

## Behaviours of Wild Residents

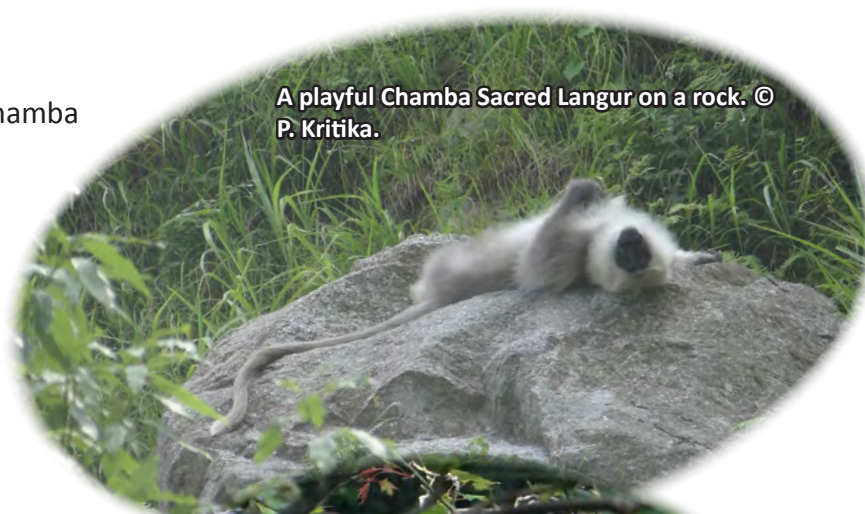
### First things first

My initial visit to the enchanting Chamba Valley in Himachal Pradesh was a truly remarkable experience.

Everything about the place, from the sight of the Ravi River gracefully flowing through the town to the majestic mountain ranges that cradled it, left me in awe. Perhaps it's my personal inclination toward mountains, or perhaps it's the innate charm of the region. It took me some time to familiarize myself with the landscape, directions, and local places. During the initial days, I dedicated my time to examining herbarium sheets prepared by our principal investigator, Vishal Ahuja.

I frequented the nursery, acquainting myself with the species there, assisting with seed sowing and collection, and making visits to the wildlife sanctuary. I was eagerly anticipating commencing my study on the behavior of the Chamba Sacred Langur (*Semnopithecus ajax*). Then, the day arrived – March 21, 2023 – a day I would always remember. I saw these incredible ajax langurs in the wild for the very first time. I observed them perched on a dried-up tree, but they swiftly darted away as I exited the car. That moment made me ponder how

I would habituate myself with these langurs if they were so wary of humans. Nevertheless, I set aside that concern for the time being. On my way back, I encountered another group of langurs near a garbage dump, showing no signs of fear when we approached. That day, I witnessed two contrasting behaviors of these majestic creatures – one in their natural state and the other influenced by human presence, highlighting how human impact alters their natural behavior.



A playful Chamba Sacred Langur on a rock. © P. Kritika.



Injured adult male sitting on a tree. © P. Kritika.

## Ongoing chapter

As time progressed, I began to opportunistically collect whatever data I could. I initially believed that I could habituate at least a group or two and identify individuals by their morphological features, as is typically done in primate behavioral ecology studies. However, I soon realized that this was an exceedingly challenging task, both due to my newcomer status in the field and the rugged terrain. Tracking langurs in the complex landscape proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated.

In farmlands, it was somewhat easier to follow a troop to a certain extent, especially as these fields were surrounded by degraded forest patches or abandoned agricultural fields where bear sightings had occurred. Navigating these areas required me to keep this information in mind. In the wildlife sanctuary, the situation was entirely different. I considered myself fortunate if the langurs moved only a short distance, as there were virtually no trails for me to follow if they ventured far away.

When I began my observations, I received guidance from my mentor, Dr. Sanjay Molur, on how to proceed. Input from field researchers who specialize in primate behavior studies in various parts of the country also contributed to my understanding. While I had studied the sampling techniques (Altmann 1974) and related papers in theory, adapting and experimenting to determine which methods



Ajax sitting in a farm land.  
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A grooming pair of juvenile langurs.  
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best suited our study was a significant process that took time. Data collection remains opportunistic, but I can confidently say that I have learned to identify the age and sex classes of the animals and observe their actions and resting patterns. I've witnessed the unpredictable nature of fieldwork; there have been days when I couldn't spot a single langur during an entire day of field visits, and there have been times when I didn't expect to encounter a troop but was pleasantly surprised.

Thanks to the langurs, I've also developed the ability to identify several plant species in the landscape, as sometimes I need to determine which new plants they are feeding on and which parts they prefer. This has helped expand

the list of plant species favored by the Chamba Sacred Langur. Currently, I'm working on a comparative study of the behaviors of these langurs in their natural habitat versus the human-dominated degraded habitat.

### **Apart from behavior**

Amidst all these activities, I had the opportunity to design an information pamphlet, along with my fellow interns, to raise awareness among tourists visiting the wildlife sanctuary. This project was undertaken in collaboration with the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department. Additionally, I participated in the langur census of 2023, conducted in conjunction with the Forest Department to estimate the langur population. This census will aid in my behavior studies and contribute to population monitoring in the area.

Over the past few months, I've learned a great deal as a part of this project, not only about behavioral studies but also about working in a nursery, identifying plant species, interacting with local communities to understand their perspectives, and collaborating with the Forest Department. As I mentioned, I've encountered various real-life challenges in the field, such as having to cancel observations due to adverse weather conditions, struggling with poor visibility caused by monsoon mist, and facing road closures due to landslides. While I know I have a long journey ahead, these past months have provided me with valuable experience, both in terms of challenges and the joys of fieldwork.

### **Personal note**

During my observations, I have observed firsthand the challenges that these primates face in human-dominated landscapes. They struggle to inhabit their natural habitat peacefully due to a high influx of tourist vehicles during the holiday season. Additionally, their foraging opportunities are limited due to degraded forest patches with very few native food trees. They also encounter negative interactions with local communities, including people pelting stones at langurs near their farms and being chased by dogs. In today's rapidly changing world, projects like HLP (Himachal Langur Project) are crucial, focusing on developing strategies to help and conserve endangered species facing such challenges.

### **Acknowledgements**

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