



# A MONKEY WATCHER'S DIARY

By Naravan Sharma

A huge crashing sound from the nearby trees stops me in my tracks. I reach for my binoculars to peer through gaps in an otherwise impenetrable canopy, but see nothing. Pushing stealthily, eyes on the canopy, I am rewarded with the sight of two monkeys demolishing the juicy fruits of *sam kothal* or *Artocarpus chama*, which belongs to the jackfruit family. Hanging on to a branch with one hand and reaching out to the ripe fruit with another, both are engrossed with their feeding and I am given a rare insight into the secret life of one of India's most intriguing and endangered primates known to locals as *hollow bandor* and to science as the hoolock gibbon *Hoolock hoolock*.

As male and female swing athletically from one tree to the next, one of nature's most enthralling symphonies is played out just for me it seems. It starts with short 'whoops' that soon change into intermediate 'notes', with the 'singers' locomoting through their arboreal home with the help of their long, specially adapted arms. This perfect canopy ballet eventually culminates in a final 'great call' for which hoolocks are famed across the world.

By any measure this must be one of the most spectacular displays in the animal world and despite

having witnessed it countless times, I doubt I'll ever tire of it. That these elusive primates also happen to be one of our closest relatives only makes the experience more ethereal. I am in the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary, a 21 sq. km. forest patch located near the foothills of Nagaland, near Mariani town in Assam's Jorhat district. A fragmented and isolated tropical rainforest in a sea of sprawling tea estates and human settlements, the wilderness harbours a unique assemblage of seven primate species, including the capped langur, the Bengal slow loris and the Western hoolock gibbon. It took me very little time to decide that this would be the ideal site for me to pursue my doctoral research on primate communities.

## A MACAQUE SANCTUARY?

My day in the field begins at 4 a.m. It is still dark when I kickstart my motorbike from my temporary home at Bheleuguri, a small village about three kilometres from Meleng, the official entrance of the sanctuary. My field assistants and I usually follow and observe one troop of each of the four macaque species, taking turns in a fixed schedule of five days for each species per month.

Today we have to track what locals call the *xenduri bandor* and what we know as the stumptailed macaque *Macaca arctoides*. These are elusive and we have to 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 to locate them.

As we enter the sanctuary, the first thing we notice are the curled up bodies of *molua bandor* or rhesus macaques *Macaca mulatta* on the branches of the *ajar* tree *Lagerstroemia flos-reginae* near the beat office. These adaptable primates live along the edges of the forest. As we watch, an occasional head rises up from slumber, looks around casually and returns to its previous soporific state. At this hour of soft light, the monkeys look incapable of any mischief, but as the day progresses, they are known to slowly slip into the nearby tea gardens or the Meleng-Lakhipur village, creating chaos among the villagers. They are marvelously versatile and adapt to any kind of habitat, but, interestingly, are seldom found in deep forest.

Leaving the macaques behind, we head into the jungle. Around us the forest slowly wakes and the predawn stillness gives way to the cacophony

of birds and cicadas. The sanctuary harbours over 200 bird species, including the rare *deohahn* or White-winged Wood Duck *Cairina scutulata*.

Two kilometres along the track that runs through the heart of the sanctuary and I have already spotted 10 species of butterflies and an atlas moth *Attacus atlas* – the largest moth in the world! These beautiful creatures are ubiquitous along the road. We reach a junction and decide to head towards the northwestern part of the sanctuary, known to be frequented by stump-tailed macaques.

Hitting an overgrown trail I see high above me a troop of *gahori nejia bandor* or pig-tailed macaques *Macaca leonina*, searching for insects under the dry and curled up leaves of the *morhal* tree *Vatica lanceaefolia*. Although pig-tails primarily feed on fruit, they ignore the ones on this tree, preferring instead to hone in on 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 is perched, keeping an eye out for stray, unfortunate insects that escape the foraging pig-tailed macaques.

As we watch this unusual association between monkey and bird, something rustles in a nearby bamboo patch. Could it be the stump-tails? They often feed in bamboo thickets on shoots, spikes, fruit and leaves. Sometimes they even catch frogs that have taken refuge in split bamboo stems. But a trumpet and rumble put a quick end to these speculations. Elephant! We turn and run. A safe distance away (is there such a thing?), we hide and watch. A mammoth tusker emerges and stands in full view, looking straight in our direction, slowly flapping its gigantic ears. Would he charge? A few heart-stopping moments later, he makes up his mind to turn and walk away, vanishing into the undergrowth.

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

### STUMPED BY THE STUMP-TAIL?

It is already afternoon and our search for the stump-tails has not yet yielded any result. We decide to put off the search in deference to our stomachs, which are making their presence felt. But we do not have 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 – the only relatively safe haven from those silent invaders.

Today is turning out, literally and metaphorically, to be a great field day for we see the *tupi-muria bandor* or capped langur *Trachypithecus pileatus* resting on a large tree at a distance, their distinctive, long tails hanging down like lianas. Mainly leaf-eaters, capped langurs spend

considerable time resting to digest the tough cellulose in their diet. These langurs look particularly satisfied. Some are nodding off and others are already napping, their arms holding onto the branches.

After lunch, we resume our quest for the still-elusive stump-tails. Over several months and years we have grown accustomed to these prolonged search operations. My first encounter with these macaques came at the end of 12 days of combing the forest. These animals cover a large area for their daily activities and so our search has to be widespread. Today too, our chances look bleak. Evening is fast approaching and with the fading



The Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam's Jorhat district is home to seven primate species including the Bengal slow loris *Nycticebus bengalensis* (above) and the *gahori nejia bandor* or pig-tailed macaque *Macaca leonina* (top), which primarily feeds on fruit, but also on insects that abound in the foliage. Birds such as the Greater Racket-tailed Drongos can often be seen with these macaques as they take advantage of the insects that escape the foraging primates. It is not very easy to find the stump-tailed macaque *Macaca arctoides* (facing page), even in forests that harbour decent populations of the species as these animals cover a large area for their daily activities.

light, our spirits begin to dim. Nevertheless we plough ahead, hoping for a later sunset than usual.

A sudden, shrill call alerts us and gives us hope. We slowly move ahead, in the direction of

the sound. As we approach, we notice freshly uprooted *aathubhanga* shrubs *Forrestia mollissima*. We realise at once that the stump-tails

were here just moments ago.

We follow the trail of uprooted *aathubhanga*

shrubs to a clearing in the forest. And there, in clear sight of us and deliberately ignoring our presence, sit over 100 stump-tailed macaques!

Looking closer I discover they are busy feeding on ground-sprouting mushrooms. And then, as if on command, the entire troop (a hundred, mind you!) rush off towards a nearby fig tree, whose branches hang low with ripened fruit. As if dessert to a main course, they proceed to gorge on the tree's red offerings.

Meanwhile, a Malayan giant squirrel *Ratufa bicolor*, the original occupant of that bounteous table, skitters to the top branches in utter terror. Stuffing their cheek pouches (which are now as large as their heads), before the final run to their sleeping quarters, the troop feeds frantically. We knew this troop was led by an adult female, with an old male we had named *Bandh* (meaning friend) bringing up the rear. He had learnt, over time and our many intrusions, to trust us and allow us to approach fairly close. When *Bandhu* leaves the tree, we too pick up our gear and silently stomp along behind the troop to their roosting tree.

Today, they choose another gigantic fig tree to rest in. I find myself a spot some distance away and watch as the troop ascends one by one, grasping the lianas for support. Finding comfortable resting places for the night takes the large troop quite a while! More than half an hour later, they begin 'grooming' each other – something most monkeys do to reinforce social bonds.

A sigh of contentment escapes 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.

### NOT JUST A MONKEY FOREST

On our walk back from the forest, I see the same troop of rhesus macaques that we passed in the morning, hurriedly marching towards the beat office at the edge of the forest, perhaps also in search of a safe 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 – for near human habitation they are safe at night from predators such as leopards.

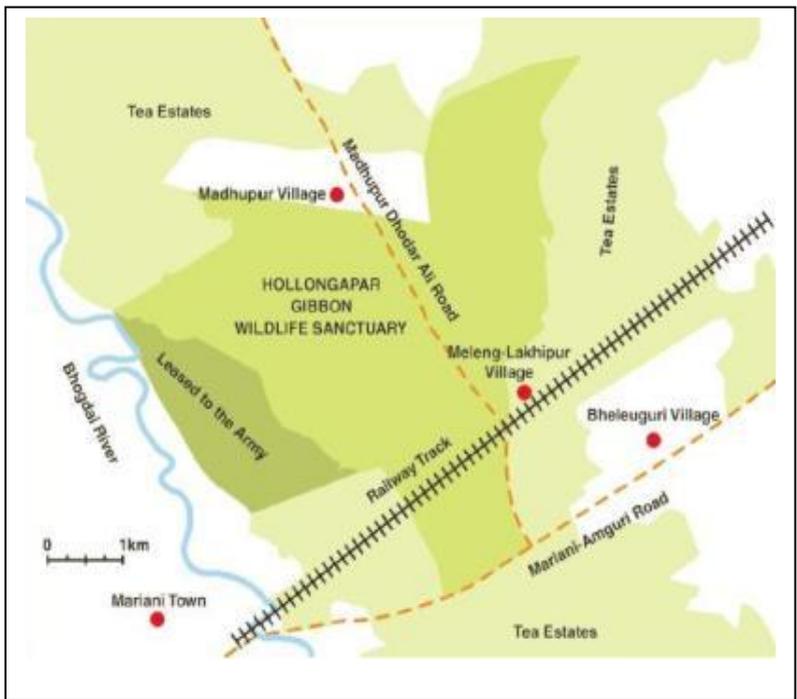
Watching these little scoundrels and thinking about their possible lodging sites, I suddenly spot something large and dark ahead of me. I stop and try to decipher its outlines through the veil of darkness. A leopard! Scarcely concerned by our presence, the cat slips into the tea garden next to the sanctuary. With

darkness for cover, these majestic nocturnal creatures will rule the forest until dawn.

Smaller than a single range of a reserve such as Nameri, the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary nevertheless holds a magnificent array of wildlife. Only a hundred years ago, it was part of an unbroken stretch of lowland tropical forest along the Brahmaputra valley. Although still rich in animal and plant life, the fragmented forests of

Assam are slowly losing their battle for survival. Many are mere shadows of what they once were, and have already 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 fuelwood collection poses a great



threat to the habitat and is wiping out important food plants for animals. A busy railway line passes through the sanctuary, dividing it into two unequal chunks. Hoolock gibbons, stump-tailed macaques and the nocturnal *lajuki bandor* or the Bengal slow loris *Nycticebus bengalensis* never cross the railway track, which means that the resources available across the railway track remain unavailable to them. Animals that do cross are often killed by passing trains. The main road that runs through the sanctuary also witnesses several roadkills.

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 the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary does not lose the very animals it is named for, or the other creatures that bring it such fame!



The busy railway line passing through the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary, divides the forest into two unequal chunks. The primates must therefore access resources by negotiating their passage across dangerous rail tracks, which led to the death of this unfortunate capped langur.