

THREE UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS AT THE INSTITUTE'S SAL PATCH

– K P AKILAN

At around five in the evening, I found myself walking through the Institute's 40-hectare rectangular-shaped Sal patch, adjoining the main campus. The forest here is dominated by Sal (*Shorea robusta*) trees of similar age class. A relatively thin strip of residential settlements separate it from the forests of Dehradun Forest Division. As I navigated the slopes and streams, I noticed a creature on an opposite slope. It stood behind a newly growing Sal plant, its brown tail with a white border resembling that of a deer. I waited for a minute before walking down the slope, jumping across the stream and climbing the slope.

I stood at the place where that deer stood looking at me earlier. I tried tracing behind the vanished deer. While I stood looking around, I heard a rustling down the slope. There emerged a jackal with its long furry tail. I had probably earlier mistook the jackal (*Canis aureus*) for a deer. The jackal continued walking through the stream under a canopy of shrubs, while another animal, this time surely a barking deer (*Muntiacus vaginalis*), climbed up the slope. As the deer sought cover, the jackal began to climb in a different direction, its golden coat shimmering in the filtered sunlight. On another morning, I was navigating towards a point for a bird count, my eyes shifting between the path and my phone. I was stopped by a thicket of bushes, as water trickled down the drying stream. A pair of jackals climbed out of the water straight towards me. Two metres away, I froze. They walked past me as if I was invisible, in what seemed to be their regular track.

I found a way past the bushes and walked away. During another evening bird count, I heard rustles and splashes in the stream behind me. Turning around, I saw a jackal emerge from behind a shrub. Startled by my presence, it quickly retreated and began to climb the slopes with its partner. It momentarily paused to take a look at me, before vanishing into the bushes. However, its partner stood there and directly gazed at me. I looked back at it. It took a closer look at me, in turn, and eventually decided to leave the scene. A minute later, I heard splashes once again, only this time the splashes approached faster. Another jackal was approaching, probably trying to catch up with the other two. I saw it before it saw me, as it was truly stunned seeing me stand there. It was quick to turn up to a slope. Once at a distance, it glanced at me and ran away. As I stood in silence, dead Sal leaves slowly drizzled down occupying the autumn forest floor.

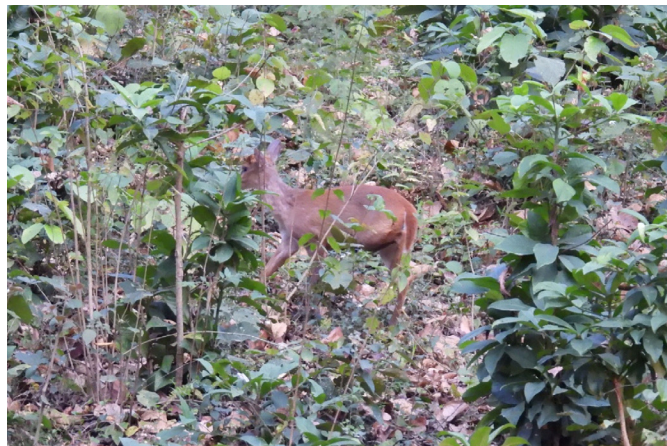
These three encounters all share a common thread – they were

unexpected for both me and the animals involved. Each time, I walked away from the scene having, even if momentarily, disrupted their everyday life. Whether these encounters were significant or insignificant to them, I am glad to have been a part of them, and to have walked away with a few natural history lessons.

About the Author

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Barking deer (*Muntiacus vaginalis*) are common in the Institute's Sal patch and seem to thrive in areas with a dense understorey of shrubs and saplings



Golden jackal (*Canis aureus*) are one of the most adaptable canids in the world and are equally at ease in their natural habitat and at the periphery of human-use areas