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In search of the blue poppy – a botanical trip to Sikkim

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Fig. 19 *Meconopsis simplicifolia*.

In late May I had the opportunity to join a botanical tour to North Sikkim. A sparsely populated Indian state, Sikkim is a Himalayan former kingdom to be found between Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet (China) to the north and West Bengal to the south. I was nervous

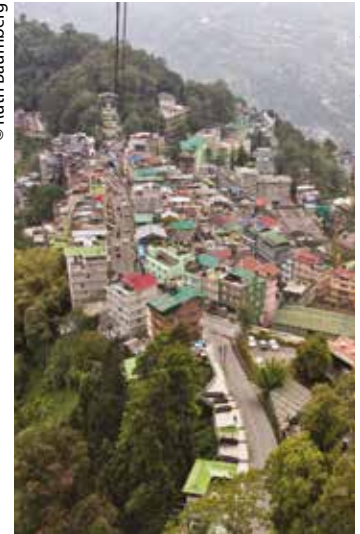
as to whether I would be fit enough for the trip, as the brochure talked about going up to 15,000ft; but this was not to be a trek, rather a journey, with fifteen of us aged between 62 and 75 plus guides and drivers, involving a great deal of very uncomfortable, bumpy

travelling in local cars on routes that were chiefly dirt roads, crossing streams and landslides up to the heights. Of course our problems were nothing compared to the privations suffered by our predecessor, Joseph Hooker, who travelled in Sikkim and the Himalayan



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Fig. 1 Mist and rain obscured what would have been spectacular mountain scenery.



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Fig. 2 Looking down on the capital, Gangtok, from the ropeway.



Fig. 3 Rhododendrons on the valley floor in a high area.

Fig. 4 *Rhododendron baileyi*.

regions in 1849–1853 and who brought back huge numbers of the rhododendrons and many other familiar plants we still grow in our gardens today.

Sadly we saw very little of the Himalayan peaks as the clouds were remorselessly low, and the rain it raineth (almost) every day (fig 1). Tantalisingly, our last hotel in Kalimpong, where plant hunter Joseph Rock (who gave his name to that beautiful and elusive species, *Paeonia rockii*) had once stayed, advertised views of Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world at 28,169ft – but we didn't even have a glimpse of it. It wasn't the monsoon season but it might as well have been, and we became adept at photographing flowers from under an umbrella – you need three hands – and appreciating that water droplets add sparkle to the pictures.

We spent a few days acclimatising with a couple of nights at an old-fashioned

hotel – courtesy of the Raj – at over 6,700ft in Darjeeling, with visits to a tea processing factory among the tea plantations and the famous Darjeeling mountain railway. Then we had another two nights in Gangtok (fig. 2) looking at the tourist sights before going up country with our precious North Sikkim passes: bureaucracy is another relic of the days of the Empire and obtaining the passes seemed almost as time consuming as Joseph Hooker's travails getting into North Sikkim in the 1840s. We were very much on Hooker's trail, and it was thrilling to find plenty of plants with his name on them throughout our trip.

We proceeded to Lachung at 9,600ft, and even before reaching such heights, passing through temperate forests of mostly teak, bamboo, fig, alder and oak, and in deep valleys trees dripping with epiphytic orchids, we started to spot some of the plants we had



Fig. 5 *R. dalhousiae*.



Fig. 6 *R. thomsonii*.



Fig. 7 *R. campanulatum*.



Fig. 8 Marshland with *Iris clarkei*.



Fig. 9 *Pleione hookeriana* in woodland.

come to see: on the roadside *Androsace sarmentosa* and tiny red wild strawberries (sadly not sweet like the alpine ones), and huge banks of lush ferns (*Gleichenia volubilis*) as we swept past. In the village gardens were familiar plants including daturas, the Tawny Daylily, *Hemerocallis fulva*, and hydrangeas, and unfamiliar plants such as the exotic Mexican introduction, pink *Hebranthus robustus*, which is a weed in agricultural land.

Lachung is the main tourist village in the north and the jumping-off point for the high alpine and rhododendron areas. North Sikkim has very little in its economy apart from tourism and the military outposts guarding the Tibet/China border, serviced by locals and Yak herders. The two don't necessarily go well together: no photography in the military areas and the yaks graze the flowers in the

high meadows, not to speak of erosion from the tourists and for both the building of permanent roads creating scars across the landscape.

Though Sikkim was not affected by the recent Nepal earthquakes, there are constant landslides in the area: two months before our visit, a landslide had caused devastation, strewing rocks, uprooting trees and changing the course of streams which were now wandering across the roads at random. The Yumthang valley (12,500ft) holds the Shingla rhododendron sanctuary, and although I am not a rhodo nut I did enjoy seeing an enormous range of species, more than twenty of various colours, shapes and sizes (figs 3–7). I wished to echo Joseph Hooker's comment: 'The splendour of the Rhododendrons is marvellous: there are 10 kinds on this hill, scarlet, white, lilac, yellow, pink,

maroon (sic). The cliffs actually bloom with them'.

On the first morning out we also made stops by a marsh full of *Iris clarkei* (fig. 8), a woodland thick with *Pleione hookeriana* (Joseph Hooker again) (fig 9) on trees and moss, and our first glimpse of Himalayan primulas with *PP. dickieana*, *calderiana* and *denticulata* (figs 10–12), the last almost as ubiquitous as in Leeds' suburban gardens. Everywhere lush and beautiful plants were just waiting to be photographed, particularly a range of arisaemas (figs 17 & 18), *Streptopus simplex*, *Viola biflora*, maianthemums, paris, *Cotoneaster microphyllus* (similar to those in many of our gardens) and buttercups. At one point we came upon a dwarf prostrate willow, *Salix calyculata*, with maroon vertical catkins, again first collected by Hooker.

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Fig 10 *P. dickieana*.

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Fig. 11 *P. calderiana*.

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Fig. 12 *P. denticulata*.

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Fig. 13 *P. atrodentata*.

After a hot lunch prepared by the drivers and guides, we progressed to a short walk in the further meadows to see our first blue meconopsis, *M. simplicifolia* (fig. 19), plus beautiful examples of vivid green *Fritillaria cirrhosa* (fig. 20), the best ones protected from the ever-grazing yaks by their position in the middle of spiny berberis shrubs, and *Clintonia udensis* in thick moss on a horizontal tree trunk together with

an unidentified primula. Later, in quite heavy rain, we crossed a tributary of the Teesta on foot over a swaying bridge and came to the spot where yellow *Meconopsis paniculata* (fig. 21) was growing. On our return journey to Lachung, stopping to photograph yet more arisaemas and rhododendrons, we came upon a rock with tiny *Lloydia serotina* and *L. flavonutans* perched in the rain.

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Fig. 14 A white form of *P. calderiana*.

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Fig. 15 *P. capitata*.

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Fig. 16 *P. concinna*.



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Fig. 17 *Arisaema speciosum*



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Fig. 18 *Arisaema tortuosum*.



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Fig. 20 *Fritillaria cirrhosa*.

We also reached a vast meadow filled with *Primula calderiana*, the Purple Golden-Eyed Primrose, first collected by Hooker in 1849 but about which Sherriff, another later planthunter wrote: 'I have never seen more of any primula except *sikkimensis*... In places the grassy hillsides were covered for areas of nearly 100 yards square'. It certainly was breathtaking, despite the rain.

The next day was the most exciting of the whole trip. We were going up to Yume Samdong, the highest point we would reach, and the weather up there was atrocious – very cold (and I hadn't packed a woolly hat or gloves), windy and raining, patches of snow and mist all around us. The higher reaches of the mountains were full of low-growing rhododendrons and it looked amazingly bleak; we saw an avalanche across the valley where the land was steeper and even more inhospitable

than our own surroundings (fig. 22). As our cars climbed up the hairpin bends on the mountain, there were thickets of a shrubby willow, *Salix sikkimensis*, complete with catkins (pussies), again first collected by Hooker. At the highest point all the vegetation was much more prostrate than at lower levels, but again we saw many new plants, particularly primulas: *P. atrodentata*, a white form of *P. calderiana*, *P. capitata* and *P. concinna* (figs 13–16). Crouched beside a yak pat was the local Himalayan form of the mandrake, *Mandragora caulescens* (fig. 23); nearby were prostrate white *Anaphalis nepalensis* and a prostrate pea, *Spongiocarpella purpurea*. Care was needed on standing up after taking photographs of plants as the altitude certainly affected my balance. My hands got very cold but happily there were some hot springs close by in a hut and I was taken there to warm up.



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Fig. 21 *Meconopsis paniculata*.



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Fig. 22 A landslide in progress across the valley.



Fig. 23 Himalayan mandrake, *Mandragora caulescens*.



Fig. 24 *Halenia elliptica*.



Fig. 25 Sundew *Drosera peltata*.

I definitely sympathised with Joseph Hooker's remarks in his 1854 Himalayan Journals: 'At 13,000ft to collect seeds of the Rhododendrons and with cold fingers it is not very easy!' Not easy taking photographs at that height either. There was a sense of relief during the long drive back to our hotel.

The following day should have been less demanding with a local roadside walk in the morning and a transfer to another village after lunch. The morning walk was pleasant and we saw a few new plants. I particularly noted *Halenia elliptica* (fig. 24), like a tiny aquilegia with backward-facing blue spurs; *Drosera peltata* (fig. 25), a sundew covered with raindrops; more ferns; a soft, deep-pinkish-red *Buddleja colvilei*, again discovered by Joseph Hooker; good euphorbias, *EE. sikkimensis* (fig. 26) and *wallichii* (fig. 27); everywhere the yellow-flowered leguminous shrub *Piptanthus nepalensis* (fig. 28), which until recently also grew in my back garden in Leeds. Also visible was a familiar moss, Stag's Horn Clubmoss, though not in fruit or flower, which I'd last seen in the Scottish

Highlands.

After lunch we were told that work was continuing to make a way out of the valley, a landslide having taken out three hairpin bends with rocks and mud, and we should leave and join the long queue to get out. Undaunted, we stopped on the way to photograph *Corallo-discus lanuginosus*, which we had seen from a moving car on our way up and whose foliage resembled a more familiar European plant, *Ramonda serbica*, which I'd last seen in Northern Greece. After a long wait, while we walked down some steps on the hillside and the cars drove precariously, one at a time, over the flattened road (fig. 29), we eventually moved on and managed to get to Lachen. Our journey took 7 hours rather than 2½, the last two in the dark on dirt roads through streams and up steep hillsides.



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Fig. 26 *Euphorbia sikkimensis*.

Our drivers were magnificent, and we had no doubts that we would arrive safely. But we were not prepared for the last hazard of the day, a steep climb in the pouring rain up dozens of steps to our hotel.

Lachen is slightly higher than Lachung but a similar small tourist village, and the following day's trip to



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Fig. 27 *E. wallichii*.

the Thangu and Chopta valleys again reached close to 15,000ft. En route we stopped to look at a damp, boggy farmyard full of yellow *Primula dickieana*, memorable for two of our number falling backwards into some noxious mud while taking photographs. A couple of hours' walk up into the hills was the most



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Fig. 28 *Piptanthus nepalensis*.

taxing part of the holiday as the altitude made climbing up even an easy path very hard work. Our efforts were rewarded, however, by a good range of 'new' flowers including *Thermopsis barbata* (fig. 30); lots of daphnes (fig. 31); *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum* (fig. 32), a relative of the 'Spotty Dotty' many HPS members



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Fig. 29 Leaving the valley.

Fig. 30 *Thermopsis barbata*.Fig. 31 *Daphne tangutica* Retusa Group.Fig. 32 *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum*, a relative of 'Spotty Dotty'.

grow; *Polygonatum hookeri* (a miniature, prostrate relative of Solomon's Seal with pink tubular flowers; and a

bud of the Slipper Orchid, *Cypripedium himalayicum*.

After a hot lunch we travelled further up into another rather bleak rhododendron valley, known somewhat ironically as 'The Valley of Flowers', where we stopped and found more plants, including another blue poppy and a rhodiola. But mostly we simply enjoyed jumping from rock to rock across the stream, though rather slowly as we were so high up, and looking at alpiners. Then it was all downhill passing another flock of yaks, stopping to photograph more yellow *Primula dickieana*, and through the military posts

and road works down to our hotel.

We left the high mountains and stayed one more night in Gangtok, then spent three days in Kalimpong, another old-fashioned hill station of the British Raj. Here we explored something of Sikkim culture, which had also interested the great plant hunters.

Memories of the high mountains and their flowers will of course stay with us. We'll enjoy their relatives in our own gardens, and appreciate the historic plant hunters who endured far greater hardships than ours to bring back the many plants that have become part of our garden heritage. 🌿

Ruth Baumberg is an enthusiastic, though she would say not particularly green-fingered, gardener and a member of the West Yorkshire Group for 30 years. After a working life in IT she is enjoying travelling to see and photograph garden plants growing in the wild. Ruth is Vice Chairman of the Society.