

Why the Mountains?

M.K.Ranjit Singh

Ever so often I am asked as to why I have a special predilection for montane fauna.

Firstly, the Indian subcontinent has montane mammals unparalleled in the world for their variety, diversity size and splendour. They have been the least studied, indeed least known for the remoteness of their habitats. Amongst them are species gravely threatened, but there are no godfathers to mountain animals, not even for the snowleopard or the stately Hangul. Of all the terrestrial regions, the mountains are the most difficult to police and protect from the poacher and they are also the most fragile. Yet, next to the hot deserts, of all our terrestrial biomes the mountains and uplands find the least representation in our protected areas system, despite the fact that they provide the most precious commodity in our country: potable water.

But there is another reason for the mountain preference. I have always been fascinated by mountains, but I will not climb them just for the sake of climbing. I will do so if I can see an animal. And in the pursuit of these animals, I have travelled and climbed the Himalayas from the Kaj-i-Nag in western Kashmir to Walong and beyond in Arunachal in the east. I have been rewarded with some of the most treasured days of my life. It is just not the backdrop alone - and could there be a more magnificent backdrop than those of the Himalayan snows and peaks and of the Nilgiri Sholas - but the animals themselves. A great 50 inch-homed

markhor statuesquely pivoted on a pinnacle, immobile except for the wafting of his cape of long hair in the strong mountain breeze; Ibex with horns almost full circle, silhouetted against a turquoise - blue sky; a hundred *Ovis ammon*, the largest bodied sheep in the world festooned over a stark - barren hillside; a superb specimen of a snow leopard stalking bharal over shale in the bright winter-morning sun; a fourteen-point hangul stag, head raised heavenward, the rising crescendo of his rutting call drowning the gentle murmur of the Harwan stream, all around the landscape draped in autumn hues, russet, copper, gold and sombre green.

There is yet another reason. Man turns to nature for two basic needs - to escape the confines of communal living and to have communion with nature. While occupied with your favourite pastime of watching animals in our parks or sanctuaries, how many times you must have frowned with disapproval when another vehicle drove up, or when you realize that you are not alone in the jungle? Not so in the mountains. You have your animal and your ambience all to yourself in the mountains. Selfish perhaps, but how deliciously satisfying and rejuvenating. One has *lebensraum* - living space - uncluttered. And there are no shortcuts in the mountains - no driving up in jeeps, no hides at waterholes, no boat rides. When you look at a picture taken by you of a shapu or a Himalayan tahr, you remember the long stiff climb, lungs



abursting, and the benumbing cold. It is not just a photograph, but the reliving of a vivid experience. Only those who have savoured this elixir and have the gumption and the physique to crave for more, would understand and appreciate this.

My first long trek in the Himalayas was way back in 1958 when I was still in college. The flight from Srinagar to Leh was in a propeller driven DC 2 plane, barely going over the 10,000' ZojiLa and then dipping down, the entire route flanked by awesome mountains towering above. There was only one jeep in Ladakh west of Kargil and that was with the commanding officer of the Qnly. Battalion in that area. And there were just 2 roads - one from the gravel air-strip to the old Moravian Mission which constituted the battalion HQ and where we stayed, and the other from Leh to Hemis Gompa some 22 km away. The last caravan from Yarkand had come in over the Karakoram Pass a year earlier and its wares were available for sale. But there were only 2 tins of kerosene available in the market, and which we bought. In the countryside the Rupee had little value and we bought our supplies of eggs and the delicious hair - entwined yak-milk butter on a barter basis. We walked from Leh to Upshi, ferrying ourselves over the Indus over a rope as the makeshift bridge had been washed away. Then up the spectacularly awesome Upshi Gorge, past Gya, up Kiamer Nala and the *Ovis ammon* grounds, over Kiamer La and to Tso Kar, where we saw our first Tibetan Gazelle, grey wolf and Tibetan sandgrouse. On the Tso Kar, bar-headed geese were breeding, as were brahminy duck in their deep russet-red plumage. Then over the 17600', Taglang La and down to Hemis for the annual fair and Lama dance, the festival of the year for Ladakh. I was

surprised by the number of animals and birds to be encountered and even more by their lameness. The last hunting expeditions, all by Englishmen - were before World War II. The locals were Buddhists and the army had not penetrated beyond Leh. We had chakor amongst our camp and bharal above it - Shapu were still around on the vast sandy plains. Amongst all the shrill trumpeting of the monastic horns and clashing of cymbals, the din and chang-swilling at the Hemis festival, I remember looking up at the mountain above and seeing a herd of bharal peaceably munching. It was a month of marching in pure paradise.

I next went to Ladakh in 1970. What a change, what progress! One could drive from Leh to Hanie or Demchok in a day, a distance of over 250 kms, or go over Fotu Za to Kargil and even over the mighty Khardong La, the highest pass in the world traversable by motor vehicles. But wither wildlife? Gone were the bharal, the shapu and the chakor in the Indus valley and the Kiang would lit out on seeing one's vehicle. I have traveled thrice more through Ladakh. The armed forces are not the prime enemies of wildlife that they used to be. The Kiang do not spook so much and animals can be seen off the roads, though never in great numbers. Tibetan sandgrouse still come to sip water at the rivulets that empty into Tso Kar, though the gazelle have gone from this area. But there is now a *Shiv mandir* at Tso Kar, looking forlorn and totally out of place. Why do we need another Shiv temple when the entire Himalaya is a Shivalaya?

In 1960, I went to the Nilgiris for the first time. We walked to Bison Shola and Nadgami Peak from Emerald. En route there were tracks of tiger and we saw



sambar, bison, barking deer and elephant. In days to come we camped on some exquisite sites and saw a black leopard and Niligiri tahr, I suspect I also saw a Malabar civet, the rarest among the rare. From the lip of the kundah escarpment we looked down upon Silent Valley and its surrounds - miles upon miles of unbroken canopied forest of bewildering hues. I have never in my life seen such pristine, verdure jungle, shola, crags and grassland. And I never saw a vestige of human presence except for the few footpaths, surrounded though we were by some of the densest human habitations in the world. Now the Forest Department has planted eucalyptus in the grassland, denying the tahr of grazing and providing the leopard cover to stalk the tahr. Are there not other places to plant gum trees?

In no mountains of the world have I found man and nature in such harmony and equilibrium as in Bhutan. When I first trekked there in 1965 there were no forestry operations, hardly any roads beyond Thimpu and Paro and mountain animals and birds were so unbelievably fearless of man. Musk deer and snow partridge would allow human approach to

within 20 metres. Herds of bharal would allow our yak caravan to pass by within 200 metres and even takin would mill around on seeing humans, not depart. Quietly padding amongst some stunted junipers, I rounded a tree and came upon a male satyr tragopan in bright morning sunlight, resplendent in red, barely 5 metres away. Both the bird and I froze, he cocking his head slightly to survey me. Both watched each other for three or more minutes. Then the bird relaxed and started feeding! Perhaps it had never seen a human before.

For the long-term survival of our wildlife and wilderness we need popular support. That can only be forthcoming if there is mass appeal and appreciation, which in turn can only occur if people visit the areas and enjoy nature and the animate life. It won't happen in the mountains if the people go there only for pilgrimage to the mountain shrines and never undertake the arduous exercise to climb in order to see the animals. We need our armchair conservationists. We need bucket-seat (jeep driven) conservationists more. But most of all we need conservationists who do their work on their feet - and take no shortcuts.

