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Nepal - December 2002

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Areas visited

Pokhara (briefly) 9-10th December.
Annapurna region (Naya Pul to Muktinath on the Jomsom Trek) 11th - 23rd December 2002.
Langtang Valley (Syabrubesi-Kyagin Gompa-Dhunche) 24th – 31st December 2002.

General

In Nepal my wife and I travelled around using local buses/taxis etc and whilst walking we did not hire a guide or porter. We had no problems finding the way using the standard guide books.

We encountered no security problems anywhere. There was a general feeling that Maoists had a presence in the Annapurna region but that they had no argument with tourists. We didn't meet anyone, Nepali or tourist, who knew of any recent problems with tourists. Everywhere we went lodges were empty and we met very few other walkers – very nice for us but not so good for the local economy! The situation further west sounded less stable.

There was a two-day general strike while we were in Nepal but at the time we were in the Langtang valley where the effect was not felt. It would be worth asking around in advance about strikes if you were planning to stick to a tight time schedule at any point.

Pokhara

One morning spent in the forest south of the lake. We got a taxi to the dam and walked over the bridge then up through the woods to the temple on the top.

Annapurna region/ Jomsom Trek

We walked from Naya Pul via Ghorapani to Kagbeni, then up to Muktinath and back down to Jomsom, from where we flew back to Pokhara. Most days we walked but we did spent a day at Ghorapani and a day at Ghasa (and a day inadvertently waiting for the plane at Jomsom).

Around Ghorapani the best birding was below the pass on the way to Chitre, also on Poon hill and the start of the ridge path. Lots of wood collecting was going on in the forests all around Ghorapani.

At Ghasa we stayed at the Eagles Nest Guest House where the very friendly owners put us in touch with Nobin (younger brother of Abinash; living in the next house north along the path) who guided me on two mornings to look for pheasants. I visited high up on the west side (to the 'Black Forest') and somewhat lower on the east side. The forests are very good here once you have got some distance from the main path in the valley. I wish I could have stayed more days.

From Kalopani to Marpha there was excellent birding along the path. Muktinath/Jharkot also was excellent for birding. We did not walk all the way up to Thorong La (it is possible from this side but you should spend a day or two in Muktinath to acclimatise first).

communities where management intensity is low, perhaps simply involving mowing on an annual cycle or low grazing levels.

About 120 dune sites in Great Britain have been identified as SSSIs and approximately one sixth of these partly or entirely include golf courses within their boundaries. Three of the SSSIs that include golf courses retain sufficient conservation interest to be included within sites identified as nationally important dune systems in the Nature Conservation Review (Ratcliffe, 1977). However, only in one of these (Sandwich Bay dunes in Kent) does the golf course cover a major part of the SSSI. Whilst golf courses clearly reduce the extent of dune vegetation, Marshall and Green (1984) suggest that golf courses have also helped to conserve dune vegetation since other uses that would probably have been allowed on the dunes could have been more completely damaging. In their study of the Kent golf courses they show that part of six golf courses in Kent are included within SSSIs, covering a total area of 605 hectares. Although this is but a small percentage of all SSSI areas in Kent they do include almost all the remaining sand dune communities in the county.

iii) Afforestation on dunes

Almost total destruction of the native flora and fauna occurs within a very few years when sand dunes are planted with conifers as a result of progressive shading of the vegetation and the deposition of a carpet of needles. Some plants like Epipactis helleborine and Allorhiza trifida seem to tolerate the cool, damp and dark conditions within conifer plantations and survive. As the forest grows, an increasing amount of water is lost through the canopy and the water table may be lowered. In adjacent unforested areas this may reduce winter flooding of dune hollows so that species-rich dune 'slacks' may be invaded by birch in some areas making conservation of dune vegetation difficult. This problem has occurred at Ainsdale and Tentsmuir National Nature Reserves. Similar problems are recorded in Holland by Van der Meulen (1982). Invasion by pine seedlings from the plantation into adjacent unforested dune areas may also occur and they too will eventually destroy the semi-natural vegetation on dunes.

Although first attempts at dune afforestation were made before the twentieth century the first widespread planting of dunes occurred between 1922 and 1952 during which period, 4,000 hectares of dunes were afforested (Macdonald, 1954). Today the total area of afforested dune in Great Britain is estimated at nearly 8,000 hectares, approximately 14% of Britain's total dune area. The most seriously affected sites are shown in Table 7. Two case studies serve to give some indication of the sequence of planting.

Langtang Valley

We walked from Syabrubesi to Kyangin Gompa then back to Dhunche via Syabru. We walked up and back in six days. I would have been very nice to have had longer, particularly around Kyangin Gompa.

The birding in the forest on the way up the valley was generally excellent with a good range of species recorded. I didn't see too much in the higher regions of the valley but I'm sure they are all there somewhere! I spent most of the time looking in vain for Blood Pheasants in the birch/rhododendron forest. Much of the forest seemed very disturbed by wood collecting.

At Syabru I tried the forest above the village early in the morning but again I found the habitat to be very degraded and didn't have much luck. By walking off the path in a westerly direction the forest seemed to improve and did eventually support some understory! Tragopans may still be here...

Selected bird list (some common birds omitted)
[Square brackets for notes on birds not seen]
(normal brackets where identity uncertain)

Great Cormorant	One seen from the hot spring at Tatopani
Ruddy Shelduck	Two seen in flight over the river between Jomsom and Kagbeni.
Himalayan Griffon Vulture	Commonly seen in the Kali Gandaki valley
Red-headed Vulture	Pokhara
Hen Harrier	From the bus near Pokhara
Besra/Eurasian sparrowhawk	A single below Thorong La
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	A single Kyagin Gompa
Black Eagle	One bird near Marpha
Golden Eagle	Single birds at Jomosom, Kagbeni, and Muktinath
Mountain Hawk-eagle	A single bird from the temple above Pokhara.
Peregrine Falcon	One bird above Langtang Village
Himalayan Snowcock	one on the high slopes above Muktinath (north of the path to Thorong La).
Chukar	Several groups near Muktinath
Hill Partridge	Below Ghore Tabela (Langtang valley)
[Blood pheasant]	Searched for in the forests near Kyagin Gompa but no sign.
[Satyr Tragopan]	Searched for in forests above Syabru but no sign
Monal	c.20 seen (inc. one male) in and near the 'Black Forest' high above Ghasa on the west side.
Kalij Pheasant	One group in the forest by Pokhara, several groups seen very well in forests low down above Ghasa on the west side.
Cheer Pheasant	A group of seven (including at least one male) flushed from long grass on the east side above Ghasa (above the small bamboo-clad plateau north of the ravine on the east side).
Ibisbill	A single bird seen at close range on the river at Kokhethati (Kali Gandaki valley) – a nice surprise!
[Solitary Snipe]	Searched for at Muktinath but no sign – most water was frozen solid.
Hill Pigeon	Several near Muktinath
Snow Pigeon	Several groups of 100+ near Langtang (but not elsewhere).
Asian Barred Owlet	One in woods near Pokhara
Crested Kingfisher	A single seen on the way up to Ghorapani.

Culbin sands in Moray is the largest dune system in the United Kingdom covering 3,096 hectares (Ranwell, 1975). Afforestation at Culbin began in 1839 (Macdonald, 1954) in an attempt to stabilize the shifting sand surface which by the end of the seventeenth century had overwhelmed the local agricultural estate (Steers, 1973). This was continued by the Forestry Commission whcih began planting in 1922 (Ovington, 1950). By 1950, 2,428 hectares west of the Bay of Findhorn had been afforested, approximately 80% of the total area (see Figure 4). By 1977, virtually the whole of the Culbin sands area had been afforested. Paradoxically, the sand dune stability brought about by the tree cover at Culbin sands has provided a habitat for terrestrial lichen growing on heather and has recently been identified as one of the best sites for this type of lichen development in the United Kingdom (British Lichen Society report to the NCC, 1984). However, this specialized interest must be considered against the loss of Britain's largest dune system.

The Tentsmuir system (Figure 5) shows a similar sequence of planting although early planting was restricted to shelter belts. It was not until 1924 when the Forestry Commission began planting that large-scale afforestation took place (Ovington, 1951).

iv) Agriculture on dunes

There has been a long history of grazing on dunes. Grazing is generally compatible with survival of the native flora and fauna but overstocking and therefore overgrazing can be detrimental. The heathland vegetation on acid dunes at Earlshall Muir (Leach, 1985 in press) and at Lindisfarne in Northumberland has become very fragmented due to overgrazing. Similar overgrazing on calcareous dunes by cattle, sheep or burrowing rabbits can lead to unstable conditions and eventually, large-scale erosion. At Ardnave in Islay, natural factors such as lack of new sediment combined with high stocking levels of both cattle and sheep and a large rabbit population have caused serious erosion which is accelerating (Ritchie and Crofts, 1974).

More direct losses of semi-natural dune grassland to agriculture through ploughing and reseeding have occurred at a number of places including Dunborine Links SSSI, Aberlady Bay Dunes (Gullan Links) SSSI and Tors Warren SSSI and discussions are currently in train over a proposal to plough the Earlshall dune system in Fife (Leach, 1985, in press).

In the Outer Hebrides, ploughing of the dry machair has long been a traditional practice,providing an important habitat for both plants (including

Orange-rumped Honeyguide	A single seen perched up by a bees nest on the north side of the Langtang valley (seen from the south side) about 300m above Landslide Lodge.
Rufous-bellied Woodpecker	Poon Hill
Crimson-breasted Woodpecker	Ghorapani (track to Chitre), Langtang Valley
Brown-fronted Woodpecker	Langtang Valley
Scaly-bellied Woodpecker	Ghorapani (track to Chitre)
Maroon-backed Accentor	Two in a small grassy clearing in woods below Chitre
Rufous-breasted Accentor	Around town in Ghorapani, above Ghasa, and common in the upper Langtang Valley
Brown Accentor	Common around Muktnath, frequently seen between Tukuche and Kagbeni.
Robin Accentor	Common around Muktinath and seen once in Kyagin Gompa.
Altai Accentor	Several large groups seen between Langtang and Kyangin Gompa, other groups seen above and below Ghasa and the Muktinath area.
Alpine Accentor	A single bird seen between Jharkot and Jomsom and several groups seen in the upper Langtang Valley.
Golden Bush robin	A single seen on the way up to Ghorapani
White-browed Bush Robin	Seen at Ghorapani and once in the Langtang Valley (near Landslide Lodge).
Rufous-breasted Bush Robin	Seen in forest on the way up to Ghorapani.
Blue-capped Redstart	High above Ghasa, near Tukuche, near Langtang.
White-throated Redstart	Common in open areas at higher altitudes.
Hodgsons Redstart	A single bird between Tukuche and Marpha.
Blue-fronted Redstart	Commonly seen on Jomsom and Langtang Treks
White-winged Redstart	Several around Muktinath
White-bellied Redstart	A single bird just below Langtang village.
[Grandala]	None seen!
Blue Rock-thrush	A single seen by the river above Tatopani.
Plain-backed Mountain Thrush	A single bird at Chitre (near the 'Namsate' guest house).
Long-tailed Mountain Thrush	Several seen, including at Ghorapani and in The Langtang Valley.
Scaly Thrush	Two in the woods near Pokhara.
Long-billed Thrush	A single seen in a ravine just off the path about 500m below Ghorapani in the direction of Chitre.
White-collared Blackbird	A single from the road near Dhunche (on the way to the Langtang valley area).
Dark-throated Thrush	A Black-throated Thrush seen at Tukuche and a fine looking Red-throated Thrush seen in orchards at Jharkot.
Mistle Thrush	Seen at Muktinath.
Slaty-backed Forktail	by the river at Birethanti (start of the Jomsom trek).
Chestnut-headed Tesia	Several seen lower down in the Langtang valley.
Grey-bellied Tesia	A single seen in the woods near Pokhara.
Golden-spectacled warbler	Frequently seen in forest mixed flocks
Grey-hooded warbler	Frequently seen in forest mixed flocks
Black-faced Warbler	Several seen in mixed flocks near Birethanti.
Ashy-throated Warbler	Frequently seen in forest mixed flocks.
Lemon-rumped warbler	Several seen in mixed flocks near Birethanti.
Humes Warbler	Several seen in mixed flocks near Birethanti and Pokhara.
Stoliczka's Tit Warbler	A pair seen near Tukuche and commonly seen around Muktinath/Jharkot.

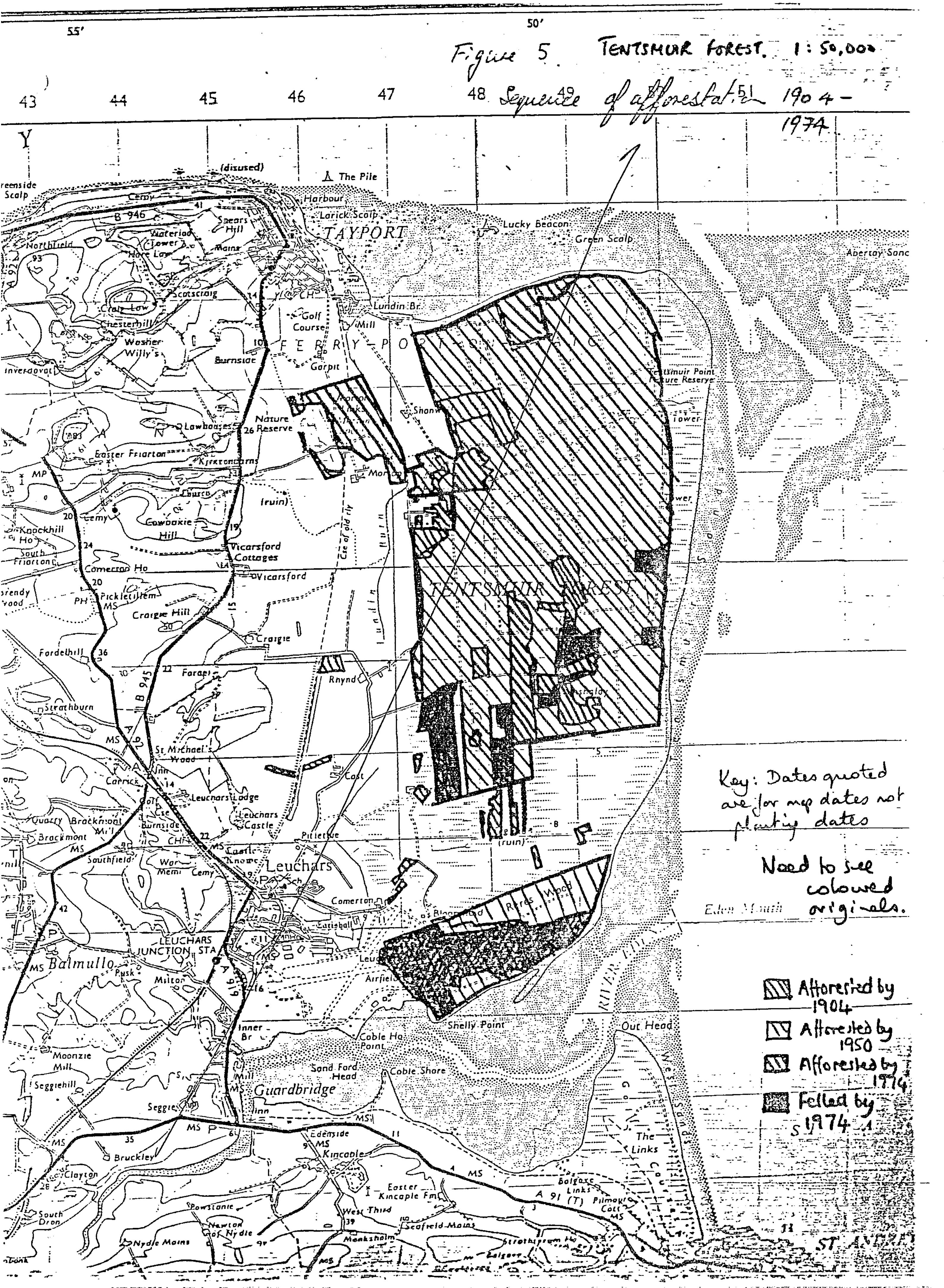

Figure 5. TENTSMUIR FOREST. 1:50,000 Sequence of afforestation 1904–1974

(Dark-sided Flycatcher)	A single *Muscicapa* flycatcher between Ghasa and Kalopani appeared to be this species but it really shouldn't be there at this time of year?
Snowy-browed Flycatcher	A single in the woods near Pokhara.
Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher	Commonly seen in forests.
Yellow-bellied fantail	Commonly seen in forest.
Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler	One seen in a mixed babbler flock near Ulleri and again in the lower Langtang valley.
Great Parrotbill	Two seen at first-light in mixed bamboo/forest on the east side at Ghasa.
Black-throated Parrotbill	Flocks were seen on several occasions in the Kali Ghandaki (near Tatopani, above Ghasa and between Ghasa and Kalopani.
Striated Laughingthrush	Seen on several occasions between landslide Lodge and Ghore Tabela in the Langtang Valley.
Variegated Laughingthrush	Commonly seen at higher altitudes.
Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush	Common in forests
Scaly Laughingthrush	Seen on two occasions in forest in the Langtang valley.
White-throated Laughinthrush	Commonly seen in forests
Spotted Laughinthrush	Two seen just off the path below Ghorapani (400m in the direction of Chitre). Several seen in mixed babbler flocks just above Syabru.
Black-faced Laughinthrush	Seen on Poon Hill and commonly higher up in the Langtang Valley (above Ghore Tabela)
Streaked Laughinthrush	Common in scrubby open areas.
Red-billed Leothrix	Seen between Tatopani and Ghasa and again in forests above Ghasa.
Black-headed Shrike babbler	A single seen just above Bamboo Lodge in the Langtang Valley.
White-browed Shrike babbler	Seen in the lower Langtang Valley
Green Shrike babbler	Seen in the lower Langtang Valley
Hoary Barwing	Seen on several occasions in forest in the Langtang valley
Chestnut-tailed Minla	Seen on several occasions in forest.
Stripe-throated Yuhina	Seen on several occasions in forest.
Rufous-vented Yuhina	Abundant above Lama Hotel in the Langtang Valley.
Rufous-fronted Tit	Seen high up in the Langtang Valley.
Black-throated Tit	Occasionally seen in mixed flocks in forests.
Yellow-browed Tit	Occasionally seen in mixed forest in the Langtang valley.
Grey-crested Tit	In forest below Ghorapani and in Langtang Valley.
Fire-capped Tit	Seen in Langtang valley and above Ghasa.
Rufous-vented Tit	Commonly seen in forest.
Black-lored Tit	Commonly seen in forest.
White-tailed Nuthatch	In a mixed flock near Ghorapani and again near Lama Hotel in the Langtang valley.
Wallcreeper	A single bird seen just outside Birethanti and others on numerous occasions in the Kali Ghandaki valley from Tatopani to Muktinath.
Eurasian Treecreeper	A single bird in orchards near Jharkot
Rusty-flanked Treecreeper	Occasionally seen in high altitude forests
Mrs Goulds Sunbird	Several seen between Lama Hotel and Ghora Tabela.
Fire-tailed Sunbird	Several seen between Lama Hotel and Ghora Tabela.
Maroon Oriole	A single in forest on the walk up to Ghorapani and another below Ghora Tabela in the Langtang valley.

rare agricultural weeds) and birds. Recently, management of machairs has changed from 'run-rigg' cultivation with small-scale planting of potatoes and oats on a cycle of several years to a more intensive two-year rotation with cereal only and using artificial fertilizers and herbicides. The overall effect of this has been to reduce the vegetation diversity, to eliminate the period of fallow when colourful machair grasslands develop and in some cases to destroy the species-rich wet grasslands which are so much a feature of the machair plains of North and South Uist. Many of these developments may become more widespread with the infusion of funds from the EEC through the Integrated Development Programme (IDP). A monitoring study has been underway and whilst there is little evidence of direct loss of important habitats, subtle but nevertheless significant changes in the flora and fauna are likely to occur.

In contrast to the over exploitation of dunes for agriculture, problems may also arise as a consequence of too little management. Calcareous dune systems require a certain level of grazing to ensure the retention of species-rich communities. At many sites where grazing management has ceased in recent years the growth of coarse grasses followed by scrub encroachment threatens the survival of plant and animal communities. This is particularly noticeable where part of the dune has been afforested or where other alien species such as Hippophae rhamnoides or rhododendron have been introduced as at Braunton Burrows NNR (Venner, 19) and Winterton Dunes NNR (Boorman, 197). Recognition of the need to understand the impact of grazing on dunes has led to the initiation of a three year study on dune grazing regimes, to be carried out by the ITE. Reports should be available in 1988.

v) Natural dune changes

The worldwide decrease in sediment availability along coastlines is particularly marked in the case of sand dunes. Evidence from Ireland suggests that the main dune-building phase finished around 2,500 BP and that few dune systems are actively accreting today (Carter, 1985). This is also true for the rest of the British Isles where with notable exceptions such as Tentsmuir Point in Fife, Morfa Harlech in Gwynedd and Tywyn Point in South Wales, most dune systems are fossilized or actively eroding. There is therefore, a particular need to avoid damage to natural dune systems since they are irreplaceable.

Eurasian Jay	A single bird in forest between Syabru and Dhunche.
Lanceolated Jay	Seen in forest near Pokhara.
Green Magpie	Seen in forest near Pokhara.
Nutcracker	Above Ghasa and above Syabru
Russet Sparrow	Several groups around Ghorapani.
Plain Mountain-finch	Several large flocks near Langtang village.
Blandford's Rosefinch	A single female in forest just below Ghorapani (in the direction of Chitre).
Common Rosefinch	A pair between Tukuche and Marpha.
Beautiful Rosefinch	Several seen in the upper Kali Ghandaki valley and commonly seen in the upper Langtang Valley.
Spot-winged Rosefinch	Several small groups seen around Ghora Tabela in the Langtang valley.
White-browed Rosefinch	Two birds seen on Poon Hill.
Streaked Rosefinch	A pair in bushes just below Jharkot.
Red-fronted Rosefinch	A fine looking male seen on a rocky slope above Kyagin Gompa.
Red-fronted Bullfinch	Several around Poon Hill and again in the Langtang Valley near Ghora Tabela.
Rock Bunting	Common near Jomsom.

Shingle

Shingle shorelines protect approximately 20% of Britain's coast. They are composed of water-worn pebbles of more than 6 millimetres in diameter and are unstable and devoid of vegetation except at the top of the shore where a few specialized plants manage to gain a foothold. Typically, plants have very long root systems to reach underlying water tables through the highly porous shingle structure. Lathyrus japonica, Mertensia maritima and Crambe maritima are among the most interesting of these species but have shown a decline since 1930 (Figures 6a,b and c), possibly in connection with the increased recreational use of shingle though the exact reasons for the decline are not clear.

Shingle shorelines may develop as a series of abutting ridges and can develop into large structures as found at Dungeness in Kent, Scolthead Island in Norfolk and Orford Ness in Suffolk which have more terrestrial features than smaller shingle features. Nevertheless, natural vegetation on shingle is limited to approximately 4,000 hectares in Great Britain and is subjected to a number of uses (Table 8) which can cause complete loss of plant cover. This takes a long time to recover as shown by the still visible wheel tracks created by vehicles during the Second World War at Dungeness.

Dungeness is Britain's largest shingle structure and also the most disturbed (see Table 8), with only approximately one third of its semi-natural vegetation still remaining (Figure 7). Although military use has removed the vegetation cover from large areas on the west side, shingle excavation for gravel is the most damaging activity since it not only removes the surface vegetation but damages the structure as well. Open water sites which develop after excavation can support bird populations but the rare shingle habitats are permanently lost. Water extraction is also a major threat to shingle communities by lowering the water table.

Shingle sites serve important sea defence functions, a role which has long been recognized. Thus discussions over shingle extraction during the 1907 'Royal Commission on Coastal Erosion and the reclamation of tidal lands in the United Kingdom' prompted many exchanges like the following,

> "Do you recommend that the removal of shingle, whether for manufacture of concrete, road-making, or ship ballast should be stopped?
>
> I think that any beach that can be shown in any way to protect the coast should be left alone... I think that ought to be enforced very strongly indeed. In many cases shingle is taken from comparatively narrow, small masses of beach, the decrease of which leads to very serious results, that is to say, the damage done is many times the worth of the shingle taken." (Vol.1(2); page 92; minute 2268)