



Following A River: Tale of Kolhu

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Mahseer yearlings were swimming in shallow calm pools of the river while our feet received the cool welcome of Kolhu waters, marking the beginning of our five-day trek along the riverine habitats of Lansdown Forest. We set out from Saneh Forest rest house with our faculties, Dr Suresh Kumar, Dr J A Johnson, Dr Navendu Page, and a few Gujjars, to Kolhu Chaur when the sun was almost above us. We crossed the river and started walking the moist deciduous forests along the banks of Kolhu. On the way, we observed tracks of Otters on fine sand leading to the river. Otters, semi-aquatic species, enjoy habitats with nice deep pools of water with the potential of big fish catch and fine sand banks as their grooming sites.

Further, we encountered a small congregation of Tiger beetles, a predatory beetle species. They are one of the favourite meals of Amur Falcons. Throughout the day, our task was to try identifying plants by observing the leaf arrangements, feeling their texture, and smelling and tasting them. It was easy for species like *Aegle marmalade* since they have a characteristic smell. Giant *Bauhinia* climbers were quite fascinating and were sighted throughout the journey. These are now known as *Phanera*, and this particular species whose nice big leaves we borrowed for eating our food out in the forest is *Phanera vahlii*. Agave plants which looked like giant *Aloe vera*, were seen with lots of tiny bulbils on the central stalk. These mini-Agaves are the vegetative propagules of the plant and are not to be confused with flowers or germinated seeds. A few meters before our first camp in Kolhu Chaur, we saw a great slaty woodpecker on top of a snag which was quite an exciting sight. Since the sun was almost going down, we could only note down their characteristic bald head and relatively bigger-sized body. By the time we reached the camp, we had crossed the river so many times as if we were walking the river and crossing the trek paths. Later at night, we all slept on the veranda in our sleeping bags. After an excellent fortifying breakfast, we set out before nine o'clock the following

day. Near Kolhu Chaur grassland, we spotted a group of River Lapwings. An interesting fact about river lapwing is that they have claws at the bent of their wings, somewhat similar to *Archeopteryx*. A golden jackal flashed out from nearby bushes, stared at us and then ran away. At the beginning of the journey, Dr Suresh told us about the chances of seeing collared falconet, whose westernmost limit is the Kolhuchor grassland. So naturally, we kept our eyes on the sky to spot the bird. Giving us an utter delight, suddenly it flew to the sky from a tree on the periphery of the grassland, caught an insect and again came back and sat on the branch. We also saw a baya weaver nest near a small swampy patch within the grassland. Baya weavers always prefer to nest near waterlogged areas.

On the way further, there were a few oxylem trees bearing its flat log pods, which gave it the name Indian Sword tree. The big red flowers of this tree will be open only at night and are specifically bat pollinated. *Catunaregam spinosa* is an attractive tree with a curious feature called thigmotropism which means the tree feels ticklish or is believed to be giving a shivering response when we softly touch it. One of my friends, who claimed to have the softest hand, volunteered to tickle the tree. We were curious to see the outcome, and when he did it, to our great surprise, the tips of the branches started shivering, which was unbelievable. On the way, when we got a nice cascade and pool of water, we threw ourselves into it. Enjoying the splashing water, we didn't want to get out of it. When we climbed on the banks to dry ourselves, we saw leaves without petioles lying on the floor. Those were the leaves of *Terminalia elliptica* (Crocodile bark tree) dropped by Langurs after feeding on its petioles. Usually, chitals eat these dropped leaves forming a feeding association between them.

In the streams, there were lots of huge rocks covered by slimy green algae called periphyton algae, with long, broad marks on them.

Dr Johnson explained to us that those were the feeding trails of Labeo which use their suckorial mouth to scrape out those algae. These rocks are essential for riverine species since they act as a hideout and feeding grounds. We could see *Syzygium* trees and *Acacia catechu* all along the waterlogged areas. We had to climb a bit to reach our next camp Chowkam. On the way, we saw *Colebrookia oppositifolia* plants whose leaves will be convenient when we live in the wild as their soft leaves can be used as toilet paper.

Dr Navendu was so excited to show us the snow orchid, *Diplomaris hirsuta*, a rare sight. It grows on rock, and the plants we saw bloomed with white flowers, which were even rarer. Reaching the Chowkam camp, we spotted nest sites of great slaty woodpeckers. These social hole nesters prefer to have individual nests that are closer to one another. We camped at Chowkam, and the next day, we went

to the fire line ridge between Lansdown Forest division and Sonanadi wildlife sanctuary. From there, we could see an elephant herd drinking water in the Ramganga reservoir at a distance. We also spotted a flying Red-headed vulture from there. They are also known as King vultures, as the other vulture species wait for their arrival when they spot a fresh carcass because only the red-headed vulture can tear open the carcass.

We stayed there one more day because of the heavy downpour, and the water level in the river was relatively high. We spent our day observing the visitors of profusely fruiting ficus trees and learning fish trapping methods in a nearby stream. The very next day, we trekked back to where we started and returned to campus with an arm full of valuable learning from nature brightening our spirit of enthusiasm and adventure.

