

Project Update: November 2010

A Monkey Watcher's Diary

It was a huge crushing sound from the nearby trees that put a brake on my progress. I stopped in my tracks to get a better look. Sensing excitement, I immediately reached for my binoculars and tried to peep through gaps in the otherwise impenetrable canopy. Unable to see through the blanket of thick foliage, I pushed myself stealthily further for a better view, but keeping an intent eye out.

Finally, I spotted them. Not far away, on the branches, I could see a couple, busy savouring the juicy fruits of *sam kothal* (*Artocarpus chaplasha*) of the jackfruit family. Hanging on a branch with one hand and reaching out to the ripe fruits with another, both of them were deeply engrossed on feeding. As I was relishing this unique and effortless way of resource harvesting—the adult male left the tree in a hurry and positioned himself on top of another tree nearby. Minutes later, the female joined him.

Then, nature's most enthralling symphony proceeded to play out, it seemed, just for me. It started with short 'whoops' which sailed through intermediate 'notes', and all the while, the 'singers' were swinging on their long arms from one branch to another in a perfect canopy ballet that culminated in a final 'great call'.

I have heard this magnificent concert countless times yet I doubt I'll ever tire of it, for it is performed by one of our closest relatives – the hollow bandor or hoolock gibbon.

I am in Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary, a 21 km² forest patch that is located near the foothills of Nagaland, near Mariani town of Jorhat district in Assam. A fragmented and isolated tropical rainforest forest patch in the sea of sprawling tea estates and human settlements, the sanctuary harbours a unique assemblage of seven species of primates, including four species of macaques one of capped langur, the Bengal slow loris and the western hoolock gibbon. This profusion of monkeys made the sanctuary an ideal field site to pursue my doctoral research on the primate communities of the sanctuary.

My day in the field starts at 4 o'clock in the morning. It is still dark when I kick start my motorbike from my temporary home at Bheleuguri — a small village about 3 km from the forest — to reach Meleng, the official entrance of the sanctuary. My field assistants and I then embark on a day long fieldwork. Usually, we follow and observe one troop each of four macaque species in turn, in a fixed schedule of 5 days for each species per month. Today, it is the turn of *Xenduri bandor* or the stump-tailed macaque, one of my study species. These are a bit elusive therefore we have to first track them before we begin our data collection. It is not an easy task since the troop occupies a large area within the sanctuary and we have to patrol the whole area in order to locate them.

As we enter the sanctuary, the first things we generally notice are the curled up bodies of *Molua bandor* or rhesus macaques on the branches of the ajar (*Legerstroemia flos-reginae*) tree near the beat office. These highly adaptable animals live along the edges of the forest. As we watch, an occasional head wakes from slumber, looks around casually and return to its previous state. But, as soon as you raise your binoculars, to have a closer look, it will flee.

At this hour of soft light, these monkeys look innocent, but as the day progresses, they slowly slip into nearby tea gardens or Lakhipur village, creating chaos among villagers. They are marvelously versatile and can adapt to any kind of habitat but interestingly, they are seldom found in deeper forests.

Leaving the still somnolent rhesus macaques behind, we head into the jungle. Around us, the forest is slowly waking up and as dawn progresses, pre-dawn stillness gives way to the cacophony of birds and cicadas. The sanctuary harbours more than 200 bird species including the rare *deohahn* or white-winged wood duck.

2 km along the track that runs through the heart of the sanctuary and I have already spotted ten species of butterflies and an atlas moth *Attacus atlas* —the largest moth in the world! These beautiful creatures are all along the road, sapping the juicy minerals from fresh road kills of frogs and from scats of leopards and civets. We reach a junction along our road, and decide to head towards the northwestern part of the sanctuary which the stump-tailed macaques frequent.

As we hit the overgrown trail that will take us to the stump-tails, road, high above me I see a troop of *gahori nejia bandor* or pig-tailed macaques, searching for insects under the dry and curled up leaves of *morhal* (*Vetiva lanceaefolia*). Although pig-tails primarily feed on fruits, they ignore the ones on this tree, preferring instead the insects that abound in the dry foliage.

Coo-coo! Soft sounds waft down to us. The animals call to each other constantly while feeding, perhaps to keep the widely-dispersed troop together. Meanwhile on a different branch of the tree, a greater racket-tailed drongo bird is perched alert, keeping an intent eye out for the stray, unfortunate insect which escapes the foraging pig-tailed macaque.

While we watched this unusual association between monkey and bird, something rustled in a nearby bamboo patch. Could it be the stump-tails? They often feed in bamboo thickets on shoots, spikes, fruits and leaves. Sometimes they even catch frogs which have taken refuge in split bamboo stems.

But a trumpet and a rumble put a quick end to these speculations. This was definitely an elephant or more! We turned and ran. A safe distance away (is there such a thing?) we hid and watched.

A mammoth tusker emerged and stood in full view. It looked in our direction slowly flapping its gigantic ears. Would it attack? A few heart-stopping moments later, he made up his mind, turned and walked away, vanishing into the other side of the undergrowth.

Every time I look at these giants my heart goes out to them. Their situation is pitiable, as this slowly-diminishing sanctuary is the last refuge for 30-40 individuals that still survive. Vanishing forage and shrinking habitats force them to venture out of the sanctuary and into human habitation. The result is severe conflict with losses and casualties on both sides.

It is already afternoon and my search for the stump-tails has not yet yielded any results. We decide to postpone the search in deference to our stomachs which are making their presence clearly felt. Here, we have not the luxury of a relaxed meal; we cannot afford to sit on the ground for more than a few seconds—the waiting hordes of leeches could make us *their* 'bloody' lunch. Even a leech guard doesn't provide much more than moral support in these moist tropical forests. We spot a wind-felled tree and sit on its trunk—this is the only safe haven from those silent invaders.

Today is turning out, literally and metaphorically, to be a field day for, while lunching, we see the *Tupimuria bandor* or capped langur resting on a large tree on the distance, their distinctive, long tails hanging down like lianas. Being mainly leaf-eaters, capped langurs spend considerable time resting to

digest the tough cellulose in their diet. These langurs looked particularly satisfied. Some were nodding off and others were already napping while their sleepy arms held onto the branches.

After lunch and a much-needed break, we resumed our quest for still-elusive stump-tails. Over months and years we have grown accustomed to these prolonged search operations. My first encounter with these macaques had come at the end of 12 days of combing the forest. These animals cover a large area for their daily activities and so our search needs to be widespread.

Today too, our chances looked bleak. Evening was fast approaching and with the fading light, our spirits too began to dim. Nevertheless we ploughed ahead, hoping for a later sunset than usual.

A sudden, shrill call stopped us in our tracks. Was it...? Could it be...? There, another!

We slowly moved ahead, in the direction of the sounds. As we approached, we noticed freshly uprooted *aathubhanga* plants (*Amischolotype hookeri*). We at once knew that the stump-tails had been here, moments ago.

We followed the trail of uprooted *aathubhanga* shrubs to a clearing in the forest. And there, clearly in sight of us and deliberately ignoring our presence, sat over a hundred stump-tailed macaques.

They were busy feeding on ground-sprouting mushrooms. All of a sudden, the entire troop (a hundred, mind you!) rushed off towards a nearby fig tree, whose branches hung low with ripe fruits. As if dessert to a main course of mushrooms, they proceeded to gorge on the tree's red offerings.

A Malayan giant squirrel, the original occupant of that bounteous table, skittered to the top branches in utter terror. Stuffing their cheek pouches (which were now as large as their heads), before the final run to their sleeping quarters, the troop fed frantically.

We knew this troop was lead by an adult female and an old male we had named *Bandhu* (meaning *friend*) brought up the rear. He had learnt, over time and our many intrusions, to trust us and allowed us to approach fairly close. When *Bandhu* left the tree, we too picked up our gear and silently stomped along with the troop to their roosting tree.

Today, they had chosen another gigantic fig tree to rest in. I found myself a spot some distance away and watched as the troop ascended one by one, grasping the lianas for support.

Finding comfortable for the night took the large troop quite a while! More than half an hour later, they began 'grooming' each other—something most monkeys do to reinforce social bonds.

A sigh of contentment escaped me. What a day! Soon it would be time for us to head back to our own shelters. But, we leave reassured that they have chosen a safe site and at this height will be safe from most predators.

On our walk back from the forest, I see the same troop of rhesus macaques, which we passed in the morning, hurriedly marching towards the beat office at the edge of the forest, perhaps searching for a suitable sleeping tree. Which kitchen gardens did they raid today? Or did they satisfy themselves with fruits of *Acacia* from the surrounding tea gardens? They are a mischievous lot and often make life

difficult for villagers. In return, they too are constantly chased away but it is a good trade-off – near human habitation, they will be safe at night from predators like leopards.

Watching these little scoundrels and thinking about their possible lodging sites, I suddenly spot something large and dark ahead of me. I stop and try to peep through the veil of darkness. A leopard! Scarcely concerned by our presence, the leopard slipped into the tea garden next to the sanctuary. With darkness for cover, these majestic nocturnal creatures will rule the forest until dawn.

Smaller than a single range of a reserve like Nameri, Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary nevertheless holds a magnificent array of wildlife. Only a hundred years ago, it was part of unbroken stretch of lowland tropical forest along the Brahmaputra valley.

Although still rich in the number of animal and plant life, the fragmented forests of Assam are slowly losing their battle to survive, but are certainly making their exit rather dramatic. Many of these are mere apologies for a forest and have lost one or more species.

This particular sanctuary is well-known for the seven primate species it is home to, but how long can it hold on to this mantle? Unabated fuel wood collection poses a great threat to the habitat and is wiping out important food plants of animals. An important railway line passes through the sanctuary, dividing it into two unequal forest chunks. Hoolock gibbons, stump-tailed macaques and the nocturnal *Lajuki bandor* or the Bengal slow loris never cross the railway track, which means that the resource available across the railway track remains unavailable to them. Animals that do cross the line are often killed by passing trains. The main road that runs through the sanctuary also witnesses several road-kills.

Further expansion of the sanctuary is impossible with private property hemming it in on all sides but one, which is occupied by the military. Strict protection then, remains the only means of ensuring that Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary does not lose the very animals in its name or the other creatures that bring it fame! It is a matter of shame dozens of reserves whose pride rests on the smaller and less charismatic species are neglected by policies that cannot see beyond the tigers and the elephant.