it safely back to Liuwa on his own, where he became the resident male. Over the years, a special bonding developed between Lady and Sepo. Brauer was expecting a tight chemistry between the three remaining survivors of the endeavour. The male frequently copulated with Sepo, but every moment after the chance of her conception, there was the fear of Lady's exile from the trinity. Luckily, no such uncanny affair happened. At one point, having the male on her side, Lady lied down by Sepo. This is what a pride looks like. Herbert Brauer met his eyes with that of Lady's, as if they were asking: "Is this what you wanted so far?" In 2014, his and his fellow experts' dream came true. Sepo gave birth to her first litter of cubs — two females and a male. Now aged fourteen, Lady was entering that age zone which a handful of lions eventually gets to see. Still strong enough, but no longer hunting as well as she once did, Lady relied on Sepo to do most of the hunting for the pride. Instead, Lady kept her place at the head as the honoured grandmother – the matriarch of the pride with her years of wisdom and experience, and babysitting the cubs while Sepo was busy in taking down dinner. Andrew, a photographer who spent a month in the park, captures one beautiful event:

**It was sunset and Lady was all alone. We followed her as she slowly rose and began a call and response with Sepo, Lady adjusting her path each echoing back from the dark. Eventually,**



**we picked up Sepo and the cubs with our spotlight, but Lady still hadn't noticed them. They were crouched in the long grass, and when Lady was a few metres away, they sprung up, startling Lady who jumped backwards before realising who it was. She immediately rushed forward, nuzzling Sepo and the cubs who were just jumping on top of her. There was so much love at that moment.**

And, not only the mutuality of reciprocation, a few more remarkable spectacles showed how lofty a resurrection everyone was witnessing, a resurrection of lion kingdom with its divine ambrosia:

**Once when Lady was recovering from an injury, and unable to move with the pride, Sepo hid her cubs away, travelled 40 km north to Lady, killed a wildebeest and dragged it over to her, all before travelling 40 km back. That was the kind of love and respect that Lady's pride had for her. She was a very special lion.**

Reminisced Innocent Tembo about his time with Her Majesty. So, what was next to expect from such a reputed lion dynasty? A hearty congratulations to the solidarity and strength of the pride. Sepo's cubs are now stunning adults. She even embraced her second litter of cubs — two males, who were born in November 2016. Around the same time, African Parks in collaboration with the Zambia Carnivore Programme

(ZCP), DNPW and Mushingashi Conservancy decided to reintroduce another male lion in September 2016 to help grow the pride and increase genetic integrity. He had a bit rough entry after an explosive encounter with Sepo, but he was reported to be gradually familiarising himself with the pride, and expected him to be yet another strong pillar of the dynasty of the lions of Liuwa. The newly translocated male and the resident male were placed in a boma for two months to undergo the bonding process and they were successfully released into the park to join with the females. While the males were in the enclosure, Lady Liuwa and Sepo would visit them, sleeping just outside of it at night, and staying just a short distance from it during the day. On 15 November 2016, it was confirmed that Sepo had produced another two new cubs, sired by the resident male. While Lady Liuwa could not have cubs of her own, she was seen helping to raise Sepo's numerous litters over the years, and it was clear that finally, Lady Liuwa had a pride of her own.

Sadly, the pioneer of the dynasty had to adieu her plains after seventeen years of ruling her domain. Lady Liuwa passed away on the 9th of August in 2017. Lady Liuwa's exact age was unknown, but it is believed she happened to be seventeen-year-old, an extraordinary feat for a wild lion hunting and surviving on her own, and is a testament to the collaborative protection she was afforded by African Parks, the

DNPW, ZCP and the BRE. Her remains along with her VHF collar were found yesterday. There was no sign of human activities. It was not known what she died of, but all signs pointed to natural death. The last time Innocent Tembo saw her in late June she was still strong, but in that last brink of twilight, even the tiniest deviation may cause a lion to fade away. "I was very, very sad to hear that she had passed away. Her story is so touching and so important to Liuwa Plain. What a special lion!" — Innocent expressed, downcasting his eyes, hinting at the pain and vacancy he felt at her passing. But, Lady Liuwa cannot be gone. Her spirit still roams the plains. Overlooking for that "bigger savannah upstairs", Lady blesses her lineage and the lofty denizens of the plains. The Queen is no more, but her immortal soul touches our hearts with her saga of survival — a success story of conservation, a meaningful rendering of the rebirth of the lions in the plains! "It's incredibly rare for a lion to live to such an old age and to die from natural causes," said Matthew Becker, CEO of ZCP. "Lions are incredibly threatened across their range given the levels of poaching, conflict killing and habitat loss and fragmentation that is occurring across the continent. Her survival and that of her growing pride signify what can happen when people come together to help protect and restore a species — Lady's story is one of hope and possibility."

# SHOWCASE

Debaditya Sarkar













## GREEN WARRIOR : MR. SEWARAM MALIK



Mr Sewaram Malik comes from a farming background. His early education started in the local village school and upto his senior year, he studied in the local schools. He graduated having taken up physics chemistry and mathematics. He continued his education further till he finished his post graduation. He was always keen to join the armed forces as he loved the outdoors. He tried to enter into defence forces but despite a few tries, he was unable to get through. He then tried his second choice, the Forest Department. Here he was successful in getting through. After joining, he trained for two years and then started his duties. While continuing on the job, Mr Malik kept taking courses in various subjects related to his present job. He was posted in Kuno wildlife sanctuary, where he worked in the reintroduction of lions who were coming in from Gir Forest. However this was a short stint and he joined Madhav National Park from 2006 and continued till 2010. He took study leave at that point to

do M Tech from IIT Rourkee, a 2 year course on Environmental Management of Rivers and Lakes. This course was sponsored by the government. He studied various subjects there, related to conservation, waste management. On completion, he rejoined Madhav National Park and was there for another 6 months. He recalls an interesting incident while based in Madhav National Park. There used to just a single captive tiger living in the park. Then, unexpectedly, they found pug marks of another tiger whom they found out later had travelled

from Ranthambore. The tiger stayed in this park for around 9 months before travelling to Kuno, where the tiger stayed for 6 months. Then he was later tracked back to Ranthambore. Quite an unusual course for a tiger. From Madhav National Park, Mr Malik shifted to Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Management in Bhopal as a research officer which was for a few months. There was also an Ayurvedic production unit there and he became a marketing manager for the unit for 9 months. In the meantime he had been promoted to the position of a Sub







Division Officer. For the next few years he moved around in different departments.

In 2019, he came to Nauradehi as a Sub Divisional Officer. After moving here, he knew that there was 1 tiger in the forest, but soon, 3 tiger cubs born. This was great news and being such a large forest, there was lots of space. He came to be in charge of two divisions in Nauradehi and in a couple of years there was the addition of 2 more cubs. Presently as of May 2022, another 2 cubs were born from the litter of 2019. It is a big achievement when in the span of 3 years, a forest park sees an increase of tigers this fast and there are now a total of 10 tigers in Nauradehi.

Some interesting things about Nauradehi is that this sanctuary has wolves, one of the very few places in India to see a wolf. It has a







healthy population of vultures and the sanctuary is teeming with a varied choice of wildlife and an equally varied flora and fauna.

Mr. Malik has also been involved in studying birds and has conducted a survey of birds for 3 years. He has also done surveys on crocodiles, vultures and butterflies.

Nauradehi is as yet an unknown destination, it is slowly gaining a spot on the wildlife tourist map. A lot of the onus has been taken by Mr Malik who clearly shows how much he loves this place and has been doing a great job looking after such a large place. Since it is yet to receive the status of a National Park, they don't have the same access to staff and funds as other certified parks and reserves. Despite all the challenges with minimum staff, huge and varied wildlife, unregulated boundaries, Mr Malik has made significant inroads into improving Nauradehi. He is using all the latest technology and the power of social media, marketing to bring people in. He has started tourism in an organised way and has opened 3 gates for



wildlife safaris. He has shared with us that there might be another tiger litter expected as they feel that one of the tigers is pregnant which is always a joyous event.

A lot is happening now with people slowly coming to know of this piece of paradise. Earlier there were no clear zones, no buffer areas and no boundaries. There were villages deep inside the forest. Today a lot of these villages have been relocated successfully. This has shown an increase in the numbers of herbivores. There was a lack of sufficient water holes, new waterholes have been made for the animals.

Looking at the future of Nauradehi, Mr. Malik feels that things will be much better. Certain management plans need to be implemented and if they are handled properly, this will be one of the best wildlife destination to experience. After hearing from Mr. Malik the progress that has been in these few short years, it's quite an achievement and he is eager to take it further, like the warrior that he is.







# SHOWCASE

Debaditya Sarkar



## RISING STAR : HIMANSHU YADAV

**H**imanshu Yadav is a Naturalist, literally born for the role from his childhood. Growing up very near the forests and seeing wildlife close up from the early days, he was instinctively drawn towards nature. Though his parents were working people, with jobs in a different field, they were always taking Himanshu outdoors and teaching him about Nature, the animals, the flora and fauna etc. They used to give him only animal toys to play with as a child. Soon it became his sole purpose in life. He would forgo going on holidays with his parents and create a lot of

difficulty just so that he could spend his time in forests and in the wild. Straight out of school, he started working as a Naturalist. He continued his studies and finished it while working through long distance learning.

Being a Naturalist, he had to have extensive knowledge about the environment and all that it was home to. While on his various excursions into the forests and guiding tourists around, another hobby of his became a serious part of his profession.

He started documenting everything he saw on visual media. Photography and Videography

became synonymous with his job as a Naturalist. He has made some really good documentaries and has also worked for and collaborated with various organisations, the Forest Department and created visual content for them. This is a very important aspect of conservation, visual documentation of our environment, the forests, wildlife, the habitats, the flora, everything needs regular checks and observation to understand better how to keep the natural balance of our eco system.

Himanshu spent a lot of his initial time working in Bandhavgarh,







*Himanshu Yadav*









Madhya Pradesh. He branched out on his own, starting Tour companies, providing guides and Naturalists on his tours. He has remained in the capacity of a Naturalist and also continues with his photography and documentaries.

Recently he was asked to do a survey of the lesser known Nauradehi. He did a documentary for it and while going around the place, he fell in love with it.

It's full of natural beauty, the environment and terrain are very different to any of the other parks and reserves. It is very diverse and he is in awe of everything the forest offers. He has started tours there as it is an unknown destination for wildlife enthusiasts. He mentions how it's a virtual paradise for photographers.

In the beginning, it has been

mentioned about the varied and rich wildlife that this forest is home to. Tiger population has grown in the past couple of years. Every season has its own charm and he feels that once people experience the place for themselves, it will become one of their favourites.

At the young age of 24, Himanshu is showing us so many ways that conservation can be done. He has helped in relocating villages that were inside the forests and has trained the youth from these villages to get jobs that will give them an alternative source of income. He trains boys and girls to become forest guides, naturalists, he is trying to get the women

involved in handicrafts. His age belies his forward thinking. He is working hard to break the conservative mindset of the villagers there, he wants to include the women and girls in teaching them skills that will allow them to work and earn their own money.

Having seen his documentaries, videos and photographs, his talent is apparent, he has created some captivating imagery. I have also spoken to this very eager, passionate young man and I have no doubt that he will definitely achieve his goals and his plans for Nauradehi to be a spot on the map will be fulfilled. A true Shining Star.

# NORTH BENGAL TRAVELOGUE

Dr Golaka Nath

## HOLONG (JALDAPARA) DAY ONE

**W**e started early from Bhubaneswar on March 5th with all COVID precautions as the Indigo flight to Kolkata started at 6.30AM to reach Kolkata at 7.30AM. As the Kolkata – Bagdogra flight was at about 11.30AM to reach the destination at 12.40PM, we moved to the airport Lounge for breakfast. The Indigo flight to Bagdogra was smooth like Bhubaneswar – Kolkata flight and we landed at the airport at about 12.40PM and our driver for the 9-day trip (Airport to Airport) was Mr. Subhan who was awaiting us at the airport parking lot. Our trip was immaculately planned and directed by Mr. Sumit Adak who is an expert in North Bengal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, HP and Uttarakhand travel options. The exit from the airport is a bit of pain as the parking fee collection gate is very slow moving. After loading our luggage in the Bolero (in many areas you require a vehicle with high clearing) and a bit of introduction, we drove through the Aqua corridor via Gajaldoba (we stopped here for roadside quick lunch). Gajaldoba is an aquatic area (good place for street fried food (mainly fish) where you can see migratory birds in winter season. Gajaldoba has a big Youth Hostel as well as W B T D C accommodation. The drive is a real pleasure as the road was generally good and you pass through large



*Famous Holong Bungalow at Madaribat, Jaldapara*

tea gardens adjacent to the main driveway enjoying the green environment. The beauty of Dooars is unmatched.

Our destination was Holong tourist bungalow inside Jaldapara forest area which is about 160km from Bagdogra airport. We reached the entry gate at about 5PM and was informed by the security guard at the entry gate that wild elephants are nearby on the road and the driver should be careful while driving. We saw a herd of wild elephants with baby

elephants happily chewing leaves and breaking small trees for food. We tried to take a few snaps as these elephants were outside the electrically charged fence. The Holong bungalow is one of the best property but the disappointing thing is that they do not allow you to stay for more than 1 day as it is sold as a package to have one night at Holong and another night at Tilabari / Moorti / Batabari. Most people book for 2 nights but only stay at Holong and forgo the other place as it is far



*Mighty king of the Jungle – Rhino at Jaldapara*





*Owl looking at the visitors on Safari near the Jaldapara Tower*

away at Lataguri forest area. One choice is to keep Holong as your last night but one destination so that you can move to Lataguri area from Holong from where the airport is nearby (about 1.5 hours). Holong Bungalow provides best accommodation in Jaldapara area. Once upon a time, the ex-CM of Bengal, the famous Jyoti Basu was a regular visitor at Holong and a special room was created for him. Now electricity is made available for the benefit of the guests. While driving to the Bungalow, we saw Indian gaur, sambar deer, peacocks, herd of wild elephants, etc. on the road. The Holong stay is memorable as we could enjoy our time there seeing many wild animals and birds in the evening as well as in the morning. The staff use powerful spot lights to show the guests the arrival of wild animals in the salt pit nearby. We

saw Rhinos, Indian Gaur, etc. in the night. Sleep was really good as jungle brings the tranquility. The nights were a bit cold and the blankets were good protection. The food served was very good and the system here is to charge per person per meal with 2 meals (dinner and breakfast) and snacks and tea have separate charges. There is no option of going out for food as entry and exit are generally restricted after 6PM. Further, entry fees have to be paid for each entry. We made friendship with a North Indian (Bhopal) family which had driven from Cooch Behar where they are presently located for employment of the head of the family in a nationalized bank branch. The early morning Elephant safari (from 5.30AM to 6.30AM) from

the bungalow allows a visitor to explore the morning jungle with wild animals. Four people ride one elephant guided by one Mauhunt nwho guide the elephant. We could see a Rhino happily chewing the grass for food. The jeep safari (7.30AM to 9.00AM) is also good as it takes you inside the Jaldapara forest area to explore wild animals and birds. We saw serpent eagles, owls, yellow pigeons, green pigeons, mouse deer, barking deer, parakites, wild boars, Indian gaurs, Rhinos, etc.

All bookings have to be done online basis. The Holong forest booking (all accommodation in their property) has to be done at [wbtdcl website \(https://www.wbtdcl.com\)](https://www.wbtdcl.com). They will charge the base charges and Taxes have to be paid at the destination. The safari (Elephant as well as Jeep) has to be booked at (<https://wbfdcl.net> West Bengal Forest Development Corporation Limited (WBFDCCL) . Thursday the safaris are closed. The Safari basic charges will be collected at the time of online booking depending on number of persons. The cost of hiring a jeep and the guide cost will be paid at the



*Green pigeons and other Birds on the tree near Holong*



*Indian Gaur (Bisons) at Jaldapara*





*Wild elephant on way*



*Wild elephants going away inside Jungle area*



*Mouse deer*



*Flying off – Peacock in Jaldapara is a regular feature*



*Tea Garden on way – Green everywhere*





*Dancing away – peacock at dance class*



*Beauty at its best*



*Night visit of Rhinos and Indian Gaur – from Holong Bungalow through search light*



*Indian Gaur looking at visitorsB*

counter of the Forest Dept. near Jaldapara Tourist Lodge (typically in the evening at 6PM for next day safari). You can ask your tour operator or the driver to send information to the agents who will onboard your entry and the vehicle will come to your resort to pick you up at the requisite time of Safari. For us, Subhan, our driver for the trip arranged for the boarding and we paid him 1500 (charges for the jeep and guide). Please keep the receipt as it is used for vehicle entry and exit charges setoff otherwise



*Parakite couples fighting with each other*

you have to pay extra charges if you are staying in Holong (entry and exit fees are required for the vehicle taking you to the place). There are many staying options in Jaldapara area and the best possible

option is Jaldapara Tourist Lodge (Government property). Many private properties are also available at various levels of budget to suit the need of the tourists.





# DHUPJHORA ELEPHANT CAMP

## DAY TWO

After having breakfast at Holong, we took the Madarihath road and started at about 11AM for Dhupjhora Elephant Camp. The drive was about 2 hours through a combination of good and bad roads – partly Asian Highway, partly National Highway and partly under construction road. The place is closer to Lataguri area and it should have been covered along with Lataguri tourists options. As we had booked for Holong and got Batabari stay option the very next day as per original plan we had already made bookings for other places and arranged for logistics. But we did not like the idea of staying in Batabari and wanted to explore Dhupjhora Elephant camp (commonly known as Gachhbari or Tree House locally) as it was opened by Forest dept. for booking after Feb 16, 2022. We took the chance and booked the property for our accommodation.



*Cottages provide comfortable stay to tourists at Dhupjhora Camp*

Dhupjhora is in Gorumara forest area and surrounded by jungle in one side, river in another and tea gardens in all other sides. The place has almost zero noise level and you hear only the sound of birds everywhere. You drive through tea gardens to reach the forest accommodation at Dhupjhora. The backside of the camp is also covered with tea gardens. After checking in we wanted to look around the place. This is an elephant camp where tourists are exposed to elephant bathing,

elephant ride (if you book online), feeding elephants, etc. before their elephant ride in the evening at about 4.30PM.

The camp provides all meals as there are no options of going out for food. They charge 1800 for 2 persons which includes all meals, a tribal performance in the evening at the camp, some souvenirs of jute products manufactured by local women in the June center within the property. We had booked our elephant safari on online basis from wbfdc website from 4.30PM to 5.30PM and here one elephant carries only 2 tourists. The food was prepared by locally employed female cooks and they prepare excellent meals for the tourists. Tea / coffee and snacks are provided by the kitchen caretaker Pradip. He also guides you for birds in the area. After lunch, we opted to take some rest and at about 3.30PM, we were called to visit the river nearby for elephant bathing experience. This is an unique experience for tourists. We found many birds in this area –



*Bathing elephant is a great experience at Dhupjhora camp*



*Baby elephant is playing with mother and another elephant*

yellow nape woodpecker, pigmy woodpecker, leaf birds, sun birds, hill myna, black headed Oriole, magpie, peacocks, fan tailed drongo, etc. The evenings are very pleasant. We went for the elephant rides and the ride is through the jungle and then crossing the river, then passing through the grassland to come back to the camp. We saw wild boars, sambar deer, Indian gaur, peacock, etc. The local tribal dance troupe arrived in the evening to perform the dance. As our family of 4 were the only tourists staying there, they

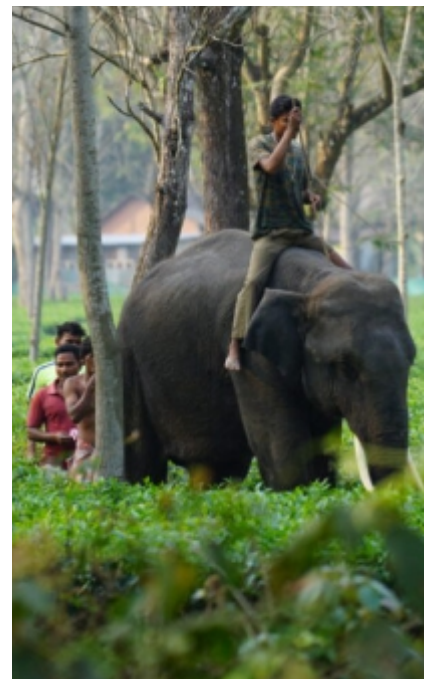
requested us to attend the same. 11 (7 dancers and 4 musicians) members of the troupe produced 3 dance sessions of about 10 minutes each – a Jhumur dance sequence was performed by the local dancing girls where the guests can also join to lend a leg. It was a good experience to witness the tribal dance.

Early morning at the camp is simply beautiful. Mr. Pradip from the Camp had advised us not to venture into the jungle alone without a guide as wild elephants are nearby so also good number of



*Black headed Oriole*

leopards. Sunrise is really beautiful and enchanting if you can walk towards the river area about 200 meters away from the camp. Wild animals walk out of the jungle and at times enter the camp. We saw a barking deer happily foraging grass in front of the cottages and slowly walked inside the jungle while a peacock was walking to the camp area from the jungle. It is always better to carry your own tea making stuffs as nobody is available to help you with morning tea before 8.00AM. We met one Mr. Indrajit Sengupta from Kolkata who had come there to attend a training and review meeting. He heads a dog squad and helps forest dept. to avoid and reduce poaching incidents. He is a good in birds identification as he is associated with a wildlife magazine and a resort in Sundarbans. He invited us to visit the place in Sep to



*Elephant used for Safari*





*Sunset at Dhubjhora camp*



*Elephant baby (17 months) playing in the river area*



*Blue Whistling Thrush*



*Minivet Female*







*Barking deer inside Dhupjhora Elephant Camp*



*Yellow Nape Woodpecker*



*Yellonape Woodpecker is at work*



*Barking deer going back and peacock is coming in*



*Jute spinning – creating a dignified livelihood for local women at Dhupjhora camp*





*Reflection of a Tree on the River near Sishamara Rhino Camp*



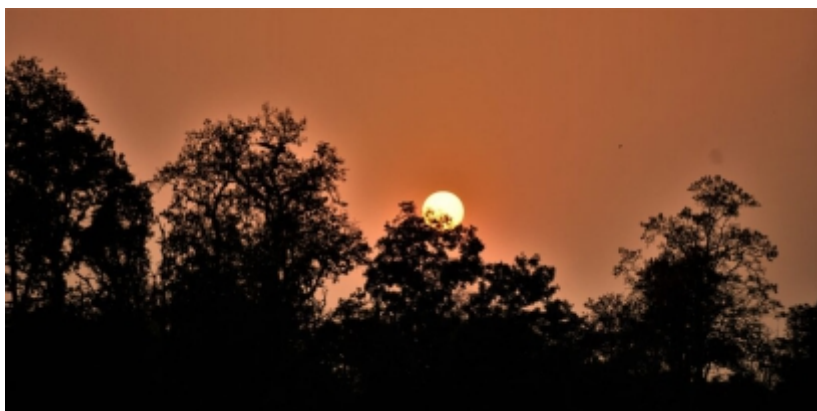
*Searching for Food items on the tree*



*The famous Gacchbari – Tree house*

see the beauty of Sundarbans. In the morning, we found lot of birds happily chirping away in the area. The sound of woodpecker hitting the tree is really noisy early in the morning.

The booking for Dhupjhora was made from <https://wbfdc.net> –



*Sunrise at Dhupjhora camp*

the official website of Forest Dept. West Bengal Forest Dept has many stay facilities in forests and they have opened up for booking by tourists. Cancellation charges are reasonable for accommodation but for Safari, there would be no refund. It is always better to carry dry fruits, biscuits, tea making provisions, etc.

After breakfast, we visited the Jute products workshop where the forest dept. trains local women to make Jute products like bags, mats, carpets, essence sticks, etc. A small buying by the tourists can help these local women to earn a dignified living.

## **SISHAMARA RHINO COTTAGE**

### **DAY THREE**

**S**ishamara is about 7-8km away from Holong and regular Jeep Safari trips are made by tourists staying in Sishamara. It is a new tourists attraction with limited staying options. The drive from Dhupjhora crosses through many interior roads among the cultivation fields and we could see harvesting and packing of potatoes everywhere. The area does not have many banks (rather we did not see any) and hence carrying cash is most recommended as ATMs are not available easily.

There are only 3 Homestays in the area (close to each other on the bank of the river adjacent to the forest) and Rhino Cottage is the oldest and started about 5 years ago

in 2017 by one Mr. Pradip Roy of Falakata area (the nearest small town). The accommodation is located in a 10 bigha land parcel on the boundary of Jaldapara forest separated by the river. The tourist accommodations are located in the first floor of the two small buildings (4 rooms in all) and one dorm with 4 beds. The tourists can sit out at various sitting areas in the property and as well use the swing for comfort. The dining place is in an open place covered with straw giving cooling comfort to tourists. The dining table and chairs have been created with trunks of large trees and looks gorgeous. The river adjacent to the forest and Home stays is the main source of water for wild animals and you can see at times a few wild animals coming out from the forest or passing through. We could see some peacocks and wild boars in the evening.

Sishamara is a quiet place and full of tranquility of a village. We met 3 senior couples who have come to unwind and staying in the new nearby Home Stay opened only a couple of months ago. The place does not provide any outside exploring except walking on the raised river bank and moving around in the property. People who would like to come here for unwinding should bring good number of books to read and spend time in solitude.

The hosts are very nice people and they arrange for all your food but typically service staff get up late and early risers will have a problem of getting tea and breakfast early in the morning. It is suggested for tourists to bring your own tea making stuffs to avoid discomfort of not getting morning tea. The food is generally standard non-veg (fish in lunch and chicken in

dinner) and getting vegetarian food is a big challenge here.

The evenings are cooler as the place is located near the jungle and water body like the river. The camp fire is helpful to sit out for sometime. The sleep is very peaceful. We did not find any interesting birds in the area though the place is closer to the jungle area. As there is no online booking facility, we were guided by our trip guide to contact Mr. Pradip Roy, the owner on his mobile number. If you are taking a driver with you, typically the drivers are placed in the ground floor rooms against payment.

We had our delicious breakfast of “Luchi” and “Alu dum” and tea with eggs. We started for our next destination “Chilapata” at about 10.00AM as it takes about 1.5 hours of drive to reach Chilapata from Sishamara Rhino Cottage.



*Sishamara – closer to the forest area and separated by a river*





*Morning Sunrise at Sishamara*



*Sunrise at Sishamara*



*Sishamara Rhino Cottage*



*Nearby Home Stays at Sishamara Rhino Cottage*



*Potato harvesting on our way to Sishamara*



*Peaben walking with a reflection on River nearby*



*Dense Chilapata forest*



*Fort of Chilapata – destroyed and partially visible*

## CHILAPATA NALGARH RETREAT

### DAY FOUR

**C**hilapata Range is a good drive of about 2 hours from Sishamara area. The road is generally good to drive though at times we encountered bad road and road under construction. The accommodation was arranged at Nalgarh Retreat which is about 1.5km from the main Chilapata area and closer to the entry gate of the forest. One side of the resort is connected to the forest and sitting in the rear-side balcony, we can enjoy the beauty of the forest with continuous chirping of birds everywhere. The resort is a good property with 4 building housing 8 rooms with a good gardening area and children play area. There are a few birds continuously chattering away – specifically redwhiskered bulbuls.

We had booked a Jeep Safari at Chilapata and we paid the resort people to arrange for the vehicle and guide to come to the place of our stay in time so that we can start the jeep safari well in time. Last time we had seen many elephants in Chilapata and our expectation was very high. However, we did not see any animal this time. Just before getting down at Gorumara jungle camp for tribal dance show, we saw a big Indian Gaur walking on the road.

The Tribal dance was a very short affair as we were the only vehicle which had come to see the dance as we did not disappoint the dancers who have come from far off places to showcase their dancing skill. The dancers and the people around the place typically use Asamese Mekhela and Chadar (two pieces) as their regular dress.

The food at the Nalgarh Retreat is good but typically oily. The booking can be made online as well as by calling up the front desk or through a travel advisor. There is hardly anything to do in Chilapata except walking around in nearby

places. The forest Jeep safari does not offer much as hardly any animals are available in the forest. The tower where grasslands are available (you can see some wild animals like Indian Gaur, wild boar, etc.) is closed for tourists and it is simply driving through the forest enjoying the green environment.

Chilapata became famous after a Prasenjit starrer movie “Moner Manus” was shot here by famous director Mr. Gautam Ghosh. They have a resort by the name of the Movie. Restaurants are hardly available to have decent food. Hence, you are typically confined to your resort if not going out for jungle safari. In entire Dooars area, only Jaldapara offers great animal viewing in safaris while other places like Chilapata are available for unwinding and enjoying the tranquility of forest. Chilapata has very little to offer to value seeking tourists.



# RAIMATANG

## DAY FIVE

Our next destination was offbeat Raimatang closer to Bhutan border area. It is a good drive from Chilapata as we wanted to cover first Bhutanghat before landing at Raimatang village. We started from Chilapata after breakfast at about 9.00AM and drove through good and bad roads to reach Bhutanghat at about 11.45AM. We needed a local guide from the area who will get the required permission from the forest and the army post (SSB) and our driver made the arrangement after talking to some local person near the place. We drove through the jungle for about 20 minutes to reach the river bed and Bhutanghat. The beauty of Bhutanghat is that the small hills on the bank of the river has seven colours of stone. It is a nice place for picnic. We walked upto the river bed for snaps. You will require 45 minutes to 1 hour to have a good visit to the place. Near Bhutanghat,

there are a few Home Stays and a big Youth Hostel.

After spending some time in Bhutanghat, we started driving towards Buxa area through the forests as there was no place nearby to have food as we are close to lunchtime. We reached Buxa at about 1PM and visited Banante hotel for our meals. It is a reasonably good place for food and earlier we had food from the place a few years ago when we visited Jainti area. Food was okay and we got ready to take another couple of hours drive to Raimatang. The drive through Buxa reserve forest was a good experience and we enjoyed the cool breeze while driving via Kalchini. We called up the Home Stay to inform them about our expected time of arrival where we are going to stay for the night at Raimatang.

After Kalchini, we reached the Raimatang market area and saw the weekly market is in full swing and local people are busy in buying the products starting with vegetables to clothes for family members. As directed by the Home Stay owner, we started driving towards

Raimatang village who will meet us on our way. We drove through a very large riverbed and later we were informed by the Home Stay owner that during rainy season, the river gets water from the local mountains and totally flooded and there will be no transport available from the village to outside world. People typically stay indoors and inside the village area for almost 3 months when the Raimatang river is flooded.

We also understood that local villagers used to cultivate many agricultural products in their own fields but the elephants destroy the same every year. Hence, the villagers have stopped agricultural cultivation and moved to Betel nut farming which is of no interest to elephants. The place is famous for black pepper cultivation and we found every house has a plant that gives black pepper, we also purchased a small quantity from one of the villagers.

Raimatang village has a very few houses and have about 5/6 home stays. The Home Stay in front of the Forest Bungalow is the best option but we stayed in a smaller



*Entry to Bhutanghat through the Forest area – SSB permission is required for the vehicle*



*Bhutanghat hill with 7 colours – River connects India and Bhutan*



*River on Bhutangbat with clean water*



*Village Road in Raimatang*



*Raimatang River dry bed which gets flooded in Rainy season*

homestay (Mountain view) which was not so good.

Typically, fans are not required for the night but as the temperature was soaring, we had to switch on the standing fan. The dinner and breakfast was simple.

We walked towards the river area through the forest with the help of a guide. The guide said that birds like Hornbill come regularly to Raimatang. The walk to the river

was pleasant but there was not so steep climbing for about 200 meters or so to reach the river bed. It was good experience. Raimatang offer stunning Sunset from the village through the trees.

The place is totally quiet and only sound you hear is the chirping of birds nearby. Typically, some Bulbuls and sun birds visit the place and fly happily. The booking for this place was done by our tour

guide but there were better options available in the area. A nice and quiet place. Most importantly, network is not available for Jio/Airtel/Voda. Only BSNL is available but not always you can call. Hence, the villagers have stopped agricultural cultivation and moved to Betel nut farming which is of no interest to elephants. The place is famous for black pepper cultivation and we





*Homestay where we stayed at Raimatang*



*River Bed in Raimatang river*

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Raimatang village has a very few houses and have about 5/6 home stays. The Home Stay in front of the Forest Bungalow is the best option but we stayed in a smaller homestay (Mountain view) which was not so good.

Typically, fans are not required for the night but as the temperature was soaring, we had to switch on the standing fan. The dinner and



*Raimatang Seasonal River – gets flooded in Rainy season cutting off access to outside world*

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*Birds at Raimatang*

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## TODEY

### DAY SIX

**T**oday is an offbeat place in Kalimpong district and you have to take the long road to Bindu, Paren area to visit Todey. It is a very remote place with bad roads and last 36km took almost 2.5 hours. Once you reach the place, it is a kind of heaven on a hill top with a very few people around. It is a real long drive from Raimatang and the road condition is not very good and you have to continuously ask people for direction as road signs are not generally available. However, our driver, Mr. Shuban, was more or less had idea about Paren and Bindu and could maneuver the place. Network is also a major issue on our way at many places and after about 5.5 hours, we could reach Todey at about 1.30PM. First, we had to stop at Todey market and meet one of the owner brothers and seek direction to drive another 2km upward to hilltop to reach the Home Stay. The drive is difficult

but once you reach the place, your mind fills with joy seeing the nature in abundance. You can see the mountains on Indian and Bhutan side and easily see Bhutan houses from the top. The weather was not very clear to see the snowclad hill tops. We could see the Doklam peak from the Home Stay. The Tongse (last Indian village before Medicine river divides India and Bhutan) monastery could be seen from the Home Stay. The accommodation is basic but clean. The Home stay has only 3 rooms to offer for tourists. Todey is a new tourist attraction as other nearby areas like Bindu and Paren are operating on almost full capacity given their resource crunch.

Lunch was simple but delicious. There is a beautiful Church nearby from where we could hear the sound of the bell. Lepcha brothers are very good hosts and take all care to make you feel comfortable. In the evening, they do bonfire and make kababs for the tourists. As there is not much to do in the place, we had early dinner and went to enjoy the tranquility of the place by sitting out to watch the stars.

Generally hill people are late risers and you do not get bed tea or early morning tea unless you make your own arrangements. The morning was used for watching birds and Sunrise. We could see some birds (limited varieties) like red whiskered Bulbul, yellow vented Bulbul, minivet, leaf bird, verditer flycatcher, sun birds, etc.

Breakfast was usual Puri and Sabji with eggs and tea...Quite good taste...The Lepcha brothers of the Home Stay offered the traditional welcome with a cloth apiece on our

necks as a mark of respect. Red cloth is generally given to the head of the party and others are given white cloth as a mark of respect to the tourists. The booking of the place was arranged by our tour guide and we enjoyed our overnight stay here at Todey. We also visited the Church and local school to interact with a few students. We were informed that teachers have gone for some work and all students upto Std 8 had gala time to enjoy.



*Cardamom plantation and Todey village*



*Todey Village from Home Stay*





*Todey – snowclad tops are covered with fog*



*Dining area for Home Stay – nicely designed*



*The local Church catering to the nearby areas*



*The traditional welcome of Guests with clothes*



*Bhutan Mountains from Home Stay*



*Bindu area – Crossing riven lands you in Bhutan*



*Local School*



*Tongse Monastery from Todey Cardamom Home Stay*



*Verditer Flycatcher*



# SUNTHELIKHOLA

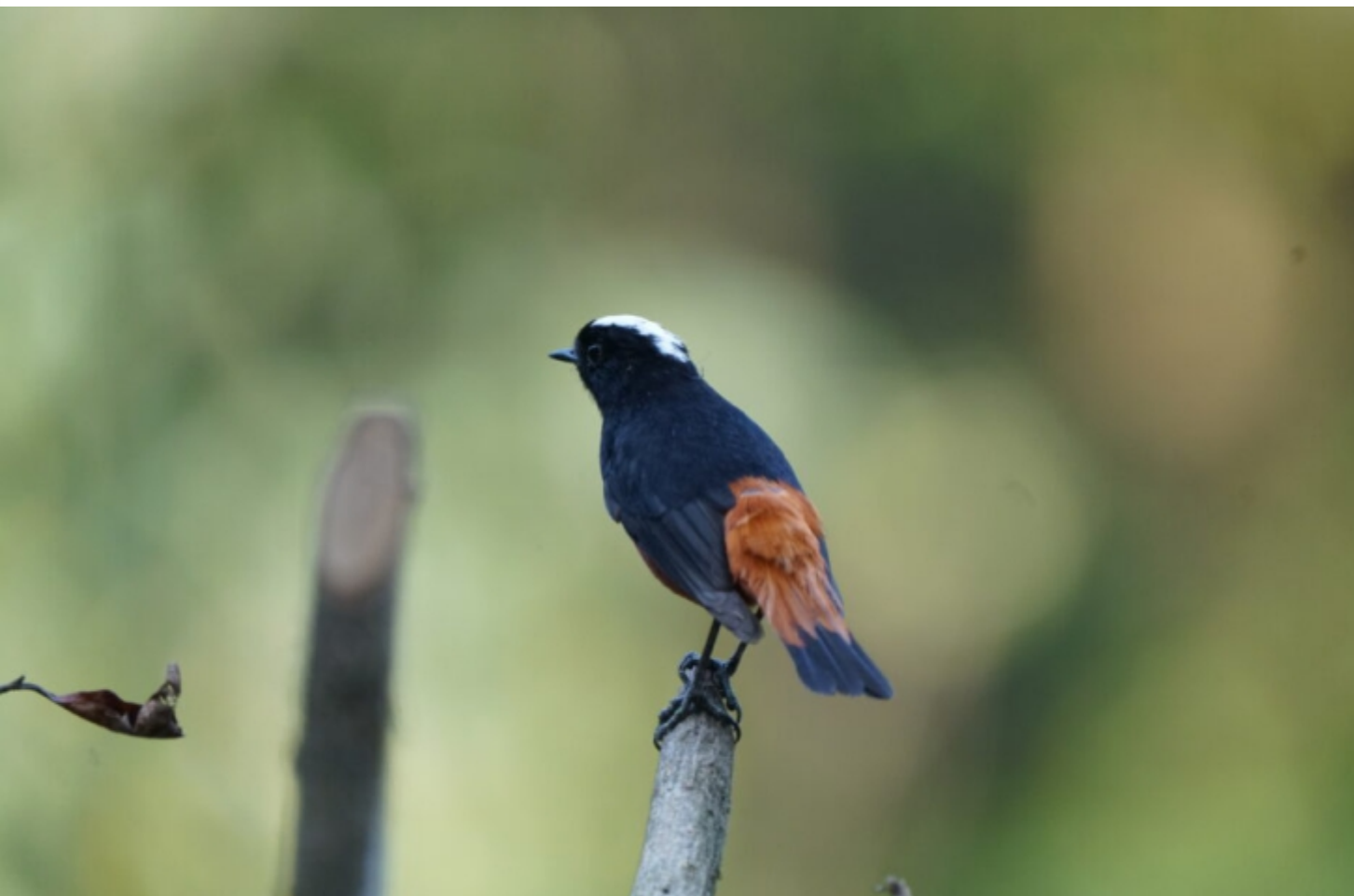
## DAY SEVEN

The drive to Sunthelikhola from Todey was about 2.5 hours passing through Bindu, Paren, Rocky island, Jhalong, etc. The road is partly okay but many places, the construction work was going on. Bad hill roads is a genuine problem. We drove through the tea gardens and reached Samsing area. Samsing is a small town with a few shops and Home Stays. We have to travel beyond Samsing to reach our

destination inside the forest area. We had booked the forest dept. super deluxe rooms through online booking portal of WBFDC. The rooms were large with one common room used for sitting out. There is also a small verandah to sit outside to watch the birds nearby. Continuous chirping of birds can be heard. There are 2 sets of accommodation owned by forest Dept. One is a camp with only 4 rooms (where we stayed) and

another has about 14 rooms and tents after you cross the hanging bridge to reach the cottages and tents (little cheaper than the other set). Camp was fully occupied but the Cottage had only one guest in a tent.

The food is prepared if ordered well in time otherwise you need to either walk about a km or drive the same to reach the Samsing market area where you can get food and other necessary stuffs.





The place is enchanting as it is fully covered with greenery and tall trees everywhere. It gets dark very fast and you have to be confined to your room. The food prepared by the security guard looking after the place is tasty but very oily. All meals are charged as per intake. The security guard goes out after lunch hours and comes back only in the evening. Then he gives dinner and goes out to be back in the morning at about 8AM.

After getting up in the morning, we walked around in the property and also moved to the cottage area after crossing the hanging bridge to see the bird activities. We could see many common birds like Bulbul, sun birds, minivet, drongoes, etc. Worth staying for overnight.





# NEORA JUNGLE CAMP

## DAY EIGHT

**W**e drove from Sunthelikhola through tea gardens and stopped at various places to buy tea and see the tea garden workers picking up tea leaves and depositing them to the weighing team on the road. The workers are paid on the basis of the collection of leaves from the tea garden. The whole process is hand picked. We stopped at Batabari area to visit the Tata Tea shop located inside tea garden selling both Assam and Darjeeling tea to local people as

well to the tourists. We drove towards Lataguri area via Madarihat and our destination was inside the jungle. Neora jungle camp is located inside the forest and can be booked through the portal of WBFDC. They have only 7 rooms and being inside the forest, your entry and exit are restricted. We had booked a Jeep Safari for Chapramari tower which is the farthest of the towers. It takes about 45 minutes to reach the gate.

We reached the place around 12 Noon and checked into our rooms. The camp has only 9 rooms – 5 cottages with attached bath outside the main watch tower area and 4 with common baths (rooms are small) in the watch tower building

near the dining place. We were given the attached bath rooms and the view of the jungle was great with continuous sound of birds and peacocks.

The food is good but do not expect better service here. If you have a flight to catch and need to start before 8/8.30AM, in all probability you will not get even morning tea. Generally, food is standard with a few items and to be paid on meal basis.

Nights are very peaceful as the place inside the jungle. Early morning safari starts at 5.30AM and you will see many jeeps passing through the staying area.



*Entry gate to Neora Jungle camp*



*Indian Gaurs near the Chapramari gate*



*Indian Gaurs*





*Indian Gaurs in the Chapramari Tower area*



*Sunset at Chapramari area*





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