

# The Nawabs Of Garo Hills (eco-tourism in Meghalaya)

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*Photo: Varun Satose. A group of pale, yellowish-white-winged butterflies fluttered around the rotting fruit. We moved forward slowly and then stood still to observe them. Yes, the prominent yellowish-white forewings had a black margin with two chains of white spots and two isolated white spots. The whitish-yellow hind wings had two tails with a ridged margin. A couple of years ago, we would not have been able to identify these butterflies but we had no hesitation now – great nawabs we wrote down! The nawab butterflies, along with the rajahs, we had read up, belong to the 'brush-footed butterfly' family, also referred to as the Charaxinae group. Nawab butterflies occur in Northeast India and further east up to Thailand. Many have gaudy colours and brilliant flashes thanks to iridescent scales covering the wings. Beauty notwithstanding, some are known to favour decaying crab-meat or rotting fruit. Our newfound interest was thanks to our latest project – encouraging butterfly watching through our community-based ecotourism project. Samrakshan's Meghalaya field-base had undertaken community-based conservation programmes in the landscape for the last few years but our latest attempt was a community-based ecotourism programme with multiple goals. We were nervous and excited, since success would mean that we would be able to provide livelihood options that were friendly to the local biodiversity values, enhance pride among the people here and create awareness about the Balpakram-Baghmara Landscape. Homework involved extensive reading, field visits and assessment of the situation on the ground. We chose two villages to focus on and set up camp-sites – Siju and Gongrot. Siju abuts the Siju Wildlife Sanctuary and Gongrot is next to the Balpakram National Park. The landscape constitutes the crux of the Garo Hills Elephant Reserve and the report of the Elephant Task Force lists the Baghmara–Balpakram corridor as one of India's vital elephant corridors. The Balpakram Complex is also recognised as an Important Bird Area with the White-winged Duck, White-rumped Vulture and Grey Sibia listed from here.*

## ENTICING TOURISTS

*We enjoyed our first days, putting across the concept of eco-tourism to the locals in household and village meetings. These discussions slowly moved on to management models that could be undertaken and also to visits to neighbouring Assam to learn from similar efforts there. We also spent several hours consulting with and seeking approval for our activities of the village headman (nokma), since ownership of land in the Garo Hills rests with the clan, with the village headman as the decision-taking authority. The average tourist needs to know what wildlife he or she can hope to see in a given destination. Sighting mammals in the dense tropical forests of this landscape is not easy. The altitude and temperature are, however, butterfly friendly. This led us to initiate efforts to enhance our understanding of butterflies, which in turn sowed seeds for butterfly tourism. Long-term research was undertaken in partnership with experts to identify and record species. Trails and spots in and around Siju and Gongrot that offered butterfly sightings for the amateur and seasoned explorer were mapped. These surveys, undertaken over a period of time spanning multiple seasons actually identified Garo Hills as a butterfly hotspot and also led to the first field guide for butterflies in this landscape. Published in 2013, 'The Butterflies of Garo Hills' covers 320 species from six families. This includes species like the blue begum, scarce jester and pointed palmfly, each of which is protected under Schedule 1 of the*

## Wildlife Protection Act

*along with other rare species like the China nawab and stately nawab. Photo: Yaranajit Deka. **GRUNGE WORK** We needed to establish institutions to manage the camps at both villages. So in Gongrot, a new body was formed while at Siju we joined hands with an existing society. Together with the camps, we established rules and regulations including specifying that locals would be employed at every level and that construction would be with locally-available material. Siju also houses one of India's longer cave systems. However, though tourists had been visiting the caves and the wildlife sanctuary for years, it had not benefitted the villagers. It was decided to contribute 10 per cent of the funds generated to the Community Welfare Fund and that villagers could decide where and how to use the money. Capacity-building programmes were organised for people from these villages to help them contribute towards and run the camp effectively. Cooks, guides, porters and camp-managers were employed from the villages. Arrangements were made for select members to visit Sikkim for a month-long training programme to help them further augment their skill-sets. Separate bank accounts for each of these sites were created. The camps began with individual visitors and eventually, Gongrot played host to not only a large group from the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) but also the annual Butterfly India Meet. Siju has three butterfly hotspots and Gongrot boasts of six. We have recorded some 90 species in Siju including the redspot duke, red-tailed marquis, common nawab, jewelled nawab and marbled map. Gongrot, perched on a higher altitude, has some 130 species including the yellow gorgon, Malayan nawab, pallid nawab, red caliph and great nawab. These biodiversity-rich locations also offer 'bonus' sightings of other wildlife such as the Hoolock gibbon, Assamese macaque, Malayan giant squirrel and the hoary-bellied squirrel. **NEXT STEPS** We knew that to take this to the next level, make it sustainable and widen its support base, partnerships at the local level would be essential. The tourism department of Meghalaya facilitated training of the staff on hospitality issues and joined hands to design, print and disseminate brochures for the landscape, which also included our camp sites. The department also invited colleagues (from both camps and Samrakshan) to attend a training on cave exploration. We organised a butterfly walk at Baghmara to raise awareness levels as part of the Winter Festival organised by the tourism department. At Siju, the Forest Department pitched in with construction of a tree house. The Baghmara Block and Border Area Development Office too have extended their support. Photo: Varun Satose. Experience-sharing with other wildlife tour operators has helped us guide tourists on the law and order situation in the Garo Hills. Yet another village, Karwani, within the Baghmara Reserve Forest will also be joining the league of Siju and Gongrot. Karwani is already a popular spot for exploring butterflies. It is easily accessible from Baghmara town, has easy-to-walk terrain and butterfly-friendly streams. Discussions taking shape with the Forest Department could see home-stays in the village within the coming months. The colourful nawabs of Garo Hills should expect more guests in coming years! [Location: (South Garo Hills district, Meghalaya) 25°30' 90°45'] [This story first appeared in: Sanctuary Asia, Vol. XXXIV No. 1, February 2014 <http://www.sanctuaryasia.com/magazines/conservation/9700-the-nawabs-of-garo-hills.html#sthash.Dnz71zGT.dpu>]*