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Kathmandu Natural History Museum - notes on a short visit in November 1985

Returning from a trek, we had a few days to explore Kathmandu before leaving for home and included a visit to Nepal's national natural history museum.

The only big problem was finding it ! Thankfully, one tourist leaflet mentioned that it was near one of the big temples which was on the map.

How to get there ? Hire a bike. A bargain at 8 Rupees/day (36p), fairly quick and good for avoiding hassles ! Make sure that it has a good bell. Riding through Kathmandu is a bit like cycling through a ploughed field at the same time as the RAC rally, a circus and one thousand hyperactive double-glazing salesmen.

If you ever have the good sense to visit Nepal then head for the Swayambunath, popularly known as the Monkey Temple. Cycle around the south side of the temple mound and you will eventually see a smallish brick-built building with the words 'Natural History Museum' on the gable end. The hundreds of child 'guides' will not believe that you want to go there instead of to the temple.

The museum was locked when we first arrived at 10 a.m., but a friendly, elderly Nepali cheerfully answered the door and opened it up.

The contents of a Kathmandu museum must create an impression in everyones mind. The first impression was of a small museum with rather old-fashioned displays. The general layout of cases and specimens was reminiscent of the sort of museum that is regarded generally as poor by British curators. However, the interest of the displays to me proved great on closer examination. There were cases exhibiting the more obvious Nepalese butterflies, and others with Nepal examples of the major insect orders and families. The museum staff have been collecting actively and many data labels were very recent.

Vertebrates were represented by mounts of most of the smaller native mammals and a few birds. Thankfully there were none of those awful mongoose and cobra mounts which haunt the souvenir stalls of the Indian subcontinent, as well as many a U.K. enquiry desk ! Many birds on display were study skins. These gave a chance for yours truly to check up on a few identification points not covered in the field guide. Again these were in superb condition and recently obtained.

Unfortunately the only curator present spoke very poor English, and I even less Nepali ("Please may I see your entomological reference collections ?" was not in my phrasebook.!). All in all, a very interesting visit. Don't forget to sign the visitors' book.

I didn't have time to visit the National Museum as well (although it is on the maps). However, as I chatted to a bank clerk one day he asked what I did in England. The answer was followed by considerable mirth amongst all of the bank staff. "After all," they said "it is so funny that you came all this way to see our museum and it only has replicas. You have all the real things in England!" What can you say?

Steve Garland

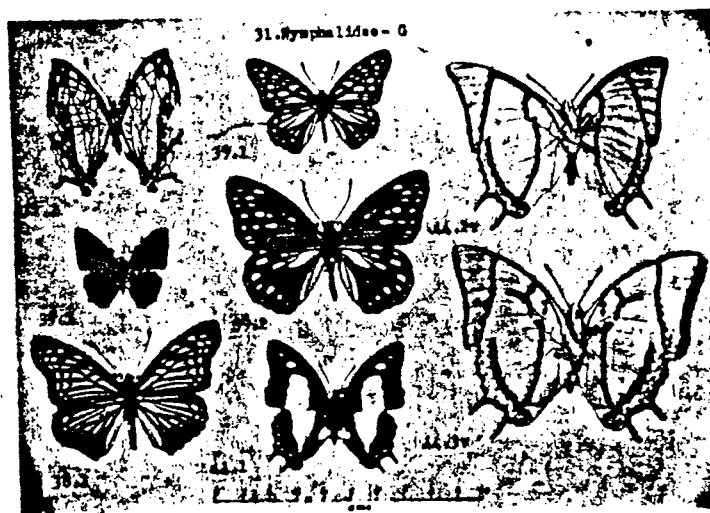
Field Guide to Nepal's Butterflies, by C. Smith
Natural History Museum Bulletin 2.

Natural History Museum. Institute of Science and Technology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. Price 63.00 Nepalese Rupees. 1981 (Limited edition of 500). Tribhuvan University Press

This book contains over 200 genera and about 480 species of butterfly. There are keys to families and subfamilies and, in the case of Papilionidae and Pieridae, down to genera. Each species is listed with notes on distribution, flight period and altitudinal range, together with useful notes concerning identification. Small black and white photographs of a selection of species are included.

A basic guide, on a similar level to many regional guides in Britain. However, it was an adequate guide for most butterflies which we observed in November and is the best available (only available) guide for Nepal.

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*G.34.1 *Pseudergolis wedah* (Tabby) This butterfly does not appear to be related, but has similar habits. It could be confused with the Ariadne (G.22) but for its discal row of black spots (and stronger flight). It flies in mainly jungle habitat, 3400- 6600 ft. from April to June.

*G.35.1 *Apatura ambica* (Indian Purple Emperor) The male of this very rare butterfly has a beautiful purple sheen. Only one record is known- from E. Nepal, 3600 ft. in May.

*G.36.1 *Rohana parisatis* (Black Prince) This tiny butterfly darts rapidly around rocks by the streams in East Nepal.