

Sikkim

Hooker's Himalayan Kingdom

A Greentours Tour Report

29th April – 16th May 2007

Led by Chris Gardner

NB – do bear in mind that the itinerary we followed in 2007 is different from that we'll be doing in 2011. In 2007 the trek was an integral part of the tour and took place in the mid-late part of that tour, whereas in 2011 any trekking is done as an extension. The order of the itinerary has thus altered from the 2007 report, however nearly all the same places are being visited so the report still gives a good idea of what to expect.

Day 1 To Gangtok

After our early morning arrival at Delhi we took an internal flight across the dry plains below and on to the lush green paddy fields and wooded hills of Assam, before eventually backtracking to Bagdogra. From there it was a lengthy drive to Sikkim, the first part via the crowded streets of Siliguri and then forested lowlands before beginning the winding ascent through subtropical forest. The road paralleled the river for a time, the border between India and Sikkim and when we finally crossed it at Rangpo the change was dramatic. Immediately we left behind the crowded ramshackle Bengal and entered the more pristine and tidier Sikkim, passing up through villages with neat houses and balconies festooned with pot plants and then on to the bright lights of Gangtok the state capital and our comfortable hotel set amidst the grounds of an orchid nursery, where we were greeted with a drink of Indian red wine (actually quite good) and then fed a huge meal of many dishes before retiring to the dog chorus that echoed around the hills.

Day 2 Kyongnsola Alpine Sanctuary

A fine sunny day (garden birds and orchids) saw us heading up towards the Tibetan border winding up and stopping at a waterfall where there was our first *Rhododendron* arboretum and a few flowers on a *Daphne bholua* var. *glacialis*, then into the higher subalpine slopes that are dominated by open silver fir forest and *rhododendron* scrub with many species beginning to bloom (although hail damage had ruffled the flowers a little) with *Rhododendron thomsonii*, *barbatum*, *hodgsonii*, *niveum*, *campanulatum* and *campylocarpum* in bud. Here and there were clumps of pink flowered *Primula boothii* and the shrubs were full of birds with many Buff-

rumped Leaf Warblers and feeding actively from the vivid red rhododendron blooms were equally stunning male Fire-tailed Sunbirds resplendent in orange and yellow with iridescent blue crowns. We wandered up and then down through the reserve past the attractive flaking bark of Himalayan Birch *Betula utilis* to a river beset with prayer flags. Higher up there were better patches of primulas, but we climbed first to Changu Lake and the touristic throng of yak rides and tea stalls that front the otherwise picturesque lake, backed by snowy hills. Returning towards Gangtok we stopped for the primulas and also the yellow stars of *Oxygraphis polypetala* a miniature celandine.

Further down and we stopped to look at a spectacular forested valley plunging down and down and along its upper flanks were many superb trees of large-leaved *Rhododendron falconeri* in full flower with trusses of creamy bells. They lined the valley sides for miles and we could see them colouring the slopes as we progressed occasionally coming closer to plants near the road. Some were lucky enough to see a Himalayan Monal cross the road and run up the slope and others saw a tree festooned with *Rhododendron dalhousiae* a very fine epiphytic species with large creamy-white flowers.

Lunch was a bit later than planned and the post lunch shopping was thwarted by the curious Tuesday closing in Gangtok. Instead the hint of clearing mountains saw us heading out of town to the Tashi viewpoint where we enjoyed the wonderful evening panorama of Kanchenjunga and its flanking ridges virtually free of cloud save for a few that were illuminated by the golden sun adding drama to the rugged silhouettes of the peaks.

Day 3 To Lachung via Phodong

Another sunny day and we once again passed the Tashi viewpoint but there was no peak on show today. There were however, our first plants of *Arisaema speciosa*, a common aroid at this elevation at this season with tan brown spathes sporting extraordinarily long appendages that trailed off beyond the spathes for some distance and as we all gathered to take their photograph. A Grey Bushchat flew back and forth from a hunting perch. The road twisted and undulated past waterfalls, some thronging with holidaying Bengalis and we crossed numerous bridges over deep jungle clad river valleys. Reaching the monasteries at Phodong we first visited the older one called Labrang where we entertained the monks and monklets as much as they did us by rolling around on the floor trying to take artistic photographs of drums and prayer flags. The monastery itself was an attractive building with the usual brightly coloured Buddhist painting around the doors and windows but all somehow more subtle than the newer monastery at Phodong, which had a quite different feel and was far more frequented by tourists, although under a shady fig we found a flowering spike of brown and pink *Cymbidium devonianum*.

After lunch we continued passing through areas of bamboo clad slopes and lush sub-tropical forest the verges brimming with greenery including a delicate yellow balsam *Impatiens scabrada*, the odd impressive spathe of *Arisaema concinnum* and the tall forest trees were home to red flowered *Aeschyanthus sikkimensis* and many epiphytic orchids including white flowered *Coelogyne nitida* and outside one of the many village houses clinging to a tree was Sikkim's national flower the beautiful *Dendrobium nobile*. Local people enjoy orchids as much as anyone

else and frequently collect them to display outside their homes and perhaps unfortunately this is one of the best ways of seeing some of Sikkim's orchid wealth. Various view stops were made along the way as well and this was no surprise given the spectacular nature of the terrain with forested valleys and rushing rivers complimenting the human element of impressive rice terraces and rows of fluttering prayer flags on tall bamboo poles.

We had a break for tea at Chongtang before the final climb up to Lachung at 2550 metres.

Day 4 Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary

What a day this turned out to be. The weather was again fine with broken views of the snowy ranges and the great swathes of silver fir forest that clothed their lower slopes and we spent the day among these forests. However, we stopped first below in an area of scrub dotted with *Piptanthus nepalensis* shrubs with their bright yellow pea flowers and stands of reddish emerging shoots of *Euphorbia sikkimensis*. Closer examination revealed the delicate pink tinged white flowers of *Androsace rotundifolia* and a pretty white *Veronica* sp. and rising from all of this were a number of bizarre *Arisaema nepenthoideis* with indeed nepenthes-like spathes on tall marbled stems. Clambering among the mixed shrubs were plants of *Holboelia latifolia* an unusual climber with scented waxy bells of pinkish lilac to cream. A pair of Peregrine Falcons flew overhead calling loudly and no doubt nesting on the steep cliffs that rose above us. We continued up past a number of bends before stopping for our first rhododendrons of the day with some decent colour forms of purplish *Rhododendron niveum* (Sikkim's state tree), pink *glaucophyllum* mixed in with the white of *ciliatum* with its hair fringed leaves. The latter two were low growing species and thrived in dense shrubberies alongside *Gaultheria hookeri*. A few of the impressive *Arisaema griffithii* and a *Paris polyphylla* were found among the shrubs, but many more of the former were to appear as we climbed yet higher stopping for the first big drift of *Primula denticulata* that we saw. More *Arisaema griffithii* were close by among a stand of *Rhododendron decepiens* (?) (I find this species somewhat dubious and the defining characteristics vague CG) their dark purple spikes thrusting out of the ground and unfurling their bizarre recurved spathes with yellow reticulate veining. There were also many shrubs of *Viburnum nervosa* with frothy heads of white flowers among reddish emergent foliage adding to a vibrant spring scene that was perhaps defined by the simply remarkable displays of primulas and rhododendrons that we saw. After we'd passed through a fine mini forest of blood red *Rhododendron thomsonii* and stopped for the gorgeous clear yellow of *Rhododendron campylocarpum* and the various shades of lilac *Rhododendron campanulatum* we were drawn to another stand of *Rhododendron thomsonii* beneath which swarmed so many *Primula denticulata* providing a striking combination of colours. Even more dazzling displays of primulas were close by, quite literally carpeting the ground with lilac purple and these staggering displays continued for miles and must have represented hundreds of thousands of plants. We carried on past silver fir forest brim full of lilac *Rhododendron campanulatum* which eventually gave way to deep pink big-leaved *Rhododendron hodgsonii* growing as multi-stemmed understory trees and then we stopped again for the beautiful creamy-white blooms of *Rhododendron wightii*. A bit of searching around in the surrounding forest produced another gem, the deep purple flowered *Primula calderana*.

We did eventually make it to Yumthang, a small collection of shacks and a big white chorten bedecked in multicoloured prayer flags that sits on a broad pasture studded with yellow *Anemone obtusiloba* above the braided river. Some of us went down to the river to search for a very special bird and after three Snow Pigeons briefly got us going, the bird duly appeared flying along the river course. The Ibisbill is a stunning bird, exquisitely marked with grey, black and white and with a prominent curved red bill and we enjoyed a very good view of the bird.

On the return we stopped several times despite the fact that lunch was already well overdue, it was simply too stunning a day. Stopping for a view of a *Rhododendron campanulatum* filled fir forest, Sheena drew our attention to a colony of *Primula gracilipes* she had seen growing next to a late snow patch. There were some very fine clusters of yellow-eyed pink flowers and while we photographed them our driving team amused themselves on the snow before presenting us with a specimen of *Rhododendron anthopogon* in flower with its delicate pinkish shell-like blooms. Further down was a good swathe of *Rhododendron ciliatum* and more dazzling mixed displays before we eventually wound our way back for a somewhat late lunch, but that didn't seem to matter after such an exhilarating day.

However, there was still time for a little more as I attempted to locate a very special rhodo on the slopes above Lachung. Somehow I took a wrong turn and we had to settle for a look at the waterfall that plunged into the thicket of Himalayan Hemlock *Tsuga dumosa* and two smaller species namely *Rhododendron triflorum* with yellowish-green flowers in threes as the name suggests and the diminutive and pretty *Rhododendron virgatum* with its palest pink flowers. Then driving back and just when we thought this rhodo fest was over I spotted a couple of early flowers on a roadside *Rhododendron lepidotum* to bring our tally of flowering *Rhododendron* species for the day to an impressive seventeen. Despite the late lunch we were still served a huge banquet at dinner.

Day 5 To Lachen

After the unsuccessful attempt to locate *Rhododendron lindleyi* yesterday we decided to try again this time up the right stream gully. It was a steep and rocky ascent passing dense bamboo stands, *Rhododendron falconeri*, *Rhododendron triflorum*, tantalising glossy leaved shoots of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* and *Arisaema griffithii* but sadly there was no sign of our quarry, which I had seen here four years previously growing as a lithophyte close to the stream and which may have now been washed away! To compensate the morning mists had cleared and there was a fabulous view down to Lachung and across the valley to the snowy ridges that form the Tibetan border. After a careful descent we found some very fine pink forms of *Androsace rotundifolia* by the roadside before setting off down towards Chongtang, stopping occasionally for rural scenes, a plant of the creamy flowered *Michelia doltsopa* and the odd waterfall. At Chongtang we turned north again towards Lachen and drove up through the narrow valley lined with lush forests. One vehicle stopped for some superb creamy *Rhododendron dalhousiae* before we had lunch under a shady shelter as Striated Laughingthrush skulked in the dense foliage and Brown Bullfinch flitted about the trees. Closer to Lachen the huge white blooms of a roadside *Rhododendron griffithianum* drew our attention and then another finer specimen in the forest allowed us a close look and a chance to enjoy its delicious perfume. Whilst all this

was going on Alistair casually asked “What’s this white flower” as he pointed to a *Rhododendron edgeworthii* hanging from the rocks where we’d parked. This was another beautiful species and special enough for us to all scramble one at a time onto the top of one of the vehicles to get closer photos. However, not long after our not-so-elegant climbing antics Jeff discovered an even lovelier form with a pink flush to the petals at a more convenient height a short distance back down the road. Two cracking species and there was even the added delight of seeing huge shrubs of *Rhododendron griffithianum* among the Hemlock forest downslope.

We arrived in Lachen in mid afternoon and had plenty of time after a cuppa to explore the town and relax prior to tomorrow’s more energetic delights.

Day 6 Zemu Valley & Thangu

We left by 7.30 for our walk along the sunny Zemu Valley following the route of the Green Lake Trek. The Zemu River was in full spate and cloudy with glacial meltwater from the mighty Zemu Glacier fed by Kanchenjunga and the steep sided valley was clothed in hemlock and fir forest. We made our way along a recently constructed stone path passing some very fine deep red *Rhododendron arboreum* and many superb *Arisaema nepenthoides* (including one with eleven spathes) and simply huge *Arisaema griffithii* with their impressive recurved purple spathes and there were many *Primula denticulata* and a nice patch of *Primula gracilipes*. We disturbed a mixed flock of Black-faced and White-throated Laughingthrushes and there White-capped Water Redstarts along the riverside and many warblers calling from the shrubberies. Unfortunately we encountered a series of tricky obstacles where landslides had wrecked the trail and then a huge snowpatch and so were forced to turn back. However, the walk back was easy being mainly downhill and the sun was still shining and on reaching the trailhead we had lunch and opted to take the road up to the remote village of Thangu, within sight of Tibet and this turned out to be a fascinating change of plans. The road wound up through small farms and forest, with views across the valley of incredibly beautiful Himalayan forest clothing the steep slopes, slopes that in places had given way to form immense landslide zones. We moved higher encountering rich rhododendron belts with a mixture of *Rhododendron thomsonii*, many soft pink *Rhododendron campanulatum*, *Rhododendron campylocarpum* and a succession of stunning *Rhododendron cinnabarinum*. Accompanying all of this was an endless carpet of *Primula denticulata* in quite unbelievable numbers that at times coloured the pastures lilac, but in fact came in a wonderful range of colours from lilac to deep cerise-purple. These displays were staggering and the forests also became increasingly beautiful filled with pink rhododendrons.

When we finally arrived at Thangu, a decidedly one yak town, we enjoyed a refreshing cuppa in a small teahouse and drew the curiosity of the locals some of whom seemed to dress as if this was a real wild west town. The descent brought a new set of fantastic views and a fair assortment of flowers with large shrubs of *Rhododendron wightii* hanging over the rushing river, a colony of bright yellow *Anemone obtusiloba*, delicate *Rhododendron anthopogon* then a colony of *Rhododendron pendulum* hanging from a cliff with delicate saucer-shaped white flowers. Stops for more of the charismatic *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* with cascades of narrow red and orange bells also produced a *Clintonia udensis* a white-flowered bulb with broad leaves. To round off the day we paused regularly to photograph the superb mountain scenery and the odd herd of yaks grazing in the fields watched by the numerous Long-tailed Shrikes that hunted from the overhead lines.

Day 7 To Ravangla

There was a long drive ahead of us today so we left Lachen at 7 am and descended towards Chongtang. We stopped not far out of town to watch two Langurs feeding at the top of a hemlock as an agitated Yellow-billed Blue Magpie flew across. Further down we photographed the unfolding landscape and then a superb shrub of *Rhododendron dalhousiae* with its huge flamboyant creamy flowers. Tucked away in the adjacent lush herbage were also a few *Disporum cantoniense* an unusual lilaceous plant with cream coloured bell shaped flowers. Souvenir hats were bought from the nearby Angora rabbit farm before we carried on down to Chongtang stopping there to photograph a fine assortment of Sikkimese orchids growing in a bundle outside a rundown hotel and these included the state flower the beautiful pink and white *Dendrobium nobile*, along with more subtle brown and purple *Cymbidium devonianum* and a sprig of *Aeschyanthus hookeri* for good measure.

There was another roadside orchid to follow not long after with a superb golden yellow *Dendrobium densiflorum* growing in a rusty square tin can set on top of an equally rusty tin roof. It was a hot day and grew hotter as we descended towards the Teesta River with only the odd stop for a fine *Arisaema concinnum* and then a pre-lunch snack at a shaded lookout with the rushing Teesta below us. Lunch was on the other side of the same river set in the tropical forest of lowland Sikkim with plentiful butterflies flitting about the greenery and unseen Barbets calling from the treetops and consisted of tasty chowmein and mo-mos accompanied by Spiderman II at top volume.

The last leg to Ravangla included a couple of stops for the rural landscape of West Sikkim with its carefully tended and immaculate terraces full of healthy maize and even a team of cattle ploughing. Arriving at our flower-filled resort at Mount Narsing set among a tea plantation that included a superb specimen of *Rhododendron dalhousiae* we settled into the comfortable cottages before enjoying tea on the lawn with the odd leech for company. Hopes were high for a clear morning and views of mighty Kanchenjunga.

Day 8 Maenam

The early birds were up to see the sunrise over the Himalayas from our elevated hotel site, although the hazy conditions meant there was no great golden moment, but the range was impressive all the same with mighty Kanchenjunga centre stage. After this we spent time photographing the superb *Rhododendron dalhousiae* that graced the hotel and surrounding scrub, with some breathtaking specimens festooned with huge creamy flowers. After breakfast we made our way to the trailhead for Maenam Mountain and set off along the long trail to the summit to the calls of Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo, passing first through an area of forest with many more *Rhododendron dalhousiae* on show as well as the pretty white orchid *Coelogyne corymbosa* with its intricately marked flowers. There followed a stunning plant of *Rhododendron dalhousiae* subspecies *tashii* with narrower and distinctly greenish tinted flowers, if anything more attractive than the blousier whiter form. *Arisaemas* were abundant with many *Arisaema speciosa*, the odd *Arisaema concinnum* and *Arisaema tortuosum* and as we progressed higher both *Arisaema griffithii* and *Arisaema nepenthoides* appeared. The upper forests were full of ferns and

all the trees were swathed in lush moss and Golden-spectacled Warblers flitted among the big leaves of *Rhododendron grande* that stood out with their new shoots bursting forth. Strands of sweetly scented *Holboelia latifolia* were strung across shrubs and fallen trees, whilst tucked among the fallen logs were groups of *Paris polyphylla*, but this temperate cloud forest gradually changed its floral mix as we ascended eventually reaching the upper forests dominated by magnificent *Rhododendron falconeri* with huge candelabras of creamy flowers atop their large green leaves with a rich cinnamon felt underneath. There were some huge specimens fully twelve metres or more tall and with trunks half a metre across. Among all this were many other fine trees including a couple of *Magnolia campbellii* still with some creamy white blooms. The odd Royle's Pika scurried about the undergrowth, a diminutive type of rabbit with much smaller rounded ears.

At one point I was presented with a sweetly scented white flower by Jeff and Sue and this was instantly recognisable as *Rhododendron lindleyi*, the smell being quite different from the similar *Rhododendron dalhousiae*. This was a plant to look for on the return journey, but for now we continued past the pretty pink bells of both *Vaccinium nummularia* and *Vaccinium retusum* and many sturdy *Arisaema griffithii* with handsome purple leaves until the rain began to fall and then the light hail. Fortunately we soon reached a shelter, but within minutes the rain and hail intensified and unleashed a truly vicious storm with a ferocious downdraft that propelled horizontal rain and hail under the shelter roof. We huddled around eating our lunch subjected to the din of the hail on the tin roof and the cold blasts of air that whistled through the shelter. The full force of the storm lasted at least half an hour and then slowly the rain receded enough for some of us to begin the descent and for four of us to head for the summit to locate a rather splendid floral holy grail. After a half hour or so of switchbacks we arrived at the top in an area of rather battered silver fir forest and among the moss at the base of these were a number of charming *Bryocarpum himalaicum* with delicate yellow bells and attractively marked broad leaves, a very choice plant and well worth the effort to reach. Hanging from the firs were plants of *Rhododendron pendulum* and scattered among the understorey were creamy-flowered little bushes of *Skimmia laureola*.

We now had the long descent ahead of us but this was broken up with stops to photograph various things from the swirling mists among the trees to whatever plants took our fancy and there was a brightly coloured blue and orange Rufous-bellied Niltava before we eventually met up with the *Rhododendron lindleyi* a large plant that had been a casualty on a falling tree – the perils of growing as an epiphyte. It was well after 5 p.m. when we made the bottom and drove back to our hotel with views of the clearing mountains in time for a well earned hot drink.

Day 9 To Yuksam

After saying our goodbyes to Warren who was leaving the tour today we spent the rest of the morning driving across to Yuksam the overnight base before our five day trek into the southern section of Kanchenjunga National Park. It was an overcast and warm day but not too hot and we stopped occasionally to look at the delicate pink flowers of *Dendrobium aphylla* or to photograph the landscape, whether it be suspension bridges or fantastic terraced hillsides. We took tea at Tashiding before finally making it to Yuksam and settling in for a relaxing afternoon before tomorrow's endeavours. However, Ron, Chris, Sheena and I did opt for the forty minute

climb to the Dubon Monastery the oldest in Sikkim (built in 1701) and the humid forest that flanked the hill was filled with arisaemas including many *Arisaema concinnum* in a variety of colour forms, some dark brown others green along with *Arisaema speciosum* and a few *Arisaema tortuosum*.

Day 10 Yuksam to Tsoka

Today was the first day of our trek into the heart of Kanchenjunga National Park, a huge tract of mountainous wilderness that encompasses the eastern flank of Mount Kanchenjunga. After carrying out all the necessary permit formalities we started into the humid forests along a winding, undulating rocky trail seeing *Coelogyne nitida*, *Cautleya gracilis* and arisaemas along the way. Every so often a lumbering train of Dzoes would come past carrying various loads of food and trekkers belongings and we all had to step aside to let them past. A tasty lunch was prepared by our trekking crew beside a river before continuing eventually reaching a large bridge over which was a steep climb up to the Tibetan village of Tsoka at 2900 metres, passing through cooler forests of hemlock with an understorey of *Mahonia napaulensis* and rhododendrons. We were to spend the night in one of the wooden lodges in the village and after settling in most of us went up to enjoy the view and a cold beer at Ma Chokas 'bar' as the evening light played some fine tricks with the clouds. It had been a long day's walk and the cook rustled up another appropriate feast to keep us going and we went to sleep with gentle sound of Dzo bells ringing.

Day 11 Tsoka to Kokchurung

We left early climbing up above Tsoka from where there were fine views back down and several very fine deep pink *Rhododendron arboretum*, superb *Rhododendron falconeri* some with huge flower trusses and an abundance of *Rosa sericea* the bushes smothered in creamy flowers. Then as we climbed we found a colony of *Clintonia udensis*, a lovely clump of *Paris polyphylla*, the white form of *Gaultheria trichophylla* and star of the show *Primula irregularis* with its deeply toothed pretty pink flowers. The forest now was of silver fir with an understorey of magnificent white flowered *Viburnum nervosa* and a variety of rhododendrons with the stunning alabaster bark of *Rhododendron barbatum* the branches festooned with bristly young shoots and then higher up the ghostly twisted trunks of *Rhododendron hodgsonii* the boughs laden with handsome trusses of flowers that varied from pale to very deep pink above the large leathery leaves. The flowers of *Rhododendron pendulum* could be seen scattered on the ground and glancing upwards we could see fine epiphytic plants hanging from the silver firs. Mists swirling among the forests as rain began to fall but this had largely stopped by the time we reached Pethang a small clearing at 3600 metres where we had a break.

From Pethang we branched off into a superb forest of *Rhododendron hodgsonii* along a rugged track unsuited to animal traffic and so it was virtually empty. There were occasional shrubs of clear yellow *Rhododendron campylocarpum* and pale cream *Rhododendron wightii* but the star attraction along this trail was the stunning display of *Primula boothii* that smothered a bank. Once again we had lunch en route and, as we ate, a mixed flock of Rufous-vented Tits and

White-browed Fulvettas fed in the nearby bushes. Further along the track we found a few good *Primula calderana* with their gorgeous deep purple flowers alongside various small streams but there were better displays when we reached our somewhat crowded campsite where we had to camp a little closer to our dzos than we might have liked thanks to a huge trekking group that had taken over the entire camp site.

Day 12 Kokchurung to Dzungri

The mists cleared this morning for views of Mount Pandim situated further along the Prek Valley, with a great glacier clinging to its summit. After breakfast we climbed up into the *Rhododendron wightii* forest behind the camp, making our way up onto the Dzungri plateau at 4000 metres and we passed many good *Rhododendron anthopogon* on the way in a variety of colour forms from white to peach or pink. The plateau was far from flat, something we were fast learning about Sikkim – such things are all relative to its extreme topography – and we followed an undulating trail across through shrubberies of the previous two rhododendrons and finding in the grassy areas fine *Primula deuteronema* growing among the abundant emerging silvery leaves of *Potentilla peduncularis*. Closer to our camp, which was actually a hundred metres lower in altitude we found many lovely primulas including the charming little *Primula glabra* a delicate species with lilac flowers and there were also many *Primula calderana* and a good few *Primula deuteronema*. A stunning blue *Grandala* was seen along the way and around the camp were White-browed Rosefinches and Rufous-breasted Accentors. Unfortunately the rain set in for most of the afternoon, but then in the late afternoon this stopped and the amorphous clouds parted and the whole glorious landscape was bathed in rich sunshine with the beautiful snowclad Mount Pandim and a host of other jagged peaks. This wonderful show was swallowed up in mists and cloud again within an hour but what an hour it was.

Day 13 Dzungri to Tsoka

A bleary-eyed 3.30 am alarm call saw us walking across the plateau towards the viewpoint hill half an hour later as the dawn light gathered and revealed the ghostly shape of the mountains that surround the plateau. Although it was a brooding grey sky this gave a surreal air to the silvery peaks of the Singalila Ridge and those along the Prek Valley. It was still a magnificent sight despite the absence of Kanchenjunga and we enjoyed this for nearly an hour before we saw the clouds moving in and as we returned across the plateau it began to snow. This worsening weathered was to our benefit however because it forced many of the indescribably blue *Grandalas* down from higher up and suddenly there were literally dozens of them, with at least fifty seen, many very close, a simply exquisite bird and the glory of the Himalaya.

After breakfast we packed up and made our way towards Tsoka. Once again the route undulated through rhododendron shrubberies and past fabulous slopes smothered in the sumptuous purple of *Primula calderana*. There were shrubberies of *Rhododendron fulgens* a species we had not seen well until now and then as we descended to Pethang we passed through stunning *Rhododendron thomsonii* forest the plants smothered in blood-red bells

glistening with silvery raindrops. The rhododendron forest here was among the finest we had seen and we passed many superb *Rhododendron hodgsonii* trees and glorious yellow *Rhododendron campylocarpum* before arriving at Pethang for a hot drink and some snacks. A Spotted Laughingthrush and Yellow-billed Blue Magpie were moving about the clearing and there were rents in the clouds to occasionally reveal the mountains beyond.

The remaining descent to Tsoka passed through the same forest we had climbed up through two days ago, but this time we were able to appreciate its beauty more fully finding and photographing many of the things we were prevented from doing in the rain before. The afternoon was spent relaxing and observing the rural scene, with occasional walking piles of herbage appearing with yellow wellies underneath, that turned into little Sikkimese dzo men carrying fodder to the ravenous beasts.

During the night a violent storm raged overhead lashing down rain and threatening to lift the roof off the lodge.

Day 14 Tsoka to Pelling

The overnight rain had done nothing to improve the trail and it was quite slippery and slow going, but the morning was clear and sunny with lovely views down the forested valleys towards Yuksam. There were Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush and Darjeeling Woodpecker before we reached Bakhim and then progressing through the lush forests we saw more teasing tall stems of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* and a profusion of fresh ferns. Across the bridge we followed the undulating trail (a term we were now familiar with) finding plenty of good yellow-flowered *Cautleya gracilis* and on shady mossy rocks colonies of the curious creamy spathes of the aroid *Remusatia hookerana* and everywhere were the bright yellow stars of *Sedum multicaule*. White-throated Laughingthrushes skulked among the canopy and a noisy male Mrs Gould's Sunbird showed well as he tried to impress the females of his kind. Another tasty lunch was taken along the trail before we completed the walk arriving by early afternoon. We then drove through the beautiful countryside before climbing up to the town of Pelling and our hotel with a commanding view of Kanchenjunga National Park and the eponymous peak even out in an afternoon showing peering from between the clouds for a short time.

That evening the cloud dissipated completely and this boded well for a morning show.

Day 15 To Kalimpong

The dawn arrived with a glorious mountain vista as golden highlights were thrown onto the snowy flanks of the Himalaya. It was the view we had all hoped for and the sky remained blue and cloud free for over three hours allowing us to witness the gathering light on Kanchenjunga and its adjacent peaks below which spread the wonderful forests we had trekked through and the dome-shaped plateau (!) of Dzongri. Indeed it summed up the full beauty of Sikkim, an exceptional, verdant oasis tucked away among the mightiest mountains on Earth with a human element that valued what it had and kept it a "Clean and green Sikkim"

We paid a visit to the monastery at Pemayangtse and the now familiar colourful prayer flags and painting with views of still clear snowy peaks as a backdrop then made the drive to Kalimpong, making sure we were careful with its curves on the way, dipping down to Melli where we had to finally leave Sikkim before climbing up to the comfortable and very pleasant Himalaya Hotel with its colourful gardens and relaxed ambience and where we happily spent the afternoon before going out to dinner with a local family ...

Systematic List Number 1 Flowers

GL = Green Lake trek

Ranunculaceae

- Anemone sp. Delicate blue species in deep forest at Tsoka
Anemone sp. Tall white species on Observatory Hill, Darjeeling
Anemone obtusiloba Common at Thangsing meadow 3950m en route to Thangu
Oxygraphis polypetala Kyongsola area at 3500m

Magnoliaceae

- Magnolia campbellii Maenam. Tree sized species with a few large white flowers.
Michelia doltsopa A tree in the roadside below Lachung

Berberidaceae

- Mahonia napaulensis Common understorey shrub above 2400m
Berberis wallichiana Large-leaved evergreen, yellow flowers
Berberis indigina A superb large-leaved mid-altitude species seen en route to Lachen and at Maenam

Lardizabalaee

- Holboelia latifolia Unusual sweet scented purplish-pink or whitish flowers.
Common on Maenam c2700m, also above Lachung

Papaveraceae

- Meconopsis paniculata Huge rosettes of cut leaves smothered in golden hairs
Meconopsis sp. Unidentified species seen on the trek, non-flowering

Brassicaceae

- Cardamine macrophylla Common on banks especially in wet areas a few in flower.

Violaceae

- Viola canescens Common between 2500 and 3000m on Dzongri
Viola spp. A frustrating genus here with at a lovely white species in abundance near Tsoka 3200m

Theaceae

- Camellia sinensis Tea! Extensive plantations around Darjeeling
Schima wallachii Fine flowering tree at lower to mid-altitudes

Rutaceae

- Skimmia laureola Forest shrub, yellow-green flowers. Maenam, Tsoka, etc.

Balsamaceae

- Impatiens scabrata Common roadside yellow species at lower to mid-altitudes
Impatiens sulcata Pink flowered species

Aceraceae

- Acer campbellii En route to Lachen
Acer pectinatum Tsoka area
Acer sterculiaceum Widespread in the north

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| Anacardiaceae <i>Rhus succudena</i> | Wild Varnish Tree. Common along roads. |
| Fabaceae <i>Piptanthus nepalensis</i> <i>Bauhinia variegata</i> <i>Parochetus communis</i> <i>Erythrina stricta</i> | Spectacular yellow flowered shrub N Sikkim Near Yuksam Labrang monastery, blue flowered pea Vivid scarlet flowers on bare branches. Lowlands |
| Rosaceae <i>Rosa sericea</i> | Pretty pale yellow flowers and arching habit. Widespread 2500m+ |
| <i>Prunus cerasoides</i> <i>Potentilla pedunculairs</i> <i>Sorbus rhamnoides</i> <i>Neillia rubifolia</i> <i>Fragaria nubicola</i> | Lovely peeling bark. N Sikkim Abundant in turf on Dzungri plateau, but barely in flower. Zemu Valley Lachen area Common and widespread wild strawberry |
| Saxifragaceae <i>Bergenia ciliata</i> <i>Bergenia pupurascens</i> <i>Chrysoplenium</i> sp. | Often planted in walls as at Nork Hill Hotel, Gangtok As above. Common in forests. |
| Hydrangeaceae <i>Hydrangea aspera</i> <i>Hydrangea heteromalla</i> | En route to Lachen Maenam |
| Grossulariaceae <i>Ribes griffithii</i> <i>Ribes takare</i> | Shingba, etc Possibly this species above Tsoka |
| Loganiaceae <i>Buddleja asiatica</i> | Roadsides at mid-altitudes |
| Crassulaceae <i>Sedum multicaule</i> | Very common on rocky banks and walls below 2500m |
| Combretaceae <i>Combretum roxburghii</i> | En route to Ravangla |
| Melastomataceae <i>Melastoma normale</i> | Big pink flowers. Subtropical areas. |
| Begoniaceae <i>Begonia</i> spp. | Various subtropical species in forests |
| Araliaceae <i>Schefflera impressa</i> <i>Aralia cachemirica</i> | Fine digitate-leaved tree on Maenam Roadsides |

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| Sambucaceae | |
| Viburnum erubescens | Very common in sub-tropical to temperate forests, pinkish flowers. |
| Viburnum nervosum | Waxy white flower. The common highland species. Previous records of <i>V. cotinifolium</i> are erroneous. |
| Viburnum grandiflorum | Large pink flowers on bare branches. Kyongnosla, Thangu area |
| Rubiaceae | |
| Rubia manjith | Widespread madder species, looking a bit like a clematis |
| Asteraceae | |
| Ainsliaea aptera | Frequent in forest and shrubberies. Delicate white flowers |
| Tussilago farfara | Zemu Valley, etc |
| Erigeron bellidoides | Abundant on roadside banks |
| Leontopodium himalayanum | Last years flowers, c4000m GL |
| Taraxacum officinale gp | Dandelions are everywhere in the world |
| Ericaceae | |
| Rhododendron anthopogon | Pinkish or yellowish, flat flowers. common on Dzungri Plateau above 3700m |
| Rhododendron arboreum | Red or deep pink. Fabulous deep red forms in in Zemu Valley and en route to Thangu. Often very large tree-like habit. |
| Rhododendron arboretum ssp cinnamomeum | The lovely pink-red form above Tsoka. |
| Rhododendron barbatum | Bright red, with bristly leaf petioles. Widespread |
| Rhododendron campanulatum | Lovely variable pink species usually with spotting on dorsal petal. Common above 3300m especially at Shingba |
| Rhododendron campylocarpum | Lovely yellow bells. Flowering below 3300m at Shingba and big shrubs above Tsoka. Various hybrids appear to exist between this species and campanulatum and thomsonii with beautiful peach-coloured forms at Shingba of the latter. |
| Rhododendron ciliatum | Abundant at Shingba. |
| Rhododendron cinnabarinum | Orange-yellow narrow bells. Great forms in North Sikkim, above 3200m |
| Rhododendron dalhousiae | Spectacular epiphyte/lithophyte – especially on Maenam and at our hotel nearby. |
| Rhododendron dalhousiae ssp tashii | A handsome greenish flowered form seen well on Maenam |
| Rhododendron decepiens | Probably seen at Shingba, but I'm not entirely convinced! Very similar to hodgsonii |
| Rhododendron edgeworthii | Pretty white and pink epiphyte with deep-veined leaves with a rust felt beneath, seen en route to Lachen |
| Rhododendron falconeri | Handsome big-leaf species, with brown felted underside and cream flowers. Common and huge on Maenam, and spectacular hillsides covered in them above Gangtok, also near Tsoka and Lachung |
| Rhododendron fulgens | High altitude red, Dzungri Plateau |
| Rhododendron glaucophyllum | Compact pink species, North Sikkim |
| Rhododendron grande | Early season big leaved species of lower elevations. Widespread, e.g. Maenam. |
| Rhododendron griffithianum | Beautiful big white flowers, roadsides approaching Lachen, also Tsoka & Lachung |

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| <i>Rhododendron hodgsonii</i> | Abundant and magnificent pure forests at Shingba and Dzungri, above 3300m. still some confusion over this and <i>decepiens</i> . |
| <i>Rhododendron lepidotum</i> | A few flowers near Lachung |
| <i>Rhododendron lindleyi</i> | Fine fragrant white trumpets. A lithophytic species only found on a fallen tree at Maenam |
| <i>Rhododendron niveum</i> | Unusual purple species found wild at Shingba and the Zemu Valley |
| <i>Rhododendron pendulum</i> | White epiphytic species, red spotting. Maenam summit, Tsoka and en route to Thangu |
| <i>Rhododendron setosum</i> | Non flowering |
| <i>Rhododendron thomsonii</i> | The ultimate red species – truly magnificent at Shingba and below the Dzungri Plateau. |
| <i>Rhododendron trichocladum</i> | Non flowering |
| <i>Rhododendron triflorum</i> | Greenish yellow flowers. Common above Lachung, also Zemu Valley |
| <i>Rhododendron virgatum</i> | Lithophyte above Lachung, white. |
| <i>Rhododendron wightii</i> | Abundant high altitude species, creamy yellow. |
| <i>Agapetes serpens</i> | Common at Fam Bong Lo & Maenam. Red flowers. |
| <i>Pieris formosa</i> | Common in N Sikkim e.g. Lachung |
| <i>Gaultheria fragrantissima</i> | Forests |
| <i>Gaultheria hookeri</i> | Common in highland areas |
| <i>Gaultheria trichophyllum</i> | Both red and white flowered forms seen above Tsoka |
| <i>Vaccinium retusum</i> | Maenam |
| <i>Vaccinium nummularia</i> | Forests |
| <i>Cassiope fastigiata</i> | Near Dzungri |
| Primulaceae | |
| <i>Androsace rotundifolia</i> | Widespread in the north |
| <i>Bryocarpum himalaicum</i> | Maenam summit. Gorgeous little yellow bell flowers. |
| <i>Primula irregularis</i> | Between Tsoka and Dzungri |
| <i>Primula calderana</i> | Scattered at Shingba but in superb abundance at Dzungri |
| <i>Primula gracilipes</i> | Seen at Shingba and Zemu Valley |
| <i>Primula glabra</i> | Common in short turf on Dzungri c4000m. Previously misidentified as <i>tibetica</i> |
| <i>Primula deuteronema</i> | Dzungri c4000m |
| <i>Primula boothii</i> | A superb bank of flowers below Dzungri also clumps at Kyongnosla |
| <i>Primula atrodentata</i> | Only seen with certainty at Kyongsola |
| <i>Primula denticulata</i> | Abundant and spectacular at Shingba and Thangu |
| Gentianaceae | |
| <i>Gentiana pedicellata</i> | Tiny annual species growing in grassy slopes. Widespread. |
| <i>Gentiana capitata</i> | Distinctive species with ovate leaves arranged beneath infl. Dzungri |
| Oleaceae | |
| <i>Osmanthus suavis</i> | Maenam |
| <i>Neolitsea pallens</i> | Maenam |

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| Solanaceae Brugmansia sauveolens | Widespread and spectacular non-native (Neotropical) |
| Scrophulariaceae Mazus surculosus Morina polyphylla Hemiphragma heterophylla | Trackside weed around Tsoka & Bakhim In leaf only on in Zemu Valley. Curious pink flowered shrublet between Tsoka and Dzongri |
| Gesneriaceae Aeschynanthus sikkimensis Aeschynanthus hookeri | Epiphytic. Bright red flowers, en route to Lachung Epiphyte seen at Maenam. |
| Lamiaceae Ajuga lobatus | Scattered e.g. banks between Tsoka and Yuksam |
| Polygonaceae Persicaria capitata Aconogonum molle | Common ground cover plant in forests Common in damp forest, etc |
| Saururaceae Houttuynia cordata | Occasional on damp roadsides |
| Thymelaeaceae Edgeworthia gardneri | Non-flowering near Yuksam. |
| Euphorbiaceae Euphorbia sikkimensis Euphorbia wallichiana | Lachung area. Tall species with red-veined leaves. Common on at c3300m e.g. Shingba. big yellow bracts and white central leaf vein |
| Elaeagnaceae Hippophae tibetana | Zemu Valley |
| Buxaceae Sarcococca hookerana | Small evergreen shrub. N Sikkim |
| Urticaceae Giardinia diversifolia | Big cut leaved nettle. Widespread. |
| Cannabaceae Cannabis sativa | Roadsides. |
| Betulaceae Betula utilis | Widespread in forests |
| Salicaceae Salix sikkimensis | Attractive catkins. Common. |

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| Pinaceae | |
| <i>Abies spectabilis</i> | Silver Fir. Upper tree zone |
| <i>Tsuga dumosa</i> | Himalayan Hemlock. Humid mid to upper forests |
| <i>Larix griffithiana</i> | East Himalayan Larch. Upper Forests e.g. Shingba. |
| Taxodiaceae | |
| <i>Cryptomeria japonica</i> | Commonly planted around Darjeeling, Yuksam, etc. |
| Cupressaceae | |
| <i>Cupressus cashmerianus</i> | Drooping branchlets. Widespread and planted. |
| <i>Cupressus funebris</i> | Widely planted around towns |
| <i>Juniperus recurva</i> | Mainly upper forest to treeline |
| Taxaceae | |
| <i>Taxus baccata</i> | Occasional in forest. GL |
| Orchidaceae | |
| <i>Coelogyne corymbosa</i> | Common above 2500m on Maenam and roadside trees between Lachung and Gangtok |
| <i>Coelogyne cristata</i> | Non-flowering near Yuksam |
| <i>Coelogyne ochracea (nitida)</i> | Abundant below 2200 around Yuksam & Darjeeling |
| <i>Cymbidium devonianum</i> | c2300m en route to Tsoka |
| <i>Dendrobium aphyllum</i> | In trees between Ravangla & Yuksam |
| <i>Dendrobium fimbriatum var. oculatum</i> | Roadside garden between Gangtok & Ravangla |
| <i>Dendrobium densiflorum</i> | Another roadside garden species |
| <i>Dendrobium nobile</i> | Big plants growing in trees near Mangan, also scattered on rocks and trees throughout |
| <i>Phaius tankervilleae</i> | Widely cultivated in gardens |
| Zingiberaceae | |
| <i>Curcuma aromatica</i> | The source of turmeric |
| <i>Caultleya gracilis</i> | Pretty yellow flowered forest species above Yuksam |
| | Various other species of ginger are widespread. |
| Amaryllidaceae | |
| <i>Zephyranthes carinata</i> | Mexican, naturalised on banks. |
| Agavaceae | |
| <i>Agave Americana</i> | Roadsides. |
| Liliaceae | |
| <i>Cardiocrinum giganteum</i> | Tantalisingly in spike on Yuksam to Tsoka climb! |
| <i>Smilacina oleracea</i> | Forest around Tsoka |
| <i>Clintonia unesi</i> | Good colonies above Tsoka |
| <i>Theropogon pallidus</i> | Waxy white flowers. Forest banks below Tsoka |
| <i>Paris polyphylla</i> | Handsome species. Widespread e.g. Shingba, Maenam. |
| <i>Polygonatum verticillatum</i> | Above Lachung |
| <i>Disporum cantoniense</i> | Roadside below Lachung |
| Pandanaceae | |
| <i>Pandanus nepalensis</i> | Impressive serrated sword-like leaves |

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| Araceae | |
| <i>Arisaema utile</i> | Between propinquum and griffithii. Probably this at above Lachung (?). |
| <i>Arisaema speciosum</i> | Lower altitude species with purple and white spathe, very long appendage and trifoliate leaves. Widespread e.g. Yuksam, Maenam |
| <i>Arisaema griffithii</i> | Fabulous species, with strongly recurved spathe and exquisite reticulate patterning. Abundant in Zemu Valley, also Maenam, Dzungri, etc. |
| <i>Arisaema tortuosum</i> | Plentiful on approach to monastery at Yuksam and on the trek |
| <i>Arisaema nepenthoides</i> | Common in Zemu Valley and Maenam, tall species |
| <i>Arisaema concinnum</i> | Interesting spoke-like leaves. Maenam and Yuksam area |
| <i>Remusatia hookerana</i> | Small yellow spathes. Rocky banks between Tsoka and Yuksam |
| <i>Raphidophora decursiva</i> | Big-leaved climbing arum in lowland areas |

Polypodiaceae

Many beautiful fern species were emerging during the trip – for next time!