

# The Great Himalayan National Park

By Anuranjan Roy

*Located in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh, the Great Himalayan National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.*



A Great Rosefinch fluttered right by my nose and perched on a shrub. The red side of my reversible jacket had piqued his curiosity. All of yesterday, up at Nara Thach, camera in hand, I had stalked one of his cousins with zero success. Now, noting the absence of any optical weaponry in my hands, he plonked himself within cuddling distance of me, in all of his 'Angry Birds' grade redness. Inspecting me thoroughly and fully convinced that I wasn't competition, the most photo-worthy expression of my life flew away.

Oh, well. That was that then. Evening was closing in on Shankha Thach and I had come as far as I would on this trip to the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP). If I hadn't been crowned Mr. Landslide 2017, destroying softened trail edges and fresh rain-fed vegetation with methodical precision in my often shaky understanding with gravity, I would have continued. It was only

early June but the incessant unseasonal rains had put paid to my plans to hike to Tirath Glacier... and to my toughest pair of *khaki* cargos. Tomorrow morning, I would start my three-day journey back towards Rolla Camp.

The cave we had captured for our night halt at Shankha Thach was nice and toasty by now. The cooking fire was being tended to by Dileep with Maggi noodles on the boil; Ishwar had run out to fetch some water from the Tirthan raging alongside, doing his goral-moves on co-operative rocks; Basant Singh sat joking in Pahadi – after 33+ years of guiding in this wild country, there was nothing he couldn't laugh about.

June, he said, was a good time to stay in this cave. If it were the winter months, the resident landlord, a *sheim* (Himalayan brown bear), might have objected.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Basant looked dead serious as he motioned me to look towards a group of seven visitors from Jalandhar who were a flurry of activity in the firepit hut structure in front of us. It was a large group, unlike our compact quartet of Basant, the dynamic cook porter duo of Dileep and Ishwar, and me. It was late afternoon, we had just entered GHNP and set up at Rolla. I gave him a quizzical look to which I got an exasperated one in return. "*Unkey pichey* (behind them)," he silently mouthed. And so I looked again.

The firepit hut stood on the edge of a steep descent to the Tirthan, the river being about 15 m. of violent water wide at this point. Beyond the river, the sheer slopes were clothed with *kail* pines and wild walnut trees. And on that slope, in full eye-level view of the Jalandhar seven, had they turned around, was a magnificent goral. I had always imagined

that my first sighting of this tautly muscled, grey, beautiful goat-antelope would be through binoculars on some distant cliff. Apparently not.

GHNP sent many more such moments our way. We pretty much walked into a group of four goral on our descent down Nara Thach's eastern side, which bounded away in a rivetting display of speed but not before a warning 'sneeze'. A red and ochre Siberian weasel with its distinctive little white face sought an opening under the stream side rocks quite unconcerned as we watched from the rickety wooden bridge at Challocha Hut. We had already had our heart's content of majesty as we watched a Golden Eagle soar above pine tops for several minutes. Then as we reluctantly got going, a giant shadow on the trail forced us to look up again. Maybe only six metres above us, cruising on its massive wings, was a Lammergeier.

A SPECIAL WILDERNESS

Basant just knows. About practical *baatein* (things). About *kharab* (bad) points on the trails, slippery logs, treacherous rocks – wherever non-mountain feet would need an extension of his axe handle for support. Other times, he lets you be, staying just out of visual range, while you dwell in awe of these forests, its butterflies, dragonflies and wildflowers. You have brushed up your theory and feel excited as you notice the main trees change from the mysterious gnarly *baan* (white oak) to the *moru* (green oak) to the very brown *kharsu* (brown oak) groves rising around the high altitude *thaches* (meadows) as the trail ascends. Yet, he will always be there to gently correct you as you mix up the *kail* (blue pine) and *tosh* (silver fir) for the n<sup>th</sup> time.

He and his people knew long before UNESCO agreed, that this was a World Heritage Site, a living landscape peopled with massive *devtaa* trees and stories from the Mahabharata, and to them, protectors against the vagaries of nature. For nothing is to be taken for granted. I had watched as a goral stumbled after an ambitious leap onto a rocky ledge and fell, never to get up again. Locked by the Pin Parvati range on the east, its north and south also protected by near impassable snow-covered ranges



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The Great Rosefinch and the Western Tragopan, the state bird of Himachal Pradesh, are among the around 200 species of birds found in the Great Himalayan National Park.

as three rivers, the Tirthan, the Sainj and the Jiwa Nal course through it, the GHNP is a wilderness both precious and serious.

Basant told me that I just had to make the strenuous climb to Nara Thach for a particular realisation. When I did, the mysterious El Kapitan like rocky massif of Pakni and the overpowering calm of the snow-clad mountains, which encircled our little hut on a meadow greeted me. The evening campfire had roared for a while after the sun's last rays had stopped illuminating the snows of Majhauni Top in the east as four humans stood silently around it, jungle

all around as far as the mind could think and the ears could hear.

That night I dreamt of a snow leopard stalking blue sheep, not that fictional a dream it must be said, as this extraordinary national park covers terrain from sub-tropical to permanent snows. I realised that I had to agree with Basant. They had not prefixed the 'Great' just for the sake of it. ✕

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Inhabiting steep mountainous areas, the Himalayan goral feeds on grassy ridges and rocky slopes.



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