

Himalayan trek tests gunners' endurance

A group of gunners returned exhausted but ecstatic after embarking on a high altitude expedition in the remote Himalayan wilderness.

Twelve months' planning went into the trek to Nepal, led by Major Tony Heath RA and made up of six soldiers from the King's Troop RHA alongside the Farrier Sergeant Major from the Defence Animal Centre, Melton Mowbray.

After a long flight via Bahrain, the soldiers stayed in Kathmandu's luxury Hotel De L' Annapurna – in stark contrast to conditions to come.

After an interesting two days, including a tour of the town and visit to a funeral pyre, the group prepared for the expedition.

"Two hair-raising internal flights later, we arrived at Shey Phoksumdo National Park," said Sgt Major WO1 Mark Watson, senior Farrier RHA who runs the Army School of Farriery at the DAC.

"Throughout the next 21 days we would be trekking for up to eight hours a day, reaching altitudes of up to 5,400 metres.

"We started off at around 2,000m and as we trekked through the bottom of a river valley to Shey Phoksumdo Lake we encountered several small, remote villages.

"The local people are incredibly poor and survive on the crops from their harvest and heating from dried yak dung collected by elder members of the community.

"Despite the conditions they were incredibly welcoming and always seemed happy and interested to see us."

The party continued

hiking through the National Park, moving with 20 porters and three guides, until crossing an enormous pass at 5,400m. This took them out of Shey Phoksumdo and into a far more remote area.

"By that time we hadn't seen any other people for about six days," said Sgt Major Watson.

"After several cold nights and some severe weather we arrived at a relatively large place where our chefs kindly purchased a goat, slaughtered it in front of us and turned it with amazing efficiency into a stew.

"If you've never tried goat stew then my advice is not to! We lived off the goat for the next three days – it arrived on our table in various forms, including curry, stir-fry and soup, all of which tasted pretty repulsive.

"After two-and-a-half weeks we peaked with a sleeping height of 4,800m. After a restless night we rose with thumping headaches in the freezing cold to begin our descent.

"We trekked to the final 5,400m peak and after a steep descent made our way back to civilisation.

"After three weeks in the remote wilderness of the Himalayas, we reached the small town of Kagbeni, happy to see real beds and running water again.

"Nepal was a fantastic experience – the trip of a lifetime. Difficult in places and very remote, we encountered a totally different way of life.

"Of course, the group you travel with is crucial to the smooth running of any trip and the mix of ours was about as perfect as it could be, so that we gained a great amount from the expedition."

JOINT SERVICES TEAM IN PACIFIC OCEAN EXPEDITION TO HELP CONSERVE SHARKS

Shark A-tag!

▶ Sixteen military personnel from the Army, Navy and RAF have completed an ambitious diving expedition to tag endangered sharks around several remote Pacific Islands.

The team, led by ARTD's Major Andy Reid, SO2 Training & Assurance at HQ ITG, spent three weeks on Exercise Jurassic Shark 2, travelling from Guadalupe to the Revillagigedo Islands off the coast of Mexico.

Their challenge – the second shark tagging expedition to be conducted by the Joint Services Shark Tagging Team – was to contribute to shark conservation in the area by tagging a total of 20 sharks, including great white and scalloped hammerhead sharks.

The tags send signals to underwater radio receivers allowing the movements of the sharks to be recorded.

Major Reid, who has nearly 25 years diving experience with more than 1,300 logged dives, said the expedition was a valuable opportunity for military personnel to undertake scientific work in an adventurous setting.

"It was all about experiencing controlled exposure to risk and developing the kind of leadership, teamwork, courage and co-operation that is vital to military operational capability," he said.

"Sharks are in dramatic decline around the world and this was our

chance to make a difference by establishing those parts of the shark's habitat that most need protection."

All tagging was carried out while the sharks were free swimming as this is least stressful for the animal. The expedition started at Guadalupe, west of the Baja California peninsula where 10 great white sharks were tagged from the surface, under the direction of a locally-based scientist.

After four days tagging white sharks, the team moved to the Revillagigedo Islands where they began the difficult task of tagging scalloped hammerheads, an exceptionally skittish species.

Major Reid said that diving there took place in open waters in areas that should have been prime habitats – sadly, the effects of shark fishing meant hardly any sharks were seen until the team reached an isolated rock outcrop just 80 metres long.

Despite difficult conditions, including strong currents, huge swell, extreme depths – and sea urchins – they managed to tag six hammerhead sharks, three Galapagos sharks and a silver-tip shark. Tissue samples were also taken from two manta rays for DNA and toxin analysis.

Expedition member Corporal Tim Gort from 3 RSME Regiment in Surrey, summed up the experience: "The expedition has been hugely

ambitious and an incredible experience. The rate that sharks are being needlessly killed is unsustainable and most are now endangered. The work we have done will result in a better understanding of shark movements and help national and international strategies for their protection."

The expedition was carried out in co-operation with the Mexican marine research organisations, Centro De Investigaciones Biologicas del Noroeste, S.C. (CIB) and the Centro Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Marinas (CICIMAR). It was sponsored by the Joint Services Expedition Trust and approved by the Royal Geographical Society. Scientific equipment was bought with funds from Selex Galileo.

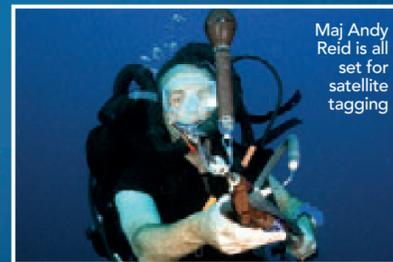
• For more information, visit www.jurassic-shark.org.uk



Matt Palmer tagging a great white shark



Great white shark



Maj Andy Reid is all set for satellite tagging



Elusive prey of the taggers

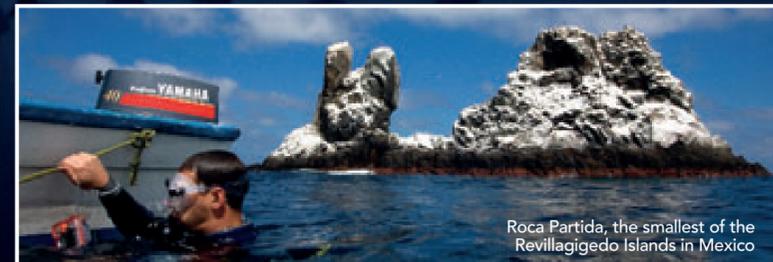
Tagging sharks in the Revillagigedo Islands was incredibly difficult, says Major Andy Reid.

"The sharks were present only in small numbers, were incredibly timid and not everyone had the skills in terms of patience, tenacity and marksmanship needed to tag sharks. Shark tagging is about 95 per cent waiting and 5 per cent real excitement.

"Also, we simply did not have enough spearguns or tags (especially £2,500 satellite tags) and the game was constantly changing as a result of currents, sea conditions, water temperature, time of day etc. You might see sharks in one location only to find you couldn't get near there an hour later because the current had changed direction. As a result, half the team dived with a heavily pregnant whale shark but not one of them was equipped to tag her.

"Co-ordinated teamwork was required to get as many of the right people with the right kit for the job into the right place at exactly the right time. Different species required different equipment. The team ultimately got this right for the hammerhead and Galapagos sharks, but the whale sharks decided to stop playing much too early in the game, with the result that there was no longer a right time or place.

"All this proved to be a useful case study in coping with constant, unpredictable change in a challenging environment with limited resources. It also clearly demonstrated that you must always work as hard as possible to be prepared to take an opportunity as soon as it presents itself. Like whale sharks, really important opportunities rarely seem to come around twice!"



Roca Partida, the smallest of the Revillagigedo Islands in Mexico



Capt Gilbert and Gnr Johnson negotiate the Funfingerspitzen Traverse

Artillery dozen aim high on the Italian job

Twelve members of the Artillery Centre went on a demanding climbing expedition to develop leadership and self-confidence.

Planning for 'Exercise Limestone Tiger' started months before the long journey from Larkhill to the Dolomite mountains, northern Italy.

Capt Hugh Gilbert from 104 Regt RA (V), and SSgt Gaz Lant from the RA Adv Trg Centre joined instructors from within the garrison for the adventure led by the Chief Instructor of the ACS branch (RSA) Lt Col Garry Mason.

The adventure enhanced climbing experience for all members in order to develop leadership, self-confidence and prepare soldiers for instructor courses.

Members of the expedition with no qualification took their Rock Climbing Proficiency (RCP).

Two days of torrential rain greeted the group on arrival at Cortina, Italy, the location for the first base camp.

The expedition assembled into teams to assault the different stunning routes and climbs.

The tactical importance of the Dolomites during the First World War was evident on almost every mountain, with labyrinths of tunnels and catacombs; some descents included impromptu battlefield tours.

The move toward the famous Sella Pass and the second and final base camp pushed the intensity of the expedition further still.

The climbs, some difficult and committing routes, would have been an achievement for experienced climbers, let alone a group including novices. Everyone was challenged and pushed well outside their comfort zones – true adventure training.

The expedition provided elements of adventure, leadership, teamwork and camaraderie.



Gnr Dan Crawford and Gnr Dan Clark reflect on the remaining ascent of Funfingerspitzen



Mark Watson nearing the end of the expedition