

3.2.1 Day seven – Tshochenchen to Jule Tsho

Woke up to a magnificent chilly morning but the sky was clear and the sun was shining and moral was very high after the amazing finds of yesterday. The views to the mountains were amazing also (See Plate 55) as we could see the valley were we had to walk including our pass.



Plate 55. Almost what you'd expect to see on a postcard.

Me and Tim Lever went back up the valley we came from last night to see if we missed any new plants but to our dismay there was none. I learned a bit about scree plants like *Chrysosplenium spp*'s which as the soil moves down the plant moves with it as well.

We got back to camp and set out for the first time with our Yaks. We were told to stay well clear of them for the time being and well advised as is shown later on in the report. It was a very green grassy valley almost had a Swiss Alps feel to it but our plant finds soon brought us back to reality. Two hybrids of *Meconopsis simplicifolia* were awaiting us not far from each other (See Plates 56 and 57) one of which we mistook for *M. sheriffii*!

A funny moment happened when we found *Primula primulina* (See Plate 58) – a sudden rainfall came on us and out of frustration for not being ready I shouted up to the heavens “Is that all you got you weakling?” well suffice say it started pelting

down hail stones so hard you could not see anything ahead of you. I'd learned a lesson already.



Plate 56. *Meconopsis simplifolia*

One thing to note about them is that I never saw them growing in huge clusters besides *M. sherriffii*. Must be part of their survival strategy.

Plate 57. *M. simplicifolia*

Having only ever seen pictures of *M. sherriffii* when I saw this chap I was delighted but even after I got told it was not due to being half the size in all aspects I was pleased as it was the best specimen out of the lot.





Plate 58. Easily recognised by the little cotton balls in the middle of the flower –
Primula primulina.

We kept on following a stream to Jule La pass (4550m) with amazing views back towards camp. Along this walk we encountered many Rhododendrons and Primulas but another Lilly caught our eye and this time it was *Lillium cf. nanum* (See Plate 59).



Plate 59. Growing in open meadows on steep banks was this lovely *Lillium cf.*
nanum.

Our ascent took us past a sheltered lake where I found my first *Rheum nobile* in flower but unfortunately its flower spike was only a tenth of its average common size. Many of these Rheums are cut to offer at Buddhist temples or for medicinal purposes most of which is taken by Chinese people who illegally take it. Fortunately Bhutan offers the best conditions for these plants and they grow in such inaccessible places there that gathering them is a hard chore. Further up even I came across my first Edelweiss – *Leontopodium himalaycum* (See Plate 60). Identified by its shorter height than its European counterpart and having less hair than *L. monocephalum*. Another thing that stunned me was the scale and perspective change going high up made on you. Things seem so close when in fact they were double the size or length. This was a constant hindrance as we could never judge our distance to a plant from our main route (See Plate 61).



Plate 60. Seen only above 4000m it was a nearly constant companion over our trek in the mountains.



Plate 61. In this picture the pink bushes are Rhododendrons. What they are not infact is bushes but small trees taller than 7ft.

On my way up I also saw my second most liked plant of the trip which was *Eriophyton wallichii*. This woolly tuft we only ever saw growing out under rocks sheltered from harsh conditions. I was only to see it in flower much later on in the trek.

As I climbed up I slowly got ahead of everyone and soon enough the high altitude fog came in and blinded my vision around me. I could still see the path so I was fine. As I reached the summit things changed. The wind calmed down and there was a deep silence. It was very eerie but still I sat down in stunned silence as I'd never expect such a thing so high up.

As I walked on from these not many plants were growing in that location for some strange reason. Only one plant saw an advantage point and took centre stage over the valley. A lovely species of *Rhodiola* (See Plate 62 and 63) which we were to find on various occasions around the trek.



Plate 62. A close relative to the Sedum Genus it is a fantastic plant with amazing flowers. It was one of the most adaptive plants we saw on the trip

Plate 63. With a great view down the valley below where camp was this solitary plant was indeed a sight to behold.



The walk back down the other side of the pass was rainy and as I arrived down to our campsite I noticed we were near a lake but due to the fog I could not make out its size or where we were. It was a very cold night again with a short plant session before bed.

3.2.2 Day eight – Jule Tsho to Dur Tsachu

Even with a down sleeping bag, a bivi bag and warm clothing on I was stone cold in the morning. Being so I woke up extra early (6am) and was ready an hour before everyone else. Paul had also woken early so we both set out to scout the area in front of us ahead of everyone. As I looked to the lake this time I saw a truly amazing site. A crystal clear lake nested in a beautiful steep valley with *Meconopsis* in flower all around (See Plate 64).



**Plate 64. View over the lake towards the campsite on the other side of the lake.
The previous days pass was far right up that valley.**

This was not to be the last amazing view. In fact after an hour of climbing I reached the top where our descent into the valley below us started and I saw what was the most amazing view ever set before my eyes (See Plate 65). From up there I in the silence and the warm sunny morning I could see as far as China and Tibet. I sat there for over an hour, taking in and enjoying something few people value today – Nature. The view showed a wild and untouched terrain. I felt at ease, knowing there was at least one such place left on this Planet. This trip brought great changes in my life as now I'm working towards saving our environment by applying for training to hopefully work in botanical gardens in order to work on endangered species.



Plate 65. View down to the Gokthong La (4327m) and the mighty river Mangde Chu down the valley.

After people started arriving I set off again down the path on the right of Plate 64 and soon found some lovely plants up on the slopes like *Saxifrage thiantha* and a species of *Sausseria* (See Plate 66).



Plate 66. Amazing adaptations to capture water. Almost looks like a spider has woven the whole plant up.

Me, Paul, Kuun and Ann managed to gain enough terrain that afternoon to avoid getting the serious rain and most of the trail ploughed up by the yaks which became a constant problem in the mountain valleys. We had our lunch in a Rhododendron forest and soon after we were warned that the yaks were coming past and that we were to take cover in the bushes and not pick up any stick to fend ourselves or else the yaks would go ballistic. It turned out that we did not even need to do this. According to Sonam the younger yaks get put up front due to their unstable behaviour and the old ones at the back so that when the young ones do go crazy they do not do any damage to other yaks and gear. I was standing quite close in amusement to see how fearsome these hairy cows were. In fact after the first 3 yaks went by I was assured they would not care if I showed myself so as the fourth one came past I poked my head out of the Rhododendron bush I was in and tried to take a picture (See Plate 67).



Plate 67. The Yak or grunting Ox, or in latin *Bos grunniens* which mean *Bos* = Ox, and *grunniens* = grunting, hence Grunting Ox.

This was a severe mistake. It looked at me in complete shock and about 3 seconds later it went “Rooooonk!!” and sped down the hill ramming his comrades out of the way and flattening Rhododendron trees in its wake. It was like nothing I’d ever seen.

The yak herders were running after it, arms in the air, screaming something which sounded like “Run fools! He is carrying the gas bottles!”.

We arrived at the hot springs in the rain but all together as we hit a crossroads in the middle of some high weeds and it was like a maze so we had to regroup to go on.

That evening we all got our swim shorts on and hopped into the baths with hot spring water. It was to be our only wash in the whole trek so we made good use of it. The water was a bit green from algae growing wildly due to the temperature but it made no harm. As we looked at our feet we noticed that they were like lumberjacks hands, all nice and calloused, except on our soles!

The suspension bridge to the springs was what made me laugh. The thing looked like it was about to fall down the river.

The night consisted of our dinner spicy which I was getting used to by now and followed by our daily plant ID and a good game of cards.

3.2.3 Day nine – Dur Tsachu to Warthang

Let me advise people in future that sleeping on a bed of rocks and dock stalks is truly painful. This was what we had to sleep on the night before. I started to think that after all that discomfort at night, when I got back I would not be able to sleep in my own bed and probably move in with the dog outside!

We had breakfast – a nice rich one made up usually of pancakes, cereals, porridge, fry-ups and good old tea and coffee.

We set off at nine and continued up the valley following another river until we reached pending death itself (See Plate 68).



Plate 68. Our faces said it all: “we are not crossing that!”

But soon enough we were crossing it which was a feat in itself (See Plate 69). Considering all dangers of that falling down, the yaks went across it all at once whilst we went one by one. The flora around that area consisted mainly of Buttercups, Rhododendrons and Abies as anything-else got eaten by the yaks. Higher up we found small *Rheum nobile* in the distance and blue *Corydalis* but for the greater part nothing we had seen the days before.

It was a 1000m climb mostly direct up. The whole day the sun shone and the only thing that bugged us was mosquitoes but Deet soon solved that! On our way up we

met some Japanese hikers which were just finishing the whole Snowman trek which is one of or the hardest trek in the world.



Plate 69. “Hold on to the railings”...well you can see what happened to the last person that did that!

With them was a stray dog that started the trek with them in Paro and survived the whole journey on scraps from the people. The dog then joined our walk and went with us till the end.

There were some funny times when I kept singing the famous Monty Python song “Always look on the bright side of life” to Martin and he kept chasing me up the hill. We gained a lot of ground doing that.

About three quarters of the way up we stopped on a grassy clearing to admire the view down the valley and to let others catch up (See Plate 70).



Plate 70. From there you can see where we came from directly below and to the right where we came from the day before.

Climbing up that valley you could really notice the variation in flora as you went higher. From lush forest to just rhododendrons to alpine meadow - it was great to see. Just before we reached our main pass that day we ran into some yak herders camping in the distance singing some folk songs. I was amazed how they lived in such harsh environments with so little to live off at that time of the year. At this stage we were also worrying where our yaks were as they had not come back. Our fastest Sherpa volunteered to go and find out what was going on.

We crossed the pass and walked into an enclosed valley which then we could not see due to fog. A fire was started near one of the yak huts kept for young calves. By then, normally, our camp would be ready.

Our yaks only arrived at 8 that night by which time it would be nearly bedtime for me normally but we kept ourselves entertained in an abandoned yak hut by singing karaoke from Roy Orbison to the Jungle Book. It was a great night and it increased our morale greatly.