YUMTHANG- SHINGBA RHODODENDRON WLDLIFE SANCTUARY

IBA Site Code : IN-SK-11  
State : Sikkim  
District : North Sikkim  
Coordinates : 27°50' 26" N 89°44' 21" E  
Ownership : State Forest Department  
Area : 43,000 ha  
Altitude : 3,234 - 3,700 m  
Rainfall : Not available  
Temperature : Not available  
Biogeographic Zone : Trans-Himalaya  
Habitats : Subtropical Broadleaf Forest, Subtropical Pine Forest, Alpine Mt Scrub, Alpine Mt St Pasture

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Straddling the Yumthang river, the Sanctuary which lies beyond the frontier village of Lachung in North Sikkim, is characterized by Temperate Silver Fir - Rhododendron forest at the head of the narrow Lachung Valley surrounded by towering snowy mountains. Rhododendron trees laden with trailing lichens provide good habitat for avifauna and flora. Shibang Rhododendron Sanctuary is home to the endemic Rhododendron niveum, the State Tree. Yumthang meadows adjacent to Yumthang-Lachung river provide shingle beds for Ibisbill (Ibidorhyncha struthersii), meadows for Yak and feeding areas for wagtails, pipits, larks, Grandala (Grandala coelicolor) and other species. Abies densa, Picea, Rhododendron, Juniperus, Acer spp. and ground flora such as Primula, Potentilla, Aconitum spp. and other alpine herbs are seen. The earlier dense stands of firs and rhododendron were worked for timber and removed for firewood. After the area was declared protected, much of the fallen material was left as such providing good habitat for wildlife. Today young firs inside the protected area show good natural regeneration.

AVIFAUNA

Not much information is available on the general bird life of this site, except for opportunistic observations. The globally threatened Wood Snipe (Gallinago nemoricola) breeds on the shingle beds of the Yumthang Chu in small numbers, usually not more than two pairs. Grandala, a local altitudinal migrant, is seen sometimes in apparently all-female flocks. Blood Pheasant (Ithaginis cruentus) and Himalayan Monal (Lophophorus impejanus) breed in the higher reaches of the Sanctuary while the Himalayan Griffon Vulture (Gyps himalayensis) is a resident of the cold desert. Gould’s Shortwing (Brachypteryx stellata), Rufous-bellied Crested Tit (Parus rubidiventris) and the restricted range (Hoary-throated Barwing (Actinodura nipalensis) are common in forest patches. The Fire-tailed Sunbird (Aethopyga ignicauda) is conspicuous when Rhododendrons are in bloom. Rufous-bellied Eagle (Hieraetus kiienerii) was sighted in Yumthang in June 1984. Jungle Crows are now resident at this altitude of 4,000 m with increasing tourist pressure (U. Lachungpa pers. comm. 2003). This IBA lies at the interface of Biome-5 (Eurasian High Mtnaonte: Alpine and Tibetan) and Biome-7 (Sino-Himalayan Temperate Forest). Therefore, species of both biomes are represented. It has alpine meadows and scrubs, so we get Tibetan Partridge (Perdix hodgsoniae), Tibetan Snowcock (Tetraogallus tibetanus) and Hume’s Short-toed Lark (Calandrella acutirostris), while at slightly lower altitude where M ontane Broadleaf Evergreen and Mixed Broadleaf-Coniferous Forest are found, species representing Biome-7 predominate.

BirdLife International (undated) has listed 48 species in Biome-5, out of which 19 have been seen in this IBA. The Biome-7 has a list of 112 species, of which 19 are found here. Looking at the intact habitat and the fact that no one has conducted a detailed study on the avifauna of this site, more species of this biome are likely to be found here. Interestingly, two species of Biome-8 (Sino-Himalayan Subtropical Forest) have also been reported from this site: Short-billed M inivet (Pericrocotus brevirostris) and Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush (Garrulax rufogularis). This is not unusual as there is a very diffuse borderline between biomes, and secondly, birds of the Himalayas, like any mountain region in the world, show seasonal altitudinal movements.

Important Bird Areas in India - Sikkim
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**Biome-5: Eurasian High Montane (Alpine and Tibetan)**

- Snow Partridge (Lerwa lerwa)
- Tibetan Snowcock (Tetraogallus tibetanus)
- Tibetan Partridge (Perdix hodgsoniae)
- Ibisbill (Ibidorhyncha struthersii)
- Snow Pigeon (Columbia leuconota)
- Long-billed Calandra-Lark (Melanocorypha maxima)
- Hume's Short-toed Lark (Calandrella acu rostris)
- Rosy Pipit (Anthus roseatus)
- Grey-backed Shrike (Lanius tephronotus)
- Altai Accentor (Prunella himalayana)
- Robin Accentor (Prunella rubeculoides)
- Guldenstadt's Redstart (Phoenicurus erythrogaster)
- Grandala (Grandala coele color)
- Smoky Warbler (Phylloscopus fuligiventer)
- Hodgson's Mountain-Finch (Leucosticte nemoricola)
- Black-headed Mountain-Finch (Leucosticte brandti)
- Common Great Rosefinch (Carpodacus rubicilla)
- Hume's Groundpecker (Pseudopodoces humilis)
- Yellow-billed Chough (Pyrrhocorax graculus)

**Biome-7: Sino-Himalayan Temperate Forest**

- Blood Pheasant (Ithaginis cruentus)
- Himalayan Monal (Lophophorus impejanus)
- Speckled Wood-Pigeon (Columba hodgsonii)
- Nepal House-Martin (Delichon nipalense)
- White-collared Blackbird (Turdus albicinctus)
- Gould's Shortwing (Brachypteryx stellata)
- White-throated Redstart (Phoenicurus albicollis)
- Black-faced Laughingthrush (Garrulax affinis)
- Orange-barred Leaf-Warbler (Phylloscopus pulcher)
- Large-billed Leaf-Warbler (Phylloscopus magnirostris)
- Orange-gorgeted Flycatcher (Ficedula strophiata)
- Rufous-bellied Crested Tit (Parus rubidiventris)
- Brown Crested Tit (Parus dichrous)
- Yellow-browed Tit (Sylviparus modestus)
- Fire-tailed Sunbird (Aethopyga ignicauda)
- Yellow-breasted Greenfinch (Carduelis spinoides)
- Red-headed Bullfinch (Pyrhula erythrocephala)
- Spotted-winged Grosbeak (Mycerobas melananthus)
- Gold-naped Black Finch (Pyrrhula perspiceptata)

**Biome-8: Sino-Himalayan Sub-tropical Forest**

- Short-billed M invict (Pericrocotus brevirostris)
- Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush (Garrulax rufogularis)

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**Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Asia:**


**Other Key Fauna**

Notable mammals include Red Panda, Alilurs fulgens, Musk Deer, Moschus chrysogaster, Yellow-throated Marten, Martes flavigula, Himalayan Weasel, M ustela sibirica, Himalayan M ouse- Hare Ochotona roylei, Long-eared Bat Plecotus auritus, Himalayan (Nepal) Langur Semnopithecus schistaceus and other typical temperate species. The enigmatic Caterpillar- Fungus Cordyceps sinensis which is a highly prized species found in very restricted patches at the upper limits of the Sanctuary, but yet to be recognized as a forest produce by the State Forest Department. In the river, the exotic fish Brown Trout Salmo trutta was introduced by the State Forest Department in the 1980s, while suitable sheltered waterbodies harbour the Sikkim Snow Toad Scutiger sp. (Anon. 2003).

**Land Use**

- Military
- Nature conservation and research

**Threats and Conservation Issues**

- Military and Police use
- Forest grazing
- Tourism/Recreation/mountaineering expeditions
- Poaching
- Collection of Junipers and dwarf Rhododendron for incense

The Lachung-Yumthang Valley lies along the western flanks of the Chumbia Valley of Tibet. Hence this IBA has considerable military presence and a small but significant State Police presence. The North Sikkim Highway bifurcates at the low altitude township of Tumsang, 25 km away and continues right up to Zadong at Yumesamdong for c. 50 km. This was also the old trade route to Tibet across the Dongkia La. There is a need for constant maintenance of this road due to considerable traffic and in fact the Yumthang ‘meadows’ were created as a result of past timber barter across the border and the more recent removal of the Fir forest to make the road. The State Forest Department had also attempted timber extraction from this region in the 1980s.

Presence of stray dogs around army camps is noticeable. As more Lachungpa tribals look forward to alternative livelihoods like tourism, livestock, mostly cows and horses are often let loose and some virtually abandoned. Yaks however are herded as they still fetch good returns (Anon. 2003). These graze in the Shingba-Yumthang-Yumesamdong region during summer, migrating to ‘tree forests’ in lower altitudes in winter. This is in sharp contrast to the Dokpa yak herders in the Tso Lhamo IBA who migrate to higher wind-blown apparently barren pastures in winter (Ganguli-Lachungpa and Rahmani 2003).

The military and the local mountaineering institute use the area for their exercises which often take them to areas not normally accessible to casual visitors. During a recent tour, M usk Deer traps in the form of live Rhododendron bushes worked into hedges were found in the higher reaches of the Yumthang valley (U. Lachungpa pers. comm. 2002) and during a recent Japanese botanical expedition, posters found and collected Cordyceps sinensis (Til Bahadur Subba pers. comm. 2003 to U. Ganguli-Lachungpa).

Tourism is a booming industry in the state and the Yumthang-Lachung package sees up to 200 vehicles per day plying in this small IBA during summer when the rhododendrons are in bloom or during winter when there is snowfall. The fallout of this enterprise in the form of garbage and vandalism, noise pollution, deforestation due to increased demand for firewood, disturbance by picnickers to breeding birds like Ibisbill, wagtails and pipits is already apparent and needs to be addressed.

Collection of wild edible and medicinal plants and plants with religious significance had always been a traditional activity but commercial harvesting of the same has been banned for five years by the State Forest Department (A non. 2003). The Forest Department has also established Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) in Lachung village, ‘Smriti Van’ a ‘Memorial Forest’ fenced plot for plant conservation and development areas in this IBA.

**Key Contributor**

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**Key References**

