

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT INDIAN FORESTS

(By Jamal Ara)

India is one of the few countries in the world that has a complete range of vegetation from the Palaearctic to the tropical. Starting from just below the snow-line in the Himalayas we first get the Alpine meadows, and through different types of coniferous and broad leaved forests, each typical of the elevation at which it occurs, we finally come to the rains forests on the Western Ghats and in Assam; which are characteristic of moist, humid, tropical regions. Each one of these zones of vegetation has forests of surpassing loveliness, though at first sight they might not strike one as anything singular or out of the ordinary. The scale on which they occur is so huge that time has to be given for appreciation to begin to allow beauty to soak in, so to say.

Let us start with the Alpine meadows. These are ^u huge grassy plains occurring above the height limit for tree growth. Incidentally, this elevation beyond which trees do not grow is called the "Timber line" by foresters, on the analogy of the geographical snow-line. The grass in these meadows is greener and softer than that of the most well kept lawn, though of attention it receives none; rather instead of being preserved like a lawn it is grazed by numberless sheep and goats throughout the summer. Yet inspite of this abuse it retains its lushness. In addition counterparts of all the famed European flowers grow here, and the Edelweiss for which Swiss swains risk their necks in order to present it to their lady-loves grows plentifully and is easily come by. It is not unusual to come across a stream which cannot be seen but whose gurgling can only be heard until one is aware of its presence by putting both feet in; so overgrown with flowers are the banks that the stream itself is completely hidden.

Descending lower the Yew and Junipers occur. The Yew is reputed in England as a grave-yard tree, and is usually associated with ~~xx~~ the rituals of witches. On the otherhand it was considerably in demand by soldiers of the middle ages as it was the best timber known for making bows. The Juniper is a remarkable plant; it grows both as a bush and a tree, and though its natural home is high up in the Himalayas it can be grown even at sea-level. Also the best wood for pencils is the ~~xx~~

Juniper, though in this case it is misnamed the "Pencil Cedar".

Next come the Birches and high level Firs. The silvery-barked Birch is a delightful tree to look at; and its reputation is for its bark. Before the invention of paper Birch bark was used for writing and preserving records. The bark peels of the tree in long rolls and looks and feels very much like paper.

Below this the Blue Pines and Deodars are found in the western and central Himalayas, and Oaks and Rhododendrons in the Eastern. The Indian Deodar is a first cousin of the "Cedar of Lebanon", that tree famed for its durability and usefulness as a construction wood. Buildings exist in the Lebanon in which the Cedar beams are 700 years old! The Indian Deodar is equally durable, and is the only conifer of which sleepers without any preservative treatment are accepted by the Indian Railways.

The Rhododendrons are remarkable for their flowers of surpassing beauty—the flowers being of all sizes and having a very wide range of colours. The largest number of species occur in the Darjeeling District, and in no other part of the world are such a large number of kinds of Rhododendrons to be found.

Next are the temperate broad leaved species, Oaks, Elms, Horn-beams, etc., and on riverine flats and islands the Alders. Last of all on the foot-hills and almost coming down to the elevated valleys is the long leaf Pine.

The Himalayan terai is the home of the Sal — the tree that yields the finest sleepers and constructional timber known to India. Formerly the Sal extended in a wide belt from the east bank of the Ganuna in the west to Assam in the east, and from the Himalayan terai in the north to the Vindhyas in the south. The extensive cultivation of the Indo-gangetic plain, however, has wiped out the Sal from that tract, and now it is only found in the terai and on the hills of Central India, with isolated scattered patches in the plains. Time was when India used to import Karrah and Jarri sleepers from Australia as being the only timbers capable of withstanding the ravages of white ants, but experience

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proved that the Sal was even better in this respect, and now no more sleepers are imported from Australia.

The Sal, individually, is a remarkable tree. It grows almost as straight and conical as any conifer, particularly in its younger stages, and an avenue of young Sal rivals in beauty the famed avenue of Poplars between Baramulla and Srinagar in Kashmir. In addition it reflects seasonal changes in the colour and texture of its leaves, in its feathery flowers and winged fruits, and provides a fascinating study, phenologically.

In the south, the counterpart of the Sal is the Teak, one of the best timbers in the world for all round utility. It can be used both for heavy constructional work as also for the most delicate cabinet making. Ships of the British and Indian Navies rely almost entirely on Teak for their wood-work; as do the Indian Railways for requirements other than Sleepers and bridge timber. Of evergreen forests there are three distinct types; the Sholas of the Nilgiris, the true rains forests of the Western Ghats, Coorg and Assam, and the Casurinas along the sea-coasts. The first present a remarkable feat of vegetative balance—evergreen forests alongside huge grasslands as any visitor to the Nilgiris has remarked. Neither encroaches on the other, and as to the reason why it should be so, the best pundits of Indian forestry are not yet certain.

The second is the home of the Dipterocarps and the Hopeas, the first being excellent ply-wood timber, and the second providing the best masts for boats. They are also the home of countless blood-sucking leeches!

The Casurinas are planted along the sea-coast to stabilise the sand and prevent it being blown inland; and along with this utilitarian purpose they satisfy the most fastidious aesthete by their beauty. Anybody who has seen the Casurinas on the Karwar beaches is not likely to forget them easily.

There are several more types of Indian forests, all with equally quaint, obscure facts, which are known only to that charmed circle which the forest service of the country is. They are extremely jealous of their prize spots and facts and only part with their knowledge after a good deal of coaxing.

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3. Galerida cristata - Crested Lark

~~Very - Common at Palung during winter.
Seen in Monghyp.~~

4. Eremopterix grisea - Ashy - Crowned Finch Lark

~~Palung, Goukera and 98th mile Tata Road Winter
visiter.~~

LARKS

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LARKS.

Alauda gulgula - Small sky Lark
seen at Patung, Duia, Chaibasa and
Goikera. Very Common at Monghyr.

2. *Mirafra assamica* :- Bengal bushlark

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SUNBIRDS & Spider-hunters: -

1. Cinnyris asiatica: - Purple Sunbird

Common everywhere. Seen at Marghys.

2. Cinnyris zeylonica - Purple-rumped Sunbird

Seen almost everywhere except - Chaibasa.