

Exploring the Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary: A Hidden Gem in the Himalayas

- Nidhi Singh & Saurav Chaudhary

Located in the Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh, Churdhar WLS lies at a distance of ~110 km from Shimla. It was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary under the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA 1972) in 1985 and currently spans an area of 55.52 km². The sanctuary was established to conserve the endangered Himalayan musk deer, also known as *kasturi*.

The musk deer, a ruminant species, is not an actual deer and is characterised by the absence of antlers. Males have significantly developed canines, while females have shorter ones. The Himalayan musk deer, the state animal of Uttarakhand, is found across the Indian Himalayan Region and prefers alpine scrub and subalpine forest habitats.

The sanctuary is divided into four forest divisions, namely Chauras, Chogtali, Nohra, and Pulwal. The region's vegetation is dominated by Himalayan Moist Temperate forests, primarily composed of oak forests mixed with coniferous trees such as spruce, silver fir, blue pine, and chir pine. Birch trees are found in a few patches in some parts of the sanctuary. Scrubs of rhododendrons and junipers are also present throughout the forest. Himalayan temperate pastures are scattered on the steep and exposed slopes, where herder communities graze their livestock. In addition, small patches of alpine meadows can be seen along the Crestline.

Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary is home to the "Churdhar temple," a temple devoted to Lord Shiva. Located near Chur peak at an altitude of approximately 3600 meters, the temple is known as the Shirgul Mahadev temple. As legend has it, a descendant of Lord Shiva, Lord Shirgul, established the temple at the peak. The region is mainly flooded with tourists and pilgrims between May and September, with an average of 400 people visiting the area daily, which subsequently increases during holidays.

In October 2021, our team arrived in Nohradhar, Himachal Pradesh, a small town on the outskirts of Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary. It was the perfect location to set up a basecamp as we aimed to explore the sanctuary, which was the focus of our biodiversity assessment research project.

Numerous studies have shown that camera traps are an effective tool for monitoring animals in tropical and temperate forests, where it is incredibly challenging to record mammals. Many of these animals are elusive and nocturnal, prefer dense vegetation, occur in low abundance, and avoid human presence. Camera traps are also the most convenient devices to study these mammals without disturbing their natural habitat. In winter 2021, we deployed the camera traps in the sanctuary. In our camera traps, we recorded various mammals, from top carnivores like the common leopard and Asiatic black bear to ungulates like barking deer and Himalayan goral.

On the trails that we walked, we found many signs of animals in the form of pugmarks and faecal material of leopards and bears, pellets of deer, and quills of porcupines. On multiple occasions, we even saw a red fox, Royle's pika, yellow-throated marten, red giant flying squirrel, masked palm civet, Himalayan langur, and rhesus macaque.

Our team was excited to spot a Himalayan musk deer in the sanctuary, as none of us had seen one in the wild before, only in captivity. Unfortunately, we didn't have a direct sighting of the species. During informal conversations with locals over meals, we learned that musk deer are present in the sanctuary. One shop owner mentioned that migratory herders often report *Kasturi* (musk deer) sightings near their herds.

The Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary is a treasure trove of biodiversity, boasting a stunning range of flora and fauna that make it a natural wonder. From the magnificent Himalayan oak forests to rare and endangered species like the musk deer, and a unique assemblage of various herpetofauna, this sanctuary is a testament to the incredible diversity of life found in India's wilderness.

The sanctuary provides a habitat for wildlife and serves as a source of livelihood for the local communities. Our responsibility is to protect and preserve this magnificent ecosystem for the present generation and the future.

Contact: nidhisinghmkp@gmail.com



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