

### 3.2.1 Day ten – Warthang to Minchugang

Had a nice breakfast with our new found companion “Socks” the dog. We got served chips for the first time since our trip, which was a treat!

I left camp with Tim around 8:30 in the hope to have more time to look around for different plants as we were getting into “true” alpine plant territory.

In the valley that we were in (See Plate 71), the flora consisted nearly all of *Caltha* spp's and *Diapensia himalayca* (See Plate 72).



**Plate 71. View of Warthang. A very marshy area but good for bringing up young yak calves apparently!**



**Plate 72. *Diapensia himalaica* growing out of rock sides. A very dense ground cover indeed!**

Going up we saw some amazing new *Meconopsis horridula* (See Plate 73). It was very lovely but it had some very nasty needles on its flower stalk which after a slight touch I decided not to take my hand to it again!



**Plate 73. *Meconopsis horridula* in full bloom. I was glad to see many of these and their amazing ability to hybridize and create such lovely colours.**

On the walk up I also noticed the geology of the surrounding landscape and it seemed to be a very volcanic area as seen in Plate 74.



**Plate 74. View back into the Warthang valley;**

But even with this barren landscape many alpiners flourished here. Everywhere you could hear underground streams flowing under the rocks providing water and the volcanic area provides large amounts of nutrients and good soil so even with such bleak looks it was a very fertile area.

At the top of the pass we had a rest and took in the views in an overcast but clear day. Me and Paul then carried on ahead and met a nomad woman whom we greeted and she said hello back in Bhutanese (Khuzo-zambo). At the top of the next pass we saw an amazing view of a sacred lake to monks across the valley from us (See Plate 75).

We could not help but admire the beauty of the landscape yet again.

As we did it started to hail on us with quite a force so we decided to run down the other side which was a bit dangerous, as the track consisted of shale and was about 20-30cm wide.

But as we reached the bottom I was amazed at what I saw. There was a lovely lagoon and what caught our eye, a sand dune! (See Plate 76)

I had seen sandy river shores on the way up but I did not expect this. It was great fun as we just slid down giving us a much needed laugh.

Further on, me and Paul reached a hut mentioned in our itinerary as a waypoint.





**Plate 76. The sand dune can just be seen on the left with the crystal clear lagoon on the right.**

As we were ahead of the group we had to rely on our scouting skills to find whether to go up or down and this point as the path split there.

After finding much evidence (i.e. yak dung) on the higher path we continued on up. To our dismay this was only to be the first of many decisions we had to do as further on we came across another road split where we had to go up or down. Here we decided to trust the instincts of our new dog guide “socks” (who had recently caught up) and go down the mountainside. There was very little vegetation as can be seen in Plate 77, as this mountainside seemed to be very exposed but we did catch a glimpse of a couple of Himalayan pheasants.

As we progressed further down we started to hear the flow of a river. Looking at our guide we read that it was the Nikka Chu river (See Plate 78). At this point we were already expecting the clouds to come in and rain to start and in just a matter of minutes from our vantage point we witnessed this happening. The weather at this altitude seemed always to find a way to impress us.

Something else that surprised us was finding Martin’s most wanted find on our trip in flower – *Meconopsis sherriffii*. We just happened to stumble upon it in a little valley

on our way down to the river and we noticed that it was in dense clumps and was much larger in proportion to the other relatives of its genus (See Plate 79).



**Plate 77. Much of the landscape was made up of low grass but largely very barren.**



**Plate 78. View of Nikka Chu river and incoming cloud and rain.**



**Plate 79. Flowers had just gone over on these *Meconopsis sherriffii*.**

Another thing we noticed close by was a very peculiar caterpillar which, judging by the hairs, would not be friendly to touch. He was still very nice to look at though (See Plate 80).

By this time we noticed that socks had abandoned us so looking at our guide notes we read that camp was upriver so we decided to make a path following close to the river. After spending many hours walking upriver (by this time it was getting very dark and the rain was falling more and more) we were losing hope and decided we were lost. Both me and Paul used our emergency whistles and shouted for attention but we soon decided nobody would hear us over the rushing river.



**Plate 80. Munching away quite happily this strange but beautiful caterpillar**

We then decided to go diagonally up the mountain slope to see if we could spot our campsite or a main pathway.

Looking down at the river I saw that the islands in the middle of this river were connected by a well worn path so we went for it to see where it led to.

In fact it led us right up the river until we hit a derelict hut and it suddenly stopped. Not knowing what to do we looked at our surroundings and we noticed a very small path up the hill. It was a mere chance we found it as it was mostly overgrown. By mere chance it led to the main pathway where we saw fresh yak dung. I don't think the Himalayas will ever see two men so happy to come across fresh yak dung as we were. We sped down the path and half an hour down it we came to a flat swamp where our camp was set around two derelict yak huts.

Arriving at camp we thought that we would surely be the last ones back and there would be a search party out for us already. It turned out that neither was true.

As we entered our mess tent there was nobody to be seen and after asking the yak herders and the cook they stated that we were the first to camp. We had to then send

our yak herders back to find the rest of our group. It took a whole hour before our group was all back and by this time it was pitch black. The main cause for this was thick fog which had reduced their vision to just seeing their hand in front of their faces.

For the first night, we slept regardless of stones underneath our sleeping bags.

### **3.2.2 Day eleven – Minchugang to Gankar Puensum Base Camp**

It was my first night of good sleep since we started the trek (mainly due to being so tired from the walk the day before). Even so, I woke around 6 as it was a nice morning. We started walking around 8 up the Nikka Chu River – it was a gradual climb. After a meeting last night with Sonam we decided that it was safest we all stayed within eye distance for the time being.

It was a very eventful wake as regards plants as we saw much better specimens of *Meconopsis sherriffii*, *Cyananthus lobatus* (See Plate 81), *Swertia multicaulis*, and a lovely species of *Saussuria cf. leodontioides* (See Plate 82).

As we walked upriver, we started to notice it was getting cooler and cooler and it was getting rockier and rockier – mostly granite if I remember correctly. As I walked up this valley I could not help the feeling that I was walking up a glacial moraine.





**Plate 81. Trailing everywhere – *Cyananthus lobatus*.**



**Plate 82. Very strange yet as complex as an orchid – *Saussuria cf. leodontioides*.**

We stopped for lunch and had lovely spaghetti and mixed vegetables but we were soon discovered by the local population of flies and had to eat fast and continue our walk or else be bugged.

My feeling of being in a moraine was confirmed when we came across a glacial beach (See Plate 83) which was quite stunning but was to be one of the first among many scenic pictures of the trek.



**Plate 83. Not the Algarve but still its more beautiful.**

I started to notice two very common plants which were *Bistorta macrophylla* and *Cremanthodium cf. thomsonii* both of which made a complete ground cover in most places above 4000m of altitude preferring boggy areas.

We reached Base Camp GP with little light and had five more miles to reach our camp. Walking was very hard at this stage as it had been a gradual climb all the way but with the distance we slowly started to look like a line of trucks chugging along the motorway.

On the way to our camp me and Tim started to notice small white mounds around the surrounding hills and where we were walking which at first we thought was only crushed stone but in fact turned out to be *Androsace tapete* (See Plate 84).



**Plate 84. Fantastic carpet – *Androsace tapete*.**

Our camp as located near the river on a small plateau at a final altitude of 5018m. Some people started to show signs of mild altitude sickness soon after they arrived, with headaches and feeling ill.

### **3.2.3 Day twelve – Base Camp GP to Tsorim**

Our trek started today with a river crossing. And not any river crossing – we had to cross it where it split in two as it was too deep and fast in one stream. And if that wasn't enough the water was fed my glaciers which made it super cold!

We started by trying to throw our shoes to the other side – some of us succeeded in doing this but as I was crossing somebody missed the shore and one of their boots fell into the water and I, standing in the middle of this stream on two rocks, had to catch it much to everyone's amusement.

The second stream could not be crossed by stepping over rocks so we had to wade through the river which unlike the lovely hot springs we had earlier on the in the trip, this water was stone cold!

Most of us made it across with relatively few injuries, all of us having cold, numb feet.

From the river it was a gradual climb with a great view of a glacier that we had to pass by in order to reach camp.

Before a major blizzard hit us and we had to abandon our plant seeking and concentrating we had some amazing finds which I would not have expected to see at this altitude. One of these was *Delphinium cf. brunonianum* (See Plate 85).



**Plate 85. This chap had the best view of the Himalayas – *Delphinium cf. brunonianum* (could also be *glaciale*).**

A bit back from this *Delphinium* was a lovely species of *Gentiana cf. phyllocalyx* in flower which we found at the bottom of small boulders (See Plate 86) growing in nearly full gravel.

A bit further on we found what was for me the most amazing alpine of the trip – *Eriophyton wallichii* (See Plate 87). It was, for me, a perfected ornamental nettle. Again this chap had no problem growing in gravel in such extreme colds – I guess its woolly coat kept it warm!



**Plate 86. *Gentiana cf. phyllocalyx* standing out amongst the greys and whites of the Himalayas.**



**Plate 87. Could be mistaken for a lamb's ear – *Eriophyton wallichii*.**

Other plants we encountered on the way were *Swertia multicaulis* (See Plate 88) and *Androsace tapete* which we would find for most of the journey at this altitude range. Reaching the pass on our guide we had a lovely view of the glacier but unfortunately it was way too cold and rainy to take a picture and risk our cameras. Instead a few of us opted to rise earlier the next day and take some pictures when the weather was better. The main reason for us to come back was an amazing find of *Chionocharis*

*hookeri* all over this plateau near the glacial pass. Even in low visibility it made the grey landscape very colourful.



**Plate 88. Lovely array of flowers. Something to notice is the pollinator guides marked in yellow. Great pollination strategy.**

Going down from the Gophu La pass we reached our campsite which was placed in a beautiful setting beside a huge crystal blue lake (See Plate 89). We were surrounded by the most beautiful setting – Glaciers all around us.



**Plate 89. Lake Tsorim and the site of our camp.**