

From classroom to field: exploring biodiversity and field techniques at Raimona National Park, Assam

“From the majestic Golden Langur swinging through tall trees to the elusive Dhole prowling the forest floor, Raimona National Park is a living testament to nature’s resilience”.

Tucked away in the verdant landscapes of northwestern Assam, bordering West Bengal, Raimona National Park stands as a vital haven of biodiversity and ecological importance. It forms part of a larger transboundary conservation area, connecting with Bhutan’s Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary and Buxa Tiger Reserve of West Bengal, which spans over 2,400 km² of the total conservation area. Raimona National Park, owing to its distinctive geographical setting and geology, contains 12 different forest types and sub-types. These include very moist sal forests, sub-Himalayan high alluvial semi-evergreen forests, moist mixed deciduous forests, savannah forests, riparian fringing forests, khair-sisoo forests, and extensive riverbeds, making it the most biodiverse forest belt in Assam.

Historically, the area was a part of the migratory route of the faunal species from Himalayan mountain, Indo-Malayan and Indo-Chinese realms towards the west and peninsular Indian realm species to the east (The Assam Tribune 2021).

The park is particularly renowned for its population of the Golden Langur *Trachypithecus geei*, an Endangered species (Das et al. 2024) and the official mascot of Bodoland. With an estimated population of over 12,000 individuals in Assam and Bhutan (Horwich et al. 2013), this primate is found in significant numbers across parts of western Assam and Bhutan, making it one of Raimona’s star attractions. Alongside the Golden Langur, the park shelters a remarkable array of wildlife, including Asian Elephant, Royal Bengal Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Indian Gaur, Wild Buffalo, Spotted Deer, and hornbills.



Field trip

The field trip to Raimona National Park, organised by the Department of Zoology at Gauhati University, aimed to observe and document the park’s floral and

Participants of the field trip to Raimona National Park.
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Students participated in handling camera traps during fieldwork. © Vivek Chetry.

faunal diversity, study ongoing conservation practices, and enhance students' practical skills in wildlife research techniques. During our three-day journey through Raimona, field observations were conducted primarily in the western range of Raimona National Park, extending up to Jamduar, a forested area adjacent to the Sankosh River known for its rich wildlife corridor, and in the central range towards the border with Bhutan's



Golden Langur *Trachypithecus geei*. © Vivek Chetry.



Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* on dry bed of Hel River. © Binay Bhuson Nath.

Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary, which forms part of the transboundary conservation landscape connecting the protected areas of Assam and Bhutan. we documented 64 avian species, 10 mammalian species, and one reptilian species. Observations were made using binoculars, cameras, and camera traps and their GPS coordinates were recorded.

Among the 10 mammalian species observed, the endangered Golden Langur *Trachypithecus geei* stood out. These arboreal primates rely on tall trees for movement, making Raimona's dense forests ideal for their survival. Other notable sightings included the Dhole *Cuon*



Fieldwork in action: learning beyond the classroom.
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alpinus and the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, which are endangered species. We also observed Spotted Deer *Axis axis*, which represents one of the easternmost records of the species' known distribution. The Bengal Monitor Lizard *Varanus bengalensis* was the only reptilian species observed which is categorised as 'Near Threatened' (Cota et al. 2021).

The park's avian diversity was equally impressive, with 64 species observed during the trip. Highlights included the 'Vulnerable' Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*, Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris*, Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*, and the vibrant Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea*.

Wild lessons and conservation practices

This field trip offered hands-on experiences that enriched our understanding of wildlife research and conservation. We learned how camera traps help monitor wildlife without human interference, providing data on species' presence, behaviour, and population density.

We performed point and line transect sampling methods on the field. Engaging with local communities highlighted the importance of involving them in conservation efforts.

Their knowledge and cooperation are vital in mitigating human-wildlife negative interactions and promoting sustainable livelihoods. One memorable moment was spotting a Leopard's pug mark-a reminder of the park's hidden wonders and the thrill of discovery.

We learned that anti-poaching camps, strategically cleared strips of land (fire lines), and habitat restoration efforts play a crucial role in wildlife protection and park management. For example, invasive plant species like Siam Weed *Chromolaena odorata* that once dominated certain areas are now being replaced with native vegetation, gradually transforming degraded patches into productive grasslands.

Conclusion

Raimona National Park is more than just a protected area. It is a lifeline for biodiversity

and a bridge between nations. As a critical wildlife corridor, it facilitates the movement of species between India and Bhutan, ensuring genetic exchange and ecological stability. However, sustaining its ecological and cultural significance requires continuous effort.

Strengthening wildlife corridors, empowering local communities, and implementing robust conservation policies will be key to preserving this natural heritage.

As we left the park, the distant call of a hornbill echoed through the trees—a poignant reminder of the delicate balance we must protect. Let us all play a part in safeguarding Raimona's future, for it holds lessons and treasures that benefit not only Assam but the world.

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