



PROMOTING AN INTEREST IN MOUNTAIN ACTIVITIES

# The Gwydyr Mountain Club 2017

## Sikkim Expedition Newsletter

## Celebrating Our Club's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

### Introduction and Planning (by Roger Hughes)

As early as 2013 members started to talk about the club's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017 and there was a definite wish to mark the year with a major trip. A few ideas were thrown around, but the Sikkim venture really got under way with an email dated 12<sup>th</sup> April 2014 inviting anyone interested in returning to the Himalaya to own up! The club had gone to Nepal in spring 1992 for the club's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and it seemed logical to go back. Sikkim as a location had been mentioned, and the fact that the Everest expeditions of 1921, 1922 and 1924 all went through Darjeeling and Gangtok before crossing from Sikkim into Tibet was a draw. Each of those expeditions had included George Mallory, son of the vicar of St John's Church in Birkenhead; the 1924 expedition also included Sandy Irvine, a Birkenhead man educated at Birkenhead School. This local connection gave Sikkim extra appeal, and the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal made it very difficult to look at Nepal as an alternative.

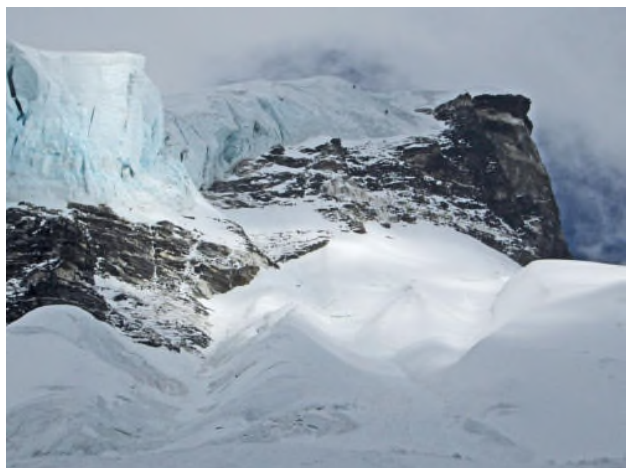
On 28<sup>th</sup> June 2014 we had 26 names of members genuinely keen to be part of the trip, so the planning phase began. We immediately opened a savings account so that any member who was nervous about the total cost could start to save regularly towards the trip. The date also was settled early on – the 1992 expedition had taken place across Easter to give extra days which didn't have to be taken as holiday, and as Easter 2017 fell on identical dates, the trip was to be April/May 2017.

The first task was to find a trekking company able to provide the sort of package we were looking for. We had positive exchanges with two companies that had been recommended to us in late 2014, but in early 2015 some of us went to a read through of Dean Johnson's "Ice Picks and Violets" which Dean had been working on with Doug Scott. Dean put us in touch



with Doug, his charity Community Action Nepal, and his trekking company Catreks run through Bhai Tamang in Kathmandu. We received immediate help from Bhai and Doug's staff in the UK, in particular Denise Prior based in London, so by the summer of 2015 the decision was to work with Catreks to plan our 2017 trip.

The second task was to settle on an itinerary. It had been agreed at the start that whilst a number of the group were happy with a reasonably serious trek, there were some who were looking for a bigger challenge. The idea was to find a peak of 20,000ft or so that was not too technical and which was near enough to where we wanted to trek. The advantage of having



a trekking company with a British base immediately became apparent. In December 2015 three of us visited Doug and Denise in Cumbria, in May 2016 Bhai came to the club in Birkenhead with Denise to discuss the trip, I had a meeting with Denise in London in June 2016, and I also met Denise and Bhai in London again in early January 2017. Through all this, there was a steady stream of queries and responses by email, and the route was settled - a trek to the Goeche La, with Mt Thinchinang at 6,010m the target peak. Whilst we understood that Thinchinang (the upper part of the mountain is shown in the photo) was very much more than a trekking peak, we felt that with extra climbing support from experienced Sherpas we could attempt it.

During the planning stage, we had considerable help from two other sources. Denise put us in touch with Deurali Travel in Wembley who Catreks had worked with regularly. I visited them on two occasions and their team, all originally from Nepal, were fantastic in sorting out our travel arrangements. We were also put in touch with a travel company in Manchester with the unlikely name "Bestdealforyou" run by Steve Dutson. His colleague Ramish came across to Birkenhead one Tuesday evening in November 2016, took individual photos of all the party, filled in the visa forms for us, took copies of all our passports so that we didn't have to part with them, and then disappeared back to Manchester with £70 from each of us. In March 2017, they supplied each of us with the necessary Indian visas - an incredibly painless way of dealing with the visa issue!

The final plan then was to fly out of Manchester on Good Friday 14<sup>th</sup> April and return on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May. The party was 20 in total, 13 of whom would simply trek to the Goeche La, the other 7 were to attempt Thinchinang peak. Although all our dealings so far had been with Bhai in Kathmandu his company did not operate outside Nepal, so he had passed all the plans over to Adarsh Trekking based in Gangtok, the Capital of Sikkim State.

From Manchester we flew first to Abu Dhabi and then on to Delhi. After a fairly uncomfortable night in Delhi airport, we flew up to Bagdogra on the Saturday morning. There we were met by Gopal, owner of Adarsh Trekking and his manager Sanjeev who were to look after us in Sikkim. They had with them a banner welcoming the Gwydyr Mountain Club – Team UK - and we realised that this was quite a special event for Adarsh as well as the GMC!

The drive to Gangtok, only about 60 miles but 6 hours of tortuous roads in 4 wheel drive six seaters, gave us a foretaste of Sikkim travel and we certainly needed the 3 nights in Gangtok to rest and recover. The main event during this time was David L-J being run over by a car in the turmoil of narrow roads and crazy driving which is Gangtok.







We had two days of sightseeing in Gangtok. There was a flower festival on at the time, which gave us an insight into the many exotic flowers which grow in this Himalayan region, many of them in the wild. Our club horticultural expert, Helen, was in her element.

We also visited the important Buddhist Dharma Chakra monastery with the attached Karma Shrinalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist studies. Sanjeev, whose brother is a Buddhist monk was able to give us some insight into the religious significance of the place. Sikkim is home to numerous Buddhist monasteries, with magnificent decoration

Day four started with a press conference, where our expedition climbing leader Richard Smith was interviewed for the Sikkim newspapers. After the now obligatory group photos against an expedition banner, it was off again on crazy roads to Yuksom, another 6 hour journey.

Yuksom was to be the base for the expedition and on arrival we met our porters, cooks and guides at the Hotel Tashi Ghang, ready to start out in earnest on day 5.



**Editor's note:** All of us who went on the trip would like to say a huge thank you to Roger for the immense effort that he put in on our behalf in organizing this trip. It was in large part due to Roger's excellent planning that the trip went so well, and we all had such a memorable experience

## Chris's Diary (by Chris Harris)

**Friday 15th April** - 5am wakeup alarm, got to be at the airport for 7 am.

**Saturday** 9pm arrive Gangtok. A very long journey with a lot of queuing at airports. Memorably a one hour queue at Delhi for a visa check where the man behind the desk thought that rapping Janet's knuckles with his pen would make the fingerprint machine work better. During the journey we found out that the Indian Government had banned sales of alcohol less than 500 metres from a highway. This had potentially serious implications.

Excellent Hotel in Gangtok, those at the front had views of Kanchenjunga. Would have had a good night's sleep but at 5am a happy, clappy, singing, ringing group marched slowly past the hotel to celebrate something or other.

**Sunday**, tour of Gangtok on foot, quite a nice town. Back at the hotel we managed to organize a Speakeasy on the first floor landing of the hotel. Beer, 8% alcohol and just over a £1 a pint, alcohol ban not too much of a problem for GMC.

**Monday**: Kit check in hotel lobby. Rough drive to monastery and two hour wait at Sikkim visa centre. Back at Gangtok, DL-J got run over (his foot) and knocked down by a car. Doug took on roll of Doctor, nurse and masseur and managed to get David up and running (limping !). Evening trip into town for the mountaineers to decide what food they wanted at the high altitude camps. Not the best organised shopping trip but we did order a good choice of chocolate bars - not that we ever saw them again.

**Tuesday**: Interviewed by the Sikkim Express journalist who had a bit of a problem knowing who's who as apparently "we all look the same". Then journey by 4x4 people carriers to Yuksom. A hair raising journey on very rough roads. To overtake: blow horn, gentle accelerate, don't worry about the blind bend, or steep drop, your God will look after you !

Road works (right) - note the "cones"



## Yuksom to Thangsing



**Wednesday** - Trek day 1. It would not be a Himalayan trek without the prayers so we had lots of chanting, burning of Juniper and the sacrifice of half a bottle of brandy - very atmospheric.

Then it's off to the trail and the queue for park visas (one hour).



A steady climb up through the forest to a camp on a shelf in the forest at Sachen. DL-J provided the entertainment by shaving his leg in preparation for Doug applying a serious bit of strapping. Glenn managed to break a chair at dinnertime. I accidentally killed a moth which Sue told me was a sin and that we would all die.

**Thursday:** Sachen to Tsokha. 1,000ft of ascent but many additional undulations. lovely little cafe on route supplied chocolate, coke crisps etc.. Lovely campsite but rather pooy as yaks and ponies roam freely, even had a bar, beer cheaper than The Stork and double strength. Colonel fell off toilet but survived to give us a very detailed description. Major progress with chairs when we found they converted from low wobbly chair to higher less wobbly stool.



Through the forest from Yuksom to Sachen



Note the footwear – we all had expensive walking boots

**Friday:** Tsokha to Dzongri. The day started with a very steep climb but rewarded with good view back to campsite and Rhododendrons and magnolias.





After a climb that seem to go on for ever, we arrived at a plateau with a table set for lunch. The meal was quite eventful. Alan stood up to reach across the table and did not notice his seat had fallen over. As he sat down Roger shouted "no", but too late, Alan sat on fresh air, rolling backwards, kicking the table which launched a cup of tea which flew in an arc and landed on Sue. Hardly enough time for sympathy when the Colonel (on left with Sanjeev) emerged from the woods carrying a toilet roll, stating loudly "that was not an easy mission".

After a hearty lunch we continued up hill to Dzongri campsite which was on another large plateau at 4,030 metres (about 13,000ft), we passed a sweet shop on the way and stocked up with Cadbury's Dairy Milk.

**Saturday:** A day of "rest" at Dzongri. We awoke at 4am to walk up to Dzongri Top (see the campsite from there in photo below) to not see the sunrise. Back to camp and Breakfast at 7am. Post breakfast discussion about the mountain with our guide. We were told that altitude is not very accurate as it varies with atmospheric pressure ! This shows the limitations of not being allowed to use GPS, maps, sat phones etc.





India played UK at cricket (above) and then some celebrated down the hill in another micropub. Unfortunately they had to stay longer than planned due to rain.

**Sunday:** Dzongri to Kochurung: The Colonel was suffering a bad reaction to his medication and a massive toothache and it was decided that the best option was for him to stay at Kochurung campsite from where he would return to Yuksom.

A slow and steady decent in rather gloomy weather brought us to Kochurung. There was another group at the site so it was decided that 8 would sleep in the shed on the floor and the others would camp by the river. It would be a beautiful site in fine weather but it was a bit wet and the route to the tents included 2 rickety bridges and a paddle through a stream. Janet and I got lost on the way to the dinner canteen, fortunately we were found by Tashi and led to safety.

**Monday.** Kochurung to Lamuney, and mountain group up to Base Camp: The dawn broke sunny and freezing, some managed to wash their hair. After breakfast we had the group photo taken as it was possibly the last time we were all together. Then an emotional farewell to Pete, the Colonel. On and up we walked, passing through Thangsing where we would stay on the way back. At Lamuney, the mountaineers headed up to base camp so it was an emotional farewell for me and Janet and for Richard and Kay.



The group photo of us all at Kochurung on the morning that the mountain group departed for base camp



## The Trek to Goecha La

On Tuesday morning, after the expedition group had departed, the Trekking Group made an early start at 3 am to set off for their high point (4,984 m) at the Goecha La viewing point, where they were hoping for a spectacular view of Mt Kangchenjunga.



An early start at 0300



A break on the way up

As they ascended, most of them were really feeling the altitude, and so considered that they had done enough to reach the first viewing point. An intrepid three (Doug, Sue and Adele), decided to press on to the second viewing point, where they were rewarded by magnificent views of Mt Kangchenjunga



The view on the way up to the second viewing point



Doug, Adele and Sue at the second viewing point



## The Thinchinang Expedition (by David Lane-Joynt)

The Expedition Team was Helen and Glenn Grant, Chris Harris, David Lane-Joynt, John Simpson, Richard Smith and Alan Thomas

As we headed off for base camp in rather dreary weather, it was with a mixture of excitement and some trepidation. Were we up to climbing the mountain, as we had seen some photos of people on very steep rock?

Under Sanjeev we had grown used to his trademark "No hurry, no worry" slogan but clearly this did not apply now, as we soon had to ask our head Sherpa Tashi to give us a bit more time. Before long however, we were at Base Camp, where it had all been set up for us. That evening Tashi led up us the initial slopes towards Camp 1, before returning to Base Camp for the night.

It was cold at night, and the tent zip had frozen up so I had trouble getting out. But when I did, the view was just jaw-dropping. It had been poor visibility the day before, but now we had a magnificent view of the Kangchenjunga peaks, and the cameras went into overdrive, as we all wanted our photo against that background



Richard, John, Glenn, Helen and Chris with the five main peaks of Kangchenjunga as background



**Tuesday:**

By this stage we had been at over 4,000 metres for four nights, but proper acclimatization is vital for success at these altitudes, so the plan was to climb up to Camp 1 at 5,000 metres and then to descend back to Base Camp for the night



Here we are, about to set off from Base Camp after a prayer ceremony to wish us good fortune



And this is us approaching Camp 1, which is over the boulder field to the right of the picture.

**Wednesday**

It was back up to Camp 1 again for lunch, and then up the boulder field above this to the base of the main glacier on the upper part of the mountain. Due to the shifting of the ice pattern from previous years, we would not easily be able to get straight up onto the glacier, and our Sherpas had found a new route off to the left. This time we stayed up at Camp 1 for the night, as the porters (the cook and his assistants) had carried our camping gear up for us

**Thursday**

We were now on our own for the summit ascent, as the porters would not go above the snow line. The Sherpas would carry the tents to Camp 2, and Helen and I had our sleeping bags carried as well. But everything else we had to carry. Weighed down with two litres of water together with all my gear, I could barely lift my sack, and looked very dubiously at the scramble over the boulders on the way up. Alan very generously offered to carry a water bottle for me, for which I was very grateful. It still seemed a long way up the boulder field again to the base of the snow line. It was to seem a lot longer on the way down



The scramble up to the base of the glacier



And now up onto the main glacier



Once up onto the glacier, the weather started to close in and by this stage we were all feeling the altitude. Tashi was in the lead, and I found myself counting the number of steps up before he stopped to give us a rest. Anything over 15 steps was hard going. I was determined not to have to ask for a stop but I really could not manage more than 20 steps before resting.

The further up the glacier we climbed, the worse the visibility got. We were assured that Camp 2 was not very far, but when you cannot see very much "not very far" can seem a long way. Eventually Camp 2 emerged out of the mist. The Sherpas has cut a small platform out of the glacier ice on which to place the high mountain tents. We had to be careful getting in to the tents, as there was quite a drop onto the glacier just outside the entrance.

Supper was "boil in a bag" curry which is an acquired taste. What happened to all the milky bars that we had selected on the Gangtok shopping trip was a mystery. After that I settled down to a very cold night trying pretty unsuccessfully to sleep before the 3 am call at the start of the summit days. I was wearing every bit of clothing that I had brought including my down jacket and was inside a sleeping bag, another inner sleeping bag and a silk liner. I was still cold but Chris said that he was nice and cosy in Katie's sleeping bag from her Canadian arctic expedition.

During the night the wind got up and it started to snow. Things were not looking good for our summit push. At 3 am the Sherpa brought us tea, and by this stage Richard as our climbing leader was in discussion with Tashi. Reluctantly the decision was taken that we would descend. Some of the party were really feeling the altitude, and not up to continuing, and we did not have the resources for some to continue and others to descend. It was the right decision, much as I would have liked to have been the oldest to climb Mt Thinchinang.

**Friday:** By morning the wind had abated and it had stopped snowing as we started the descent down the glacier. The new snow had covered up the crevasses that we had jumped over the day before, so we were all roped up. I got reprimanded for not paying sufficient attention as I started to take some photographs, as others thought we were in an avalanche danger zone. I thought it was worth it as I got some great photos, and the Sherpa with me was un-rope and using an old stick as an ice-axe



Camp 2 at 5,700m, taken in the morning



Mt Pandim taken from Camp2



This is me at 5,700m with Lupsang Sherpa!

The overnight snow meant that we had to be very careful on the descent, as the snow-line was now down below



Abseiling down the scramble

Camp 1, and everything had become very slippery. We abseiled down the now very slippery scramble below the glacier (compare this to the photo on the way up above), and then the fun really began as we started to descend the boulder field above Camp 1. I was struggling with next to no grip on large boulders and a heavy pack on my back. Glenn fell over more times than he cares to remember. At one stage we thought he had broken his leg, which would have been very difficult indeed as there is no helicopter rescue at that height. Eventually Glenn abandoned his pack on a rock to complete the descent to Camp 1. Alan was the star who then climbed back up from Camp 1 to retrieve Glenn's pack

As we pushed on down to Base Camp, the weather closed in again, and we carefully descended the very steep and slippery grass slopes. It was a tired group that evening. We had not reached the summit, and it had been the right decision to come down, but we had all had an amazing experience which we will remember for a long time. It was not bad to reach nearly 19,000 ft after all.

### Saturday

The next morning there was time for a few more photos before a fairly gentle descent to the campsite at Thansing



From left to right: Pemba Sherpa (green jacket), cook Umesh, Thukba Sherpa, Dawa Sherpa, Lupsang Sherpa, head cook Sundar, cook Tsultim, cook Gyaltzen, Tashi Sherpa

The photo on the left shows our wonderful support team, without which our ascent would not have been possible. They were unfailingly cheerful, and did their very best to ensure that we all had a truly memorable experience.

Tashi even organized hot water bottles for us, which was much appreciated



## Sunday and Monday

Lupsang Sherpa and Pemba Sherpa had made the long descent back to Yuksom in one day from Base Camp, but for us it was definitely two days. As we descended down through the forest and the wild rhododendrons, it did seem to go on for a long time, but eventually we reached the Tsokha campsite for our final night of camping. By this stage I was looking forward to a nice clean hotel bed, as the smell of animal dung was beginning to be very pervasive.

On Monday we set out for the final descent to Yuksom, pausing at the nice tea-shop on the way



Helen at the tea-shop overlooking the valley descent to Yuksom

About half an hour's walk from Yuksom, there was the welcome sight of Janet and Kay, who had walked up from Yuksom with Sonam to greet us.

Once we were back at the Hotel, the first thing to do was to have a nice hot shower, a shave and a change of clothes.

In the evening Gopal had organized a cultural show, with the local girls showing us their traditional dances. Following this everybody got up to dance. After twelve days trekking on my injured leg, I was definitely planning on sitting out the dancing. But when Thukba came up and asked me to dance, I could hardly say no. The custom seemed to be that the women danced among themselves, and so did the men. Before long everybody was on the dance floor



The final group photo taken at Base Camp (minus Tashi who was taking the photo)



**Yuksom**

The trekking party had left for Darjeeling by the time that we got back to Yuksom. There was no room in the hotel in Darjeeling for another day, and so we had a day's sightseeing in Yuksom. This gave us time to visit some more monasteries (very important in Buddhist Sikkim) and also time to try out Gupta's Restaurant, which seemed to have been extremely popular with the trekking party.



*Left:*  
The trekking party on a monastery visit

*Above:*  
Sonam with (Colonel) Pete Smedley on pillion



*Left:* Alan with Sonam and more prayer wheels

*Right:* Prayer flags surround a house, indicating that someone has died. They will remain in place for a year or more



Janet, Kay and Richard enjoy a cup of "special " tea at Gupta's

Disaster seemed to have struck the GMC when the Indian Government declared a ban on all alcohol sales in establishments within 500m of a public road. The locals, however, are very resourceful. Gupta's serve an excellent range of curries for about £2 per meal (I don't really like curry, especially after nearly three weeks of it, but the Gupta's curry was excellent). In addition Gupta's tea proved to be extremely popular, particularly with those who like a glass of beer



## Darjeeling

Our final few days in India were spent sightseeing in Darjeeling



We visited the tea-tasting shop, where we learned all about delicacies such as white tea (made from just the tips of the buds on the first flush, with a delicate flavor and a price to match). Some of us then visited a tea estate



The railway enthusiasts got the chance to ride on the famous Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, dating from the days of the British Raj and now a World Heritage Site



Sue and Hew try on some traditional costumes (much to the amusement of the locals) and we visit the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, where there was a fine exhibition in honour of Tenzing Norgay



And finally we said goodbye to Sanjeev and to Sonam, who had looked after us so well throughout our entire visit



Sonam with Alan



Goodbye to Sanjeev on the final morning



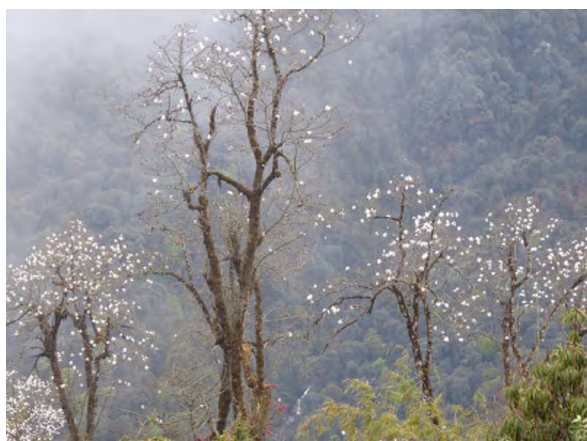
## Flora (by Helen Grant)

The Himalayan region is famous for the exotic plants that grow wild there, and I was looking forward to seeing them in their natural environment.

Luckily there was a flower exhibition on in Gangtok where we could admire the many exotic plants including Cymbidium orchids (see John doing just that)



As we gained altitude on the trek we started to see the Sikkim rhododendrons discovered by the famous plant hunter Sir Joseph Hooker in the mid nineteenth century. Many of these were the size of trees and at times we were walking through rhoddie forests. In amongst them there were also tree magnolias and mountain primula



Tree magnolia at Tsokha camp at 3,050m



Mountain primula alongside the path



Rhododendron falconeri with tree magnolia on the left





As we trekked higher the landscape changed to vast forests of Hemlock pines and then to moraine and glacier.

The photo on the left was taken on the ascent from Kochurung up towards Thansing, and shows the Hemlock pines with Mt Pandim in the background

Arriving In Darjeeling we were surrounded by lush vegetation and the familiar Camellia tea plantations



Angela and Hew showing plenty of enthusiasm for this tea picking business (but how enthusiastic would they be after a few hours of this backbreaking work?)



## Fauna (by Richard Smith)

As a keen mountaineer and birdwatcher, the trip to Sikkim held attractions on two fronts; firstly to see the magnificent views of the Kangchenjunga range, and secondly the hope of observing some of the exotic fauna of the Himalaya. Armed with a copy of Collins Field Guide to the Birds of India (obtained at Delhi airport for the knock down price of 699 rupees), we set forth with binoculars at the ready.



Upon arrival at Bagdogra airport, there were immediate sightings of the ubiquitous Common Mynah bird. These birds were once sometimes kept as caged birds in the UK and were reputedly encouraged to "talk" in a manner akin to parrots, a practice which thankfully seems to have disappeared



We stopped for lunch on day 2 of the trek at a shack, which sold inflated packets of crisps and coca cola bottles. We did, however, have excellent views of a Verditer Flycatcher (far left), a dazzling turquoise bird flitting amongst the bamboo canes. Also, a Gold-billed Magpie (left), 50% larger than our European magpie with a long tail and a yellow bill.



The following day, as we climbed higher towards 4000m at Dzongri, a pair of Blood Pheasants (left) emerged out of the mist. This is the national bird of Sikkim and is very tame, several members of our group managing to get quite close to take photos. After reaching the camp site at Dzongri, the next day was a rest day. The following day a few of us were coerced into a cricket match against the sherpas at an altitude of over 4,000m and running round the boundary was far from restful. However, during the match, a flock of Snow Pigeons (below) assembled on the outfield, pecking amongst the piles of Yak dung which made fielding a hazardous occupation





As we headed up Mt Thinchinchang on the steep climb from Base Camp to camp 1, our spirits were lifted as a Lammergeier (right) flew over our heads. The Lammergeier is a large bird of prey resident in the mountains at heights of up to 8,000m. It is known for its feeding method of collecting a bone from a carcass and flying to a great height before dropping the bone in the hope that it breaks, allowing the Lammergeier to feed from the bone marrow inside. At Camp One, we occupied our smaller expedition tents, whilst outside a few Alpine Choughs scavenged about

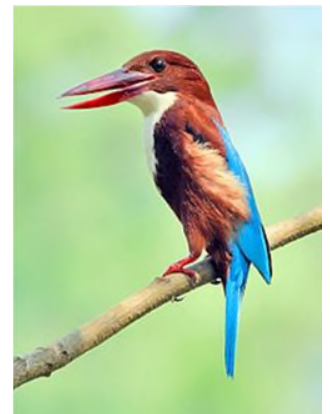


After our exertions up to Camp Two at 5,700m and a sleepless night during which it snowed quite heavily, the decision to descend the next day was met with disappointment, but acceptance that it was the right thing to do. After a night's rest at Base Camp, we had a leisurely morning and two large birds of prey, possibly Himalayan Vultures, circled over the camp. On the way down to the next camp, two White Capped Redstarts were seen on the rocks in the river bed. These look and behave a bit like the Dippers which we see in mountain streams in the UK, but are more extravagantly coloured, with bright crimson underparts and a white patch on top of the head.

On the way down from Mt Thinchinchang, we were tired and our descent through the Rhododendron forest was a bit monotonous (except of course to Helen). Our lunch stop at Phedang did, however, give us very good views of two Black-faced Laughing Thrushes (right) foraging on the ground close to our picnic table. Also a Large-billed Crow



Back in Yuksom, a trip to a lake gave Kay and Janet some great views of a White-breasted Kingfisher (far right)



Our final bit of wildlife watching was in Darjeeling, where we passed through the zoo on our way to the Himalayan Mountain Institute. Amongst the animals there was a Snow Leopard, pacing up and down in its enclosure. Their natural range is huge, and it is distressing to see such a magnificent animal in a small enclosure, but hopefully the zoo can assist with a captive breeding programme for reintroduction to the wild. We also saw Red Pandas (left). This is the national mammal of Sikkim, and they did seem more contented than the Snow Leopard, eating the bamboo shoots provided for lunch