

5. TIBETAN GAZELLE *PROCAPRA PICTICAUDATA* IN SIKKIM, INDIA

Sikkim, India's smallest state, lies between 27°5' to 28°9' N lat. and 87° 59' to 88° 56' long. covering an area of c. 7000 sq. km. It is wedged in between the Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east, and bounded by Tibet in the north and the Indian state of West Bengal in the south.

The Tibetan gazelle is found in Sikkim only in the trans-Himalayan north at c. 5000 m altitude. It is a trans-border migrant coming from across the international border between India and Tibet (China), and roaming the Chho Lhamo plateau. This high altitude cold desert holds several lakes, forming the source of the river Tista which is the main river in Sikkim. It is also the most important grazing area for most of Sikkim's yaks, sheep and goats.

Surveys over the last five years usually in the peak season of July-August showed that the animal is not common like the resident breeding Himalayan marmot *Marmota bobak* or the woolly hare *Lepus oiostolus*. Along with the southern *Kiang* or Tibetan wild ass *Equus kiang polyodon*, it inhabits this high altitude grassland region and can be sighted in groups of 10-15 animals even during winter but may not be sighted regularly each year.

During an intensive survey of the area in July-August 1995, gazelles were seen for the first time in six years at relatively closer distances than before in various places. On 28th July, 1995, we sighted nine gazelles at Chho Lhamo (5099 m) near a group of four adult and two young *kiang* but they were very shy and fled even from a distance of c. 500m. 10 were then sighted at Chhulung La (5447 m) in the valley where it is possible to get very close to *nayan* or the great Tibetan sheep *Ovis ammon hodgsoni*. A skin with horns was also recovered from this place. It was later handed over to the Forest Department. We saw two at Bamcho La the same same day, but they were the last of the herd which had gone across the border on hearing the sound of our jeep. 11 gazelles were then seen at Kongra La (5133 m). In one day we saw 33 gazelles on the Chho Lhamo plateau. In all areas the animals

were extremely shy and wary.

Local *dokpas* or the nomadic Tibetan graziers call the gazelle *raakon* and are familiar with the animal. Reporting on wild and domestic livestock movements, they said that in winter the yaks are taken to Olo (5568 m) near Khungyami La on the northeastern border of Sikkim for two months; but the sheep stay at Keraang, Chho Lhamo for almost three months grazing the grass growing due to the blowing away of snow by the wind. All *kiang* go across the border into Tibet but upto 200 *nayan* and 20 Tibetan gazelles live with the yak herd during this lean period. A herd of yak includes upto 3000 females and 400 males. During this period they are also preyed upon by the Tibetan wolf *Canis lupus chanco*. It was estimated from discussions that around 100 Tibetan gazelles occur precariously in this region.

The entire area, being on the international border, is heavily patrolled by the Indian Army posted in the region. It is a rich storehouse of grasses, sedges and innumerable medicinal plants. Availability of water on the Sikkim side only has made it the last stronghold of several rare and endangered species of mammals other than the Tibetan gazelle protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (as amended upto 1991). These are mainly the southern *kiang*, *nayan*, snow leopard, lynx and Tibetan wolf. The wetlands and grasslands in the region also serve many species of migratory water fowl and are home to various breeding birds. It is vital to declare a transborder protected area in this threatened habitat at the earliest.

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