

The Rarest by the Road

Can an endangered bird be nonchalant? Here's how the determined author waited and found the Rufous-necked Hornbill perched on a tree somewhere amidst tea gardens, forests and busy roads.

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I set my alarm for 4:30 am to ensure that I get an early start on my fieldwork. To my surprise, I woke up to pleasant notes of song birds although there was still an hour to go till sunrise. I dragged myself out of bed and by the time my assistant Sameer and I were ready to leave, the orange rays of the sun had lit up the morning sky. Soon a purple-orange hue accompanied the cacophony of busy bulbuls, barbets and the blue whistling thrush – common birds in this landscape. It was a perfect prelude to what lay in store for us.

There was Gurung daju (daju means 'brother' in Nepali), our guide waiting for us scantily clad – while we stood buried under layers. He addressed me as 'madam' instead of the usual bahini (sister) more commonly used in the region. What struck us about Gurung daju was his humility. The day before he had helped us carry our heavy soil corer (instrument used for soil profiling) up the hill. Contrary to our assumption of him being the caretaker, he turned out to be the owner and a small tea grower – an entrepreneur in his own right. In addition to his diverse entrepreneurial activities he was also an avid birder.

Gurung daju was used to 'tourists' and belonged to a community of small tea growers. This community, which consists mostly of farmers, live in the picturesque village of Tham, near Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary and Sittong- the oldest Lepcha hamlet of the region. The community here practices tea agro-forestry along with cauliflower, ginger, maize and pine for fuel-wood and timber needs. Tham boasts of varied faunal diversity, but is best known for being the 'hotspot' of the rare Rufous-necked Hornbill (*Aceros nipalensis*). Although late in the season, I was determined to see this bird.

After driving through the surprisingly well-tarred road (a rare phenomenon in the landscape), the winding way reached a spot inside the Sittong forest. The view-point turned out to be an open area on an unnamed road that connects West Bengal to Sikkim via the National Highway 10 at Kalijhora. The road was buzzing with activity. Everyone knew Gurung daju: they stopped to greet him; leaving us with an uncertainty of sighting the birds amidst the hustle. Well past 8 am, there was still no sign of the hornbills. Gurung daju tried to keep my spirits up by showing me long-tailed broadbills, blue throated barbet, scarlet minivets every now and then. Passersby gave curious looks, seeing me perched with my camera on a tripod and a binocular all pointing towards the Tarsing tree (*Beilschmiedia roxburghiana*) on whose fruits the hornbills fed.

Then all of a sudden he whispered, "They're here!" I froze. "Can't

you hear them?" I could only hear puppies yelping. Gurung daju exclaimed, "I know they are on the barko- ruk." - the rubber fig (*Ficus elastica*) down the road.

Gurung daju indeed had a sharp ear! As we stepped out of the car we saw five giant birds perched on the rubber tree, weighing down the branches and devouring the fruits. Despite fumbling with the new camera I managed to frame them. Leading the flock was an adult male accompanied by a female, two sub-adults and perhaps a year old young male. Of course the age composition of the flock was given by daju. I felt exhilarated by the sight but the birds didn't stay long and immediately flew into the direction of the Tarsing tree.

Without wasting a single moment we drove back only to hear the familiar "whoop-whoop-whoop" and the birds flying above our heads. As I looked up, a gigantic bird landed on the Tarsing tree again, bending its branches so low that I thought they might snap with its weight!

We were mesmerised as we took turns to peer through the binoculars to get a better look at this magnificent creature.

Right on top of a Tarsing tree next to the busy road, fringing the Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, was this highly endangered, lone adult male of a Rufous-necked Hornbill (*Aceros nipalensis*). He was feeding on the ripe fruits of the *Beilschmiedia roxburghiana*, completely oblivious to the human activities going on around him. There he was, taking time picking fruits with no apparent rush, while trucks and jeeps noisily moved to and fro on the road beneath him. Amazed at this sight, I asked Gurung daju how many birders he'd bring to this point during season. He replied "Hundreds!" Just imagine how busy the viewpoint can get, and what would happen if this tree is cut down?

This brought me face-to-face with a harsh reality: While protected areas exist to conserve biodiversity, areas outside protection are undergoing large transformations leading to more roads and concrete buildings. Natural habitats such as old growth forests are important breeding areas for birds such as hornbills, however secondary forests, agricultural lands with native and fruit bearing shade trees are often used as movement pathways and feeding areas. In addition to efforts that continue to protect large patches of natural habitats, endeavours should also include informed planning of development and regulated tourist activities in areas which are not just used by people but also by endangered wildlife. ○



Rufous-necked Hornbill
(*Aceros nipalensis*)