

Forest walks in Kumaon

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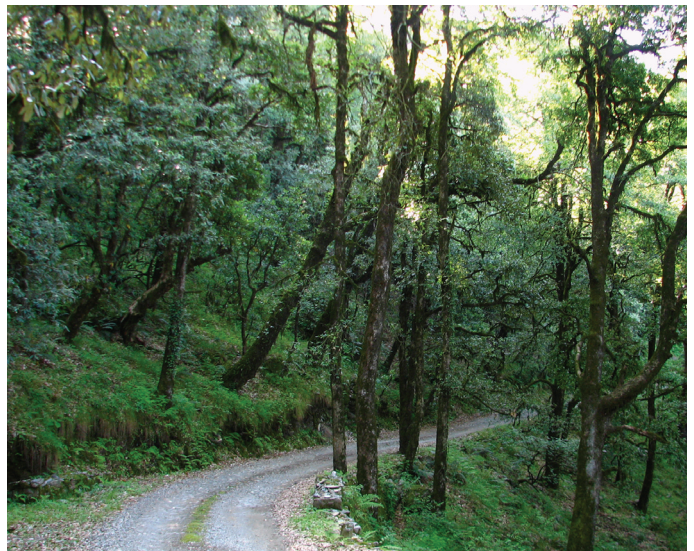
Dawn arrived early that day in June 2006, and rapidly lifted the dark shroud of the night. Sleep was one necessity that had been denied us, but there was none of that languor or glum feeling as one contemplates another day of trifling chores in the city. No one needed much prodding to awake and get dressed, as there was that invigorating spirit that comes from the eagerness of partaking in the exciting sights and sounds the day had in store for us.

As we leave the cozy warmth of the pretty little cottage and step out into the world, the glorious scenery suddenly bursts upon our senses like the opening bars of a grand and stirring classical masterpiece. Our resort nestles on an incline, noble mountains rising on its left flank and steep slopes encircling it from the right and rear, while in the front the land slopes into the valley through the mists. A dense blanket of green forest clothes the hill on both sides and rolls on to the adjoining mountains. This is the unique broadleaved natural forest of the Himalayas, above the urban crowds and sprawl of Nainital (1,920 m), where we are camped in solitude and verdant splendour.

Little wonder that Frank Smythe, the famed mountaineer, who after his successful ascent of Kamet in 1931, accidentally chanced upon the Bhyundar Valley, which he later immortalised in *The Valley of Flowers* (1949), wrote elatedly about, “the primitive beauty and grandeur of the vistas,” in the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas of his time, un-spoilt by the commercialisation he had encountered in Switzerland.

The track winds further upwards, from this tiny hamlet of Pangot, through many miles of thick forest, continuing to Kunjakharak, which is at an altitude of c. 2,400 m and 34 kms from Nainital. Our peregrinations of the previous days saw us rambling through the forests in the mornings and evenings, watching birds. The Himalayas are renowned for their bird diversity, harbouring 80% of the Indian Subcontinent’s birds. Coming from the western peninsula to these regions, one is exuberant about the new avian species one encounters and marvels at their beauty and varied brilliant hues. The richness of the Himalayan avifauna attains its peak in the eastern regions covered by Nepal, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh and its lowest ebb in the arid far west in Pakistan, with Uttaranchal figuring high in the diversity rankings with 496 species, close behind Arunachal’s 507. Central Nepal and western Bhutan, at an incredible 575 and 571 species respectively, are the frontrunners in the bird variety list. Here in the Kumaon territory of Uttaranchal, it is reported that almost 150 species of birds have been recorded from Pangot and its surrounding areas.

A walk through a forest at dawn can be a delightful experience, for one witnesses the wakening rhythms of life through the sights and sounds of the forest’s denizens as they herald the glories of a new day. The transition from the steamy plains to this picturesque montane setting is palpable in many ways and the ambience and sparkling mountain air are exhilarating. These oak *Quercus* sp., forests are the favourite haunts of the vivacious Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* and its lively whistles are frequently heard. The appealing Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*, which is particularly fond of acorns, is another common inhabitant of the oak forests along with its cousin, the Black-headed Jay *G. lanceolatus*. The Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica*, though more often heard than seen, produces the typically incessant calls of its family, “took-a-rook, took-a-rook,” prompting the renowned naturalist, C. H. Donald’s remark, “The Barbet tries his best to drown every other sound by his ear-splitting, monotonous two-note cry, and certainly succeeds in making himself heard above every other sound.” We spot many other birds including the Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos hyperythrus*, which sports a plumage liberally splashed with orange and crimson, and drills holes into oak bark to feed on sap, and the lovely Himalayan Flameback *Dinopium shorii*, which prefers prime forest. Then there was the Himalayan Woodpecker *D. himalayensis* that ranges from Afghanistan to Garhwal, largely in the dense fir *Abies* sp., oak and mixed forests where it moves around in pairs, scampering up and down the trees, diligently probing bark for insects. It also feasts on fruits, berries and seeds within the chir



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Fig. 1. The oak forest above Pangot

pine's *Pinus roxburghii* cones. The Grey-winged Blackbird *Turdus bouboul*, rated by the celebrated Sálím Ali (1896–1987) as the best songster amongst Indian birds, was also frequently seen as were its fabulously coloured cousins, the Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris* and the Blue-capped Rock-Thrush *M. cinclorhynchus*, a summer visitor, and the delicately painted Blue-winged Minla *Minla cyanouroptera*. We saw a nest of the Grey-winged Blackbird containing two chicks. The reputed entomologist, Major R. W. G. Hingston (1887–1966), wrote in, *A naturalist in Himalaya* (1920), about the characteristic "compact troops" of insectivorous birds out on hunting forays through the forest. He observed that the woods would seem bereft of birds at times and then suddenly there would be birds all over the trees and feverish activity would prevail when the "troop" appeared. Treecreepers, tits, warblers, chats, flycatchers, nuthatches, laughingthrushes and minivets would band together and comb layers of the forest, keeping together with faint twitters barely audible to humans. We came across such a troop once in the woods and it provided us with quite a thrill as we hurriedly tried to spot the many birds darting here and there in the foliage. The dainty and little White-tailed Nuthatches *Sitta himalayensis* that we saw were typically clambering on a tree trunk. They are nimble climbers and can move deftly in all directions, often descending a tree trunk headfirst.

Around our Jungle Lore resort itself, amongst open fields and scattered trees, we heard and saw the dapper Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, its call resembling that of the Painted Partridge *F. pictus* of peninsular India. Also commonly visible here were Himalayan Bulbuls *Pycnonotus leucogenys* with their trademark yellow vents, perched on electric wires and Common Stonechats *Saxicola torquata* fluttering around in grassy patches. One evening we explored a nullah whose banks were covered with the dense growth of many different tree species. Typically, this habitat was rich in birds and, amongst the boulders on the damp shady banks, we came across the pretty Spotted Forktail *Enicurus maculatus*. By the running stream I spied a Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*, another common resident of these hills. Its beak is yellow, unlike the Malabar Whistling Thrush *M. horsfieldii*, which has a black beak and is smaller. Both are partial to streams. The former revels in Himalayan torrents, hopping around on rocks, angling for insects, snails and crabs and, is known for its catchy song. I have had the privilege of listening to the song of the Himalayan species in the forests of Himachal Pradesh and the Western Ghats cousin in the luxuriant jungles of Mahabaleshwar, and the enchanting and meandering song of the latter ranks several notches above that of its relative.

But today is a special day for it is our last chance for a rendezvous with the elusive Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*. We leave very early and motor along the trail to Kunjakharak. The road ascends through the thick Himalayan moist temperate forest, which has inundated the slopes and the adjoining hills with its delightful green mantle. The forest is an enchanting sight with its vast assemblage of trees festooned with moss and epiphytic ferns on their trunks,

which throw out innumerable branches that crowd together to form a dense canopy between 10–20 m. Depending on the amount of grazing and light permitted through the canopy, shrubs and herbs grow on the forest floor. Here and there, climbers snake up the trees. Rains had already visited this area, it being the end of June, and occasionally in the open sunny patches covered with grasses and ferns, exquisite flowers bloomed on their gentle grassy stalks. Ashvin Mehta, a famous photographer of the Himalayas, writes movingly in *100 Himalayan flowers* (Mehta & Bole 1992), "The great order which manifests itself in the seasonal cycles of flowers—their regular flowering and withering, year after year—extends to our lives and to everything which pulsates with life." This type of vegetation is sustained by an abundance of moisture and these altitudes (1,200–2,100 m) in Kumaon receive about 3,267 mm of precipitation, both as rain in the monsoon and snow in winter. Oak is a conspicuous broadleaf in these forests and in the lower range of the oak zone, it is generally the evergreen ban oak *Q. leucotrichophora*, identifiable by its grey foliage with woolly-white leaf undersides, that dominates, while in the upper range, such as the Kunjakharak area, the kharsu oak *Q. semecarpifolia* dominates. The ban oak forms associations with the evergreen *Rhododendron arboreum* known for its flamboyant red blossoms that flower from February to May. The splash of blooming rhododendrons is quite spectacular on the canvas of the green mountain landscape framed by white snow peaks. These oak forests are now endangered after a colossal shrinkage of their original range and the surviving oak patches are under intense pressure from the needs of the local populace and industry.

A leisurely descent down the road into the steep valley that Pangot overlooks, finds us amidst a very different habitat in the sub-tropical pine forest with exclusively pines growing on the slopes and typically suppressing most other flora and supporting little fauna. It is here that I gathered two cones of *Pinus roxburghii*. The area under chir pine in the Himalayas has been rapidly expanding, sometimes also wresting land from the vitally useful oaks, to the detriment of wildlife and local people and the gain of the resin industry.

On the high road to Kunjakharak a small opening sometimes punctuates the dense tree growth flanking the road or at times the road itself skirts along an escarpment and this creates a good vantage point to view the country. A breathtaking panorama of lofty mountains and deep valleys greets the eye. Their slopes are adorned with a lush growth of oak; here and there terraced fields have eaten into the fabric of green and the light hazel tint on a few slopes mark the scanty pine forest. The landscape has not been defaced, as few signs of the handiwork of man are visible. One recalls the words of one of Sálím Ali's mentors—the distinguished ornithologist, Hugh Whistler (1889–1943), of the Police Service, from his book, *In the high Himalayas* (1924). While gazing at the landscape below Jalouri Pass in Kulu he remarked, "The grandeur of these forests is too impressive to be described—a rippling mass of living green of every shade, thrown in a dense

mantle over all the ridges and valleys." Brig. Gen. C. G. Bruce, who saw much active duty with his Gurkha Rifles in the mountainous northern frontier of India and took part in a number of mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas, expressed a similar sentiment. Writing in the *Himalayan wanderer* in 1934, he reminisced, "Upper Kumaon and Garhwal must be among the most beautiful parts of the entire Himalaya." From Kunjakharak itself there is a spectacular and spellbinding view of gorgeous snow peaks in the far distance, but we are not privileged to look upon such wonders as the dense monsoon clouds of late June had enveloped the horizon.

We suddenly lurch to a halt and there is much excited gesturing in our vehicle. There, by the road itself, is the object of our search—the Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*. It is a handsome cock, his grey body crowned by a dark green head, novel ear tufts and conspicuous white collar. It indulges us by searching for food by the roadside for a while, before retreating into the forest. The Koklass is found in the Himalayas from northern Pakistan through India up to western Nepal, and in India it is found between 2,100–3,300 m in summer, descending to 1,500 m in winter when its high home is buffeted by snow. In his *Game birds of India, Burma and Ceylon* (1930), E. C. Stuart Baker (1864–1944), another outstanding figure in Indian ornithology, also of the Police Service, mentioned that the Koklass was a highly prized trophy, ranked above all other hill pheasants by the sportsmen of that era, primarily due to its gastronomic qualities and its difficulty to bag. Bertram Beresford Osmaston (1868–1961), of the Imperial Forest Service, called it, "The finest shooting bird in the Himalaya," in his recollections, *Wild life and adventures in Indian forests* (1999). Roosting in trees, it is known for its furtive and cautious habits and prefers thick cover, speeding away at an astonishing pace when alarmed. The cock emits a loud call culminating in 'kokras' from which its local name is derived. Baker quoted the legendary and multifaceted birdman, Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912), of the Indian Civil Service, who believed that a cock and hen paired for life, frequenting the same patch of forest for years. Baker also states that one sportsman wrote how relatively common they were about a century ago around Nainital, having accounted for eight birds in a morning's shoot on the Cheena Range.

The Koklass is one of the star avian residents of this tract but the area also plays host to interesting mammalian wildlife. This was brought home to us vividly one night as we were resting outside our cottage and the tranquility of the night was suddenly pierced by the frantic alarm calls of a barking deer *Muntiacus muntjac* on the densely wooded hill opposite us, probably scenting a leopard *Panthera pardus* on the prowl. Wild boar *Sus scrofa* are said to abound on the same hillside, which is rich in oaks and devoid of any settlement. They raid agricultural fields in the valley for food. Sambar *Cervus unicolor*, leopard, Himalayan yellow-throated marten *Martes flavigula*, Himalayan palm civet *Paguma larvata*, langur *Presbytis entellus*, rhesus macaque *Macaca mulatta* and the grey goral *Naemorhedus goral*,

described by H. R. Nevill I.C.S., in the *Nainital Gazetteer* of 1904, as the Himalayan chamois, are the prominent species that make their home in these forests. In fact, Ilyas & Khan (2005. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 102 (2): 223–225) in their 1997 study of the grey goral, at 19 sites in the Kumaon Himalaya, recorded the maximum number of direct sightings and pellet group density of goral in the Kunjakharak area and recommended along with others that a sanctuary be established in this zone to protect its treasured wildlife and forests. Hopefully, this justified proposal may see fruition as the Naina Wildlife Sanctuary.

In the course of their research on the biodiversity of these areas in Kumaon, they also conducted a vegetation sampling exercise of the oak forests and discovered that tree density was lowest in the Kunjakharak area but fortunately, tree cutting was also the lowest. The researchers reported rampant and unlawful poaching in Kunjakharak and other areas of Kumaon, including that of the Koklass, Monal and the Hill Partridge, apart from mammals like musk deer *Moschus moschiferus*, Himalayan black bear *Selenarctos thibetanus*, goral and leopard. The serow *Capricornis sumatraensis* was once found at Cheena Peak above Nainital, but has now been obliterated. These precious montane ecosystems desperately need to be conserved especially in view of the rampant poaching and tree felling rife in the c. 21,000 km² area of the Kumaon Himalaya and its appalling paucity of sanctuaries, apart from Binsar and Askot, which cover a paltry 645 km².

We had two encounters with grey goral. Rahul, the leader of our motley group, demonstrated his acute powers of observation honed by constant practice in the field, which only the local guides could match, when he spotted a goral far away on an exposed mountain slope while climbing up to Pangot. This one had to be seen through binoculars. We were luckier when we ran into another animal on the Kunjakharak road. It was just 10 m away, above the road, and we had a generous view of this agile and sure-footed mountaineer before it scampered away into the forest. Shikar and other repugnant blood sports are now rightly officially proscribed but with rules seldom enforced in our country, city folk, villagers and government officials still poach dwindling wildlife with impunity.

Our appetite for viewing the Koklass now quite satiated, we then bade a reluctant farewell to this sylvan jewel in the mountains and headed for Binsar. We descend through this precious woodland towards Nainital and round a bend there appeared another well-known inhabitant—a Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* escorting her chicks across the road! Found throughout the Himalayas from N. Pakistan to Arunachal Pradesh in forests with thick undergrowth, both sexes of the Kalij bear a distinct red facial skin patch and are frequently found in family parties, spending considerable time rummaging the ground for food including shoots, berries and insects. The cock is an impressive sight with glossy blue-black upper parts with white on its rump, a lengthy whitish crest and an elongated sickle shaped tail. The hen is brownish. Five different races occur as one proceeds from west to east in the Himalayas.

According to Sálím Ali, when pursued and while fleeing, it gives out varied guinea pig like squeaks and chuckles.

In a stream by a temple complex, we spot the Plumbeous Water Redstart *Rhyacornis fuliginosus* on a rock amidst the swirling waters—a locale typically favoured by this species. Periodically fanning out its chestnut tail, it specializes in launching brief aerial sorties to nab an insect above the torrent and is quite an entertainer. Further on downstream, we see the Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*, a small bird, which, as suggested by its name, is adept at diving into the water and swimming around submerged, in search of food. The river banks are literally teeming with Blue Whistling-Thrushes and under a boulder, I again viewed a pair of graceful Spotted Forktails.

En route to Binsar, the road climbs up through Almora, which is situated on top of a ridge and is a launching point for expeditions to the snow mountains way beyond or to the Pindari, Sundardungha and Milan glaciers or the Rupkund Lake. Surrounded by fields and desolate chir pine groves, Almora is in the throes of a severe water shortage with the Kosi River in danger of drying up and a vast reduction in natural springs and groundwater. The rainfall has declined from 1,059 mm around 50 years ago, to 745.2 mm. A number of factors are responsible for this lamentable state, chiefly deforestation, population growth and unregulated urbanisation—a common and baneful trend in most Indian hill resorts. One cannot help contrast this situation with the dense natural woods around Pangot that have ensured that days after the last rainfall, there is still water gushing through the forest streams.

Outside Almora, we have our first sighting of another familiar Himalayan bird, the showy Red-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa erythrorhyncha* with its unusually long tail trailing behind. Osmaston toured the Almora hills with his DFO in the summer of 1908, noting that they were mostly passing through chir pine forest, between 610–1829 m, commenting that the tree was mainly valued for resin, the timber being of average quality. In favourable locations, the trees grew up to 30 m in height but in the Airadeo and adjacent woods, the chir was stunted and had twisted trunks, rendering them useless as timber.

After travelling for about 30 kms beyond Almora, we arrived at the Binsar Sanctuary (2,316 m), which is only 45 km² in area, and includes five private estates and numerous villages within and outside its borders. It has a forest bungalow of vintage architecture and charm, lined with stately deodars, and a fine view of the surrounding landscape, and much more recently, a commodious government rest house with an enormous verandah to view the distant snowy ranges—where we encamped for the night. The vegetation is Himalayan moist temperate forest, with a predominance of oak, similar to that above Pangot, but there is a greater prevalence of the desolate chir pine groves in the lower parts, which is disappointing. In Islam & Rahmani's *Important Bird Areas in India* (2004), Ilyas (pp. 1020–1021) lists 40 species of trees, 32 of shrubs and ferns, 50 of herbs and 19 of grasses largely from the oak zone of the Binsar Sanctuary, which has a similar habitat to that



Fig. 2. Scenery on the high road to Kunjakharak

above Pangot. In 1910, C. M. McCrie reported measuring chir pines in the Binsar area that reached up to 35 m, with a girth of 4 m. Fifty species of forest plants are collected by villagers for medicinal properties. Local guides point out plants like turmeric, thyme, cinnamon, vajradanti (*Barleria* sp.), etc.

On a lone evening stroll, I met an old acquaintance from Pangot, the spirited Rufous Sibia with its friendly whistles and as I walked back along the thickly wooded forest path from the old forest bungalow that evening, I could hear the frenzied calls of a barking deer. Later we saw the droppings of leopards, twice, along the forest paths, and our guide told us that sometimes the cats were seen right outside the rest house! Mounted on a wall, is a newspaper clipping and picture of a man-eating leopard and the hunter who shot it, a few years ago. Such animals are an exception, but in this region, images of the legendary Jim Corbett (1875–1955) and his accounts of pursuing the man-eaters of Kumaon instantly spring to mind. Our guide did touch upon the scarcity of prey species, a problem that was present to some extent in Corbett's day too.

B. B. Osmaston was an authority on Indian birds, whose official duties and leisure trips allowed him to spend much time in the Himalayas, being posted in the erstwhile United Provinces for a considerable part of his career, including holding charge of the Chakrata Forest Division that encompassed parts of the old Tehri Garhwal state. He was elevated to Conservator 1908, being based at Nainital, and became President of the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun, culminating his career as Chief Conservator of the Central Provinces in 1922. Very early in his forest career he had earned a reputation by shooting a man-eating tigress *Panthera tigris* at Mundali that had been terrorising the area, after a surprise appearance at an elevation of 2,743 m. Though a passionate hunter of wild creatures of all sizes, which would now appall us, he also did a lot of valuable work on birds like the other early pioneers.

In May of 1894, Osmaston accompanied his superior James Sykes Gamble (1847–1925), a forester and botanist of much distinction who was then Conservator of Forests,

and J. F. Duthie, another eminent plant expert and Head of the Botanical Survey of North India, in a high altitude expedition (2,743–3,657 m) in the high ranges of Tehri Garhwal bordered by the Tons and Pabar rivers. It was the breeding season for birds and Osmaston was the first to record the breeding biology of the Grey-crested Tit *Parus dichrous*, Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis* and the Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher *Ficedula strophciata*, and collect their nests and eggs. A year later, at the Deoban forest rest house (2,743 m) near Chakrata, he spotted a pair of diminutive Collared Owlets *Glaucidium brodiei* in a hole in a kharsu oak, below which was another cavity occupied by a pair of White-tailed Nuthatches *Sitta himalayensis*. The voluble nuthatches hurled profanities at the owlets, which were rearing young! In the summer of 1896, Osmaston took leave from the Forest College at Dehra Dun where he was on the staff, and journeyed to the source of Tons River, which is at the foot of Chaokhamba Peak, west of Bandarpunch, halting near Kedarkanta, where he came across many interesting birds and then reached Harki Dun two days later. He camped at c. 3,353 m under a grove of the Himalayan silver fir *Abies spectabilis*, above which there were only birch and dwarf willow (*Salix* sp.), being close to the tree line. Here he commonly encountered breeding birds like the Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Variegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus*, Chestnut-tailed Minla *Minla strigula*, Grandala *Grandala coelicolor*, White-bellied Redstart *Hodgsonius phaenicuroides*, Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*, White-tailed Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*, Red-headed Bullfinch *Pyrrhula erythrocephala*, Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* and many others. Some of the nests and eggs that he collected were described for the first time. Osmaston observed that in spring the Variegated Laughingthrush was drawn irresistibly to the red flowers of *Rhododendron arboreum* and in the process of sucking nectar, the bird would thrust its head deep into the corolla, emerging with yellow pollen dabbed all over its head, obviously aiding in the pollination of the blossoms. In fact he was startled by their appearance and for a very brief while suspected he was looking at a new species! While descending one day from Dhakuri to Bageswar in the Pindari River valley, after an unsuccessful attempt

to view the Nanda Devi Sanctuary by climbing up from Sundardhunga (3,350 m), Osmaston heard the calls of nine species of parasitic cuckoos, which he considered something of a record!

Binsar has been bestowed with a rich bird life and is listed as an Important Bird Area with a checklist of 166 species of birds. Among these, Ilyas (Islam & Rahmani 2004: 1020–1021) lists 23 species belonging to the Sino-Himalayan temperate forest biome, including the Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophciata*, Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*, Fire-capped Tit *Cephalopyrus flammiceps*, Long-billed Thrush *Zoothera monticola*, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*, Vinaceous Rosefinch *Carpodacus vinaceus* and Brown Bullfinch *Pyrrhula nipalensis*.

While tramping through the forest the next morning, we heard the call of the Hill Partridge *Arborophila torqueola*. Osmaston discovered a nest of this game bird near Dhakuri rest house (2,900 m), which affords a fantastic view of the 7,000 m Mt. Trisul. It was located in young oak forest amongst dead leaves and held a clutch of six pure white eggs. Though common in the thick oak and fir forests between 1,830–2,750 m, the bird is not frequently seen, flying away swift and straight, through the trees, if disturbed. Osmaston was quite fascinated by the call of the Hill Partridge. He said it was unlike any other game birds' and could be heard over quite a distance.

I too saw here for the first time, the delectable Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*, which breeds in the Himalayas and winters in more southerly regions including the Western Ghats. Major Hingston, whose book contains many eloquent passages on natural history, leaves an exquisite description of this bird, "Clothed in a most lovely blue, softening under different shades of light into emerald or turquoise." I was also glad to spot the tiny and cute form of the Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis* after many years. It breeds in the Himalayas and winters in the plains and hills to the south, which is how I had seen it outside Baroda in a dense avenue of peltophorum trees nearly 20 years ago. We lingered to take a good look at an Asian Barred Owl *Glaucidium cuculoides* perched on the bough of a burnt tree, and which frequently rotated its little head right around to quizzically view us inquisitive humans and probably wonder what we were up to!

Picturesquely located atop a mountain, amidst rich oak forests, Binsar draws visitors for its famed views of the snowy peaks. Standing on the wide gallery we strained for a glimpse of the mountains through the mists and clouds of the early monsoon, but were unsuccessful and retired dejected. But natural providence had a surprise in store for us. As we returned at sunset through the forest back to our quarters, the mists cleared for a few minutes and through a small opening in the woods we had a brief and tantalising view of the peaks. The golden rays of the radiant setting sun had splashed the forest trees with reddish and orange tints and against this backdrop, well above the northern horizon, rose the magnificent and eternal snow peaks of Nanda Devi and its allied summits reposing in sublime



Fig. 3. Grey goral on the Kunjakharak road

majesty and peace. The stupendous vista was enthralling and one was overwhelmed and humbled with a feeling of reverence and wonder at this marvellous spectacle.

Our hearts contented by the gratifying vision of the Himalayas, we journeyed down to Sat Tal. On a hillside below the Almora Ridge, we approach the town's refuse dump—not exactly a place worthy of a halt but for the fact that the endangered vulture family treats us to a lavish display. Around the shoulder of the mountain comes the imposing Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, effortlessly sailing on the mid-day thermals. With its huge 3 m wingspan the bird can be quite a startling sight when it passes close overhead, as I had discovered while trekking in the Parvati Valley area near Kulu in 1981. Shortly, two Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, with their distinct white and black markings, cruise over the valley. Not to be outdone, the much smaller and swifter Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* soars into view above us. After this stopover, we continued on our journey to Sat Tal, which is c. 22 kms from Nainital.

Jim Corbett was probably one of the most illustrious residents of Nainital, one who was quite exceptional amongst the British colonialists, in that he is still remembered by Indians for his exploits in ridding the hills of man-eating carnivores and his general dealings with the peasantry. Osmaston was enamoured of Nainital and as Conservator of Forests in 1908, had the privilege of occupying Stanley Hall on the lower slope of Cheena Peak. In his notes he dwelt on the beauties of the oak forest covering the Nainital slopes in the monsoon when clouds and sheets of rain soak the valley and masses of ferns decorate the fine oaks. The 'Brain Fever' call of the Large Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococyx sparveroides* could often be heard in the kharsu oak forest above 2,450 m on the upper slopes of Cheena. Years before this posting, he was at Jaunsar Bawar, and out on a tour of the mountains in the heavy rains with his wife, between 2,133–2,740 m, he reveled in the lush greenery, flowers and mist, being particularly enraptured by the twelve-yearly flowering of the *Strobilanthes wallichii* shrub, which proliferated over more than 260 km² of oak and fir forest and painted the forests with an incredible loveliness. Evelyn Smythies, another IFS officer serving under Osmaston in Nainital, took his wife Olive to enjoy the view from Cheena soon after arriving in Nainital. He had called it one of the 'finest views in the world'. She could not agree more, for when she laid her eyes on the panorama she was swept off her feet, gazing in awe at the august assembly of peaks spanning a 160 km range, including Bandarpunch, Kamet, Nilkanta, Trisul and Nanda Devi.

As you descend towards Sat Tal you get a bird's eye view of this stunningly lovely locale which has an endearing little lake nestling amidst the forest clad slopes. Everywhere, disagreeable patches of the chir pine are visible, striking the only discordant note in a mesmerising landscape. The lake rests at an altitude of 1,370 m and is actually part of a cluster of seven interconnecting lakes. Sixty-six lakes dot the area surrounding Nainital and the English visitors that started flocking the region after Nainital was founded in 1839, were fondly reminded of their native Lake District.



Fig. 4. Red-billed Blue Magpie

A group of Slovenian researchers reported in the *Journal* of the BNHS about the sighting of three Mandarin Ducks *Aix galericulata* in this little lake, in February 1999—the third record from India. Baker reported the first in 1902, from Assam, and Grimson the next, in 1934, from Manipur.

We spend some hours delighting in the bird life of this pleasing glen and are rewarded with many exciting avian sightings. Perched on a tree at the edge of an opening was a Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* and a gallant little Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* dived at it, chasing it all over the area. A Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon *Treron sphenura* burst out of the trees and darted across the clearing like a little green missile. We also saw the Greater Yellownappe *Picus flavinucha*—a large woodpecker bearing a yellow crest on its head. The variety of woodpeckers of different species, with their varied colouration and markings that we encountered on our Kumaon journey was truly remarkable—our total count touching twelve. Our total tally of bird species in Kumaon was a remarkable 187 species in about a week's exploration. We move slowly onward along the forest path till we are ambushed by a squadron of leeches and our group beats a hasty and humiliating retreat!

As I walked back to the lakeshore my heart was joyful as I carried a wealth of wonderful images to share with my family back home, but there was also a twinge of regret for this was the end of our wonderful tour of Kumaon. We had trod through its fascinating forests in the valleys and the highlands and reaped a bountiful harvest of sights and sounds of the land and its denizens. As I write these lines, I can once more hear the haunting and plaintive cry of the Great Barbet wafting across the hills and the merry whistles of the Rufous Sibia beckoning me to return to those alluring deep woods and grand montane vistas, and I whisper a silent prayer to the Lord that I may return one day. As my mind wanders through the mountains and comes to rest on that pristine vision of the snowy summits of the great Himalaya, the immortal Sanskrit verse composed by the sages echoes in my head, "In a hundred ages of the Gods I could not tell thee of the glories of Himachal."