

Radical. Raw. Riveting.

A unique perspective on wildlife conservation at the Wildlife Institute of India

- Rajdatta Ranade

My selection in 'the 9th Course on Wildlife Conservation for Wildlife Enthusiasts' was quite dramatic. Both my wife and I had applied. She got shortlisted while I didn't. The course got oversubscribed. But just as I was getting over the disappointment, I got another email saying that some participants had cancelled and that I could get in. I confirmed instantly.

Entering WII:

As I entered the WII campus, I was greeted by a pleasant drop in temperature. The campus is a masterpiece, with unique architecture nestled inside a Sal-dominated mini forest with its own lake. While it's a birdwatcher's paradise, the overall wilderness and biodiversity inside is just amazing. Our batch of 17 individuals over the period of five days of our stay in the WII campus had frequent sightings of jackals, oriental pied hornbills and many raptors. Some of us even saw monitor lizards and the elusive porcupine.

The course:

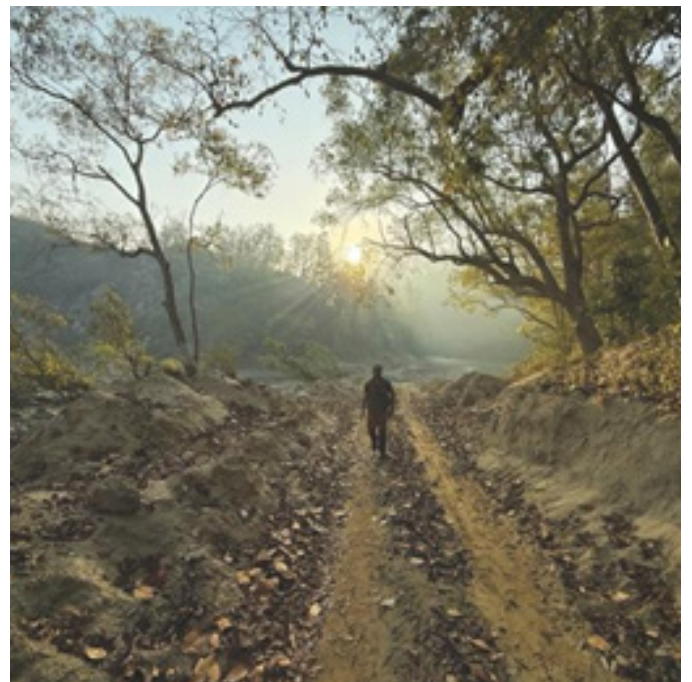
I would like to begin by saying that the course was very thoughtfully designed. The classroom sessions over 4 days were strung together in a way that each session built on the previous ones. On the other hand, the 6-day field experience unfolded for us with gradually increasing difficulty, like the levels of a video game.

The classroom sessions:

We're all familiar with superheroes who wear capes. But I was fortunate to meet a different species of superheroes - armed with binoculars, microscopes, and an unyielding passion for conservation. I got to learn from some of India's leading conservation scientists - pioneers doing path-breaking work in this field.



Abandoned Gujjar house



Scenic landscape of Lansdowne

Our classroom was the humble Porta cabin, but the wisdom within its four walls was extraordinary. The way every person spoke to us about their area of work was mesmerizing. Take for instance, our course Director, Dr R. Suresh Kumar - a fantastic storyteller. (In my mind, I affectionately call him Dr R. Suresh Attenborough!). His sessions on Amur Falcons and Tricarinata Turtles were truly captivating. Dr Lakshminarayanan's talk on mega herbivores was inspiring. Dr Bilal's perspectives on linear infrastructure and wildlife management were thought-provoking. Dr Nigam's enthusiasm while talking about wildlife in distress was infectious. Dr Gupta's session on forensics was eye-opening. Dr Sameeha's playful charm while talking about dugongs had its own appeal. I could go on and on about each faculty member. Despite back to back sessions packed with knowledge, I greedily kept wanting more.

In all, the classroom sessions broadened our perspectives on conservation and management practices in India. We were exposed to the conservation and research of large carnivores and mega-herbivores and also the research on rather less charismatic species such as the Amur Falcons, Dugongs, Golden Mahseer, etc. The classroom sessions were structured in such a way that, sitting in the foothills of the Himalayas, we travelled far and wide in the country, from research in the Trans-Himalayan landscape to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and from Northeast India to the arid grasslands of the western Indian region.

The field days:

Our first field session was a guided walk on the WII campus. Ms. Amarjeet and Dr. Amit Kumar led us through the lush surroundings, sharing their expertise on various lifeforms inhabiting the campus. They patiently chatted with us and answered all our questions along the way.

On the 3rd day, we were taken to Benog Wildlife Sanctuary. As we walked past 'Cloud's end', we got mesmerized by splendid views, complete with gentle streams and mini waterfalls. We soaked in the serenity of the sanctuary as we walked. By the end of it, I was happily tired and couldn't help but wonder if this trek was a fitness test in disguise.



Scenic landscape of Lansdowne

On the 6th day, we embarked on an early morning bus ride to Saneh Forest Rest House in Kotdwar. Accompanying us were Dr. Johnson and Dr. Amit Kumar. We were also joined by two people from the Gujjar community — Anu and Ammi, who were our guides, shielding and guiding the whole group from start to end. They knew the forest incredibly well.

The next 5 days in Lansdowne Forest Division were straight out of a dream, and I was in for a thrilling experience of a lifetime. From Saneh, we walked about 10 km to Kolhuchaur. 'Kolhu' is a river flowing through the hilly terrain of the Shivaliks. And 'chaur' means open meadows. We walked the scenic undulating Himalayan terrain to the crunchy sound of fallen dry leaves beneath our feet, sweet tunes of songbirds, shrill cries of raptors, and musically flowing river waters. We crossed the serpentine Kolhu multiple times along the way. The pristine landscape, fresh air, and the feeling of cool water at regular intervals on my feet washed away all tiredness that came out of walking in the harsh sun.

Along the way, Dr. Johnson and Dr. Amit spoke to us passionately about the flora and fauna of the forest. They opened our eyes to how every element in a good ecosystem is connected to and dependent on the other.

I was in awe of Dr. Johnson's understanding and interpretation of the forest. His energy and fitness were inspiring (he outpaced most of us!). Meanwhile, Dr. Amit's endless passion for plants deepened my appreciation for the green wonders of this world. It was fascinating to know about 'point endemic species' from him.

Just as we were reaching, we got stopped by an elephant in our tracks! We stepped back and patiently waited. With Anu and Ammi's guidance, we eventually reached our stay in Kolhuchaur. At night, Dr. Johnson and Dr. Amit chatted with us over a debriefing session sharing insights on the experiences of the day. As we finished dinner, we were treated to an orchestra of calls made by boobooks, lapwings and nightjars, under a clear star-packed sky. This was soon joined by sambar and deer calls, confirming the presence of a tiger nearby. The thrill of this moment, knowing we were in the midst of such raw wilderness, is something I will never forget.

The next day, we trekked about 10 km to reach Chokham. This place, bordering the Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve, gave me a true experience of staying in the wild. Drinking river water, little to no electricity and bare minimum comforts, I have never felt more united with nature. After another nocturnal orchestra, we left early morning to climb about 3 km to the mountain ridgeline.

We walked a narrow path created by elephants and used by other wildlife like tigers, bears, porcupines and more.

We were thrilled to discover that a tiger had walked our path, just hours before us. We found fresh wet scat, urine marking and pugmarks all along. Dr. Johnson showed us how to analyse these signs to get information like a tiger's diet, gender, age, etc. He showed us how this tiger had eaten a wild pig by looking at the grey hair and bone fragments inside the scat. (Fun fact: I discovered that tiger urine smells like Basmati rice!). Dr. Amit spoke to us about the various trees found in the landscape, and their correlations.

After a challenging trek, we reached the top of the ridge, one of the highest vantage points in the region, and were rewarded by a jaw-dropping view of Jim Corbett National Park. After a short break, we trekked down to Chokham and back to Kolhuchaur the same day. The next day was a leisurely day spent birdwatching and spotting wildlife. We spotted wild pigs, vultures, deer, sambar, peafowls and even a leopard! On the last field day, we walked back to Saneh. A surprise appearance by a young tusker doing a steep climb without Decathlon shoes was a revealing sight of an elephant's capabilities.

Finally, from Saneh, our bus brought us back to WII, just in time for our valedictory session. We were welcomed by Shri Virendra R Tiwari (Director) and Dr. Ruchi Badola (Dean) who heard about our experience and shared their valuable time and thoughts with us.



Campus Wildlife

A profound realisation:

In school, I studied subjects like History, Geography, Botany, and Zoology as separate disciplines. I wasn't even fond of History and Geography, to be honest. But during this WII course, I came to realise that these are not independent topics, but interconnected threads of a much larger tapestry! A single geological event - the collision of tectonic plates - gave rise to the Himalayas and shaped the landscape and biodiversity of what we call India. The British rule we read about in History further altered our landscapes. And plants and animals from Botany and Zoology inhabit them even today.

We often speak of feeling 'connected' with nature, but the truth is, we only use that word because we have disconnected ourselves from it - like logging out of a system we were always meant to be part of. It is important to understand that we are not just linked to nature; we are nature. No different from an elephant, a tiger, a Mallotus tree, or an Amur Falcon and the countless other forms that life flows through. This course has not only re-moulded my idea of conservation but has also ignited a deep desire to explore how I can actively contribute to it.

Author:

Rajdatta Ranade is a Creative Director with over 20 years of experience in mainline advertising. Academically trained in Applied Art and Graphic Design, he has worked on numerous brands like Amul, Tata Motors, Reliance Smart, etc. He is now the co-founder of Studio Twoo, an independent boutique studio specializing in branding, packaging, photography, and more. He was a participant in the 9th Course on Wildlife Conservation for Wildlife Enthusiasts held this year.

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Our stay at Chokham

