

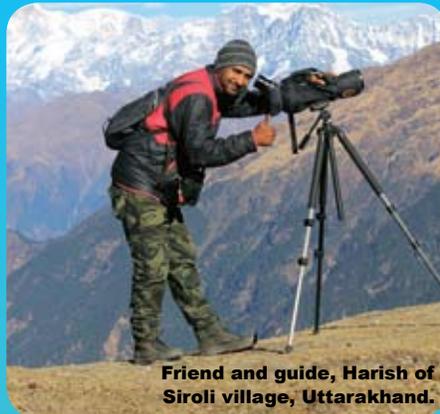
An Ode to Unsung Heroes;

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MUNIB KHANYARI

“Someone wise once told me: Let what you love be what you live.”

I feel lucky to live the life that I have always dreamed of -- a wildlife researcher and conservationist – well, one in the making anyway. As I came to the end of my first field year, working in the high-altitude region of the Garhwal Himalaya, understanding potential impact of livestock grazing on Himalayan tahr and Himalayan serow, I found myself reflecting on the many stars that needed to be aligned for the successful conduction of my Ruffords 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 and field assistant and eternal support system, Harish Maithani.

Harish is a resident of Siroli village in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, about 10 hours walk down from our field site at Rudranath (3,600 m. above sea level). A chance encounter with Sahas Barve from Cornell University's Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department, five years ago, saw Harish mist-netting and studying birds across different elevations, helping with his PhD project as an



Friend and guide, Harish of Siroli village, Uttarakhand.

assistant. What followed was an unrivalled love for the mountains he grew up in and more so for the species that called it home.

It baffles me how Harish is always prepared at 5.30 a.m., regardless of the weather (including torrential rainfall and hailstorms) or the 25 km. hike we did the previous day. His knowledge is boundless. Above everything that I have learned in the six months of field work in Garhwal, I must say Harish has taught me the importance of belief. The belief in your ideas, that you will find your way back to the path whilst negotiating through a thick fog at 4,500 m., that through all the challenges, the distance from civilisation, the tiresome hiking, the frigid nights and the multiple *dal-chawal* meals, the sight of the animals you love and are here to study will melt your heart.

“I must say that it is possible for researchers like myself to study and conduct projects on various species only because of individuals like [Harish].”

I must confess though, he would spot the tahr first each day, leaving me sulking about that fact that I would surely do the next time... that ‘next time’ never came, unfortunately. Be it following me on trails shrouded by mist, or leading me through the maze of boulders across a mountain pass, Harish has shown me that wildlife research is more than just recording tahr or interviews with herders... it is about living the dream that you always envisioned.

While anecdotes about Harish's genius are too many to recount here, I must say that it is possible for researchers like myself to study and conduct projects on various species only because of individuals like him. When we researchers take a moment and reflect on the times we have found ourselves stuck, frustrated and above all lonely in the pursuit of our research, let us consider who was there to support, guide and cheer us? Yes, every time a ‘Harish’ came to our rescue. Thank you to all the ‘Harish’ out there; the domain of research and conservation owes you a great deal! 🐾



A Himalayan tahr herd.

Munib Khanyari is a Research Associate at Nature Conservation Foundation and a PhD student at University of Bristol/ Oxford University. He studies factors that affect mountain ungulate populations.