

Sighting of the Himalayan Marmot

I was on a trip to the north eastern state of Sikkim with my family and friends this May, and reached to Gurudongmar lake on the 13th of May as per our schedule. Gurudongmar lake is a high altitude lake situated in North Sikkim (28°02' N, 88° 42' E), at an altitude of 5430 mt (17800 ft) above sea level. We can reach Gurudongmar lake from Lachen, via Thangu. The road leading to Gurudongmar is a bit dangerous, but beautiful as it winds through high alpine pastures, and we could see herds of Yaks grazing on the



Marmot Himalayan

thick rhododendron bushes.

I was told by my father, an ardent wildlife lover, that one can find Blue Sheep and other high altitude mammals apart from Yaks here. This set my imagination running, and I was secretly hoping to spot a Yeti amongst the mountains!

There is an army check post at Gianggong, at an altitude of 4572 mt (15000 ft)

where we have to acclimatize

ourselves before proceeding to Gurudongmar as the oxygen level in the air is very low. The final drive to the lake is very nice, as it winds in between dry rocky mountains, sparsely covered with snow, with Alpine Choughs (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) and Snow Pigeons (*Columba leuconota*) giving us company. The view of the lake surrounded by mountains is enchanting, and mesmerizing. The clear waters of the lake reflect the sky, giving it a beautiful blue sheen! The partially frozen lake is considered as holy as the Mansarovar lake by both; the Buddhists and the Sikhs. The temperature there was -2°C.

Just on our back, I was looking at the dry, almost barren landscape, when suddenly, I spotted a movement in between the rocks. A furry figure popped out from under the ground, and stood up on its haunches, sniffing the air! It was soon joined by another one,

and I pointed them out to my father. We stopped the car to take a closer look, and we saw one more popping its head out from the burrow. They were restless and kept on sniffing the air standing up on their hind legs and scampering back to their burrows, reminding me of the meerkats of Africa! I managed to take a couple of pictures before they scurried back into the burrows. My father figured out that they were some sort of rodents, and we then identified them as Himalayan Marmots (*Marmota himalayana*) after reaching Lachen.

Himalayan Marmots are high altitude burrowing rodents dwelling under ground, belonging to the squirrel (Sciuridae) family. They are found at altitudes ranging between 4000 mt (13000 ft) to 5500 mt (18000 ft). They live in colonies, excavating deep burrows in the ground, emerging to forage for food in the coming of spring. On sensing danger, they sit up on their haunches to look around, and disappear at the slightest hint of threat, uttering a loud whistling scream. They feed on roots, leaves, seeds and grass. They are known to hibernate in winter, sleeping away the entire winter. They are about 60 cm (2 ft) long, with a 15-20 cm tail. They are found in the upper Himalayas in Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim, Garhwal & Kashmir.

I was so excited to spot a different species of mammals, that too in the barren wilderness so high up in the Himalayas! This sighting was the icing on the cake of our trip!

Reference

Prater, S.H. (2005). *The Book of Indian Animals*, BNHS, Oxford University Press, 188-192, 202 pp.

Acknowledgments

Ms. Nishma Dahal, National Centre for Biological Science, Dr. Uma Ramakrishnan Lab, TIFR, Bangalore, Ms. Sarala Khaling, PhD., Regional Director, Ashoka Trust for Research in the Ecology and the Environment, Gangtok, Sikkim and Mr. Pranav Trivedi, Ecologist, and Environmental Educator, Ahmedabad, Gujarat.



About the Author

Keosha Shroff (12 yrs) is a student of Udgam School for Children, Ahmedabad, at present studying in the 8th std., with a special love and penchant for wildlife. She has been exposed to wildlife since early childhood, which has inspired her to write about her experiences. Email: rjshroff@gmail.com

