

Penguins in a snowstorm

Any ideas on the best time to go on a trek? I know you are thinking of a bright sunny day in the middle of spring or a pleasant evening by a flowing stream. We expected the same when we had planned a trip from Dainkund to Jot, the highest peaks of Dalhousie and Chamba, respectively.

Usually, the month of April meant bright blue skies, pretty flowers, and butterflies. This was not the case this year in Chamba, as dark clouds and heavy downpours took over the first two weeks of the month. Rain was frequently accompanied by hailstorms and sometimes snow, especially in the higher elevations. While most people chose to play it safe with the weather, the HRP team, however, chose to go against the rules of nature to experience its wonderfulness and were lucky enough to escape its rage. We also had a joyful company of Dipal and Mitesh Damania, the founders of Naturefuture, an initiative focused on environmental conservation by integrating NGOs and funders.

Our journey from the field station started after a warm breakfast, followed by a drive to Lakkadmandi, the last point in Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary. As we ascended the mountains, the amount of snow on either side of the road increased gradually, but the actual adventure began once we reached the entrance to Polani Temple. The temple steps easily had five inches of snow muddied by the footprints of all the previous visitors. As all of us wore nothing but a bunch of clumsy trekkers with regular trekking shoes, slipping and sliding became normal. Our attempts to take careful steps on the snow made us look like awkward penguin chicks who were learning to walk. Half an hour into the trek, and all of our shoes had already been wet by the melting snow. As we were feeling overwhelmed by our numb feet, we encountered something magical.

It started snowing!
Neither snowflakes
nor crystals, but
round airy pearls
that looked exactly
like thermacol. As
many of us were
experiencing snowfall
for the first time, we
started screaming
and dancing with
joy. We rolled on the
fresh snow to make



The HRP team. © Sanjay Molur.

snow fairies and a snowman. Truly, our inner child had taken control. Slow and steady, we took almost two hours to reach the beautiful temple on the top of the mountain.

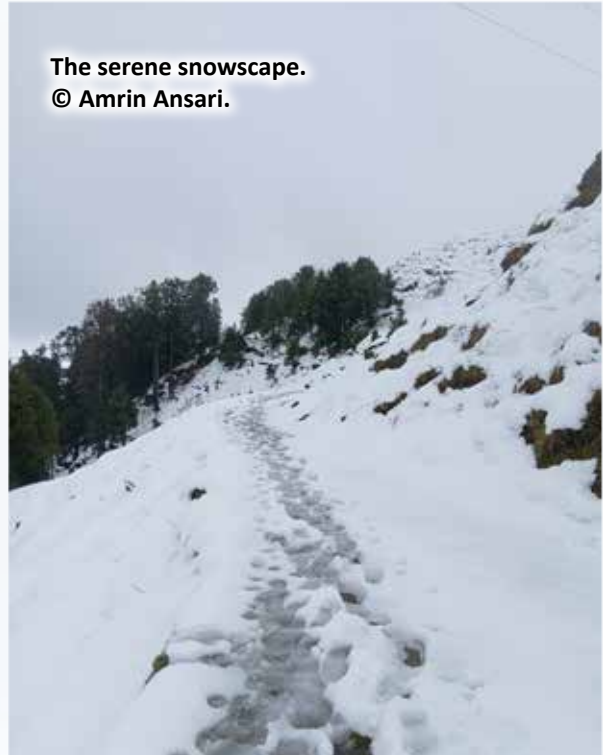
But our journey had just begun; in order to reach our destination, we still had 6.5 kms more to cover. The thought of it gave us cold feet, literally! as all of our shoes were already drenched by then. Despite shivering in the cold, nobody ever thought of going back. Fuelled by a cup of hot tea and a plate of 'pahadon wali maggi', we resumed our trek. As most of the tourists were heading back from the temple itself, the crest walk that we were going on was completely vacant and undisturbed. Vishal took the lead as he is well-versed in all the forest trails in Chamba, but the rest of us made sure to slow him down with our constant slipping and falling.

Along the way, we spotted beautiful flowers like *Bergenia ciliata* and *Primula denticulata*. Shrubs like *Viburnum*



Primula denticulata
peeping out of the snow.
© Sanjay Molur.

The serene snowscape.
© Amrin Ansari.



grandifolium and *Daphne papyracea* were covered in snow. Fresh snowfall settling on the Deodar *Cedrus deodara* trees made the landscape look magical.

Trekking further, we had reached an elevation of about 2,700 m, and the clouds had now surrounded us, limiting visibility to 5 m. The heavy winds converted the pleasant snowfall into a snowstorm. Our team still didn't give up and continued fighting against the snow hitting us harshly on our faces, until something shocking happened. A loud noise of thunder followed by a rumbling of the clouds. It hit us so close that we felt excruciating pain in our heads. All of us were extremely shocked to understand what happened. I looked around in utter confusion to see everyone equally confused; the ones behind me were sitting on the ground, huddled like pups. A few minutes later, we realised that we were in fact, hit by a compression wave. The deadly

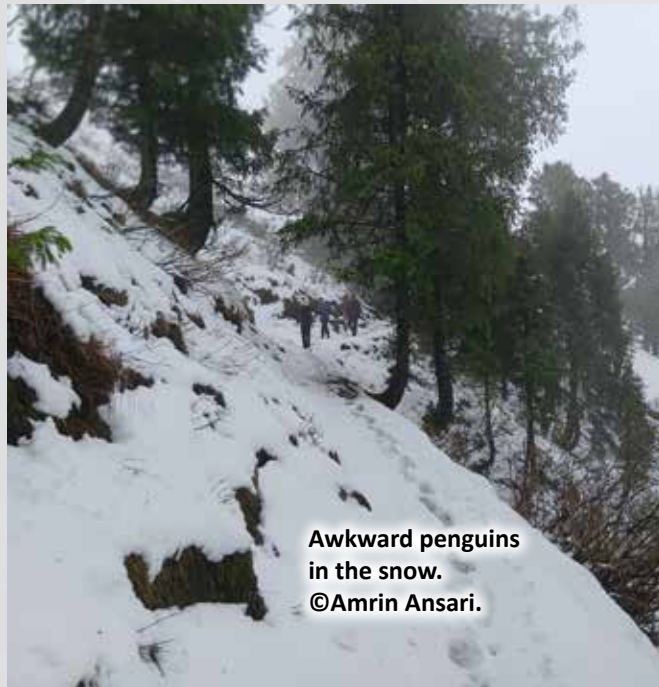
combination of high elevation and dark clouds had led to the formation of a heavy compression wave due to the presence of high electrical charge in the clouds.

It was the moment we realised we were lucky to have survived the wrath of mother nature. Immediately, we all turned off our phones and sprinted forward. Thunder followed the snowstorm, and it was getting difficult for us to go on. That's when Vishal

spotted a Shephard's hut at a distance, and all of us raced up the trail to reach it. The cosy, muddy hut gave us warmth and protected us from the snowstorm. We waited for a couple of minutes for the weather to clear. Turning back was not an option as we were right in the middle of the trek, too far to turn back and not quite close enough to the finish to stop.

The incident had shaken us, but our adrenaline rush helped us move forward despite the cold weather and numb feet. Hurriedly, we crossed over the forest fragment and reached a beautiful grassland on the fringe of the valley. We stopped to admire the beauty of the meadow, which had little snow. Descending to a lower elevation, rain had replaced the snow now, which made the rest of the journey relatively easier for us.

Four hours and 8.5 km later, we finally reached Jot, one of the passes to Chamba Valley. At this point, we were exhausted and hungry, so we crammed into the nearest shop and gobbled up whatever we could find. The cold, the confusion, the laughs, and the small moments in between will forever stay with us. I am sure if you ask any of us again, we would all still choose the same, because chaos and cold are when the magical stories are told.



**Amrin Ansari, Himalayan Restoration Project
Zoo Outreach Organisation**

Citation: Ansari, A. (2026). Penguins in a snowstorm. *Zoo's Print* 41(4): 06–08.