

Himalayan Blue Sheep (Bharal) Going Blind and Bleeding from the Eyes

SEEMA SHARMA

E-mail : sharma.seema@timesgroup.com

A Border Security Force (BSF) expedition preparing for a climb to Mount Everest led by six-time summiteer Loveraj Singh Dharamshaktu has made some startling findings in Gangotri National Park (GNP) in Uttarkashi district. Dharamshaktu, a Padma Shri awardee and assistant commandant—also India's record holder for most number of Everest climbs—and his team were shocked to find that high in the Himalaya, blue sheep, known locally as Bharal, were losing their eyesight in a grotesque manner. The team spotted sheep with eyes protruded and bleeding while some had empty sockets in place of their eyes. Two sheep were found dead in the area while in another instance, a blind lamb had fallen into a pit and its mother, also blind, was standing helplessly next to it.

Suspecting it to be some sort of disease that was spreading among the ungulates, the team members alerted Gangotri Park authorities who told them that a wildlife team would be sent to rescue the animal. The team members were later told that the lamb had died at Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI), Bareilly, one of the top veterinary centres in the country. Veterinarians at IVRI, however, told that no lamb was sent to them for treatment.

Talking about their alarming discovery, Dharamshaktu said, "In September, we were camping at Kedar Tal area of the park when we spotted at least nine blue sheep, with their eyes popping out or bleeding. Some had empty eye sockets.

Both adults and babies seemed to have been afflicted. The animals were unable to see or walk properly and had become very thin. We also saw two of the animals lying dead."

Dharamshaktu added, "We also saw a blind lamb stuck in a pit as its mother, also blind, paced around restlessly. We spoke to park deputy director Shravan Kumar and he told us that the lamb would be rescued. Later we were told that it had been sent to IVRI Bareilly, where it died during treatment." The park's deputy director denied that an unknown disease had spread among sheep in the region or that they were dying. "There are no cases of sheep going blind or dying. The only instance of a blind sheep that we are aware of is the one which died after being stuck in a pit. The lamb's autopsy

has revealed that it died of lung disease," Kumar told.

IVRI scientists said that they received tissue samples of a lamb by the Uttarakhand wildlife department which showed that the sheep was infected. They, however, could not explain why the animals were going blind. A K Sharma, head of wildlife department at IVRI, said, "We examined tissue samples from the lamb which suggested infection in the lung, liver, brain and spleen of the animal. We did not receive eye tissue samples so it would be difficult to say anything. I have never heard of such an illness in blue sheep."

A day after report that Himalayan blue sheep in Gangotri National Park were losing their eyesight, scientists at Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) in Bareilly have offered to study the cause of blindness in the species. A K Sharma, head of wildlife department at IVRI, said that he has never heard of such a case and would be keen to investigate the matter if Uttarakhand wildlife officials were willing.

A Border Security Force (BSF) expedition led by Loveraj Singh Dharamshaktu, a Padma Shri awardee and assistant commandant, had spotted sheep with eyes protruded and bleeding in the park in Uttarkashi district. Some sheep had empty sockets in place of their eyes. Two sheep were found dead in the area while in another instance, a blind lamb had fallen into a pit and its mother, also blind, was standing helplessly next to it.

Tissue samples from the blind lamb had been sent to IVRI and showed that the animal was infected. However, the eye tissue was not examined and thus no explanation was provided for the mystery disease afflicting sheep.

Rajender Singh, head of pathology department at IVRI, said, "We need to examine an infected blue sheep to reach a conclusion." Dhananjai Mohan, additional principal chief conservator of forest, said that if the IVRI scientists were to send a proposal offering to study the disease in the blue sheep, the wildlife department would consider it. Mohan, however said that it might be difficult to study a live blue sheep as they are hard to catch and are found high in Himalaya. Wildlife experts said that detailed investigation should be made into the instances of blue sheep losing eyesight and dying.

Wildlife scientist Yash Veer Bhatnagar from National

Conservation Foundation in Mysore, who has 25 years of experience in studying ungulates in higher Himalaya, said, "I never came across such a case of blindness in blue sheep species throughout my study of ungulates. The wildlife department must take this seriously and get this investigated."

Scientists at the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) have asked the Uttarakhand forest department for a whole carcass of the Himalayan blue sheep (not a sample) or an ailing one, for treatment and research into its blindness. But thick snow enveloping the higher reaches of Uttarakhand is likely to play spoil sport in getting hold of the animal. IVRI officials are studying vision loss in the Himalayan blue sheep at Gangotri National Park (GNP) in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand.

Chief wildlife warden, Uttarakhand, DVS Khati said, "I will ask employees of GNP to go to Kedar Tal, (where the blind blue sheep were first spotted by a BSF team) and try to capture them. However, the team might not be able to reach the area as it is likely to be heavily covered with snow."

Principal Scientist and in-charge of the Centre for Wildlife at IVRI, A K Sharma said, "We had recently received the head of a dead blue sheep from the Uttarakhand forest department. It had no muscle (a predator must have eaten it) but only a bony socket in place of its eyes. Hence, we informed Uttarakhand forest officials that it was unfit for examination."

A BSF team preparing for an Everest climb had found that the blue sheep, considered to be an endangered species, had become thin, with their eyes bleeding or dangling from the sockets at GNP in November this year.

The national park had allegedly wanted to keep the condition under wraps. After summiter Loveraj Singh Dharamshaktu, who had spearheaded the BSF expedition, informed the park's deputy director Shraavan Kumar about a baby blue sheep and its mother who were both suffering from the eye disease, the latter assured him that the baby would be sent to the IVRI for treatment. Dharamshaktu was later told that the baby had died during treatment.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has served notices to the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), the state chief secretary, the Uttarakhand wildlife Board and served other parties asking them to inform it about the measures that have been taken to prevent disease in Himalayan blue sheep in Gangotri National Park (GNP) which were spotted going blind and bleeding from the eyes. Notices have also been served to the Uttarakhand Biodiversity Board among others.

(From Times of India)

India's Forest Cover

State of Forest Report 2017 Released

India has recorded 0.96% increase in forest cover between 2015 and 2017, with northeastern states continuing to be the most densely forested. Mizoram is having the maximum land under green cover, says a government report. Mizoram, with 86.27% of its geographical area under forest cover, has also lost the maximum forest cover among all states (531 sq km) to developmental activities and shifting cultivation.

According to the Indian State Forest Report-2017, released by the Environment Ministry, India has added 6,778 sq km of forest area—an increase of 0.96%—between 2015 and 2017 despite population and livestock pressures.

N. E. Region : However, the forest cover in five of the seven northeastern states of Mizoram (531 sq km), Nagaland (459 sq km), Arunachal Pradesh (190 sq km), Tripura (164 sq km) and Meghalaya (116 sq km) have dropped. With 66,964 sq km, or 79.96% of its area, Arunachal Pradesh comes second in terms of overall forest cover in India, even as it is over three times smaller than Madhya Pradesh that has the maximum forest cover of 77,414 sq km, about 25% of its total geographical area.

Manipur has 76.45% of its total area under forest cover; Meghalaya has 76.45% despite losing 116 sq km. Nagaland has 75.33% forest cover despite losing 450 sq km since 2015; and Sikkim has 47.13% forest cover. Assam with 35% forest cover has added 567 sq km since 2015 through plantation drive.

According to the report, shifting cultivation, biotic pressure, rotational felling, diversion of forest land for developmental activities, agricultural expansion and natural disasters were the reasons for shrinking forest land.

The total forest cover in the northeastern region is 1,71,306 sq km, which is 65.34% of its total geographical area in comparison with a national forest cover of 21.54%. This when the region has lost 630 sq km forest area since 2015.

The pan-India biennial report unveiled by Union environment minister Harsh Vardhan says the country stands 10th in the world in terms of forest area and eighth in terms of annual forest gain.

"The total forest cover of the country is 708,273 sq km, which is 21.544% of India's geographical area. The tree cover of the country is estimated to be 93,815 sq km, which is 2.85%," the report added.

Uttarakhand : Uttarakhand has recorded a net increase of 23 sq km of green cover, which has been attributed to expansion of tree cover outside forests. According to the India State of Forest Report 2017, hill state has registered a decrease of 49 sq km in the green cover within recorded forest area. The Forest Survey of India holds rotational felling of trees and development activities responsible for the dip in the forest cover.