

DESTINATION

North

In the heart of Kumaon

What started out as a lonely job, soon became a way of life for the author. Such is the beauty of the valley with a view of the Nanda Devi and its many intriguing inhabitants, some of whom choose not to show themselves to anyone but the ones that persist.

Text & Photographs: AVIJIT DUTTA



As I gazed at the snow capped mountains of Nanda Devi and Trishul while warming myself under the October sun, out came a yellow throated marten from the overgrown bushes down below. It hurried across the stepped farms with a rodent in its mouth and disappeared into the distance in seconds. In less than three hours of my arrival, I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of this beautiful mammal indigenous to the Himalayas. But this was no National Park, no wildlife sanctuary...this was a piece of paradise with thickly wooded forests, interrupted in many places by large terraced farmlands, small streams, high mountains, cliffs and a lone temple hidden in silence. Cradled in the heart of remote Kumaon of the Western Himalayas, Chalni Chinna was to be my new work place as a naturalist and this was a place like no other.

The environment had great similarities to the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where I spent my entire childhood. And through that experience I knew that red fox and flying squirrels were definitely ones that could be around here too. But these were creatures of the night. The challenge that I faced was the relatively difficult hilly terrain — exploring all of it on foot was going to be exhausting indeed. What was worse was that I was the only one exploring, with no fellow naturalist for assistance or company. With leopard attacks on humans just 16km away in the village of Lamgarah, being on the trail at night all alone was probably not the most advisable. But my curiosity made me brave many nights that followed. On the second evening of my arrival, while amongst the thickly wooded pine trees, and as the evening had turned into dusk, I heard an unmistakable sound of nibbling on a pine branch. As I looked up to figure out the animal high above me, the only thing visible was a bushy tail. This had to be a flying squirrel, I thought.

Much of my socialising was done over Maggi plates and hot *chai* at the village market in Chalni Chinna. From the locals, I learnt that there was a regular presence of gorals, barking deer and wild boar in the area. When asked about the leopard, they explained how the phantom took away dogs and goats from their courtyards. Although there were no man-eaters around, walking through the darkness in the forest, my senses were on a high alert for a while.

Travel Tips

How to reach

Chalni Chinna is around 115 kilometres away from Kathgodam

station. Best way to reach is to board either the Ranikhet Express or Kathgodam Shatabdi from Delhi to reach Kathgodam and then hire a taxi to the destination.

Accommodation:

Itmnaan Estate, a project of Itmnaan Lodges, initiated by a very young entrepreneur, Ashish Bhatia, is an ideal way to explore Chalni Chinna. It provides excellent accommodation that blends in perfectly with the rural Kumaoni stone houses and serves good food. You may book through their website or contact them at the Delhi office.

Best time to visit:

The snow peaks are best seen during the winter season although it can get bitterly cold during the time, but the ideal time for birding, treks and exploring can be done during the summer months between March and June when the weather is remains pleasant.

April is also a special month with the bloom of the rhododendron flowers.

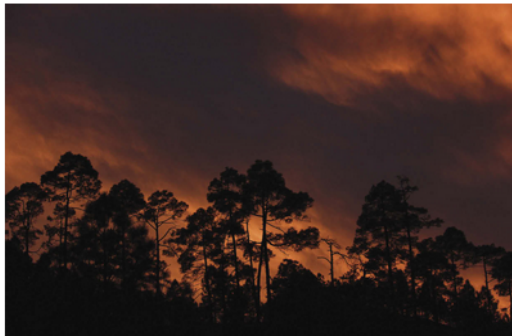


Birdlife, however, could any day overshadow the more secretive mammals that stay hidden in the forage. Grey hooded warblers, common rose finch, black headed jays, streaked laughing thrushes, blue whistling thrushes and the red billed blue magpies, who continuously chattered, were just a few among the many regular fauna. The gregarious calling of the beautifully coloured great barbet could be heard almost all day long. While days in autumn saw butterflies everywhere, the nights belonged to the fireflies. They seemed like little torch lights in the darkness. Species of butterflies included the brightly-coloured painted ladies, red admirals, blue pansies while the subtle ones were the common maps and chocolate pansies. My real challenge was to face the winter that followed. Days were shorter and the long nights, bitterly cold. At this time, mammal sightings had become extremely rare. Between December and

February, the only mammal I managed to sight was a regular troop of 14-strong *langurs* that visited often. Temperatures went down to as low as 4 degrees below zero. I hung on to the dear warmth of my blankets — I think that was the best I could do then. However, the search for anything new and indigenous was carried on under the pleasant sun during the day. It was on a comfortable January afternoon when I discovered a rotting buffalo carcass and a good 50 Himalayan Vultures squabbling among themselves for the largest chunks of meat. I needed to follow up on this till the remains were stripped to the barest. For the next couple of days when I visited, the vultures were at it, and I even sighted a lone jackal. But that is not what kept me interested. It was on the third morning since I had discovered the carcass that I managed to sight a wedge-tailed bird of prey flying exactly towards where the remains of the buffalo lay. As I got closer, I noticed not one but four to five of them fly over me. Observing them through binoculars, and after comparing my photographs to the field guides, I considered myself fortunate to have observed the bearded vultures soar high over me.

January also saw rain and this made things worse. I was confined indoors for a couple of days. With no fire, no heater or even electricity at times, and having managed to lose my gloves in the forest, I could barely keep my hands warm. My fingers fell to chilblains. On the morning of February 17, I woke up and opened my door to find a white sheet that covered the ground. The heavy rains had given way to snow in the cold hours of the night — 6 inches of snow in a single night had changed the landscape entirely. A bhutia dog seemed too confused and yet happy like many others of his kind for the sudden turn of events. As if I had entered into a calendar frame, I rejoiced with a sip of hot *chai* while listening to stories of previous winters by the villagers.

March brought a feeling of comfort as the temperatures turned bearable. And with that came the first summer visitors amongst the avian fauna. Grey headed canary flycatchers, eurasian cuckoos, verditer flycatchers, blue capped rock thrush, white crested laughing thrushes, wire tailed swallows and crested serpent eagle were just some of the many species added to my birders' checklist. This mixed temperate coniferous forest included pine, rhododendron, deodar, and oak trees. Sighting of woodpeckers, tree creepers, minivets, bulbuls, jays and tits were common. Shrubs and bushes that were a favourite of laughing thrushes and rusty cheeked scimitar babblers. Scrubs and open country were an attraction for munias and finches, while ravines, that created waterfalls and mountain streams, drew red starts and forktails and, to my surprise even common and crested Kingfishers. Spring not just brought birds, but also changed my luck in terms of mammals. On a fine afternoon, while I wandered up the mountain from a waterfall, I sighted not one but three martens together. As I followed them into the forest, they kept busy playing with each other — but all the while keeping an eye on me and maintaining a distance. They showed extreme agility when climbing up trees and hanging on to branches. I even observed one of them taking nectar from a blooming rhododendron flower.



Within a week, as I trekked up to the edge of a cliff on a pleasant evening, there was a herd of six gorals. These magnificent goat antelopes were amazingly swift on the rocky edges and cliffs, and from then on I sighted them almost every second day. Guests who accompanied me on the jungle trails at this time too were lucky. Being primarily crepuscular in nature, my best sightings of these graceful goats happened in the early morning hours, while one very special sighting of a mother and fawn happened just before dusk. In between, I also sighted a wild boar and a barking deer. The real surprise came on a night in April when I came face-to-face with an elusive cat.

On April 28, at around 10:50 pm, while I was returning to my room after dinner, the phantom of the night stood just yards away up on a hill above my house. As I looked into his hypnotic eyes that reflected light to my pointing torch, I felt the hair stand on my forearms. He sat stealthily like a cat, before making a dash to disappear into the darkness. I must admit that I rushed for the safety of my room, my heart still pounding and my feet cold.

On another fine evening, as I set off to the market for a walk to celebrate the sightings of gorals and marten on a single morning with a plate of maggi, a beautiful serpent, coated with patterns of red, slithered past into a rocky crevice. Greatly annoyed by my pulling of his tail to get a closer look, it took position typical that of a pit viper. As I compared my photographs later with that of a field guide, I realised that I had once again managed to sight the indigenous and rare Himalayan pit viper.

My luck continued as I managed to find the flying squirrels again, and this time, observed them gliding. Sightings with guests included those of red fox and flying squirrels, while gorals had almost become a habit. Amongst all these, were the wild flowers and fruits — from raspberry to rhododendrons, peaches and walnuts, wild blueberries and pears, and even apples and apricots.



The mystery of the flying squirrel is being resolved at the moment with the help of photographs by the team at BNHS and the ZSI, but in most likelihood, it seems to be the small Kashmiri flying squirrel.

While the Uttarakhand floods rocked the Garhwal mountains, I was spending my last two weeks in Kumaon. Heavy landslides had cut off road network to the nearest towns of Pithoragarh and Almora for almost a week. But no harm was done, although I wondered if the red fox family which was bearing pups at the time were doing fine.

As June came to an end, so did my nine-month tenure and it was time for me to leave. In this period, I had recorded almost 140 species of Himalayan birds, 17 species of mammals, and 50-plus species of butterflies. While I drove down the mountains for the

final time, the peak of Trishul emerged out of the clouds, to show itself to me for the last time – at least for now.

Memories remain though – the mornings with the gorals, the extensive search for the marten, the evenings with the red fox and gliding of the flying squirrel, and the ever-elusive leopard, the mountains and the village people whom I came to know personally. Add to these the happiness in a cup of hot *chai* and waking up to the chirping of birds – from the golden bush robin in the winter, the fire tail sunbird taking nectar from a rhododendron flower in the spring, to the scaly bellied woodpecker nesting in a tree hole in summer – and, of course, the snow peaks of Nanda Devi and Trishul...Chalni Chinna was one place which reminded me of stories I had read in school that started with.... 'Once upon a time'...Hopefully nature will continue to have its way here.