

..And now, for something different!

Murray Jones

I have recently returned from a tour of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. This energetic trip kept me away from canoeing, but I did get some river rafting time.

Nepal has the highest point on earth, (Mount Everest, 8848 metres), and its lowest point, 70 metres above sea level. It doesn't need a science teacher to work out that the melting snows drop down very quickly. Several rivers have a great reputation for hairy rafting and canoeing, and one of those is the Sun Kosi. A rafting trip just after the Monsoon rains will take four and a half days, whilst in April it takes double that time. The hairiest part of the river is a 30 mile stretch where it drops a mile in height. When the river is raging there is hardly a place to pull out. The river rises in Tibet, and flows down into India. It is joined by six other rivers on the way, and so when it reaches the plains the name becomes the Sapt Kosi, or Seven Kosi rivers. This is a several-miles wide series of channels and sandbanks, flowing at about 7-8 mph in February. There is a 32km barrage maintained by the Indian state of Bihar, which suffered a catastrophic collapse a couple of years ago, displacing a million people, and changing the course of the river in India by 600 km. The barrage is repaired, and much work is ongoing creating buffers to protect the land.

The barrage has become an over-winter refuge for migrating birds from Siberia, and the Kosi Thappu Bird Sanctuary now is a haven, not only for the birds, but wild elephants, rare wild water buffalos and much more.

As part of my tour I stayed at the Kosi Thappu wildlife camp, and saw many creatures. I spent half a day rafting, along with three travelling companions. The river was moving at about 7-8 mph, and when we got to our putting-in point, and looked cold. However, several young lads were dipping into the water for their morning bath. Snow melt water in February?- brass monkeys!

We just had to sit and look around, as a boatman at the back managed the oars. Cameras at the ready and binos around our necks, anticipation was the watch-word. There was mist around, so visibility was limited. However, cormorants and ruddy shell ducks were aplenty, small waders and plovers on the shoreline, and then an osprey was seen on a perch. As the sun was breaking through the mist, suddenly shapes on the riverbank turned into crocodiles, about a dozen of them. These are known as Marsh Muggers, and can be quite large. Fortunately they had not absorbed enough sun's rays to be more active, so we just floated on by. Then,- a rush of air, and circles in the water. A couple of Fresh water dolphins were about ten metres from us, coming briefly up for air, though not long enough for anyone to get a photo. They are almost blind, and use echolocation to navigate and to prey on fish and shrimps. They are endangered because of human dumping of chemicals and waste into the rivers, so it was a great privilege to have seen them.

We pulled into the bank for a welcome lunch. The bank was higher here, and we were able to see wild water buffalo and also a few wild elephants lurking in the woodland on the far bank.

We drifted on, seeing many more birds, especially bar headed geese and black and white ibis. The end of the 20 km trip came when we pulled into a shallow bank. A 45 minute walk along the beach to our Land Rover, and a wait whilst the boatmen deflated the raft and stowed it on the top of the vehicle. The wait was not at all boring, because not one but two ospreys made magical dives to catch fish not far away, though the actual take was hidden by a small island. We did see the unfortunate fish in the talons, being taken away for eating. This was a fitting end to a relaxing day filled with discovery. Not quite Basingstoke Canal, but on the water nevertheless, enjoying life.

