

Pheasant Trekking in Nepal

by LoRayne Haye
San Diego Zoo, California

Sherpa: "You *did* bring a salt shaker didn't you?"

LoRayne: "Well . . . ah . . . no. Why?"

Sherpa: "It's the only thing that will make the leeches drop off of you."

*Excerpts from a pheasant trek,
5,000 ft. Siang Kobang Valley,
Himalayas, Nepal*

Looking out over the valley it finally hit me just how really far away from home I was; far away from cars, phones, jets, and T.V. sets.

Hearing the ominous cry of a crested serpent eagle (*Spilornis cheela*), I shifted back into what was to be my reality for the next ten days. I was part of a team of interested people, biologists and others, who all shared a

common bond — the deep love and appreciation for pheasants.

The team was comprised of myself and Suzanna Currie from America; Hanna Guldenberg, Joseph Bernert, and Chris Reichenbach from Germany; Jill and Simon Warwick, Dr. Nick Picozzi (our team leader), John Brown and Sheila and Richard Howard, all from England.

The pheasant trek was organized by the World Pheasant Association (W.P.A.) which is based in England. The W.P.A. is a non-profit trust set up for breeding, research and conservation of endangered pheasants and game birds. It was through their annual journal that I learned of the 1985 W.P.A. pheasant trek to Pipar (pee-par) Preserve. Pipar Mountain (el. 10,900 ft.) lies near the Annapurna mountain range in the Himalayas, and is close to the base camp of Machupachure (Fishtail) Mountain (el. 23,000 ft.).

There are four species of pheasant that range throughout the Pipar Preserve on the east face of Pipar Mountain at elevations between 9,000 to 11,000 feet. They are the Himalayan monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*), blood pheasant (*Ithaginis cruetus*), koklass pheasant (*Pucrasia macrolpha*), and the satyr tragopan (*Tragopan satyra*).

For five mornings in a row we drug ourselves out of our sleeping bags at 4 a.m. for the half hour hike to our four census points, becoming completely numbed by the cold.

We used the same census points that had been established by Tony Lelliot in the 1981 Pipar pheasant count. Armed with flashlights, A4 graph paper, pencils, a compass and wrist watches, we trudged over, under and through the incredibly inhospitable terrain to our census points. Once there, we



Pipar Preserve (10,000 foot elevation) lies near the Annapurna Mountain range in central Nepal.

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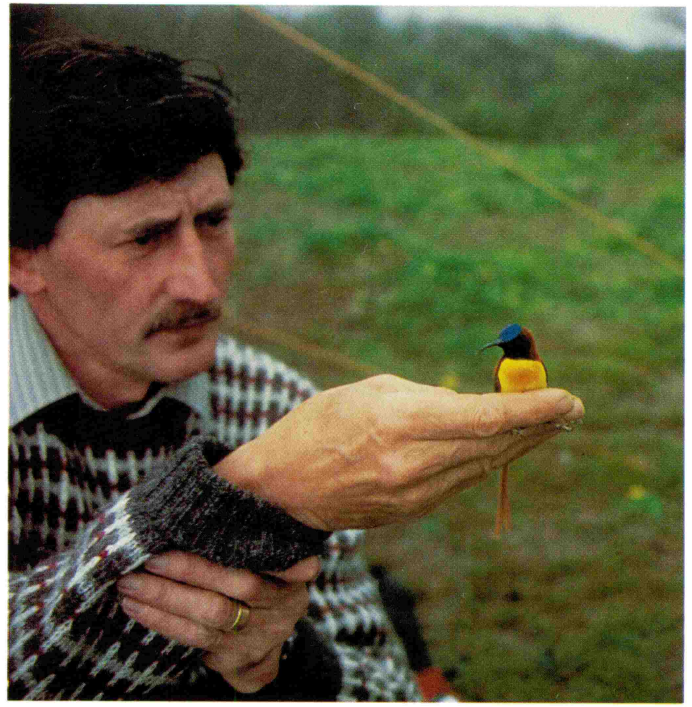


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Camp site at Pipar, Pipar Holy Lake in foreground, Machupachure Mountain in background.



Dr. Nick Picozzi holds a male firetail sunbird captured in a mist net at Pipar Preserve.

waited until exactly 4:30 a.m. to begin recording the courtship vocalizations of the pheasants.

The early hour was necessary because the pheasants don't run on the same clocks as we do, and the only part of the day (if you could call 4 a.m. day) they call is between 4:30 to 5:30 a.m. The only time of the year they call is roughly the beginning to the middle of May, which happens to be pre-monsoon season. From mid-morning



Impeyan (Himalayan monal) pheasant in captivity at the San Diego Zoo.



Koklass pheasant in captivity.



Back view of male firetail sunbird.

on it pours heavily until late afternoon. The terrain, being steep and roughly covered with dense brush and foliage, makes a visual census impossible.

We worked in pairs of two, which made it easier and more accurate in recording the vocalizations. From one point you could hear more than one species calling at any given moment. Suzanna, who was my teammate, would record tragopan calls and I would record the monals.

Continued on page 54



Pair of beautiful satyr tragopan pheasants.

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Everyone was briefed ahead of time as to what the vocalizations sounded like. Richard Howard from the W.P.A. had recorded courtship vocalizations for us prior to the trek, so there was no question as to what species of pheasant belonged to which call.

A cross on a sheet of A4 paper was oriented using a compass so that one ordinate pointed due north. A line was drawn from the center of the cross in the direction of each separate call, and the time of every call was noted. Distance from our position was also estimated.

As birds could be heard from more than one census point, a total was calculated by plotting the direction and times of the calls from each point.

The counts varied slightly from day to day. The maximum number of calls heard on any one morning was 13 koklass on May 12th, and 17 tragopans on May 16th. Based on the previous pheasant counts (Yonzon 1979, Lelliot 1981, Roberts 1983) our 1985 count indicates that the population of tragopans, koklass and monals appears to be stable.

As inhibiting as the weather was, we were still able to carry on various other activities. We explored the mountainsides, photographing the various rhododendrons in bloom and there was always time for bird watching.

Dr. Nick Picozzi set up a mist net for passerines which proved to be quite successful. Ten species were trapped and wing lengths and weights were taken. One of the most spectacular species trapped was a male firetailed sunbird (*Aethopyga ignicauda*) and his mate. This really made everyone's morning, as the pheasants proved so elusive we actually saw only one species, the monal.

We observed monals on two separate occasions, and each time they were so far away we needed the aid of a spotting scope. Unfortunately, no photographs were possible. However, the exhilaration and awe I felt witnessing this beautiful pair of pheasants strutting along the mountainside somehow reassured me that Pipar Preserve will have at least a chance at staying forever unspoiled.

REFERENCES

- Fleming, R.L., first edition, 1976. Birds of Nepal, Published by Nature Himalayas
Picozzi, N. 1985. W.P.A. Trek to Pipar, Central Nepal, May 1985, unpublished.
Lelliot, A.D. 1981. Studies of Himalayan Pheasants in Nepal with Reference to Their Conservation, unpublished, M.Sc. thesis, Durham. ●

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