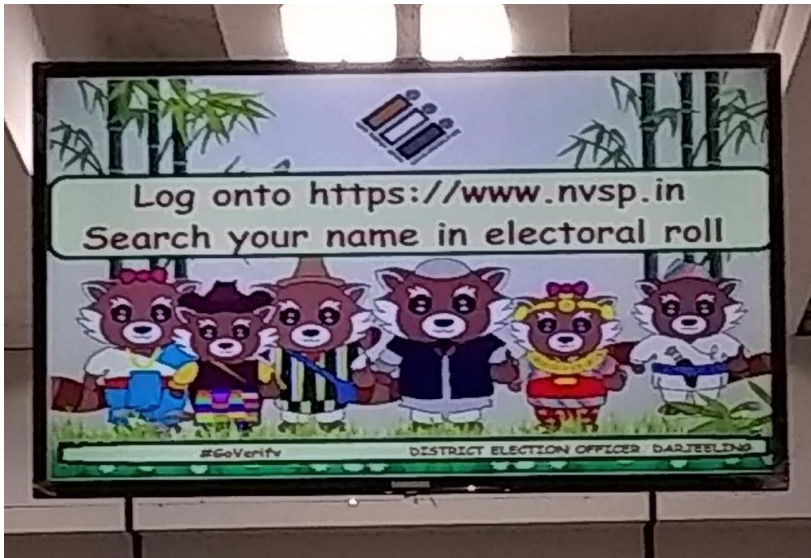


Red panda quest: -musk deer + fishing cat.

Malcolm Hunter, India & Nepal, March 2019

The charisma of **red pandas** is readily recognized, even if subliminally in the case of the Firefox logo, and capitalizing on that potential popularity lies at the heart of this report. However, before we come to that topic I need to set the stage with a little bit of personal history. During the 1980s I undertook five trips to the Himalayas: first to participate in wildlife surveys that led to the Great Himalaya National Park in Himachal Pradesh India; and later this experience opened the door to advising a Nepali doctoral student, Pralad Yonzon, who did the first radio-tracking research on red pandas. Although these trips spanned almost six months of field time I dipped on two target species: red pandas ironically (my visits to Pralad's study site coming just before and after he had animals on the air) and musk deer. I found hundreds of scats and tracks, but both creatures proved too uncommon and elusive, the outcome of extensive persecution. And in 1993, my wife, Aram Calhoun, and I made another trip to help Pralad survey the Arun Valley in eastern Nepal, but with similar results.



Red pandas encouraging participation in Darjeeling elections

Fast forwarding a couple decades, when I learned that the Red Panda Network had made seeing red pandas straightforward (redpandanetwork.org) we decided it was time to try again. However, we opted to go through India because a return to Kathmandu would be too sad given that Pralad was killed there while cycling home from work, a hard blow for Nepali conservation and all who knew him.



Pralad Yonzon with his first red panda and receiving the WWF Golden Ark award from Prince Bernhardt

We learned about an unaffiliated Indian spin-off of the Red Panda Network operation and organized a 5-day visit to Habre's Nest (HabresNest.com; Habre is Nepali for red panda) The Nest is a four guest-room lodge at 2862 m on the Nepal-Indian border next to Singalila National Park, a 5-hour drive from Bagdogra, an easy flight from Kolkata. It was established by Shantanu Prasad, a naturalist-conservationist, who, like Pralad and many others, envisioned using the red panda as a flagship species to engender support for conserving Himalayan forests.

We arrived at Habre's Nest at dusk on March 18 and before breakfast the next morning we were looking at a sleeping red panda through a spotting scope, about 300 m downslope from the lodge. This was not just a matter of good luck; the lodge employs a dozen trackers who comb the nearby countryside looking for red pandas that can be shown to guests. By mid-morning the trackers had determined that we could safely get down to where the panda was still sleeping and 30 minutes of slip-sliding down through steep bamboo thickets brought us to the tree where we had a clear view of a male red panda 10 m overhead while he looked down at us, apparently not too concerned. However, in case such close encounters are stressful they are limited to 15 minutes. An acquaintance of mine witnessed a Swedish group who probably precipitated this policy, thrashing about so close to the panda that it was clearly agitated.



March 20. We had some mid-distance (50-100m) sightings: first, a sleeping female, then two 9-month old cubs foraging together (long enough for a picnic breakfast to arrive so that we could eat with them), and later the first female was active.

March 21. The focus switched to other fauna (e.g., satyr tragopan, spotted laughing thrush, and fiery tailed myzornis to name just three species that put a smile on our faces) and we also had one distant panda sighting.

March 22. The focus moved from biota to geologica for most of the day (0400-1300h). We drove to the snow line then hiked up to Sankaphu to see dawn illuminate four of the world's highest peaks. We hiked all the way back to Habre's Nest, ca 11km, the last 4 km through good panda habitat, but with no luck.

March 23. Our best encounter with a red panda—a male foraging 20m away—came on our last morning, yielding a total of six individuals for the 5 days. That afternoon, we headed down to lower altitude, very satisfied with our red panda encounters. I must confess that I was particularly pleased to have spotted two of the red pandas before the guides did,

dispelling a fear that my earlier dips were due to my incompetence. I was less pleased by having only one species to share with the readers of Mammal Watching. The lodge's list of mammal sightings is quite impressive-e.g., **Indochinese clouded leopard**, **Asian golden cat**, **marbled cat**—but with only one to few sightings each. The biggest issue for mammal seeking, at least while we were there, are the dense clouds that enshroud the site from late morning through to nearly dawn, often reducing visibility to <5m. Short sight-lines (often <30m) along the winding roads and trails would also make spot-lighting a challenge. Incidentally, Habre's Nest's food and accommodations were luxurious compared to my experiences in the 1980s but still the remoteness constrains food diversity as well as heat and light except during generator hours: usually 17-22:00.



At dusk we arrived at Trishna Homestay, 10 km northeast of Mane Bhanjang at 2271m. From there we spot-lighted from 20-23:00, covering much of the Mane Bhanjang- Dhotrey road twice. We found two **Bhutan giant squirrels**¹, a **red muntjac**, and an **Indian hare**.

March 24. We went lower again to an area where Shantanu had many camera trap records of black leopards while managing a lodge, Aranya Baas. Upon arrival we learned of repeated sightings of three leopards (one black) and spent an hour climbing to a vantage point where we could scan the opposite slope for them, then waited 2 hr until dusk to no avail. Later we went on another night drive (20:30-22:45) on brain-rattling stone roads, second lowest point of the trip given that we found only one muntjac. The first low point came on Day 1 when we learned from Shantanu that our 3-day add-on to try for **Himalayan musk deer** would be thwarted by late snow blocking the access road, thus requiring some creative planning for March 23-25.

March 25. We flew to Kolkata and drove 1.4h W to Baghrol Basa, aka "fishing cat's nest", a 350 year-old "country manor" beautifully restored as a guest house (BaghrolBasa.com). Here Shantanu has embarked on another project: using fishing cats as a flagship species for conservation in the agricultural/ aquacultural landscapes in the Gangetic floodplain. At 22:00, after most the villagers were asleep, we set out spot-lighting in an electric motor-rickshaw, traveling paved village paths and roads at a fast-walking pace, one of the most comfortable night drives ever. We had a **golden jackal** before leaving the driveway, and at 23:00 a prolonged, open view to a **fishing cat** ~50m across a pond. A

surreal element was a Bollywood dance soundtrack emanating from a nearby house, perhaps more unsettling to us than the cat. We were out until 00:30 and saw another fishing cat and jackal, and glimpsed a **common palm civet**.

March 26. A low-key day with a narrow goal, chestnut-capped babbler, and an odd highlight, watching a local man net a striped snakehead², a new family of fish for Aram and me. **Jungle cat, Indian flying foxes, an Indian gray mongoose,** and 5 more jackals were also seen, and some invisible small bats were heard in the house's ventilators, Shantanu thinks some kind of pipistrelle. We did an early night drive (21-23:00) to search for **small Indian civet** but only glimpsed one that could also have been a palm civet again, plus another mongoose and jackal. Then directly to the airport for a middle-of-the night flight home.

All in all we were very happy to have quality encounters with two special species and we look forward to hearing of Shantanu's success in increasing their popularity and visibility with a goal to expanding the conservation efforts he has already initiated.

Two post-scripts.

1. The flying squirrels reminded me of a tale from Srikumar Chattopadhyay, a colleague on the Himachal Wildlife Project. He was collecting flying squirrel specimens for the Zoological Survey of India in Sikkim, using a torch that was just sufficient to generate eye-shine. One night he shot at a squirrel with his shotgun, but after the blast it still stared down at him. So he took a second shot with the same result. Only then did he realize that he was shooting at two lights in a house on the opposite side of the valley.
2. Faithful readers of Mammal Watching might recall that Aram and I are trying to tick vertebrate families and we had hoped to reach 121 mammal families on this trip given that musk deer have been split from cervids and the red panda now occupies a monotypic family after much debate about whether it should be lumped with the giant panda, or treated as an aberrant procyonid. A new fish family (our 168th) and a fishing cat were a very decent substitute for the musk deer.