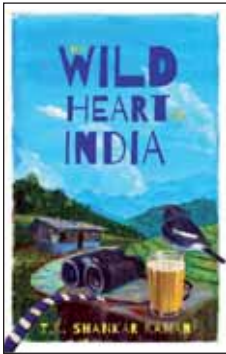


BOOK REVIEWS

By Divya Kilikar



THE WILD HEART OF INDIA

By T.R. Shankar Raman
Published by Oxford
Hardcover, 476 pages,
Price: Rs. 795

On a visit to his family home in Adyar, Shankar Raman stumbled upon a dreamy piece of writing from his teenage years, in which he confidently prophesied his future as an ornithologist in the Anamalai forests. Dumbfounded as this was exactly where his career took him, inspiration

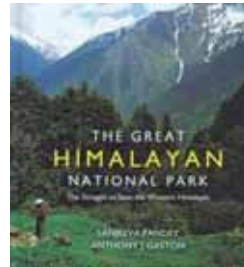
struck Raman, who began to pen *The Wild Heart of India*.

The book is an exquisite collection of essays describing the author's work, epiphanies, observations and instances of sheer joy derived from nature. The first part explores his days in the field through stories that effortlessly educate the reader while keeping them engaged. We follow the author as he delves into the misunderstood issue that is *jhum*, a slash-and-burn agricultural practice in the northeast; as he assesses the curious relationship between civets and giant squirrels... and more.

Next, Raman digs deeper into the wider world of wildlife conservation. He throws light on the decline of the blackbuck in Guindy National Park, Chennai. An essay on a particular garbage dump in Guwahati that, in a morosely ironic twist, provides a scattered group of inhabitants a desperate resource – humans, cattle, dogs and Greater Adjutants – is particularly striking. He addresses the massacres that take place on our network of roads and highways, the unending debate of economic growth versus environmental protection, the dark period (October 2015) when India's Environment Ministry eased up on forest regulations and the mission to protect the *Wildlife Protection Act*.

The chapter perhaps most relatable to the wider audience, aptly titled 'Reflections' describes the emotional rollercoaster ride of working as a wildlife scientist, and the quest to understand our place in nature. Raman acutely describes the often faltering line between the importance of being intrusive in field biology and the ethical need to leave the wild just that; wild and untouched. He talks of the prickling sensation when a creature has slipped past him, unseen by the overcasual human eye and the thrills of stumbling upon a sloth bear, or an elephant. One cannot help but enjoy the contagious enthusiasm – and just as smoothly, the vulnerability – in his storytelling.

The book ends on a thought-provoking note; on the philosophy behind conservation – the quality of sentience that we must tap further into, for conservation to succeed and more importantly, the realisation that conservation is not merely the job of the conservationist, but rather of every citizen as a collective. "It needs, as is often said, to rebuild burnt bridges across the arts, humanities and the sciences. It needs to bring back into serious discourse our motivations, emotions, passions, sensitivity, and humanism." 🐾



THE GREAT HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK

By Sanjeeva Pandey and Anthony J. Gaston
Published by Niyogi Books
Hardcover, 364 pages
Price: Rs. 1,500

If you instinctively associate the Himalayan mountains with thoughts

of unbearable cold, vast lifeless ice-fields, piercing winds and steep, unscalable peaks, and if you're unaware of the tremendous dedication and toil that go into not just the birth, but also the life-long nurturing of a national park, you need to read this book.

Sanjeeva and Anthony, who made it their purpose to protect the Himalaya, have efficiently mapped a detailed history of their decades of work in creating the Great Himalayan National Park. As you turn the pages, their mission starts to feel like yours.

Anthony took on the task of preserving the Himalaya at a time when the hands of tourism began to pollute the peaks. The following pages elaborate on the ecology and culture of the region, mapping the meandering paths of various rivers, their catchments and the communities they support, and the slopes, valleys, and the spread of flora and fauna across these rugged landscapes.

The following chapter is the most unadulterated trekking 'guide' one can ask for. The urge to escape the monotony of modern urban life and venture into the vagaries of the wild, its terrors and freedoms alike, is articulated well by the authors. They believe trekking to be a snippet of the treacherous lives of our ancestors, and it is with this approach that the book explores the various Himalayan landscapes one must smell, see, hear and feel on foot.

The park was notified in 1984 after intensive wildlife surveys that spanned years. Most other Indian Protected Areas were notified prior to Independence by the British who prioritised hunting and forestry. It is one of the first PAs in the Himalaya to benefit from enormous research inputs. Aware that local patriarchal communities tend to deny women benefits and rights, the park works with women, providing them with incomes. The book also dives into the cultural intricacies of the locality, from religion to traditional livelihoods and perhaps the most important (to the subject at hand), the settlement of their rights. Also included is a delightful, comprehensive guide to birds and mammals of the region.

The final pages ruminate on the future of the region's biodiversity, and lessons learned over the years about the tough, but rewarding task of managing a park. What stood out most for me was the importance of observing interactions between the Forest Department and local organisations and the need for them to build a smooth rapport and work together.

Peppered with breathtaking images, the book is for wildlife enthusiasts, and admirers of the Himalaya looking to dig deeper. Packed to the brim with information, the book pulls the reader into the living montane landscape and its shy, seldom-noticed wildlife. 🐾