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**Central Academy for State Forest Service
Coimbatore**

My Tales of Wildlife

Pooja Shyam Limbgaonkar



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Foreword

World is very fascinating with variety of life forms. The fascination with biodiversity grows when one is more attracted to wild fauna. This attraction towards various wild fauna made Ms. Pooja to write down her memoirs with various wild faunal species. The encounters with variety of interesting faunal species like Rosy Pelicans, Great Indian Bustard, Rufous treepie, Terrapins, Musk deer, Sea Cucumber, Rhinos and Monitor Lizard is very interesting to read. It's not only the encounters she accounted but some literature survey which gives a complete picture about the individual species. Though the description is not very exhaustive but the reader will get a complete idea about the species narrated. The maiden attempt to document her experiences is really commendable. The Forest service throws enormous opportunity for the foot soldiers to document everyday experience in the field. However, only few take pains to document it. Its really a wonderful piece of literary work by Ms.Pooja. Her fascinating journey in the field of Forestry and Wildlife began just now and much more experiences are waiting to happen. My appeal to Ms. Pooja is to try and document everything she feels worthy to do. Its also pertinent to mention that her endeavor is a great service to the conservation of Forest and Wildlife of this universe and also to fellow officers. My hearty compliments and Best Wishes.



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Preface

All of the adventures that are written in this book are personal experiences of my own. In this book, I discuss about few of my experiences with the wildlife which has happened in the last 2 years during my training period at Central Academy of State Forest services, Coimbatore & how my outlook has changed over a period of time. You will also find some interesting narratives and stories that I hope will be liked by all of you. When I started brainstorming for my first article, I was not sure of how this is going to be, but I hope you find it worth reading.

- Pooja Limbgaonkar



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Encounter with Rosy Pelicans



One sunny afternoon, I remember the time when I visited Keoladeo National park at Bharatpur.. We were passing through a huge marshland and this was the first time I saw Rosy pelicans. I was instantly mesmerised and captivated by the beauty of them. I was wondering how can something be so beautiful & so pleasing to one's eyes . For a few seconds I was dumbstruck to notice anything else ...

When I regain my senses, I began clicking pictures of it. Yes! The first and foremost thing that I do whenever I see anything photo worthy...

The large white bird with grey plumage looked like a bouncy representation of purity and innocence with a tinge of naughtiness. The long beak looked like a straight arrow ready to pierce into anything that threatens it .The beautiful shade of pink for the legs which leaves you to stare at it more..

Now one must be wondering why the name Rosy pelicans...? Even I was wondering why the name was given so and asked the resource person Dharmamji about it. It was because of the white plumage that becomes tinged pink with a yellow patch on the breast and the body is tinged yellowish rosy..It also has a pink patch around the eyes and pink legs...

The second question that came to my mind is how do we differentiate between males and females? After searching through the literature, I got to know that the male has a pink skin while the female has skin with a hint of orange shade during their breeding season. Though they can live alone, but these birds prefer to live in a group and it is called as a "Pouch of pelicans"

A very good flyer, it is seasonally migrating from one place to another for breeding and feeding purposes. These birds were making nest on the prosopis in the artificial mounds that were made for them .The nesting season commence in the early summer and continues upto August.

With a wingspan of up to 12 feet, great white pelicans are one of the largest flighted birds in the world, and they live, breed, migrate, and feed in large colonies. Males defend their territory by gaping and clapping and attacking with its bill.

It is a monogamous breeder and forms long term pair bonds. The pair will built a rudimentary nest from sticks on a ground or a tree along the shallow water bodies. Usually 2 -3 eggs are laid and are incubated by the female for 31 days. The chicks are developed and fledged by 70 - 85 days.



Scientific name : ***Pelecanus onocrotalus***

Common name : **Rosy pelicans, Great white pelicans**

Family : ***Pelecanidae***

Food habit : Mainly fish, crustaceans, tadpoles

Habitat : Swamps, marshes, lakes and shallow water bodies

Saga of Batagur Baska



After wandering through the lengths and widths of Sunderbans delta all day long, we finally reached the Sajnekhali Camp of Sunderbans Tiger reserve. This camp is undertaking conservation breeding of Batagur baska. This was the first time I was hearing about the name and it sounded alien to me. As they say curiosity leads to new information , same was the case here. The information given below is a compilation of the data obtained from the camp and some literature survey.

Batagur Baska is a large hard-shelled turtle found in the mouth of rivers, especially flooded mangrove forests of eastern India.

It has a size up to 60cm. It has a carapace which is olive grey or brown coloured domed and heavily buttressed, with long un-patterned and yellow plastron. It's head is small with an upturned snout and forehead covered with small scales. It has four claws on each forelimb.

In India, the species is restricted to estuaries such as Sundarbans, Bhitarkanika and the mouth of Subarnarekha River. It occurs in mouth of rivers, under tidal influence and mangrove dominated areas. It is also found in fresh, brackish and even salt water. Mostly it prefers to nest in colonies on sloppy sand banks and it's mating season is from September to November while the nesting period is from January to March.

River Terrapins in the Sundarbans nest in the sea-coast, A clutch comprises of 19-37 eggs, measuring 40-68 mm: incubation period is between 61-66 days. The current status of this species is critically endangered due to its rapidly decreasing population. It is endangered by over-exploitation of eggs and habitat destruction.

As per the IUCN ,it is a critically endangered species and a Schedule-1 as per Wildlife (Protection) act ,1972. It feeds on the Fruits of Sonneratia spp. Leaves and stem of many mangroves are also consumed. Molluscs, crustaceans and fish are also within choice.



Scientific name: ***Batagur baska***

Common name: **River Terrapin Turtle**

Family: ***Geoemydidae***

Food habit: Omnivore-Fruits, Stem, molluscs, fish etc

Habitat: mouths of rivers, mangrove areas

Rendezvous With Tiger's Toothpick



It was a sunny morning that day and it had rained a night before.. Our visit was scheduled to the Ranthambore National Park at Sawai Madhopur. We started our safari at 6 in the morning with wet seats of jeep, cold breeze and a morning twilight. Though tourists are common in Ranthambore, we were attracting quite a lot of attention due to our field uniforms. Our entry to the park was smooth via Gate no 6. The road was undulating and rocky wherein we were on the verge of breaking our backs .

Along with us entered more than 4-5 safari vehicles which was chaotic. I wish how I could just enjoy the peace and serenity of the place without the chaos of other 100 people surrounding me. But alas... That was a wish which remained unfulfilled. Anyways I jumped back to my old self and started observing the area to search for something distinctive. First encounter was with the Spotted Deers which were so habituated to human presence that they didn't even bother to run away when they saw the tourists in proximity.

Moving on ,we were not able to spot a single wildlife for a very long time till we reached Damdama. There I saw a bird which was fluttering near through the vehicles and giving us its magical view. It was making loud calls which attracted my attention to it. When enquired upon what it is, I got to know that it is Rufous treepie. It is known for its notorious nature and is often termed as an ill mannered bird. This bird belong to the crow family and had a very long conspicuous black tail. One interesting feature of this bird that I got to know is that it is called as "Tiger's Toothpick" because this bird cleans tiger's teeth by eating the meat stuck between tiger's teeth.

A long- and stiff-tailed bird with dull orangish upper parts and dull brown to orange underparts. The word 'Rufus' is of Latin origin which means red head which clearly shows why the bird was named after. The head and neck region are black. The long graduated tail is pale grey with a wide black band. Also it has a very conspicuous silvery-grey, white, and black patterns on the wings. The bill is greyish black and short. Both the sexes look similar, hence difficult to differentiate.

The Rufous Treepie breeds solitary, both parents participate in building the nest, which is lined with rootlets and small twigs. The female lays 3-6 light greenish or brownish eggs with darker markings. Both parents share duties in building, incubation and taking care of the young.



Ranthambore National Park

Scientific name: ***Dendrocitta vagabunda***

Common name: **Rufous treepie**

Family: **Corvidae**

Food: Omnivore feeding on fruits, seeds, invertebrates, small reptiles and the eggs of birds.

Habitat: open deciduous woodlands, dry forest, mixed deciduous forest, secondary growth and sometimes cultivated areas with scattered trees. It can be seen in urban parks and large gardens too.

The Great Indian Bustard



The most awaited visit for me was to the Desert National park at Jaisalmer because of the presence of Great Indian bustard. It is one of the last strongholds of the Bird and hence a very important area of visit. I have had prior knowledge about the bird because of its rapidly declining population which has led to its conservation status as critically endangered. As per the latest report, there are less than 100 GIBs left in India majority of which are concentrated in the Desert National park area.

This species is of great significance as being a grassland species, Great Indian Bustard, is often considered as indicators of the health of our grasslands or pulse of grassland ecosystem which are unfortunately remained neglected and being considered as wastelands. In order to protect and conserve them, Rajasthan government in collaboration with the Wildlife Institute of India has launched a project named "Project Great Indian Bustard" in 2013.

This is the largest bird of India. It is a ground bird with a height of about 1 meter, and weighs up to 15 kg.

Great Indian bustards are tall birds with long legs and a long neck; the tallest individuals may stand up to 1.2 metres (4 feet) tall. Their weight varies from 8-15kg, with the largest individuals weighing 15 kg.



Males and females are distinguished by the colour of their feathers. Feathers on the top of the head are black in males, which also possess a white neck, breast, and underparts, along with brown wings highlighted by black and grey markings. Males also have a small, narrow band of black feathers across the breast. In contrast, females possess a smaller black crown on the top of the head, and the black breast band is either discontinuous or absent.

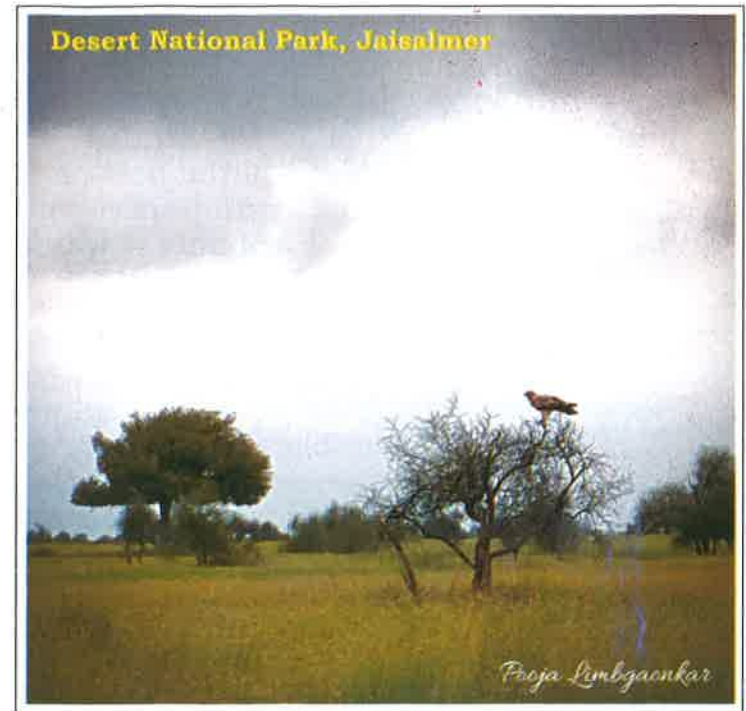
They are capable of year-round breeding, but for most populations the breeding season lasts from March through September. They are Polygynous i.e both the sexes have multiple partners for mating. After breeding, the male's leaves and females are the exclusive care givers for the young ones. Majority of the females lay one egg per year. This egg is incubated for a period of one month and by the next breeding season, they are independent and fledged.

The breeding age of the females is 2-3 years and males mature sexually by the age of 5-6 years.

The nests are simple and often are located in depressions made in the soil in low crop lands and grasslands or are situated on rocky open ground.



Location : Desert National Park, Jaisalmer



Scientific name: ***Ardeotis nigriceps***

Common name: **Great Indian Bustard**

Family: **Otididae**

Food Habit: Omnivores-various arthropods, worms, small mammals, and small reptiles. Insects such as locusts, crickets, and beetles

Habitat: arid and semi-arid grasslands, open country with thorn scrub

Modern Day Unicorn - Rhinoceros



If I could redo one thing in life, that would be trying to re-live a day with rhinos. Our visit to Kaziranga National Park at Assam started with a lot of hurdles, extreme travelling and exhausted us. But still the best part of the East India Tour was beholding the flagship species in its full glory. With the help of kumki Elephants, I was able to closely observe the species in its wild habitat.

The rhinoceros ; being the second largest land mammal on Earth, next to the elephant, is a very aggressive animal . But despite its reputation as the bully on the playground, rhinos are vulnerable when it comes to one great danger is humans. They are being poached mainly for their horns and hence their population have drastically dwindled over the past century due to poaching and habitat loss. Another reason for its declining population is human settlements nearby to their habitat due to which they are under constant threat of encroachment over their habitat as well as the risk of poaching.

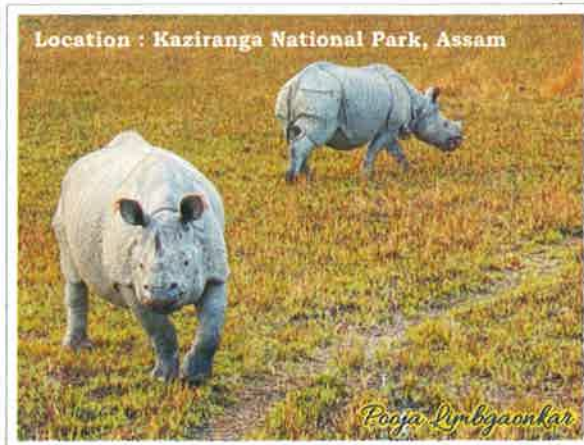
In order to conserve and protect the species, Project Rhino was launched in 2005. Indian Rhino Vision 2020 is an ambitious effort to attain a wild population of at least 3,000 greater one-horned rhinos spread over seven protected areas in the Indian state of Assam by the year 2020.



The word rhinoceros stems from the Greek words- rhino meaning nose and keras meaning horn.

They have a robust, cylindrical body with a large head, relatively short legs, and short tail. The characteristic feature of these animals is a large horn in the middle of their face. They are usually greyish black in colour and an adult rhino weighs about 2200 kg on an average. Despite their great size, rhinos can run very quickly up to 40 km/hr & can generally live for around 60 years. Rhinos, in order to show their

dominance, can spray urine a distance of over 16 feet. This is typically done in the presence of other males or breeding-age females- this is mainly done by the Alpha male rhino. Other rhinos also spray urine: For males this is typically for marking territory.

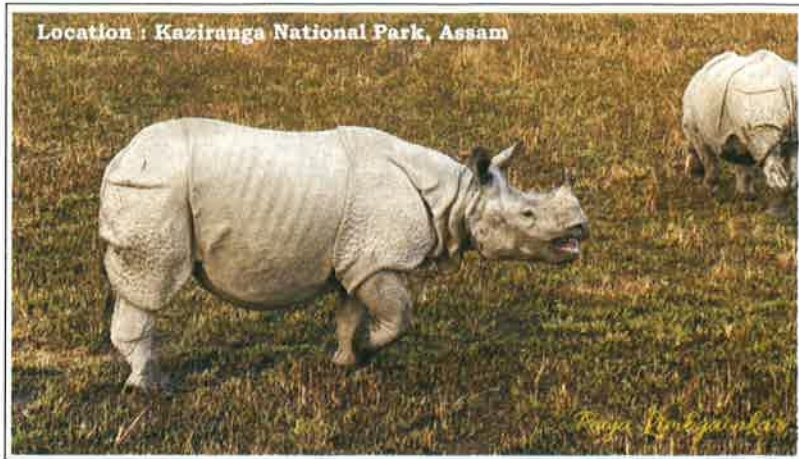


For a rhino, a nice mud bath is like a day at the spa. It helps the animals cool down in hot weather & helping to ward off pesky insects. Although the animals have a pretty thick dermis, they're surprisingly vulnerable when it comes to bug bites and sunburn.

A group of rhinos is called a "crash."

Rhinos are solitary animals, and both males and females establish territories. They use their horns not only when fighting for territory or mates, but also to defend themselves from potential predators, such as lions, tigers, and sometimes hyenas. Unusually for an herbivore, rhinos are considered to be highly aggressive. They are well known for having poor eye-sight, but they have very good hearing, and a keen sense of smell.

Female rhinos reach sexual maturity around 3 years of age, but males aren't ready for breeding until around 7 years old. There is a particular courtship ritual of a rhino. When a female is receptive, males will detect this via her scent. In order to earn the right to mate with the female, the males will fight each other. These fights can be brutal, and injuries are common. Once a particular male has established himself as the worthy suitor, it's down to the female rhino to do the chasing. Once the female is aware of which male she prefers to mate with, she'll start the courtship ritual. She vocalises, creating a whistling sound. Along with whistling, she'll start to follow the male around. She may spray scent behind her as she goes in order to warn off any other females.



Scientific name: ***Rhinoceros unicornis***

Common name : **Indian Rhinoceros**

Food habit: Herbivores-grasses, shoots, leaves, fruits, berries and buds

Habitat: savannas, grassland plains, wetlands, and dense forests in tropical regions.

The Luxury Gourmet : Sea Cucumber



During our visit to Gulf of Mannar marine national park, we were fortunate to visit the Kurusadi Islands. When our group was wandering through the beaches of Kurusadi, we suddenly saw a black cylindrical object which was washed ashore by the waves.

At first we ignored because we were unable to identify it. But the resource person accompanying us told us that the washed object is none other than Sea cucumber. Till that time, we had only heard about sea cucumbers & had a theory base to it. We have heard many news about seizures of the sea cucumber and its importance as Gourmet especially in Asian Culture. Recently, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has seized two tonnes of sea cucumber, a banned marine species, in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay areas in Tamil Nadu. It is done by Illegal Trading and smuggling since the species is high in demand across south-east Asia, mainly China, for food and traditional medicine.

This was the first time that we saw the species and hence in the spirit of inquisition, I was totally hooked up by the sea cucumber which led to the study of this particular species.

Coming to the Protection granted to it, it is recorded as IUCN Red List: Endangered.

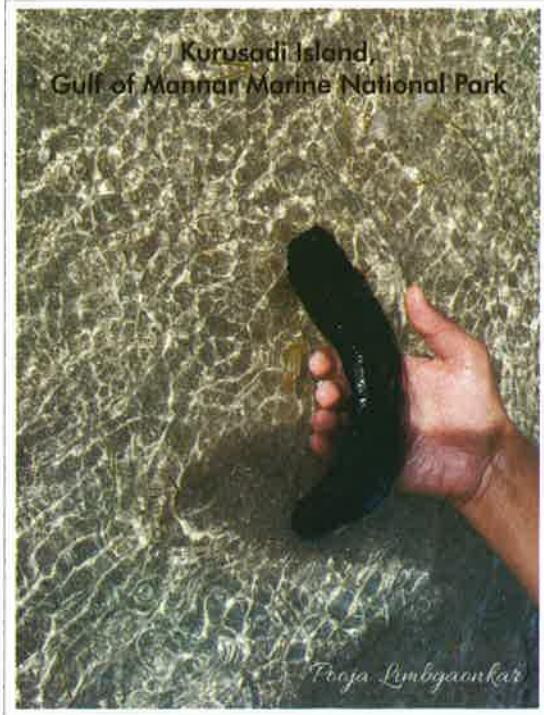
Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: Schedule I.

Its major significance is that they are an integral part of the coral ecosystem as one of the main by-products of the sea cucumbers digestion of sand is calcium carbonate and this is essential for the survival of the coral reefs.

They act like garbage collectors of the ocean world, and they recycle nutrients, thus playing an important role in keeping coral reefs in good condition. When disturbed, sea cucumbers can expose skeletal hook like structures that make them harder for predators to eat.

Sea cucumbers are part of a larger animal group called echinoderms, which also contains starfish and sea urchins. Their body shape is similar to a cucumber, but they have small tentacle-like tube feet that are used for locomotion and feeding.

One way that sea cucumbers can confuse or harm predators is by propelling their own toxic internal organs in the direction of an attacker. The organs grow back, and it may save them from being eaten. Depending on the species, sea cucumbers normally vary in size from less than an inch (2.5 cms) to over six feet (1.8 mtrs).



Sea cucumbers exhibit sexual and asexual reproduction. Unlike most terrestrial animals, sea cucumber eggs undergo external fertilisation - females release eggs into the water that are fertilised when they come into contact with sperm that males have released.

In order for this form of reproduction to be successful, many males and females must be together at the same time. A sea cucumber can live for 05 to 10 years.

Scientific name: ***Holothuroidea***

Common name: **Sea Cucumber**

Type : **Invertebrates**

Food habit: Scavengers that feed on small food items in the benthic zone (sea floor), as well as plankton floating in the water column. Algae, aquatic invertebrates, and waste particles make up their diet.

Habitat : Mostly on the ocean floor, larvae floats on the sub surface.

Beastly Varanus Aka Monitor Lizard



As a child ,My mother used to tell me many stories. One of the stories I distinctly remember is the story of Monitor lizard - used to scale to fortify walls of Sinhagad fort during a decisive battle i.e “ Battle of Sinhagad” . This particular story always kept me on pins and needles whenever I used to listen to it. The story is about the Shivaji's trusted commander, Tanaji Malusare who used these lizards in the Battle of Sinhagad in 1679. This battle is one of the important chapters of Maratha history.

The story says that Tanaji used Shivaji's pet monitor lizard Yashwanti to climb the fort wall. He tied a rope to the back of the lizard which scaled a sheer cliff face beneath an unguarded section of the fort, secured itself in a crevice, and allowed Tanaji to climb up behind. Though the assault was successful, Tanaji died in the battle. When I saw Monitor lizard in the Desert National park at Jaisalmer, the first thought that came to my mind was a huge question-as to how this lizard was used for climbing up.

So in order to gather information about it, I started interacting with the Forest staff accompanying us which gave me elaborate and exhaustive information about the species. The common name Monitor is from the Latin verb 'monere' meaning 'to warn'. This was given to these lizards because of their habit of standing up on their hind legs, as though they are monitoring their surroundings. It has a slightly elongated head and neck, with a relatively heavy body, a long tail, and well-developed legs. Their tongues are long, forked, and snakelike. Their claws are large and powerful which helps them to move quickly in their pursuit of prey. The average weight of an adult monitor lizard is 80-100kg and body length is 2 - 3m.

All monitors are tropical reptiles. They are active lizards that may be very hostile, lashing out with their tails upon the slightest provocation. Even a small monitor can produce a stinging lash. The claws of monitors are long and sharp. The jaws are very strong. Once they bite something it is very difficult to get them to let go. They hold their heads erect on their long necks, which gives them the appearance of being alert. They intimidate predators by lashing out with their tails, inflating their throats, hissing loudly, turning sideways, and compressing their bodies.

Combat between males is frequently observed during the breeding season in some species. Monitors lay 7 to 35 soft-shelled eggs, usually deposited in holes in riverbanks or in trees along water courses.



Desert National Park, Jaisalmer

Scientific name: **Varanus**

Common name: **Monitor lizard**

Family: **Varanidae**

Food habit: Carnivore -insects, rodents, fish, snails, raw eggs, and raw poultry.

Habitat: variety of habitats ranging from jungles and rainforests, aquatic areas

The Withering Scent of the Musk Deer



Every child has heard the story of the Musk deer or Kasturi mriga; which stated that all its life it keeps chasing a perfume without realising that the musk was inside it all the time.

When I use to hear this story, the 3 year old me used to ponder as to how this deer has perfume inside it. Years passed by and as I grew up, reading through the literature and books gave me some idea about it.

Since ancient times, musk has been used for its many virtues. Already at that time, it was considered a luxury product. Its trade became more important during the time of the great explorers who took part in the export of pouch of musk to all Mediterranean countries. The Arab people used it into many rituals to fight the evil spells of the deities. It is evoked in the Muslim religion as the perfume that the blessed will smell in heaven.

Oriental medicine claims that it purifies the air and expels parasites from the body. In the middle Ages, the wealthiest people used musk to fight against bad smells.

Hence there is a high demand and no supply as it is protected under schedule 1 of Wildlife Protection Act 1972. Poaching and continued demand for musk in perfumery industries is the main threat to the species. Musk is also used in oriental medicine. Due to illegal hunting and habitat loss, the musk deer has become an endangered species.

But alas...! this was all theoretical.

The first time I saw musk deer was in the kufri zoo at Shimla.

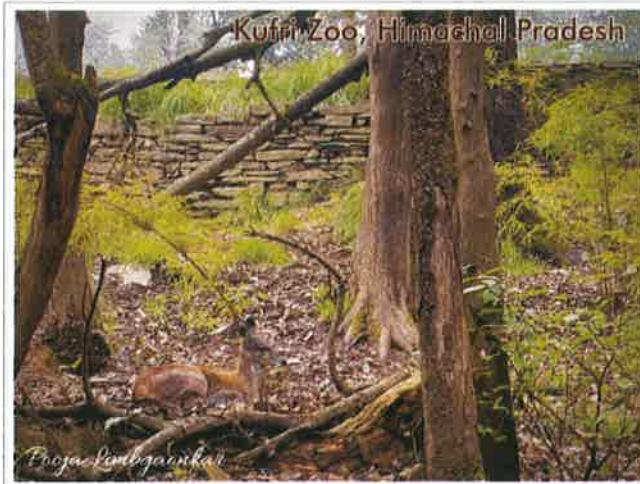
In India, musk deers are found only in three places; namely Kedarnath Wild Life Sanctuary, located at Uttrakhand which is the national sanctuary established primarily to protect musk deer. It is also named as "Kedarnath Musk deer Sanctuary", other two places are Dachigam National Park, Jammu and Kashmir & Kanchendzonga National Park, Sikkim.

Indian Musk deer is a small sized deer covered with greyish brown coloured coat. The coat has short and coarse hair over the body. The hind limbs are muscular and long and the forelimbs are weak and thin and it has large ears. The rear side is small and arched which aids them to organise the jumps. Indian musk deer doesn't possess any antlers.

As the name suggests these species have a musk pouch located in between the umbilicus and sex organ which is absent in other deer species. This musk pouch is used to release a scent when a male wants to attract its mate. The musk deer is 60 cm tall. They weigh about 10 to 15 kg. The entire body length ranges between 90 and 100 cm. The lifespan is from 2.4 to 3.1 years.

Musk deer are solitary animals or can be found in a group consisting of less than three members. Usually the group comprises of the mother, and her young ones. They are territorial. One interesting aspect of this species is that they usually defecate at the place where they spot it as the toilet.

The mating season happens during the months of December to January and the mating period lasts for about two to four weeks. They acquire territories where they leave scent markings on ground using their musk pouch. They draw the sexual attraction of the female using the scent smell. They became sexually mature during the age of two years. The gestation period is for about 185 to 195 days and deliver one offspring at a time.. At rare occasion it delivers twins. The new born stay with its mother till 2 years of age. The new born has a dark brown coat with spots and later during the winter season it develops a winter coat.



Scientific name: ***Moschus leucogaster***

Common name : **Himalayan Musk Deer**

Family: ***Moschidae***

Food habit: Herbivore- lichens, bushy lichens, few mosses, young shoots, coniferous needles, buds, leaves, aspens, barks, willow, maples, honey suckle bird cherry, buckwheat, geranium, grasses, oak leaves

Habitat: montane forest and sub-alpine scrub, hot and dry areas.

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