

CHURDHAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY :

Where Nature's Bounty Meets Cultural
Reverence

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The Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in the Trans-Giri hill ranges of Sirmaur and Shimla districts in the state of Himachal Pradesh, covering an area of 66.7 km². Established in 1985, the Sanctuary aims to preserve the biological wealth and floral diversity of the Panchmuda Range, which encompasses the highest peak (Churdhar) in the southern part of the state. The Sanctuary spans a broad altitudinal spectrum from 1900 m to 3600 m, supporting a wide array of plant and animal life adapted to different elevations. Its unique geographical location, undulating topography and diverse climatic conditions have resulted in the formation of rich and fascinating vegetation. Here, one can explore enchanting landscapes that encompass the Himalayan moist temperate forest, Himalayan alpine temperate pasture, moist sub-alpine, and dry alpine scrub. Dominated by the Himalayan moist temperate forest, it shelters endangered tree species such as *Taxus contorta*. The Sanctuary also holds a medicinal herb treasure, including threatened species such as *Fritillaria cirrhosa*, *Trillium govaniatum* and *Dactylorhiza hatagirea*. This Sanctuary unfolds as a haven for avian enthusiasts, with the majestic Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* gracing its skies. While on the forest floor, the elusive musk deer, among other mammals, is a rare and precious inhabitant in this protected habitat.

Churdhar, commonly known as Churichandni (Bangle of Snow), stands as one of the highest peaks in the Shivalik Range within the subtropical Himalayas, holding immense historical and religious significance. Mentioned in various Hindu scriptures and entwined with mythological stories, the mountain is believed to be a resting place for Lord Hanuman during his quest for the Sanjeevani herb as described in the epic poem Ramayana. At its summit, it is believed that Lord Shiva, in the form of Choreshwar Mahadev (also known as Lord Shirgul), resides. A remarkable statue of Lord Shiva graces the summit, surrounded by prayer flags wrapped by believers and visitors. A temple



Fritillaria cirrhosa

dedicated to the main deity, located a few meters below the summit, serves as a sacred pilgrimage site for residents. The peak attracts trekkers seeking panoramic views, providing sights of the Badrinath and Kedarnath peaks to the northeast and the expansive Gangetic plains to the south on a clear day.

In our study, a comprehensive and in-depth survey of the Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary was conducted from June to October 2022. 230 sites were randomly selected along the elevation gradient for vegetation sampling. Details on traditional wisdom, including the local utilisation of plants, their vernacular names, parts used, methods of use and medicinal properties were also documented. A total of 387 species of plants from Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary, comprising 268 herbs, 53 shrubs, 37 trees, 16 climbers and 13 ferns were recorded.

In the surrounding villages of the Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary, the utilisation of traditional medicinal plants holds a significant role in the local culture and social life. Despite the availability of modern healthcare facilities, residents in the area continue to place their trust in traditional healers, considering their methods as safe. Traditional practitioners use various plant species as sources of medicine for providing common primary healthcare. During the field survey, an interesting revelation surfaced from both our field assistant and residents about the herb species *Primula gracilipes*, locally known as “Boj”, which they use to cure stomach and eye-related disorders. This plant, found naturally in damp and humid environments, caught our attention as it was recorded only once during our study. According to local insight, in the past, people cultivated this plant near water sources, such as *bawdis* (wells). The traditional practice involved uprooting an individual from the group and replanting it near other water sources. However, the shift to modern practices, including water storage in tanks, has led to a decline in this cultural tradition.

One of the most popular folklore, as told by locals, revolves around a shepherd and a healing plant. Once, there was a local shepherd who found a plant that could heal wounds. He had lots of sheep and goats, so he tested the efficacy of the plant by cutting their legs. Miraculously, the limbs healed effortlessly. Confident in the plant's power, he did something extreme - he cut off his own head. Sadly, the healing plant was forgotten in his bag, and he couldn't fix himself. This tale of audacious experimentation and an ironic twist has become a poignant chapter in local folklore, revealing the mysterious allure of the botanical secret he sought. What makes this narrative all the more intriguing is the cloak of secrecy that surrounds the identity of the miraculous plant. Locals, despite sharing the tale in hushed tones, are hesitant to reveal the specific details of this plant.

Within the Sanctuary, a notable disturbance emerges in the form of livestock grazing by migratory and local herders, posing a significant threat to the regeneration potential of vital forests and the future survival of key tree species such as *Taxus contorta*, *Acer caesium*, and *Prunus cornuta*. Adding to the challenge, the unauthorised collection of herbaceous plants by nomadic *gaddis* and local residents, driven by commercial interests, further endangers the floral richness of Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary is not merely a biological treasure but also possesses profound cultural and religious significance. The local inhabitants in proximity to the Sanctuary hold invaluable traditional wisdom, emphasising the importance of initiatives to conserve and leverage this knowledge. It is through thoughtful and sustainable management that we can aspire to strike a balance, ensuring the longevity of both the natural resources and the cultural heritage embedded in the area.



Alpine pastures on the Ascent to Churdhar Peak



Spruce-fir forest

A note from the Authors:

This study was conducted as part of the project titled ‘Basic Study Design for Biodiversity Assessment of Himachal Pradesh’, with Dr. Salvador Lyngdoh, Scientist E, as the Principal Investigator and Dr. B. S. Adhikari, Scientist G, as the Co-Principal Investigator. We would like to thank the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department for all of their assistance and support. Additionally, we extend our thanks to the local communities and field assistants for their invaluable contributions, ensuring the smooth execution of our fieldwork.

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Primula gracilipes