

YUMTHANG- SHINGBA RHODODENDRON WILDLIFE SANCTUARY



IBA Site Code	: IN-SK-11
State	: Sikkim
District	: North Sikkim
Coordinates	: 27° 50' 28" N, 88° 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	: Himalayan Moist Temperate, Subtropical Broadleaf Hill Forest, Subtropical Pine Forest, Alpine Moist Scrub, Alpine Moist Pasture

IBA CRITERIA: A1 (Threatened Species), A2 (Endemic Bird Area 130: Eastern Himalayas), A3 (Biome-5: Eurasian High Montane, Biome-7: Sino-Himalayan Temperate Forest, Biome-8: Sino-Himalayan Subtropical Forest)

PROTECTION STATUS: Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1984

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. Shingba 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.

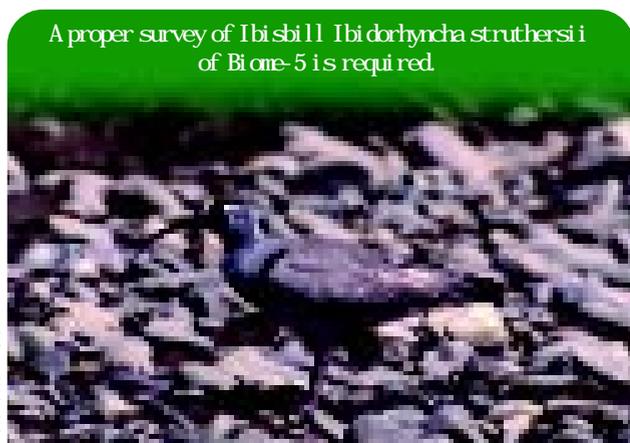
AVIFAUNA

Not much information is available on the general bird life of this site, except for opportunistic observations. The globally threatened Wood Snipe *Gallinago nemoricola* is occasionally seen in the Rhododendron-Fir forest of Shingba, and Ibisbill 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 Gyps *himalayensis* is a resident of the cold desert. Gould's Shortwing *Brachypteryx stellata*, Rufous-bellied Crested Tit *Parus rubiventris* 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 kienerii* was sighted in Yumthang in June 1984. Jungle Crows are now resident at this altitude of c. 4,000 m with increasing tourist pressure (U. Lachungpa pers. comm. 2003).

This IBA lies at the interface of Biome-5 (Eurasian High Montane: 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 Montane 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 long list of 112 species, of which 19 are found here. Looking at the intact habitat and the fact that no one has conducted 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 Minivet *Pericrocotus brevirostris* and Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush *Garrulax rufogularis* (U. Ganguli-Lachungpa, pers. comm. 2002). 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.



A proper survey of Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* of Biome-5 is required.

Photo: Otto Pfister

Vulnerable	
Wood Snipe	<i>Gallinago nemoricola</i>
Endemic Bird Area 130: Eastern Himalayas	
Hoary-throated Barwing	<i>Actinodura nipalensis</i>

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	Columba leuconota
Long-billed Calandra-Lark	Melanocorypha maxima
Hume's Short-toed Lark	Calandrella acutirostris
Rosy Pipit	Anthus roseatus
Grey-backed Shrike	Lanius tephronotus
Altai Accentor	Prunella himalayana
Robin Accentor	Prunella rubeculoides
Guldenstadt's Redstart	Phoenicurus erythrogaster
Grandala	Grandala coelicolor
Smoky Warbler	Phylloscopus fulgiventis
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 nipalensis
White-collared Blackbird	Turdus albocinctus
Gould's Shortwing	Brachypteryx stellata
White-throated Redstart	Phoenicurus schisticeps
Black-faced Laughingthrush	Garrulax affinis
Orange-barred Leaf-Warbler	Phylloscopus pulcher
Large-billed Leaf-Warbler	Phylloscopus magnirostris
Orange-gorgeted Flycatcher	Ficedula strophia
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	Pyrrhula erythrocephala
Spotted-winged Grosbeak	Mycerobas melanozanthos
Gold-naped Black Finch	Pyrrhoptectes epauletta

Biome-8: Sino-Himalayan Sub-tropical Forest	
Short-billed Minivet	Pericrocotus brevirostris
Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush	Garrulax rufogularis

OTHER KEY FAUNA

Notable mammals include Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*, Musk Deer *Moschus chrysogaster*, Yellow-throated Marten *Martes flavigula*, Himalayan Weasel *Mustela sibirica*, Himalayan Mouse-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

- q Military
- q Nature conservation and research

THREATS AND CONSERVATION ISSUES

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

The Lachung-Yumthang Valley lies along the western flanks of the Chumbi 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 Tsungthang, 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 tourist expedition, Musk 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, porters 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 (Anon. 2003). The Forest Department has also established Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) in Lachung village, 'Smriti Van' a 'Memorial Forest' fenced plot for tree plantation at Yumthang, and further seeks to establish medicinal plant conservation and development areas in this IBA.

KEY CONTRIBUTOR

Usha Lachungpa

KEY REFERENCES

Anonymous (2003) Sikkim State Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. Department of Forests, Environment and Wildlife, Govt. of Sikkim. Pp. 104.

BirdLife International (undated) Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Asia: Project briefing book. BirdLife International, Cambridge, U.K., unpublished.

Ganguli-Lachungpa, U. and Rahmani, A. R. (2003) Development of Conservation Strategy for the Alpine Grasslands of Sikkim. Annual Report 2003. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, Unpublished. Pp. 106.