

Field notes

The other side of camera trap survey

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It is always an exhilarating experience to start fieldwork amidst the woods, in the lap of nature. However, the excitement this time was much more than usual. Three months ago, we had installed automated camera traps in the contiguous jungles of Bhujung and Sikles, within the Annapurna Conservation Area to collect wildlife data. We wanted to capture clouded leopard and Himalayan black bear in our camera traps to understand how they were using the area. And now the camera traps were ready for retrieval and reveal three months' worth of wildlife activities. To say that we were excited would be an understatement! We were eager to begin our journey into every nook of the jungle, back to our cameras to check the images captured over more than 74 days and nights.



PHOTO 1: Installing a camera trap in the forest to monitor wildlife activities.

Early in the morning of 31 March 2017, four of us started our journey from Kathmandu. At Besisahar, Raju *dai*² and three supporting staff from Sikles joined us, completing our team. The plan was to start collecting cameras from Bhujung and gradually move to Sikles, following the opposite route of our previous trip. To reach Bhujung, we took a Mahindra Bolero jeep, which is the popular and practical way of travelling in the cranky mountain roads. We felt our body sway and dance in perfect harmony with every bump and jerk. With every roll of the tyre, we focused our mind on the rolling curves of hills rising from the banks of Marsyangdi river upto the crest of Mt. Manaslu. Upon reaching Ghalegaun, the cool breeze

² *Dai* is Nepali term for elder brother

reminded us of what we had been missing in the dusty capital city Kathmandu.



PHOTO 2: On the way to Bhujung from Besisahar.

The next stop would be Bhujung, our destination for the day. It was evening when we arrived at the bus park. From here we would have to walk a short distance to the village. Far off in the hills, we could literally see the area where we had placed the last camera trap. For a while I visualized a majestic clouded leopard getting photographed by that camera trap and got excited. Carrying our bags, we descended downhill along the stone steps leading to the cobblestone footpath of Bhujung.



PHOTO 3: A view of Bhujung village.

Bhujung is the biggest Gurung village in Nepal. The village is situated in a slope surrounded by densely forested arc of green hills with Mt. Lamjung on the backdrop. Adding to the beauty, is a long and flat stretch

of crop fields sloping from the lap of a hill to the banks of Madme river. Bhujung itself is a fascinating village with crowded traditional houses connected by a complex network of footpaths. It is like a maze where travellers can easily lose their way without a guide or meticulous instruction leading to their destination.

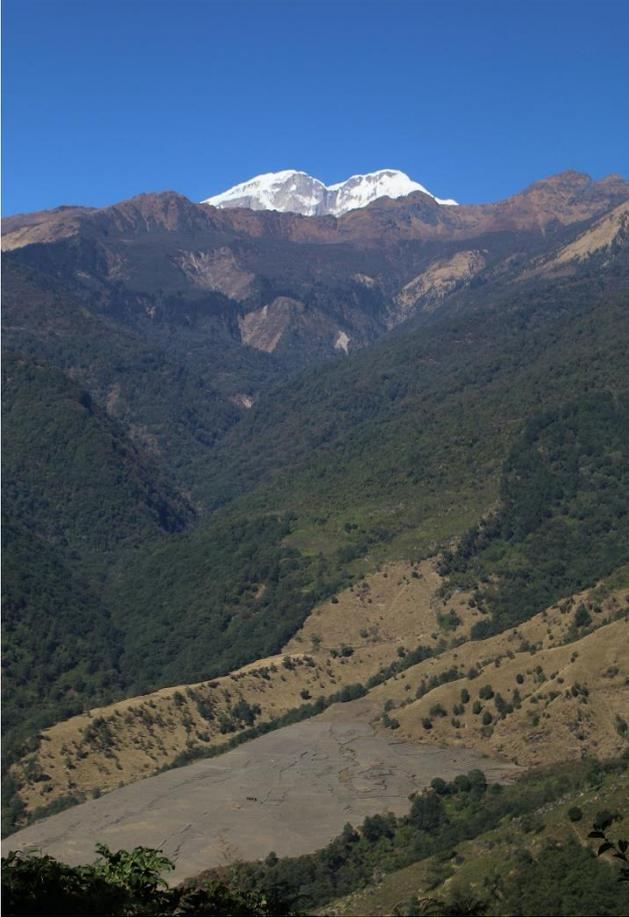


PHOTO 4: A view from Bhujung village; fields, lush green hills and Mt. Lamjung in the backdrop.

At our homestay, we were welcomed by the staffs of Annapurna Conservation Area Project's unit conservation office of Bhujung, and the homestay owner. Hospitality of Gurung community can surely amaze any newcomers to the village. After exchanging pleasantries, we made ourselves at home. We settled at the frontage of our homestay and started talking about our previous visit to Bhujung, back when we had stayed briefly after installing the camera traps. Far off we could see the trails to follow for our upcoming journey. Spicy hot tea and the cold evening were complementing our talks on wildlife and the people of the area. Lively conversations on lifestyle of the community and how they integrate nature in their day-to-day activities engaged us all. After dinner we started to make plan for our journey. We decided to retrieve two of the installed camera traps and move to our first camp the next day. Everyone made guesses about species that might

have been captured by the cameras. Common leopard and yellow-throated marten were the most common guesses based on our past field experiences. And of course, the barking deer! The night passed quickly.

We woke early and packed our bags. Before heading out, we briefly discussed our planned activities for the day and trip logistics. We had decided that two of our teammates would move ahead to reach the campsite earlier while the rest of us would retrieve the camera traps and join them. It was almost nine in the morning when we took the first step towards the magnificent jungle of the Bhujung-Sikles landscape. Moving just 300 meters ahead, we spotted a pair of barking deer. We felt happy and took it as a good omen for things to come. Moving ahead the omen was further ennobled by the sight of two beautiful birds - long-tailed broadbill and a spangled drongo. As we moved along the trail, we observed scats and faint pugmarks. We had installed camera traps further ahead on the same route so there was a good chance that this creature would be captured on one of them.

It was past midday when we crossed Madme river with great effort and took quick steps up the hill to reach the first camera station. The area around the camera station was exposed. The bushes around the tree where we had placed our camera trap unit had been burnt away. Moving closer, our anticipation and excitement shattered away as we could not find our camera.

We stood there for couple of minutes, dazed, unable to believe our eyes, with sinking hope of finding our camera trap lying somewhere around; we were all under the canopy of deep silence. Filled by melancholy, we silently moved ahead and reached the second camera station. The next few moments were beyond dejection as we could not find the other camera trap as well. The pole that we used to fix the unit had been tossed down the rock crevasse. Excitement turned to apathy as we were struck by the realization of what had happened. Heavy rain poured down as we ascended towards our camp with five heavy hearts. We still remember the words Yadav *dai* said later for fun as we went to our tents to retire for the night, "Did those cameras by any chance capture a species new for Nepal"?

Biosketch

KAUSHAL YADAV is involved in research and conservation of Himalayan black bears in central Nepal. He is particularly interested in the human-bear interaction.

JEEVAN RAI is working with canid species and has a special interest on dholes. He is interested in monitoring the recolonization of dholes in the midhills of Nepal.