



THE ALPINE GARDEN SOCIETY CENTRAL SUSSEX GROUP



NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2009

Mr. DAVID LANG NORTH EAST SIKKIM – IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HOOKER



In an introduction to Sikkim, David told us that until fairly recently the country was an independent kingdom, but following a a period of political crises and probably the fear of Chinese military designs in the Himalaya, India annexed the country to become its 22nd state. The original people are the Lepchas (now asround 18% of the population) who are thought to have emigrated from Assam and Burma around the 13th century, the Tibetans arrived later and finally the Nepalese, encouraged by the British in the 19th century who now constitute 75% of the population. At an altitude from 280 metres (920 feet) to 8,585 metres (28,000feet) Sikkim is ringed by mountains between Nepal to the west, Bhutan to the east, and Tibet to the north and east. Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest peak lies in Sikkim, straddling its north-western border with Nepal and eight mountain passes (not open to the traveller) connect the state to Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim is

only open by road to the south and getting there by bus or taxi from Siliguri or Darjeeling is to be preferred to helicopter which may leave you stranded by the weather – it can be very wet, up to 400” rainfall annually. The monsoon winds strike Sikkim between late May and early June, and there is incessant rain all across the state till late September. Of the country's two major rivers, the turbulent Teesta, which has its source at the Chho Lhamu lake in the Tibetan Plateau, gradually swells into a raging river as more tributaries converge into its path as it snakes through deep mountain valleys into the plains of Bengal.

The flora of Sikkim includes figs, laurel, bananas, sal trees and bamboo in the lower altitudes which enjoy a sub-tropical type climate; in the temperate elevations above 1,500 metres, oaks, chestnuts, maples, birches, alder and magnolias grow in large numbers; and alpine vegetation includes juniper,

pine, firs, cypresses and rhododendrons, and is typically found above 3,500 metres. The country boasts around 5,000 flowering plants, 500 orchid species, 48 primulas, 36 rhododendrons, 16 conifers, 370 ferns and fern allies and over 424 medicinal plants. There is paddy in the south and hill rice in the north.

For David's route, follow the (green) lines north from Gangtok (for online viewers, the map will zoom to make place names more easily read.) Gangtok the capital, has very strict building rules; nothing above 3 storeys because of ground instability and potential earthquakes. It is not easy to gain access to some parts with every obstacle placed in the way of getting the necessary permits, on one occasion David waiting 10 days, although this did provide an opportunity to look around Gangtok. Vegetables are superb, but unfortunately the fascinating Lal Bazaar (where once the request for three dozen carrots, became because of incorrect stress three dozen turds!) has been replaced by an ugly 2 storey indoor car park-like building. Yak curd cheese with a fat content of 14-16% butter fat was not recommended. There is no proper museum and artefacts are deteriorating. Outside the town Tsango Lake a "tourist attraction" is dreary, but up river Bitu with two policemen armed with Tibetan 1904 muzzle loading guns was worth visit. In this lower hilly area, the orchids *Oberonia nyaroyetea*, the first recording in Sikkim of tiny white and green flowered *Bhutanathera* (*Habenaria*) *albo-marginata* and a gesneriad *Aeschynanthus sikkimensis* an aroid, pale yellow *Gonatantha pumila*, *Chusa* (*Ponerorchis*) *pauciflora* (297/277), rose and purple flowered *Iris clarkei* (297/275) and white *Primula reticulata*. Some way north the river divides, the right hand branch the Lachung River. was first taken, in part for the Forestry's Department's Yumthang-Shingba Rhododendron Wildlife Sanctuary, home to the endemic *Rhododendron niveum*, a small tree with young shoots clothed with dense white felty indumentum, as well as *Abies densa*, *Picea*, *Juniperus*, *Acer* and a huge ground flora. *Hoya acucimata* grew by the side of the road and the view of white lilies 30ft up a cliff was an enticement to climb, but rewarded by a broken arm which was strapped up, the only subsequent major problem being zipping up a sleeping bag with one hand. At one point the side of a mountain had slipped covering a 200m stretch of



Pholidota (Coelogyne) recurva

road over which a waterfall fell and an alternative route sought. There has been much logging resulting in accelerated erosion. Before reaching Phuma Lodge, *Pholidota (Coelogyne) recurva*. Meadows adjacent to the river were grazed by yak and on shingle beds the black and white Ibisbill *Ibisodorhyncha struthersii*, almost impossible to photograph. Beyond in a side valle, among 3ft. Rhododendron scrub, *Pedicularis siphonantha* (297/258), and tiny yellow flowered *Hermium josephi*. In woodland very large flowered *Listera pinetorum* growing on mossy tree stumps. A broken bridge at Lachung Chu was the site a few years ago of a 20ft. high torrent carrying trees, released when a moraine holding a big lake was breached. Fortunately a new suspension bridge has been built. Hereabouts, purple flowered *Aorchis spathulata* (297/281), *Pleione hookeriana* (255/104), tiny Lady orchid-like *Chusua puberula* (297/277), *Roscoea alpina* and *R. purpurea* (297/254), *Clematis montanum*, *Rhododendron lepidotum*, *Magnolia globosa* not hitherto recorded here, *Cardiocrinum giganteum* which flourishes at Wakehurst and a new species *Arisaema epinatum* - 14 new species were found over a three week period! It is perplexing that the Director of Botany has not visited northern Sikkim and no recent field has been carried out.

Back to the left hand branch continuing to Lechen a single “high street” place where porters and camping gear were collected for the crossing of high passes before descent to Yumthang Lechen, It is always raining and tatty, although above there is as new gumpa. Growing around, *Anthogonium gracile* and the orchid *Spathoglottis ixiioides* (256/182, 183). Here a large rock, accurately portrayed by Hooker as seen in a modern photograph. *Meconopsis paninculata* (256/184, 297/254) is flourishing and there is *Arisaema jacquemontii* (217/270, 295/56) with slender green and white striped flowers with brown edges and upward pointing tails and *Pedicularis longiflora* in running water. Around Tropha *Habenaria diphylla*, *Hermium*, the endangered medicinal plant *Melaxis muscifera* and a pinkish-purple *Aster*. In a field a large sread of *Primula sikkimensis* (297/275, 309/314) just as seen by Hooker. Intelligence officers posing as forestry assistants accompanied the plant hunters and a delight was taken in leading them to the muddiest spots. Behind the Thanggu gumpa with its hospitable lama, deep violet-flowered *Primula glomerata (crispa)* (217/245). Time now to backpack as the going would be too steep for yaks. At 13500 ft the valley



Spathoglottis ixiioides

was left in mixed weather. Above Thanggu *Onosma hookeri*, *Cyanathus pedunculatus* (217/292), white *Lilium nanum* (217/262 267,300/323), *Meconopsis simplicifolia* a blue poppy with a basal rosette of undivided leaves and solitary flowers, blue *Corydalis cristata* and icy-blue *Meconopsis horridula*. (217/289) In the Upper Lachung Chu there are wonderful meanders and oxbow lakes far surpassing those of the Cuckmere, the meadows with *Primula tibetica* 237/250), *P. primulina* (217/246, 297/287, 309/332) above minute rosette of leaves and very bristly *Saxifraga cordigera*. with huge floppy yellow-flowered species with orange spots at the base of the petals. Phalong is a summer yak camp (the animals are never found below 9000ft and on up to 15000ft) where two festivals are held each year with prizes for the most decorated yak, races like a badly run point to point and blessings. The herders are very kind to their animals and give them names; those with white tails are the most desired. No charge was later made for repairing David's broken watch as the horologist had never before heard the excuse that it resulted from riding a yak! Further on at around 17000ft white *Codonopsis foetens* (with an ox-droppings smell), the odd-looking, densely felted labiate *Eriophyton wallichii* (265/327, 292/190, 294/421, 422, 300/144) and the cup-shaped lowers of a dark pink *Arenaria melandrioides*. Crossing a turbulent river in full spate, Cheshung Lake was passed in the Lasha Chu and here the hairy foliage of *Seroseris pumila*. Then up and over a 17650ft (5350m) pass west of Sebu La where there was a line of majestic *Rheum nobile* (217/203, 204, 261, 297/266, 293, 308/cover, 134, 309/328) nearly 6ft high. . The story of Gurkas shooting volley after volley shredding these rhubarbs thinking they had been ambushed by Tibetans is not retold by them! Less forbidding was tiny *Primula sapphirina* (217/222, 251, 297/288) and the strange looking *Saxifraga melanocentra* (309/cover) whose white flowers appear to have almost black centres, *Saussurea gossipiphora* (217/256, 297/290, 309/back cover) the size of rugby footballs, their tops a tea cosy which opens to show their tiny white daisies inside, but not all that common and *Rheum* on rocks. Over the snow covered Sebu La Pass and on the descent, the very dwarf tufted to cushion-forming *Primula concinna* and *P. tenuiloba* (295/50) with views of 20,7550ft (6919m) Kangchenjau to the south. The Sebu la camp site was desolate but the dawn view made up for it. Among other plants, large dense and firm mats of *Arenaria bryophylla*, some probably over 100 years old, small mat-forming *Dipensia himlaica* and *Rhododendron nivale* (217/275). Past the difficult Chombu icefalls and an earlier route now vanished below cliff falls forming a lake and on southwards towards Yunney Samdong passing purple-blue flowered *Primula capitata* (217/248), *Cremanthodium nepalense* (238/371) its nodding yellow flowers snot yet over, the mauve form of *Lilium nanum*, better forms of *Meconopsis horridula* (217/262, 289, 297/318, 309/337, 311/cover) and *Silene nigresens* (217/205, 261, 289) with inflated striped calyces. In the village the porters were

paid off as they preferred the same route to return home. There are hot sulphur springs which can be enjoyed in the snow until the moment on emerging. Care is needed not to get too close to yaks, especially if with their young as they don't like strangers and have very sharp horns. The route continues south over the lake bed at Tembawa Chu and past the deep trench where the terminal moraine had been breached. Snow leopards had been around as their paw prints were discovered around the tents in the morning., then back to Yumthang and Gangtok with views back towards 16550ft (5518m) Donkta La and of the Green Dolma, the Goddess who looks after all those who love animals.

This was David's 14th visit to the the Himalaya and he will be visiting Sikkim again for the 6th time in May with a special exploration of an unusual limestone area near Yunne Samdong. Fascinating commentary and much to admire in his adventures, especially choosing to go in monsoon weather!

A few articles in the Bulletin, but not in the area of David's talk – Bulletin 217 (Seed collecting expedition 1983) and 297/262. Just in case you were thinking of going yourself (!), Stamfords have a Sikkim Himalaya 1:150,000 map from the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research for £23.95. It is a monochrome presentation providing, far more detail than on other, more colourful maps. The cartography is in black and white with brown relief shading, contours at 100m intervals, spot heights for peaks and passes, names of peaks and glaciers, and graphics to show various types of terrain and vegetation: rock, moraine, scree, forests, scrub, lakes and waterfalls. There is at least one agency which does David's route with an extension to the Chopta Valley, but most are shorter ones either to the Chopta Valley which diverges north west from Thungu or to Yumesamdong

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FUTURE OF THE CENTRAL SUSSEX GROUP

Keith's death has many implications for the group from his ability to organise our meetings to being the major contributor to our raffles. All this was considered by the Committee on 4th March and after Roy Metcalfe said that he was willing to become Secretary and Carol Hart as Programme Secretary, it was agreed that we would be able to continue functioning, subject to all members continuing to give their support and involvement. In any event the our last two meetings will go ahead as planned. David Brown our Chairman for the next meeting will then comment further.

Message from Carol - Check out Southern FM's home page under events and look up March 21st and we are there. Also on the Bright FM home page, click on 'On air' and find the 'Events Guide', and we are there too. They might even mention it on the radio nearer the time. I couldn't see us in the Mid Sussex Times listings this week, so hopefully we will get in it in this coming Thursday's edition, I did get a confirmation of our entry from them on Friday the 6th.

MEETING 21st APRIL

BOB CHARMAN on SPRING TIME IN IRAN

Arising from a double booking, Hans Kaupert will be unable to give his demonstration, so we are delighted that Bob has stepped in with a talk on Iran's spring flowers aided by one of his splendid displays of digital photography.

Please be there and bring all your friends for whom no charge will be made!

