

UP THE TIRTHAN RIVER TO TIRATH

It is late May and there is still plenty of snow on the mid-ranges and high peaks of the Great Himalayan National Park. The Tirthan river is rumbling right below us, cascading over large boulders in streams of silvery water and bubbling up in deep pools of jade green. The oak and coniferous forest is lush and moist. We are sitting at the Rolla camping site – which is a ten kilometre climb from 1,500m to 2,100m from the trailhead at the village of Gushani. Though our trek into the Park was only planned as far as Nada Thatch, twelve kilometres from Rolla, we all impetuously agree that we should head to Tirath, the source of the Tirthan and get as far as we can on our first day.

This is an ambitious plan as it is still another thirty kilometres of trekking to Tirath that is at an elevation of 4,100m and we only have four days to do the whole round trip. The year is 2005 and I've just turned sixty; my friends laugh that an eighty kilometre round-trip sounds like a good birthday test.

Six hours later, after an exhausting, steep 12 kilometre hike, we arrived at Nada (up from 2100m to 3330m), where a small forest hut serves as a camping site. A beautiful, verdant alpine meadow is before us, filled with



wildflowers splashing yellow, blue and red in all directions. Oak and coniferous forests ring the meadow and a now abandoned, slate and stone shepherd's hut stands out like some ancient, mythic dwelling. Across the meadow the high, snow blanketed peaks of Rakhundi strain towards the brilliant cobalt blue sky. It is peaceful and we all stretch out to relax in the warm sun after wolfing down our aloo paranthas. But there is no time to rest, if we are going to make it to Tirath the same day. So, with great reluctance, we struggle to our feet, pull in our full bellies and continue on the ever upward trek. Abruptly we move from the meadow onto a very narrow and difficult path. Below us and always present, the roaring Tirthan continues its journey in the opposite direction. The river is

our guide as we move along and as the forest gives way and we are forced into a dense bamboo thicket most of which has died in its twenty to thirty year life cycle. The dried bamboo is like an army of hidden guerrillas that stabs at us from all directions. Beneath our feet, the cylindrical stalks constantly cause us to slip and fall.

At dusk we reach our campsite at Majhoni (3,800m). The

team from the local NGO, SAHARA that works in developing livelihood models for local communities quickly sets up our camp in the small green meadow after beating down the tall grasses and shrubs to create a level patch. We have been trekking for eleven hours and are exhausted from the steep climb along the difficult trail. Everyone is too tired for dinner. Ishwar, a forest watcher with years of experience in this region, informs us we must depart by 6 in the morning to reach the source at Tirath so that we can return the same day while there is light.

The next day we all stagger out of our tents, have our chai and biscuits, fill our daypacks with lunch and start our



Patrolling Hut at Nada

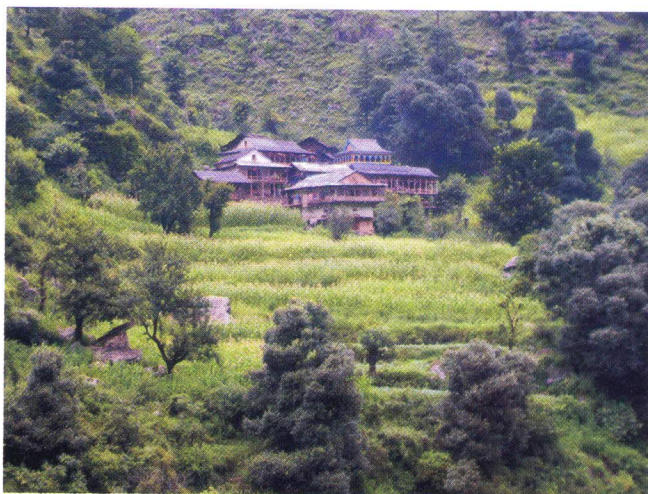
ascent. Another long day lies ahead. Within an hour of leaving the campsite, we find ourselves in front of a huge bowl of snow and ice with mountain ridges on each side of us. The snowfield in the morning sun, its ice crystals reflecting the light in diamond rainbow splashes. The snow is a mixture of white and earth-coloured browns along with tufts of soft grasses trapped by the winter snows. We all move slowly to assure ourselves of firm footing amidst the icy bowl. A single slip could be very dangerous as the Tirthan continues rolling below us, at times even submerging itself beneath the snow and ice. There is also the fear of hidden crevasses. Our team is delicately spread out along the white snowfield like dark beads in a strand.



Hippopotamus Rock

Above us loom the high jagged peaks of unnamed mountains.

After two hours of careful movement, we emerge onto the rocky stream bed close to the Tirthan's source. The powerful river has been reduced to several small braided rivulets fed by the mountain glaciers ahead of us. We move more quickly and assuredly from the stepping, slipping and hopping. We pick up pace, ever conscious of the limited time we have to do the round trip before darkness falls. Along the way, I find a large skull of a Blue Sheep, resting gently, almost incongruously in a field of yellow *Primulus* wildflowers. Its heavy, rippled horns, a symbol of power and authority, curve away from the head. I try to attach the skull to my daypack, to bring back to add in the Park's small nature display, but it is too heavy and unwieldy. So, I take a few photos with the yellow



Village ahead of Rola

flowers emerging from its empty eye sockets as a memento.

Suddenly, we hear noises to our left, high up on the ridges and see stones tumbling down. A herd of Blue Sheep is effortlessly jumping from rock to rock covering more ground in a few minutes than we have in a half hour. I continue ahead on my own and soon find a spot along the twisting, rocky rivulets. The water is frigid as it emerges from the snow pack ahead. In the distance, small dark forms move up the mountain slopes. Taking out my binoculars, I count seventy Blue Sheep - the largest group of mammals I have seen in my years of trekking in the Park. We are all quite happy to see this abundance of wildlife. It is a good sign that the Park is providing a safe habitat for a species that once was hunted for its meat and fur coat.

Excited, we push onward to Tirath, feeling that all these trickles of water emerging from the snow and ice will lead us to one single stream - the goal of our trek. But Ishwar tells us we'll have to wait until summer to see the source as everything is buried in snow and ice. He can't even find the 'jogni', prayer altar up ahead at the foot of the mountain.

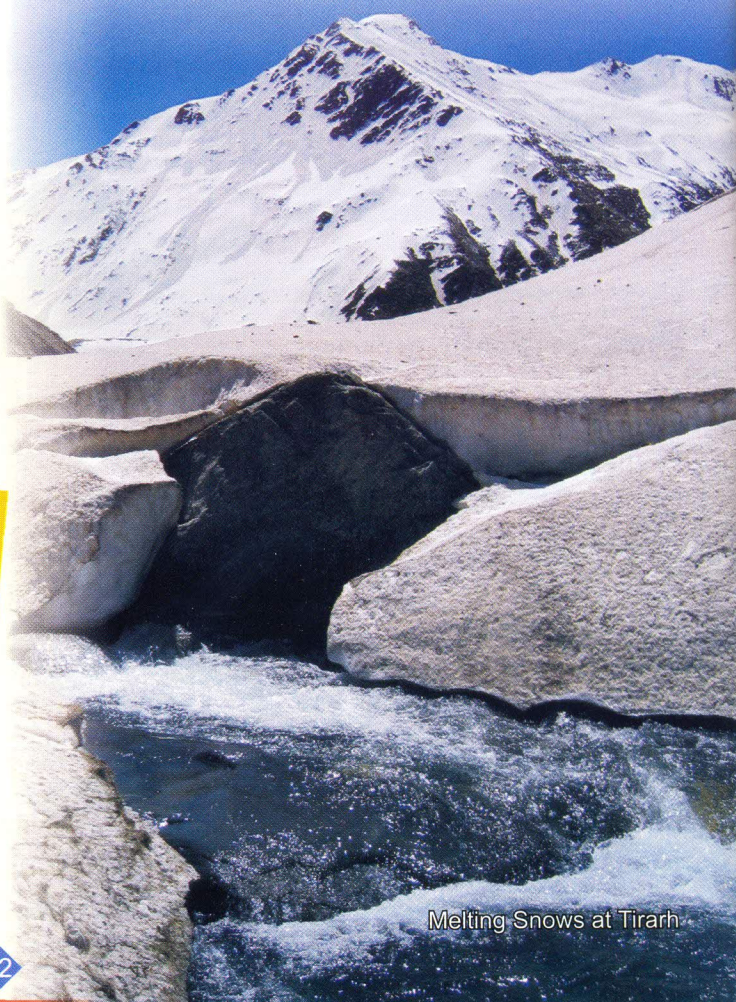
Dark, grey clouds start gathering and we realise that we must return to Majhoni before the next snow falls. It is already four in the afternoon and we just have a few more



Rola

hours of light. It would be treacherous to hike back down in the dark along the slippery, icy slopes. The source is still waiting for us, bubbling under the blanket of winter snow and ice waiting to defrost. We know it's there in all its mystery and magic. The Tirthan river is flowing as it always has through the seasons, years, and centuries. We say a prayer hoping that this will always be the case and head back down the banks of the river.

- Payson R. Stevens



Melting Snows at Tirath



Near Nada