



Birding at Dehradun/Chakrata/Deoban

*Here goes another of my trip report. Another one of my conventional – long narratives. Of course this trip was of the longest, productive and most significant one for me, as most of the sightings were lifers and absolute par excellence as most birds and butterflies came really close. My trip was from **Mumbai-Dehradun-Chakrata-Delhi-Mumbai**.*

*As this was my brother's and my first trip to the North we decided to do enough homework about the places worth visiting near Dehradun. To be more specific he went to Uttaranchal Tourism and got maps and brochures on places in **Uttaranchal**. Further, we downloaded lot of info on some places from net and we also scanned through old issues of magazines like **Sanctuary**, **Hornbill** and **Shrishti** to see if anybody has written about any places of interest for us. A few days before leaving we were racking our brains figuring out the places we should or rather we would be able to cover with the span of 3 to 4 days and finally decided 2 –3 plans which we hoped to be executed after we reach there. After the survey we did we were quite eager to see **Chakrata, Deoban, Asan barrage, Mussorie, Uttarkashi** which are with 100km radius of Dehradun. We hit upon a lot of information on Chakrata from the beautiful Nature-Travel Magazine called Shristi. We read it quite well and also carried it along. Meanwhile my brother stored a lot more about that place in his mind. (It came as a surprise to me when he was better than the most of the locals about their local sights!!!)*

En route to Dehradun:

We (my brother and self) left by *Swaraj Express* on 13th June 2005 from Borivali and reached Delhi on 14th June 2005 morning 5.00 am. This part of the journey was quiet good as the weather was quite pleasant all along and we had some rains at some places. It was an amazing experience to pass through different states. (*Maharashtra, Gujarat, MP, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi*) This gives an opportunity to taste different culinary, WATER; feel the different climatic conditions; and to see the *diverse flora and fauna*. At some place in MP I saw a few **Black-headed Ibis, Red Wattled Lapwings** and some **Ducks** in a small pond from the train. The journey was also quite productive in terms of beautiful landscape and very enchanting – all these as we feasted on different specialties like *Poha, Shev, Samosas, Roti sabzi and Puri chole*.

However, rest of the journey from Delhi to Dehradun was quite the opposite. We were traveling on a Passenger train (*the Dehradun Express*) which besides being quite late also took a real long while to finally reach Dehradun (6.30 pm). We had a really bad time in the train with the huge crowd which came in and to add to this the Ticket Collectors and Guards had nothing to say about the situation. It was a rather hot journey with heat waves blowing through from the windows causing eye-pain. To our relief, as Dehradun was approaching we could a lot of **Sal and Palas plantations** along with some shrubs and trees. At this point I sighted a few birds - **Indian Roller (Our mascot of Bird Race), Rufous Treepie, Black Drongo**.

At Dehradun:

On reaching Dehradun we hired an auto rickshaw to go to Wildlife Institute of India (**WII**). (at a fare of Rs60). It's approximately 9-10 km from station. On the way we passed through a lot of Litchi plantations and felt the essence of a simple town. As soon we approached **WII**, we were impressed by the campus and decided to explore it to the fullest for the rest of the few days of our stay there.



Wildlife Institute of India

In the campus we saw a good number of birds- **Spotted Owlets, Himalayan bulbuls, Spangled Drongos, Rufous Treepies, Crow-billed Drongos, Nightjars** and some **Unided owls** were regularly seen. The campus is also filled with *Rhesus Macaques* (which are quite aggressive and better kept away from). The **Nightjars, Treepies and Cuckoos (Indian and Common Hawk)** were quite vocal and were sometimes just too much to handle. A large variety of *Trees/Shrubs/Herbs* were spread all over - some familiar and many weren't (to my good luck some trees had name plates)- However, the best part of the campus was a small **Lantana** patch which (even though a pest plant) attracted a good variety of butterflies – here we saw **all Pansies (except Grey), 4 rings, 3 rings, Beak, Common Luscar, Crows and Tigers**. - and the best thing about this patch was that it was along one of the main paths leading towards the Hostel in which we were staying. On the other side of the Lantana patch was a narrow stream housing a host of non flowering plants along its banks in addition to featuring a lot of butterfly congregations this area also had some birds - **Warblers, Nightjars and Tailor birds**.

The following day (15th June 2005) was not too productive except for seeing a few more *Spotted Owlets* – this time very close -, *Nightjars* and a few *big Owls*. On the 16th June 2005 a friend who is also a nature lover (**Sahil Latheef**) joined us and helped make our trip successful. Without him we would have not got a chance to capture some the beautiful gifts of nature on a camera.

On 17th June 2005 morning we went to a place called **Kadvapani** which is actually a walk along and through a patch of *thick Sal forests*, approximately 5 kms. from *WII*. We left at 5.15am and though we might have not reached a particular point in *Kadvapani*; we thoroughly enjoyed the route as we saw a large no. of birds in a very short span of time and all the sightings were really good in terms of quality. Our sightings here included - **Rufous Treepie, Orange Headed Ground Thrush, Himalayan Bulbul, Grey Capped Pygmy Woodpecker** (saw him busy

Woodpecker Watching at Kadvapani



making nest for at least 20 mins), **Crested Serpent Eagle** (With his beautiful crest prominently at a short distance twice), **Black-Hooded Oriole**, Male and Female **Asian Paradise Flycatcher** (twice), **Treecreeper, Grey Headed Woodpecker** (An excellent spotting as it accidentally came in focus when I was looking for a ground thrush. Spent a lot of time watching him too), **Jungle Babblers, Grey Hornbill**, many **Warblers, Grey Breasted Prinia** and many more. It was terribly hot when we reached back (at *WII*). We spent the rest of the day indoors. I was quite lucky to see a *Palm Civet* pass by within the campus when I was alone. I got really excited and wanted to jump out of the window to have a better look but the lack of shoes on my feet stopped me.

En route to Chakrata:

Next day morning (18th June 2005) we left for **Chakrata** - a place at an altitude of around 7000 feet above sea-level and about 90kms. from *Dehradun* - After the cab we had booked didn't turn up we left by a bus for **Vikasnagar** which is at a distance of 30kms. by a bus. We crammed our luggage and ourselves on to a local bus with almost no legroom. En route we passed by a lot of famous Institutions and Academies (like the *IMA*). From *Vikasnagar* we got on a Utility vehicle (Armada) which was to take us and along with many more passengers to *Chakrata*. We had to wait in the car for around 90mins till it was time to leave. The timing of all vehicles plying this route is determined by the Gate timings. These gates are controlled by the Army and therefore there are lots of rules to be followed.

Further on our journey we passed by some beautiful houses and a few Canals filled with gushing green waters with children and men having a gala time. The roads were lined with plantations of **Indian tulip tree, Laburnum, Eucalyptus, Pipal, Banyan, Mango and Neem**. Soon we started climbing the Ghats. Even though our journey through hills had started there was no effect on the temperature, it remained hot. Soon we reached the first gate which was scheduled to be opened at 12.00pm. This was the **Kalsi gate**. We got down and roamed around the place for few minutes to get the feel of the town - It was so simple and beautiful - We also got a feel of the local hilly songs. Then we entered the official cantonment area. The path again featured a lot of *Sal trees* along with many other flowering trees. The path from now on was much better than the earlier one. The temperature was coming down slowly. The altitude was increasing and the landscape was getting better and better. Our driver was a valiant fellow as some point the path was really bad and you had to be really confident to drive specially with so many people aboard. Soon we reached our 2nd gate called the **Sahiya gate**. From this gate the **Chakrata gate** was around an hour n half distance. This was the best part of the journey. Within few minutes of our upward climb the climate completely changed. The temperature fell down suddenly and weather was very cool. The landscape was magnificent and my friend Sahil just couldn't stop taking pictures. The beautiful rocky streams

at the base, terraced fields, small sloppy roofed cottages, narrow local walking tracks and the dry streams stole our attention. Finally after feasting on all those beautiful mesmerizing landscapes we were confident that we made an excellent decision of coming to Chakrata and not Mussorie.

At Chakrata:

We reached *Chakrata* main bazaar area and started hunting for accommodation. We very were fortunate to get a simple, reasonable, beautiful and clean room fast, as it was a weekend and rooms were getting filled up everywhere. As we had reached at an odd time proper lunch was unavailable. However, we managed with whatever we got, unpacked and left to explore the place. We had heard about a lake at a close by place called *Chilmiri* and were eager to see it.

However, before we could get there we got stuck right next to our hotel as this point had an excellent view of the Yamuna Valley and some interesting trees. And as we sat at that point, we also saw a lot of birds. We saw a raptor which was most likely a *Crested Serpent Eagle* comfortably seated amidst branches of a tree after being mobbed by *Ravens*. After this another place again adjoining our hotel caught our attention, this was someone's private garden that had a view of the valley on one side and beautiful hills with conifers on the other. We must have seen around 15 birds and around 6-7 butterflies there. Some birds include the ***Treecreepers*** which were very swift and playing with each other, ***Himalyan Bulbul*** that were coming really close to us, ***Tits (Green Backed and Black-Lored)*** both in good numbers, ***Yellow Crowned Woodpecker***, ***Blue Whistling Thrush*** and ***Streaked Laughing Thrushes***. We also got to see a lot of ***Hanuman Langurs***, really huge fellows with long tails. Finally we moved from there to go to *Chilmiri*.

We decided to walk down to ***Chilmiri*** - this point houses a Military Cantonment's Mess and Quarters- The views offered on the route towards Chilmiri were excellent. We also saw many birds along this road but not much in comparison to the garden adjoining our hotel. We did wonder how the birds and butterflies coped with all the humans residing in that

area. En route we saw - ***Grey Winged Blackbirds***, ***Nuthatches*** and ***Treecreepers*** along with lots of different plants. We captured a lot of landscape images and admired the beauty of these might hills. Soon the sun melted away with a beautiful golden tinge in the blue sky. As we reached the *Chilmiri* we couldn't go to the hill which was suppose to give the best views of the adjoining valleys as it was quite dark. Suddenly the weather changed drastically and it started drizzling. Very soon the drizzle turned to heavy shower. We were fortunate to be picked up by a passing utility vehicle. My bro and I had to stay out in the open part of the vehicle. The rain came down like darts and hit us hard. What an experience!! We went back to our room, dried and went for dinner.



En route to Chilmiri

The next day (19th June 2005) we got up early to try a different route to Chilmiri – we were to go downward the hills along the main road to Chilmiri. On one of those roads we came across a lot of villagers who told us that there was a settlement almost a km away. We kept on walking with an idea that soon we will hit the road again. The walk soon became a trek and there was lot of climbing to do. With no food in the stomach and just some dry fruits to compensate we kept walking. However, we did get to see lots of birds (notable being - ***Oriental Turtle Dove***, ***Grey Treepie***, ***Black-Headed Jay***) and butterflies. We also saw many *bamboo*

plants, ferns, lichen, conifers, woody trees and climbers. The paths lead us deeper in to the forest, but an exhausting climb upwards helped us to hit the road. As we were dreading walking back towards the hotel we got a lift and reached back to town where we indulged into some very good hot *Parathas*.



The 312 feet high - Tiger Falls

While I went to our hotel to grab a half hour of rest, my brother and Sahil managed to convince an utility vehicle driver to take us to **Tiger falls** that evening and to *Deoban* the following morning. The ride to *Tiger Falls* was through some beautiful ravines and valleys. We had heard of a trekking route around 5kms. Long to *Tiger Falls* from *Chakrata town* and on seeing the trekking route courtesy our driver we were happy with our decision to stick to get a ride and to stick to the longer (17kms.) motor able road. On foot we would have easily taken the whole day to go and come back. En route we saw patches of *White Asters*, many wild plants, butterflies and terraced agricultural fields. We soon arrived at the top of *Tiger Falls* from which point we had to trek down. It was beautiful trek as we passed *beautiful traditional balconied hill*

houses with slate roofs, fields of potatoes, goats, donkeys, many wild flowers and butterflies. Here we saw many **Red Billed Blue Magpie** flying. It was simply fantastic. We hit upon a stream soon saw the world's most beautiful *Dragonflies/Damselflies*. There were lots of *tadpoles* in the crystal clear water along with *water skater insects*. We soon reached the main target which was just awesome. *The fall was one straight fall of 312feet, making it one of India's tallest waterfalls*. The area surrounding it hosted conventional waterfall flora of non flowering plants like *ferns, bryophytes*, etc. After my brother and Sahil had their quick dip in the chilling water we took a quick video of the place and started making a move back since it was getting late in the evening. On the way back we saw a Juvenile of a **Brown Dipper, Plumbeous Redstart, Spotted Forktail, Roller** and a **Great tit**. With immense satisfaction and contentment we returned back the same beautiful. We also checked out one of the many flour mills that ran on the flow of water in the streams - indeed an ingenious way to tap this amazing energy resource - We reached back at our hotel around 8 pm and hit the bed soon.

At Deoban:

Next day (20th June 2005) we were up by 5.15 for our last trip around *Chakrata – Deoban* which was at 9,400 feet above sea-level. As we gained altitude it became quite cold and the vegetation changed. We saw *Wild Roses, variety of Asters, variety of numerous Cobra Lilies, many tiny flowers and many butterflies*. Once at *Deoban*, we heard/saw lots of birds – **Himalayan Woodpeckers, Green Backed tit, White collared blackbird** - and saw many butterflies in the alpine meadows which were surrounded by Pine trees. 5mins. From the *Forest Rest House (FRH)* is **Vyas Shikar** from where on a clear day all the main peaks of the *Garhwals* can be seen, but we weren't so lucky. This point again was an ocean of butterflies. At the *FRH* I saw 3 raptors soaring quite close. They were the beautiful **White Rumped Vultures**. I was mesmerized by the sight. If it would not have been for the butterflies Sahil could probably have got some snaps of them too.

Soon we had to leave from here but we stopped at a Medicinal plant

nursery run by the State Government on our way back. It had a huge patch of **Deodar** and **Quercus** trees growing along with many wildflowers. The landscape was quite rewarding. As we reached the nursery we saw rows of small terraces having a wide variety of plants grown on them. A kind nursery attendant showed us around and told about the different plants there. He also showed us the greenhouse which was being maintained at an inhumane hot temperature and we could feel ourselves melting. Meanwhile Sahil was busy photographing the *thousands of butterflies that were feeding on a plant locally called Coot*. Since I left my notebook in my car I could not note down the names of all plants but the ones I remember are - **Digitalis Purpurea, Digitalis Lanata, Kasturi, Mint, Apricot, Wild Turmeric and Ginger**. We then hurried back as we had to take the 12 pm gate out of Chakrata. On reaching our room we hurried fast, packed and left. The journey back was pleasant till about that same awful point beyond which the weather started becoming warmer. We reached Vikasnagar soon and the weather had started killing us, one more uncomfortable bus journey and we were at Dehradun ISBT and booked the tickets for a bus to Delhi.

On the way back to Mumbai:

Early morning (21st June 2005) we were in Delhi and here too we were on a small birding spree. Sahil took us to the **Okhla Bird Park** as we had a lot of spare hours before our train back home to Mumbai. We saw a number of birds - **Purple Sunbird, Green Bee Eater, Purple Swamphen, Bronze winged Jacana, Spot-billed Duck, Flamingo, Painted Stork and many Prinias**. Late that evening we boarded our train back to Mumbai. Back home we were greeted by the beautiful showers of monsoon and a promise of many more amazing trails.

That ends my great trip to Dehradun and its surroundings. The memories are still vivid in mind, I guess that's quite evident from minutest details written in this long report even after so many days.

*These places are worth visiting, actually it's a **must visit** for Birders and Nature Lovers.!!!!!!*

- Vidya Rao



Sahil (l), Vidya (c), Dhananjay (r)

To read complete the bird/butterfly lists and to see more photos from this trip, log on to **Sahil's Chakrata webpages** on –

<http://www.geocities.com/sahil2507/chak/Chak.htm>