

The Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* is a very shy and colorful bird belonging to the family *Phasianidae*. It is the state bird of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, India.



MEET THE MONAL **HIMALAYAN BEAUTY**

A RARE ENCOUNTER WITH
**THE INCREDIBLY COLORFUL
MOUNTAIN PHEASANT**
OF INDIA'S REMOTE PEAKS
OF UTTARAKHAND

A male Monal scurries
across a mountain path
under an evening snow flurry.

This species is extremely
wary, and the unmistakable
metallic shine of its feathers is
very difficult to reproduce
properly in photographs.



TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY AMIT RANE

The Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* - also known as the impeyan Monal, impeyan pheasant and danphe - is a bird in the pheasant family, *Phasianidae*. It is the state bird of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, India, where it is known as Monal. The Monal is a high altitude bird, found at 2400- 4500 meters. In winter months it moves down up to 2000 meters, and can survive in the snow. Male Monals are extremely vibrantly colored, much resembling the peacock, whereas females are dull and come in alternating shades of brown and black. The Monal is one of the most colorful and strikingly beautiful birds, it had been on my wish list for years. Despite having been in bird photography for the last 7-8 years, Monal remained un-captured. In pursuit of this bird, I planned a trip to the Himalayan state of India,

Uttarakhand, where Monal is spotted often. I planned a trip to Chopta, which falls within the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary. The monstrous mountains and the stories of the lurking wildlife by the locals made an interesting background as I was acclimatizing myself to the high altitude reaches of the area. The Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary is spread in the Kumaon region of Uttarkhand and it is better known for the Chopta and Tungnath temple trek - Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary is a word too alien to a layman. Chopta, the Switzerland of India, offers the same salubrious climate, sweeping green pastures, rising mountains dotted by pines and rhododendrons all dressed over a backdrop of snow clad mountains. The nearest airport to Chopta is Dehradun, which lies at 243 Kms. The nearest Rail heads are Haridwar - 223 kms - and Dehradun

- 243 Kms. Besides Monal, the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary is also home to Himalayan Thars and leopards, but it is however best known for Musk Deers. Musk Deers are found in numbers there, and the forest hosts a breeding center for the species. The Sanctuary is cordoned off for almost half a year, as it lies under a thick snow blanket and the conditions are extremely hostile. The temperatures drop below 5 degrees even in the midst of summers. I landed in Kedarnath Sanctuary after an arduous 9 hour journey from Dehradun. The winding, hilly roads take a toll on you, yet the breathtaking beauty of this place keeps you going. I camped in a modest hotel 2 kms. from the Chopta settlement. My hotel was the only patch of settlement in the radius of 2kms. Right in the heart of the forest, wild creatures moved along in close vicinity and the thrill was

building. Fresh incidents of a leopard on the prowl in the hill next to the hotel kept us on our toes. I had 6 days at hand to shoot the vibrant bird. My very first day at Kedarnath Sanctuary got me a glimpse of Monal. I did not lift my camera as I wanted to admire the much sought bird thoroughly, and it much met my expectations. Monal remained out of reach. Being a hilly region, you have less scope to move around. The hills were in fact vertical cliffs at 90 degrees dropping into the valley. The drop dead cliffs were amazing to watch, but instantly gave an idea what height I was covering. Monals would appear suddenly and then run down the valley the very next instant. They are more active towards early morning and late evening. The initial days went in just tracing their whereabouts and patterns of moving and eating. I was but keen to freeze them on my camera, yet I had to wait for my turn. Nevertheless, the forest did not disappoint me in this span; I was awarded with good sighting of a pair of red fox and a herd of Himalayan Thar dangling along the rocks at higher altitude than me. What came as a side victory to me was spotting a herd of Musk Deers in the wild. On the day before my stay was to end, I had an ultimate rendezvous with Monal. The bird kept pecking on the forest grounds, and as I went clicking my frames another dominant male came in the frame and the tug between them left the dominant one around. He stayed along the near reaches of the forest valley and hence I could photograph him to my content. Monals are easily spotted at Kedarnath yet difficult to shoot because of the habitat and their extreme shy nature. I was so appealed by Monal that I earnestly wait for my next opportunity to see this vibrant bird in the wild. ●



■ The Monal is a relatively large-sized pheasant about 70 centimeters long. The male weighs up to 2380 grams and the female 2150. Adult males have multicoloured plumage throughout, while females, as in other pheasants, is rather dull. Notable features in the male include a long, metallic green crest, coppery feathers on the back and neck, and a prominent white rump that is most visible when the bird is in flight.

■ The beautiful, rugged landscape of the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary, in the Indian mountain state of Uttarakhand. Visitor facilities here are few and far between.





A male Monal surprised at twilight by an old road marker. The species's natural range extends from eastern Afghanistan through the Himalayas in Pakistan, Kashmir region and the Republic of India (states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh), Nepal, southern Tibet, and Bhutan. There is also a report of its occurrence in Burma.

The Monal occupies upper temperate oak-conifer forests interspersed with open grassy slopes, cliffs and alpine meadows between 2400 and 4500 meters, where it is most common between 2700 and 3700 meters. It may descend to 2000 meters in the winter. It tolerates snow and will dig through it to obtain plant roots and invertebrate prey.