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Eaglenest Biodiversity Project

summary

by [Ramana Athreya](#)

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Motivation

Eaglenest is an extraordinary wildlife sanctuary in a state which is renowned for wildlife. There are others which are vaster, some span a larger range of altitude, and perhaps have a longer list; but none have a serviceable road through them providing easy access across 3500m of altitude. Unlike other sanctuaries Eaglenest is accessible even during the monsoon. Birds breed during the monsoon and cold-blooded animals are visible in Arunachal only during the rains. So monsoon access is essential for many ecological studies. Furthermore tourists can step off a plane at Guwahati and be birding in Eaglenest in less than 5 hours! In comparison it takes a major expedition to get into interior Namdapha during the rains and a major expedition is required for any visit above 800m during any season.

This ease of access makes Eaglenest ideal for studying Arunachal's flora and fauna across a wide altitudinal range all through the year and the best prospect for promoting ecotourism as a vehicle for conservation measures. And Eaglenest desperately needs conservation measures and protection. In keeping with the tradition of Arunachal Pradesh the local tribes insist on their hunting rights within the sanctuary even though it is legally prohibited and a burgeoning population - Arunachal has one of the highest decadal growth in India - is beginning to nibble away at the buffer between Eaglenest and civilisation. And this buffer, prime forest all, is community-owned and is being sold as firewood. It is not an easy task to protect forests in an economically backward state where forests are viewed as symbols of backwardness.

Until now Eaglenest has been protected by the inability of timber trucks to navigate the jeep track. While people indulged in some hunting the forest remained intact and has more-or-less recovered from the trauma of the construction of the first road 40 years ago. This protection is no longer valid. Some years ago the Indian army began widening the Eaglenest track to handle two lanes of their heavy truck traffic. They have also blasted new alignments in several sections devastating the fragile mountain terrain. Without going into the merits of the often twisted development v/s conservation debate it is clear that a regular highway will directly ruin more than 10% of the sanctuary area and furthermore will be a permanent canker through which the usual suspects -- from indigent encroachers to timber merchants; from subsistence poachers to high society carnivores with a taste for wild meat -- will ravage the area. At the moment the area has some breathing space with the Supreme Court staying all work on the road until final orders are passed.

It has become increasingly clear that confrontational conservation measures are doomed to failure. Conserving wilderness in the face of local resistance can at best only be a short term objective. Armchair action plans enforced by central diktats are clearly on the way out, and appropriately so. Working with local communities and developing alternatives to non-sustainable exploitation of forests is perhaps the only sustainable conservation paradigm. This is easier said than done since every area will have its own special set of features and constraints within which a solution will have to be found. Ultimately, the people of Arunachal Pradesh will decide whether or not a highway will run through Eaglenest wildlife sanctuary. The role that I envisage for the Eaglenest biodiversity project is to make widely known what is at Eaglenest, the choices available for the future and to the extent possible in a complex situation the consequences of each course of action; i.e. to help the people of the area make an informed choice. Local communities, the forest department with its institutional framework and resources, and scientific expertise will have to pull together if areas such as Eaglenest are to be conserved.

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Long-term Goals

1. to inventory the flora and fauna of Eaglenest (and W. Arunachal in general)
2. to build a team of Indian, and especially Arunachali, field biologists of diverse interests who will pursue the above goal in an effective manner
3. to understand the consequences of a road through the protected area and explore ways and means of mitigating the damage if a highway is unavoidable
4. to explore the prospects of tourism as an alternative to destructive exploitation of the forest. Central to this goal is the involvement of the local Bugun and possibly the neighbouring Sherdukpen tribes.
5. to raise the profile of the area among the general public. While anonymity has saved Eaglenest till now I feel publicity is essential for defending it from the new danger.

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Phase 1 (November 2003 - December 2004)

We have completed the first step of demonstrating the potential of the place to a wider audience. We hope to sustain the process for a few more years until the efforts of the local people and the reponse of the outside world lead to self-sustaining conservation measures

The Team

Co-ordinator	:	Ramana Athreya
Birds	:	Ramana Athreya, Pratap Singh, Dhananjai Mohan and Shashank Dalvi
Butterflies	:	Ramana Athreya, Viral Mistry and Shashank Dalvi
Herpetofauna	:	Ishan Agarwal, Viral Mistry, Ramana Athreya and Shashank Dalvi

Field visits

29 Oct - 18 Nov, 2003	:	RA (birds, GPS markers, preliminary organisation)
20 Mar - 19 Apr, 2004	:	RA (bird tour)
18 May - 10 Jun, 2004	:	PS+SD (birds)
01 Oct - 23 Oct, 2004	:	RA+IA+VM (butterflies and herps)
15 Dec - 04 Jan, 2005	:	RA+DM (birds)

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Goals - proposed and disposed

1. Determine the altitudinal distribution of birds in different seasons

We initially planned to map the avian distribution in 4 different months. The March count had to be replaced by a demonstration bird tour in the face of intense local pressure and the October effort was vitiated by very poor bird activity due to heavy rain. We have collected data for December and May-June. In some sense these are the most meaningful months, with 'settled' bird populations, for studying the altitudinal distribution; October-November and March-April see a lot of altitudinal movement.

2. Inventory the butterflies and herpetofauna of Eaglenest

Given the poor bird activity in October we concentrated on butterflies and especially herpetofauna and were suitably rewarded as the webpages show. We would have also liked to carry out a herpetofaunal and butterfly survey in May-June but could not due to budgetary and manpower limitations.

3. Generate ecotourism resources

o Publicise the area and its wildlife wealth

The information in these webpages is sufficient for planning a tour to Eaglenest and W. Arunachal in general. I hope private tour groups and tour operators will take a serious look at these areas as eco-destinations. Some have already evinced an interest in doing so.

o Build a photo-library of the fauna of the area

These webpages are the primary product of this goal. The images were drawn from a large bank of over 1500 slides photographed during the project.

o Record bird song

We have so far recorded 100+ species (more than 20 hr) and the effort will continue if we can raise resources. This is to be used as a scientific database as well as for calling out special birds for tourists. While song playback can be infinitely abused to the detriment of birds such sightings

bring in tourists and money which may prove crucial for the long-term conservation of the area. One may have to rethink the issue if ever tourism reaches epidemic proportions, which is far from being the case now.

- **Altitudinal markers along the Eaglenest road**

Alpha-numeric labels have been painted along the roadside in a non-egregious manner to help visitors, tourists and scientists alike, estimate the location and altitude of their sightings without having to carry GPS units. Almost 100 markers have been painted along the 35 km stretch of road within the Sanctuary.

- **train local camp staff for bird tours**

A core staff of 3 have now accompanied us on 5 project visits including a bird tour and are reasonably well versed in the strange ways of birders and herpers! More shall be trained as demand increases.

- **train local wildlife guides**

We have started the process but trained bird guides were never going to happen in one year. We have donated two binoculars and field guides for birds and snakes to the Bugun Welfare Society and we will encourage youngsters to take an interest in the wildlife around them. There are sociological and psychological barriers here which need working down. Many people are only one or zero generations removed from a forest life and working in a forest is a throwback to what they have struggled hard to get away from! Those with some schooling -- the kind who can utilise books and handle diverse clientele -- refuse to step into the forest (except as wood contractors!) while those willing to work in the sanctuary are often illiterate.

4. **Run a pilot/demonstration bird tour**

This was not a part of the original proposal but I had to bow to the wishes of the local people who wanted a practical demonstration of returns from conservation -- now, and not a decade later! As part of the Eaglenest Project I contributed my time to advertising, organising and guiding a bird tour for 3 foreign tourists in April 2004 in collaboration with Mr. Indi Glow of the Bugun community. Our model for this first tour, and all future tours, is that (i) all visitors pay a daily entry fee to the Bugun Welfare Society and (ii) tour operators, whether local or external, will be strongly encouraged to employ local camp staff and provision the tour from the local market.

Birdwise, the tour was very successful -- over 17 days in Eaglenest, Pakke and Kaziranga the visitors saw 359 species including many rarities (see tour list); and this was without birding above 3000m! The visitors also saw such spectacular mammals as the indian rhino, elephants, wild buffalo, swamp deer, hoolock gibbon and many other mammals.

A well planned Eaglenest bird tour should include in its itinerary nearby area like Pakke and Dirang-Tawang (and even Kaziranga) to cover the widest possible range of habitats. So I expanded the scope of the Eaglenest project to include short visits to Dirang and Tawang to identify good bird areas (I was familiar with Pakke from before and a well-trodden path leads to Kaziranga)

5. **Build a team of field biologists for sustained work in W. Arunachal over the next many years**

Three of our team were college students from Mumbai visiting Arunachal for the first time and it would be safe to say that they are, not surprisingly, hooked! They are all headed back to Eaglenest this summer even though the project is over and its coffers are empty. There is enough work to be done in Arunachal for 5 times that number of workers for many years to come and the challenge is to (i) raise resources for supporting all of them and (ii) coopt as many Arunachal students as possible into the team.

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Phase 2 plans

1. Visit the areas 3 times a year -- in May-June, October and December -- and continue to compile faunal information, compile bird song and augment the photo-library.
2. expand the activity to Dirang-Tawang and Pakke which, together with Eaglenest, form an integral whole
3. Print publicity material, from the photographs already collected, for distribution to nature clubs and tour operators, both Indian and foreign.
4. Produce audio-visual presentations for the school children of Arunachal to inculcate a sense of pride in their invaluable heritage.
5. continue the training of bird guides
6. co-opt Arunachal students into our team

Oh yes - raise resources for achieving these goals!

All help - in cash, kind, time and expertise - will be gratefully accepted and acknowledged!

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The author would appreciate an email from people, scientists and tourists alike, who found these webpages useful.

13 March 2005

[Kaati Trust](#), Pune