

An Ode to the Unsung Heroes!

Someone wise once told me that “Let what you love be what you live”. I can’t emphasize enough, the importance of this statement. I feel lucky to live the life that I have always dreamed of, a wildlife researcher, conservationist and enthusiast... well, one in the making anyways.

As I come to the end of my first field year, working in the high altitude region of the Garhwal Himalayas, understanding potential impact of livestock grazing on Himalayan tahr, *Hemitragus jemlahicus* and Himalayan serow, *Capricornis thar*. I found myself reflecting on the many stars that needed to be aligned for the successful conduction of my Rufford Small Grant funded project.

Of the various bright lights that guided this project home (and still need to continue so for future work), none shine more brightly than my friend, field-assistant (well, he is much more than just that) and eternal support system, Harish Maithani. Harish is a resident of the Siroli village in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, about 10 hours walk down from one of our field site at Rudranath (3600m). A chance encounter with Sahas Barve from Cornell University’s Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department, 4 years ago, saw Harish mist-netting and studying birds across different elevations, helping Sahas, as an assistant, with his PhD project. What followed was an unrivalled love for the mountains he grew up in and more so the species that called it home.



Harish Maithani, a resident of the Siroli village in the Chamoli District of Uttarakhand, has been working with various research and conservation projects in the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary since 2012. He is also one of the most experienced bird guides of the region.

The only word that comes remotely close to describing his love for and desire to see and study species in his homeland is enthusiasm. It baffles me how Harish is always prepared at 0530am, each day, regardless of the weather (and yes, we have had torrential rainfalls and hailstorms) or the 25 km hike we did the previous day. His knowledge is boundless as well!

Above everything that I have learned in the past 6 months of field work here in Garhwal, I must say Harish has taught me one of the most valuable lessons. The lesson of belief; belief in your ideas, belief that you will find your way back to the path whilst negotiating through a thick fog at 4500m, belief that through all the challenges, the distance from civilization, the firesome hiking, the frigid nights and the multiple *dal-chawal* meals, your heart will be melted by the sight of the creatures you love and are here to study and conserve. And, yes that means the successful conduction of your project objectives as well! It is individuals like him, that are our connect to the communities and locations where effective conservation can occur. I must confess though, he would spot the tahr first each day, leaving me sulking about that fact that I would spot them first the next time... that 'next time' has yet to come, unfortunately.

Well, I write this not just to show how unique and amazing Harish is, but to show appreciation to the multitude of 'Harishs' across India and the world, helping researchers like myself study and conduct projects on various species. Be assured, without them, our projects would be left wanting... Let us researchers and conservationists take a moment and reflect back to times we have found ourselves stuck, frustrated and above all lonely in the pursuit of our project. And think, who was there to support us, guide us and cheer us up? Yes, these very 'Harishs'.

Well, be it following me on trails shrouded by mist, or leading me through the maze of boulder across a mountain pass, Harish have shown me that wildlife research is more than just taking focals of tahr or interviews of herders... it is about living the dreams that you always envisioned. Thank you to all the 'Harishs' out there, the domain of research and conservation owes you a great deal!



A male tahr, Hemitragus jemlahicus photographed here by Harish Maithani, near the Shokarkh area of Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary. Our studied makes use of focal ecological sampling and fecal analysis to understand health difference in tahr groups and serows, in sites with and without livestock.