

A report on a visit to

## **The Wildlife Sanctuaries in the Dafla Hills of Arunachal Pradesh**

*(This report on the Pakhui, Sessa orchid and the Eagle nest wildlife sanctuaries of Arunachal Pradesh is based on our visit to these places in the winter of 1994-95. we spent a total of 13 days in Pakhui in December, 1994, and 3 days at Sessa in January, 1995. One of us (RMA) visited Eagle-nest for 6 days in January. A short visit like ours is quite inadequate to build a comprehensive and accurate picture of these places. However there is very little published information available on these places and we hope that this report will be useful to other visitors as well as the Forest department.)*

### **The Sanctuaries**

The contiguous areas of Pakhui, Sessa orchid and the Eagle nest wildlife sanctuaries are located in the East and West Kameng districts of western Arunachal Pradesh along the Assam border. They are spread over a total area of 1300 sq.km in the Dafla hills at the base of Eastern Himalayas. They range from an altitude of a little over 100m in Pakhui to over 3500m in the Eagle nest wildlife sanctuary.

#### **The Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary**

The Pakhui wildlife sanctuary in E.Kameng district is spread over 862 sq.km of some of the finest lowland forests of Arunachal Pradesh. It is bounded to the east and the west by the Pakke and the Kameng (Bhareli) rivers respectively. The state border with Assam forms the southern border. It is contiguous with similar (reserve) forests across the border which provide a good buffer zone. We visited Seijosa, Khari and Tipi in this sanctuary.

The sanctuary ranges in altitude from about 100m along its southern boundary to peaks which scale to over 2000m. However the average altitude is much lower with very few peaks touching 1000m. It is drained by a large number of rivers which essentially run from north to south. The soil is very loose and heavily eroded where exposed. Precipitous hillsides are a common feature of this area. The vegetation ranges from reeds and tall grass of the flood plains and degraded scrub to semi-evergreen forests (riverine patches along the streams and rivers and the low altitude variety on the hills). Cane is common, especially along streams. The area abounds in epiphytes and a variety of lianas and other creepers. Most places are very difficult to access if not inaccessible due to the terrain and the dense vegetation - perhaps the main reason that such a vast tract of excellent foothill forest has survived to this day.

Seijosa is the park head-quarters and lies on the banks of the river Pakke. The forest near Seijosa is extremely disturbed lying as it does at the sanctuary edge. In fact, the beautiful shingled banks of the river are a favourite haunt of picnic parties from the adjacent areas in Assam. The only (fair weather) motorable road into the sanctuary starts from Seijosa and terminates at Khari. The road condition is rather poor and obstacles are many, the first being the lack of a bridge over the river! The river can be forded only during the dry months of winter.

Khari is situated on the banks of the river Khari at the junction of two other rivers. The rest house is on a hillock and commands a lovely view of the surrounding hills and the river. The vegetation around Khari is much less disturbed except for the area around the settlement. Apart from a few elephant paths, the river system provides the sole access into the forests. The vegetation is extremely dense and the presence of cane and other thorny plants along with lianas makes wildlife-watching of any kind in the pathless patches an impossibility. The best strategy would be to walk along the river bed beside the forest patches or follow streams up into the valleys and folds of the hills. The stretch of the road immediately before Khari (for about 2-3 km) is perhaps the best area for watching birds and butterflies. Forest patches around the

settlement have well defined paths running through them and are comparatively less dense. These places and the dense vegetation along streams are the best places to look for animals which stick to thick cover.

Tipi is situated on the Kameng river at the other end of the sanctuary from Seijosa. The stretch of the river around Tipi is extremely scenic. The sanctuary lies across the river and can only be accessed by boat. A major attraction at Tipi is its Orchid research centre and the orchidarium run by the State Forest Research Institute. Many orchid species and hybrid varieties can be seen in their green houses. Several orchids are also being cultivated for commercial purposes.

### **Sessa Orchid Sanctuary**

The Sessa orchid sanctuary, spread over 100 sq.km in the W.Kameng district, lies sandwiched between the Eagle nest and the Pakhui wild life sanctuaries. It is bounded to the north by the valley of river Tenga. The sanctuary ranges from approximately 1000m to about 3000m. However easily accessible areas are very few and quite disturbed, situated as they are along the busy Tezpur-Bomdilla highway. The terrain is very precipitous and the vegetation dense consisting primarily of sub-tropical evergreen forests. One also comes across a lot of bamboo and wild banana plants in cleared areas.

We only stayed a couple of days at the Sessa village at the edge of the sanctuary. The birdlife is very rich and in fact many birds were seen within the settlement or along the stream running next to it. Over 200 species of wild orchids are known from the sanctuary.

### **Eagle nest Wildlife Sanctuary**

The Eagle nest sanctuary in the W.Kameng district is spread over 217 sq.km ranging in altitude from about 500m to over 3500m. The area is very precipitous but a motorable road runs right across the sanctuary. The department has cleared a few trekking paths which are the only means of accessing places off the road. Since we had spent a large fraction of our time at low altitudes in the other two sanctuaries, we confined our visit to the higher reaches of this sanctuary.

The areas visited in (and around) the sanctuary included the Ramalingam forest camp, the Eagle Nest pass, Sunder View, Chakoo and Bompou. Inclement weather forced the cancellation of a visit to the highest parts of the ridge at Piri La at about 3500m. The road which runs through the sanctuary starts from Tenga on the Bomdilla road and passes through the above mentioned places and continues down to Khellong and Foothills and on to Rangapara in the plains. This used to be the highway earlier, providing the only road link to the western part of the state.

The area around Ramalingam camp consists of degraded scrub with stands of original forest. There are also plantations of pine and fruit orchards. The sanctuary begins a little before the Eagle nest pass (2835m) where the road crests the ridge. The area on either side of the road outside the sanctuary is heavily disturbed due to ongoing logging operations. However, the mixture of scrub, plantations and original forest makes for a very rich diversity of birdlife that one encounters along this road. The vegetation is primarily bamboo close to and above the Eagle nest pass all the way to the top. Beyond and below the pass the vegetation gets progressively denser and is dominated by the wet temperate evergreen forest type all the way down to Bompou (which was the lowest point visited on the road). One also comes across vast stretches of bamboo in places where the original forest had been cleared.

The sanctuary affords spectacular views and the wide altitudinal range makes it an ideal place to watch a wide variety of wildlife. Serious wildlife tourists with limited time at their disposal would find it the ideal place to watch a rich variety of animals.

## **Fauna**

Detailed faunal lists have been appended at the end of this report.

Mammal sightings were rather disappointing, especially considering the amount of evidence one encountered along the river. The river banks around Khari is replete with a variety of mammal tracks including numerous long stretches of tiger pug marks. Apart from a few squirrels and a few troops of capped langur a whole week of day time walks and elephant rides on two nights provided us with just one

glimpse of a small mammal vanishing into the forest in a distance. Leopard tracks were very conspicuous by their absence, perhaps an indication that there exists a good population of tigers.

That the place is rich in mammals is very evident .... that they are exceedingly shy is also obvious. We learnt from the local people that mammal sightings are not very frequent in that area. While it is difficult to be certain of the reason, human disturbance is likely to be a major factor for this. We learnt that mammals are more often seen in more remote areas like the Upper Dikorai river. Whether the disturbance consists solely of the presence of a large number of people who come in quest of cane or also consists of hunting is a moot point.

Bird sightings were very good and about 240 species were recorded during our visit. One reason for the large variety of birds that were encountered was the wide range in altitude that we covered. We were given to understand that no protected area in Arunachal Pradesh offers this range of altitude which can be easily accessed. Winter (November - March) is probably the best time of the year to see birds.

Only one reptile was seen during the entire month, no doubt, because of the cold conditions. Reptiles are likely to be common during the warmer months (April - September?). We found three frogs hibernating between the curled up leaves of a banana plant at Sessa.

The invertebrates were as scarce as the cold blooded vertebrates. How ever we recorded some 85 species of butterflies mostly at Khari and Seijosa. The complete list of butterflies is probably at least three to four times that number. The best time for butterflies is likely to be the dry spells during the monsoon or immediately after it before the onset of winter.

We came across many tribals sporting animal pelts on the outskirts of the sanctuary. Skins of bears and leopard cats, capped langur tails, beaks and tails of great pied hornbills were seen every now and then.

## **Tourism**

We saw no tourists during our entire stay in the wildlife sanctuaries. We heard that the frequency of visitors is about one every few months! It is very surprising considering the vast potential the place has in terms of scenic spots, wildlife, fishing and possibly many adventure sports. While tourism of the wrong kind can destroy a sanctuary, properly managed tourism in that area can be a very good source of income both for the forest department and the local population. However, facilities, where they exist, are woefully inadequate for attracting any but the most dedicated wildlife tourist! Much of our time was wasted in trying to get from one place to another using public transport.

The wide range in altitude within a hundred kilometers with good access in terms of roads and proximity to Assam, provides a very good opportunity for the serious wildlife tourist to watch diverse animals within a few days. The orchidarium at Tipi where tourists can see and buy orchids is another major attraction. The places visited are very scenic, especially the stretch of the river Bhareli around and upstream of Tipi and several places in the Eagle nest sanctuary. The very heavy rainfall for over 8 months of the year (March - October), limits access to these places to just a few months during winter. However aseasonal rains could occur during any time of the year at all.

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## Appendices

- a. (information on) The places visited (2 pages).
- b. Mammal list (1 page).
- c. Butterfly list (1 page).
- d. Bird list with notes on individual species (6 pages).

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