



# Wildlife Sound

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## WANDERINGS IN THE GARHWAL HIMALAYAS

by Chris Hails

Several people have asked how and where I had recorded my “Himalayan morning” piece which won the Silver Fox award in the 2021 WSRS Competition. So I decided to write up the story.....

Some years ago, a friend and colleague of mine took a piece of forest on steep land adjacent to the hill town of Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, and establish it as a private nature reserve. Mussoorie (alt. 2000m) is a popular holiday location. Tourists are attracted by the cool air and greenery, many coming from Delhi 300km



*Above: The forest in Jabarkhet Nature Reserve*

to the south. However, population pressure and development are making it less green and destroying the native habitats. The main purpose of Jabarkhet Nature Reserve is to educate visitors and resident young people in the necessity of conserving the forests ([www.jabarkhetnature.com](http://www.jabarkhetnature.com)). One immediate practical need is that these hills are the water supply for hundreds of millions of people on the plains below. Yet, forest destruction is removing the trees that are nature's sponge, and the rapid run-off that follows a downpour means flood-drought cycles for people below. For people at the top, it means tanker lorries that haul water up into Mussoorie every day to keep the human population supplied. Thus, the awareness-



*Above: Trails in Jabarkhet are well sign-posted with evocative names!*

raising activities of Jabarkhet are vital.

Jabarkhet was originally covered in oak and pine forests. During the 1800s it was mainly used to supply Mussoorie town with wood and charcoal, an activity (by the British owners) which laid large tracts bare. Under Indian ownership, in the 1960's, a forest management plan was adopted. Oak, cedar and pine trees were planted, restoration took place and employment for local people was created. In 1980 the government banned all felling of trees on slopes above 1000 m. With the end of this economic activity the forest was no longer managed, and local villagers took fuelwood and grazed their cattle freely in the forest. Two further cycles of restoration and decline took place until the far-sighted owners agreed, in 2013, to join in a conservation plan. Today, the forest is recovering well, invasive weeds cleared out, and the trees all maturing nicely. In spring, the rhododendron forests flower in a burst of crimson.



*Above: In late spring the trails light up with rhododendron flowers*

To support these efforts, at the start of my retirement in 2016, I offered to spend several weeks in the reserve preparing a bird and sound guide, to be used by the local guides who conduct tourists around the reserve. Courtesy of my hosts who support the reserve ([www.hotel-padminivas.com](http://www.hotel-padminivas.com)) I was provided with a place to sleep and eat, and I was able to arrange a local driver who would take me to the reserve every morning before dawn and do the reverse later when peak singing time was done. Afternoons and evenings were mostly spent cataloguing the sounds captured that day and planning what to do with them. Each morning we picked up Virendra (Viru) Singh who was the principal tourist guide at the reserve. He accompanied me and took many of the photos we needed whilst I focussed on sounds. Viru's younger eyes and passion for his work were an important part of the project.

I quickly found that the task would not be easy. The terrain was steep, in early March it was freezing cold at dawn and baking hot at noon. But the biggest challenge of all was noise. Not the aircraft that I curse in Europe, but human noises from the villages that clung to the steep hillsides, dogs barking, hammers working, lorries and motorbikes with engines straining as they wound their way up the steep valleys – all echoing off the mountain sides as life in this densely populated country moved forward. Couple that with the roar of streams and rivers that hurried to find their way down to the Ganges, and it all provided ample challenges for the field recordist. The early hours of the day were precious, and a lot of time was spent in getting myself in the right position for reasonable quality recordings. Although I had visited India many times, I clearly did not know all the birds nor all the sounds – especially at this latitude and altitude.



*Above: Nearby settlements clinging to the hillsides*

Because I wanted clean recordings of single species I used a Telinga Pro 5W parabolic microphone connected to a Fostex FR2LE recorder. A combination that worked well (and thankfully was reliable). For some night sounds, I used drop rigs made from an Olympus LS11 or Sony M10, each attached to small omni EM272 mics. But I was always worried that the latter might be found by a forest wanderer with either 2 legs or 4. Tigers passed through very rarely, Sloth Bears occasionally, but there was a resident Leopard and many other lesser beasts, any of which could make short work of my drop rigs if they so wished. Fortunately, we had no dramatic encounters. I would focus on positioning myself with my back to any invasive sounds, aiming the parabola at the singer, whilst Viru would stealthily creep on a circular route to try and photograph the star of the show. Several times we did not know what we had captured until Viru came back with the photo – instant feedback from digital cameras be praised!

Our aim was to try and produce an electronic book which had both pictures and sounds that Viru (and others) could use on a tablet to help to interpret the reserve for visitors. We also thought that people could buy the book at the end of their visit if they so wished and so make a contribution to the effort. At the time, I



had no idea how such a book could be published - I simply focussed on obtaining the basic raw materials. The project was made all the harder by the fact that there was no internet signal in the reserve so the book would have to be free-standing, not linked to a website. Once back in Europe, I found that I could write the book using Apple Pages software, embedding sounds and photos into each page. A fortuitous software

update in late 2016 enabled me to export it in “ePub” format which can be read on stand-alone devices. The first edition was published late 2016 and the interest it stimulated enabled a 2018 second edition as more species were added to the reserve list, not all of which I had recorded. You can get an idea of the product here:

<https://www.wildechoes.org/shop/birds-of-jabarkhet-ebook>

[In the following narrative, scan the QR code with a mobile device, or use the link, and it will take you to a web page extracted from the book so you can see a photo and listen to the sounds.]

One of the most iconic sounds of the reserve was the Hill Partridge (*Arborophila torqueola*) whose low mournful whistles would fill the air even though the bird is very hard to see:  
<https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/hill-partridge>



This is in sharp contrast to the Koklass Pheasant (*Pucrasia macrolopha*) whose sudden sharp crow, often made when one is close, would scare the living daylights out of me at regular intervals: <https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/koklass-pheasant>



There were gentler, less aggressive sounding birds, like the Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon (*Treron sphenurus*) whose calls waft through the canopy, where it spends most of its time, sounding like an old-fashioned child’s wooden whistle: <https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/wedge-tailed-green-pigeon>



Each day I would hear what I thought were Hoopoes down in the bottom of a valley dense with trees and vegetation. A strange place for a Hoopoe I thought and, a few weeks in, I had still not seen one there. Then I discovered that I was listening to a Himalayan Cuckoo (*Cuculus saturatus*)! I did find Hoopoes on the old fields that were now patches of grass in the reserve, and so quickly learned to tell the difference:  
<https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/himalayan-cuckoo>



But my favourite cuckoo has to be the “brain fever bird” – Large Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx sparveroides*) whose hysterical calls really do set one’s nerves on edge:  
<https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/large-hawk-cuckoo>



One that will always last with me is the marvellously named Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler (*Pomatorhinus erythrogyne*). It is very difficult to see for reasons I explain in the book, but it has a very loud 3-note call that rings out nicely, which I characterised as “cue-pee, quip!”. I was astonished to learn from Salim Ali’s excellent work that this was actually a duet, with the male singing “cue-pee” and the female responding instantaneously “quip!”. Very difficult to believe there were two birds doing this: <https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/rusty-cheeked-scimitar-babbler>



### Cloud's End

Towards the end of my time in Mussoorie, I still lacked a good recording of the Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler and I was also very keen to see them closely and convince myself that it really was two birds producing this sound. Viru told me of a nearby place called Cloud's End where he had seen them often. I had visited this location 2-3 years earlier. It is a remote lonely ridge to the west of Mussoorie with spectacular views to the south and west down to the plains of India, and to the north to the snow-white high Himalayan range in the distance.

This was the place where, in 1832, George Everest bought a house which was to become his base for the final phase of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. This amazing story is well told by John Keay in "The Great Arc" (Harper Collins 2000). For anyone interested in maps, surveying, or the history of colonial India, this book is a must. Basically, it describes a survey planned to start at Cape Comorin at the very southern tip of India in 1802 and, by using basic trigonometry and triangulation, survey northwards to the mountains. It entailed a huge army of labourers, equipment, chains, giant theodolites, and levelling instruments, that weighed tons. This had to be carried by elephant and ox-cart the full length of India. George Everest took over as leader of this gargantuan task in 1823 and it became his life's work until he retired in 1861 (with the job still not complete). He lived in the house at Cloud's End, near a village called Hathipaon, for about the last 11 years of this time.



Above: George Everests house with his observation tower on the hill to the right.

The first time I saw the house, in 2014, it was largely intact, but abandoned, with cattle wandering around inside. By 2016, the time of this story, it was fenced off and some trees planted nearby. Today, it has been renovated and turned into a tourist visitor's centre. By the way, George Everest (which he pronounced "eve-rest") never had any real connection with the mountain that was to bear his name. It was his successors who, finally proving that it was higher than any other mountain in the world, (and initially feigning any knowledge of local language names, and later deliberately discrediting names like Chomalungma, Sagamartha and Devadhanga), decided to give it the name of their former leader which became widely adopted in the western world.



Above: The house.



Above: The observation tower.

So, this was the setting where, on a morning in late March, Viru and I started out on the northern side of the ridge, descending it at a 45-degree angle on a small track, looking for our Scimitar Babbler and anything else that could be useful for us. It was about an hour after dawn, the sun was up, the birds in full voice and insects beginning to add to the scene as warmth filled the air. I suddenly became aware of a wave of sound rolling up from the valley below me and was immediately moved by the whole scene. I wanted to capture it. I stepped off the track, crossed to where a small open area gave me a clear view over the tree canopy below, and sat on a log with the ground dropping away steeply below me. I thought for a second or two about removing the mic from the parabola to give me a wider sound field but was worried that the moment may pass. So, I simply aimed the parabola across the top of the canopy and pressed the record button, monitoring pick up through my field headphones. I was glad I did not wait as the moment only lasted for about a further 5 minutes and then things moved on. For me this was a wonderful moment, but little did I realise then that I would receive a coveted award and be writing about it 6 years later!

Himalayan Morning: <https://www.wildechoes.org/jabarkhet/himalayan-morning>



Any WSRS members interested in your own free copy of the e-book just drop me a line ([cjhails@gmail.com](mailto:cjhails@gmail.com)) and I will be happy to send you one.