
TIMOTHY ELSON

India 2018



Flat Top (6100m) in the Brammah area. The north spur is centre right and the east ridge is on the left. (*Timothy Elson*)

The 2018 season in India was quieter than normal in terms of successes, due to unseasonably bad weather in the post-monsoon season. However, there were two outstanding ascents and one major repeat. The highlight of the pre-monsoon season was the first ascent of Janhukot (6805m) by the British team of Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg and Guy Buckingham; they climbed the south-west buttress to the south ridge over four days. It was Malcolm Bass' third attempt at climbing Janhukot and Paul Figg's second attempt. The highlight of the post-monsoon season was the fifth ascent of Cerro Kishtwar (6173m) by a Japanese team made up of Genki Narumi, Yusuke Sato and Hiroki Yamamoto by a new route on the north-east face in mid September. They were caught in a terrible storm on the descent that washed away roads and Manali's petrol station, causing havoc across the northern Indian Himalaya, and so had a real battle to make it down. The major repeat was of the 1997 British route (Murphy, Cave, Fowler and Sustad) on the north face of Changabang (6864m) in May by the French team of Léo Billon, Sébastien Moatti and Sébastien Ratel, part of the Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne (GMHM). It is rare for routes of this calibre to be repeated.

There were 117 Indian expeditions and 34 foreign expeditions registered with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in 2018. Most were to popular mountains such as Kun (7077m), Nun (7135m), Deo Tibba (6001m) etc. There were numerous teams in Kashmir climbing in both the pre- and post-monsoon period, and there seemed to be few access issues. However in November 2018 there was a political assassination in Kishtwar and in 2019 there have been several terrorist incidents within Kashmir, which led to an escalation with Pakistan: this is expected make access to Kashmir's mountains more difficult for the 2019 season. It should be noted that the current FCO advice is not to travel to Jammu & Kashmir with the exception of Ladakh.

The weather in the post-monsoon season was the worst for a generation according to residents in Manali and Padum. The Rohtang pass tunnel is due to open in 2019, which will provide quicker access north of Manali: to Lahul, Pangi and Spiti. There is also a plan to link Manali to Leh with a railway, which would be one of the highest in the world and will connect Delhi to Leh in 20 hours. In Kashmir, there is a plan to create an all-weather tunnel on the Srinagar to Kargil road to bypass the Zoji La. The state of Uttarakhand, which includes Garhwal, is due to get air ambulances in 2019. These are not mountain rescue helicopters but may be used to evacuate casualties in remote locations. In 2018 there was a semi-permanent high-altitude medical and research centre at Stok Kangri (6154m) base camp for the season, where 500 patients were treated and 14 evacuations were conducted. Stok Kangri is the most popular trekking peak in India, located near Leh.

In August 2018, Uttarakhand's high court banned overnight camping in *bugyals*, alpine meadows, which led to a ban on trekking. However, latest information suggests this ban has been overturned after the government of Uttarakhand challenged the order on the grounds that many people's livelihoods are dependent on income from trekking groups.

Janhukot

In the pre-monsoon season the British team of Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg and Guy Buckingham made the first ascent of Janhukot (6805m) via the south-west buttress to the south ridge. They were accompanied by Hamish Frost who made a film about the trip, available online. Janhukot had been attempted seven times previously, including a 2004 attempt by Malcom Bass and Paul Figg, and a 2014 attempt by Malcom Bass and Simon Yearsley. After climbing the lower buttress, the 2014 expedition reached the top of a feature known as 'The Castle' on the south ridge, at 6,600m only a couple of hundred metres from the summit but strong wind and impending darkness forced retreat. Janhukot is 18km up the Gangotri glacier adjacent to Chaukhamba (7138m), which sits at the head of the Gangotri glacier. The team reached base camp (4400m) below Kedar Dome (6940m) on 22 May. They acclimatised on Kedar Dome between 25 and 27 May. After a rest it took two days to get from base camp to the base of Janhukot on 1 June. At 1.30am next day, the team headed up the funnel and ramp on the



The line of the first ascent of Janhukot: south-west buttress to south ridge.
(*Hamish Frost*)

south-west buttress, reaching a safe bivy spot at 9am in the morning where they rested for the remainder of the day. The second day they reached a bivy spot 100m below the junction with the south ridge and on the third day reached the ridge and continued along knife-edge terrain. In the afternoon the weather deteriorated and after trying to dig into the ridge, thought better of it and moved up to below the Castle, where they made a 50m abseil to a perfect bivy spot in a wind scoop. Next morning was very Scottish, i.e. mist and drizzle, but at 7am they set out anyway for the summit, which they reached in the afternoon; they were back at the tent by 9pm. Next day they made a long descent down the ridge and then the east side of the mountain, the same descent Malcolm Bass and Simon Yearsley had used in 2014. They graded the route ED1, Scottish IV with 1,700m of vertical height gain.

Cerro Kishtwar

In September the Japanese team of Genki Narumi, Yusuke Sato and Hiroki Yamamoto climbed a new route over six days on the north-east face of Cerro Kishtwar (6173m), the fifth ascent of the mountain. Cerro Kishtwar is the stunning Patagonian-type mountain – hence the name – situated in



Cerro Kishtwar's east face with Chomochior on the right. The Japanese route climbs the bottom left of the east face then goes around the buttress and out of the photo. (*Mick Fowler*)

the centre of the Kishtwar Himalaya. It was first climbed in 1993 by Mick Fowler and Steve Sustad, although the previous year Brendan Murphy and Andy Perkins had got to within 100m of the summit over 17 days up a futuristic line on the north face. The second ascent had to wait until 2011 when restrictions on mountaineering in the Kishtwar were lifted and Stephan Siegrist, Denis Burdet and David Lama climbed the north-west face. In 2015 Hayden Kennedy, Marco Prezelj, Manu Pellisier, and Urban Novak climbed the east face and last year Siegrist returned with Thomas Huber and Julian Zankar to climb the north face direct. The Japanese team set up basecamp on 3 September in the Chomochior valley, the same side of the mountain that Marko Prezelj et al made the third ascent of Cerro Kishtwar via the east face in autumn 2015. In fact the Japanese team were inspired to attempt their line from a photo provided by this team.

After acclimatising they set off up the north-east face on 20 September from their advance base below the face, climbing a 1,000m snow gully with a steep ice section at the top on the first day. On day two they had 500m of technical climbing to get to the summit: they went without bivy kit as they had a short weather window. The second day started with a skinny ice pillar and some tricky mixed pitches to reach the upper wall where they climbed bold mixed pitches. The team reached the summit at 11pm and started rappelling into the night, stopping for two hours to brew and reaching their tent at midday on 22 September. By this time a storm had moved in; this was the

season's major storm that caused havoc throughout the northern Himalaya region. They continued to make a further 20 abseils down the face whilst being hit by avalanches. They were in a serious situation but luckily at midnight found a safe place to stop for the night. On their fourth day out they reached the glacier to be met with three feet of fresh snow to wade through to reach advance base, which had been destroyed by snow. Having rebuilt their camp, it was rocked by an avalanche and so they moved it 200m down the glacier under a boulder to sit out the storm. They finally returned to base camp on 25 September. They named the route *All Izz Well* (VI, WI5, M6, 1500m) after the Bollywood film *3 Idiots*.

Changabang

From 11 to 13 May the French team of Léo Billon, Sébastien Moatti and Sébastien Ratel of the Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne (GMHM) made the second ascent of the 1997 route on the north face of Changabang (6864m). The north face was climbed over 10 days by Andy Cave, Brendan Murphy, Mick Fowler and Steve Sustad; tragically, Murphy died in an avalanche on the descent. It is rare for routes of this calibre to be repeated in the Himalaya, however a direct route on the north face was climbed in 1998 by a US-Russian team. The French team made a remarkable three-day ascent of the route using a combination of the line attempted in 1996 by Roger Payne, Julie-Ann Clyma, Andy Perkins and Murphy and the 1997 route. The route is 1,200m and climbed in 40 pitches. The team stopped short of the main summit to make the long and difficult descent down and around the mountain.

Kashmir & East Karakoram

With the removal in 2016 of foreign nationals requiring a protected area permit to visit the Nubra valley, the popularity of the Indian east Karakoram has increased with foreign expeditions. There were Indian expeditions to Saser Kangri I (7672m), Plateau (7287m) and Saser Kangri IV (7416m); sadly the well-known climber Pemba Sherpa died in a crevasse fall descending from a successful ascent of Saser Kangri IV.

To the south of the Saser Kangri group an Estonian expedition visited the Kunzang range in July, making a long approach from Rongdo and crossing a high pass (5981m) to the Phurdupka glacier. From the North Phurdupka glacier, they took four days to make the first ascent of peak 6801m via the south-west ridge and west face; the peak has various different names on different maps so the Estonians named it Rangston Gyathok, which means '100 years of independence' in Ladakhi and celebrates the hundredth anniversary of the Republic of Estonia.

In July a German expedition also started from Rongdo and set up base camp in the Rongdo valley. Initially their aim was to climb peak 6064m but regular rock fall on their intended route put them off and they switched to peak 6235m. On 22 July they climbed the south face of Phokto Scheyok (Black Pyramid) (6235m); the expedition noted that the valley had numerous 500m unclimbed granite walls, as well as several unclimbed 6,000m peaks.



The north face of Chiling II (6253). (Alex Mathie)

Ladakh

In August, Pawel Sharma, Passang Tenzing and Girish Singh from the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), Darjeeling, made the first successful traverse from Kang Yatse I (6401m) to Kang Yatse II (6250m). These are both popular peaks situated close to Leh.

Zaskar

Missing from 2018's India summary was the first confirmed ascent of Chiling II (6253m) and the first ascent of the east ridge of Chiling I (6349m). Jon Griffin and Tad McCrea (USA) made the first ascent of the east ridge of Chiling I (6349m) in August 2017 and named the route *Wantonly Tarnished* (600m, 70°). On 29 July 2017, a Spanish team of Oriol Baró and Lluç Pellissa made the first confirmed ascent of Chiling II (6253m) via the east ridge in a 23-hour push, rating the 900m route ED, 6b, M4+ 80°. In 2015 an American team got to within 80m of the summit via the same route before retreating; there has been some confusion on the naming of Chiling I and II in the past with both being referred to as Z2, which, on the Indian Mountaineering Foundation classification, is a mountain further south above the Durung Drung glacier. Chiling I seems to have first been ascended from the south by an Italian expedition in 1977 and had a further ascent in 1982. The 2017 Spanish team had started their trip climbing in the Shafat valley climbing various routes on the Shafat Fortress and its surrounding peaks; they made the first ascent of the east buttress of Shafat Fortress (c5900m, 700m, 6b, A0 and snow). They then climbed the west summit of Shafat



The Mulung Tokpo team heading to their high camp. (*Derek Buckle*)

Fortress (5700m) via a route named *Estética Goulotte* (900m, V/5+, M5).

In 2018 some of the Spanish team returned to the Shafat valley, the team was made up of Iker Madoz, Oriol Baró, Edu Espanyol, Edu Sanchez, Anna Gimeno, Ferran Rodriguez, Luis Alfonso Sanz and Santi Gracia. They spent three weeks in June in the valley and had almost consistently good weather, allowing them to make 30 new routes from V to 7b on routes from 150m long to alpine undertakings. The rock is reported to be excellent granite and good climbing was reached within half an hour's walk from base. Ferrán, Oriol and Iker climbed two alpine routes on peaks 5600m and 5950m. Chiling II (6253m) saw two attempts in 2018, the first in June by a British team of Alex Mathie and Matt Harle and the second in the autumn by Alan Rousseau and Tino Villanueva (USA). In June the British team first attempted the east buttress of Lalung III (6126m) for acclimatisation, which is situated at the head of Lalung valley where the Lalung and Chiling peaks form its eastern boundary. They reached a shoulder at 5,600m but were then snowed off the peak. After that they attempted the north face of Chiling II (6253m) on 21 June but were turned around by heavy spindrift avalanches. The American team had the same objective in the autumn, the north face of Chiling II (6253m). However the storm of 22 and 23 of September scuppered their trip. Police came to rescue them and they evacuated base camp. The same thing happened to the British Kishtwar expedition made up of Tom Livingstone, Uisdean Hawthorn and Will Sim. Their main aim was the first ascent of Barnaj II (c6300m). The team were 'rescued' after the storm of 22 September, but after negotiation was allowed



Above: Open bivy site looking over the Hagshu valley. (*Beth Goralski*)



Left: Tower 1 in the Kange valley. Tower 7 is to the right. (*Beth Goralski*)

to continue. After that they went to attempt Chiring (c6300m) but only got as far as its base, after which they made the decision to abandon.

In September an Alpine Club team including Derek Buckle, Drew Cook, Mike Fletcher, Adele Long, Gus Morton and Tony Westcott explored the Mulung Tokpo. They approached from Leh via the Kargil road to Padum where they started the two-day walk in to base camp at the head of the Mulung glacier. They established a high camp at 5,085m in the south branch of the Mulung glacier and on 19 September Derek, Drew, Mike and Adele made an attempt on peak 5631m via its north face, retreating 300m from the summit due to cold and unconsolidated snow. The same day Gus and Tony gained the Aari Dont col (5480m) and Gus continued onto the summit of Aari Dont (5557m) to make the first ascent via the north-west ridge. The rest of the team repeated the ascent of Aari Dont the following day with Derek and Mike continuing on to climb the adjacent peak Chilh Point (5537m). When they returned to base camp they were also hit by the big storm of 22 September. Their base camp was buried and they abandoned everything other than essential gear and waded down Padum.



Kishtwar Eiger (6000m) with base camp in the foreground. (*Timothy Elson*)

An American team, Beth Goralski and Lindsey Hamm, visited the Kange valley north of the Hagshu valley in September where they attempted peak 19,000ft. They attempted a ridge with seven spires that would lead to the summit, but after initial exploration of the north face could not find a safe line. They set off on the ridge on the 20th of September and climbed the first spire with climbing up to 5.9 to a bivy. The next day they decided to retreat due to the complex looking ground ahead and a deteriorating forecast. While retreating they were hit by the major storm of 22 and 23 September, they made it back to base camp on 22 September and their base camp was quickly buried. After they storm they went down to the nearest village and decided to abandon their expedition.

Kishtwar

Expeditions to the Kishtwar side of the Himalayan watershed in the autumn of 2018 were also affected by the storm of 22 and 23 September and the following continually bad weather, resulting in no expeditions being successful, apart from from the Japanese ascent of Cerro Kishtwar described above. The Anglo-New Zealand Kishtwar expedition made up of Timothy Elson and Richard Measures attempted Flat Top (6100m) and Kishtwar Eiger (6000m) from the Brammah glacier. They approached via Kishtwar itself up the Marau valley and the Nanth Nullah but arriving at base camp



At the base of the north spur. *(Timothy Elson)*



Day one on Kishtwar Eiger with Brammah II, Flat Top & Brammah I.
(Richard Measures)



Ice climbing on Kishtwar Eiger during day two. (*Timothy Elson*)

were caught in the storm and after this the mountains were buried under snow for the rest of the expedition. The pair made a three-day attempt on the north spur of Flat Top (6100m) and retreated due to bad weather. Up to their highpoint the climbing had been technically interesting, mixed climbing up to Scottish VI. They went up for a second attempt but received a new, worse weather forecast and attempted the easier east ridge in a single push, retreating from 5,400m when they realised they were not going to make the summit in a day. Following that they reached 5,700m on the south face of the Kishtwar Eiger (6000m): enjoyable climbing similar to Scottish gully climbs with several bold ice pitches. However they retreated in a storm on the second day of their attempt. The mountains surrounding the Brammah glacier were once very popular, due to their short approaches, modest altitude and striking lines. However, this was this was thought to be the first expedition to the area in almost 30 years.



Above: Route attempted by US team on 6,000m peak adjacent to Arjuna. (Whitney Clarke)

Left: Airy climbing above the Kijai Nala. (Josie McKee)

In September Whitney Clarke, Josie McKee and Caro North (USA) visited the Kijai Nala where they initially intended to attempt the west face of Arjuna (6230m). Arjuna's west face currently has four routes on it: two from Polish climbers in the early 1980s, which must have been among the hardest technical routes in the Himalaya at the time, and two from 2017 as reported in last year's *Alpine Journal*. The rock on Arjuna is reported to be granite of exceptional quality covered in chicken-heads. As with other teams in the post-monsoon period the Americans had poor weather, which impeded their acclimatisation and scoping of their routes. On 17 September they received a favourable forecast and set out for Arjuna. It took them a full day to navigate the maze of glacier to the mountain and upon reaching Arjuna the west face was caked in snow, so they switched objectives for a 6,000m peak just to the north. The next day they set off up the south-west face, climbing from 4,900m to 5,500m on the first day, encountering difficulties up to 5.10. Next day they climbed six pitches before the weather closed in and they retreated back to their 5,500m camp. On 20 September they descended the lower section of their route and returned to basecamp just missing the big storm of 22 and 23 September.

Himachal Pradesh

In September the Swiss Stephan Siegrist and Jonas Schild aimed to attempt the north face of Shiva (6142m) in Himachal Pradesh along with photographer Dominic Fischer. The expedition did not get off to the best start with base camp being put on the wrong side of the mountain. The storm of 22 September hit as they were moving base. They then scoped out the line on the north face of Shiva and decided that after the heavy snow it was unfeasible and moved to the west ridge only to meet similar conditions. They did put up an 8a+ crack-line in the Jobri-Nala valley: this is thought to be the hardest crack in India at the moment. Shiva was first climbed in 1973 by a Japanese team via the south ridge; the south-west ridge was climbed in 1975 by another Japanese team. In 1988 the west ridge was climbed again by a Japanese team and in 2012 Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden climbed the 'prow' of Shiva, the north-west buttress that involved sustained hard mixed climbing and won them the Piolet d'Or.



The 'Unknown Mountain', Baspa valley. (Hansjörg Auer)

In October Hansjörg Auer, Max Berger, Much Mayr and Guido Unterwurzacher made the first ascent of 6050m above Sangla in the Baspa valley. The team climbed the route in alpine style over three days, 3 to 5 October, climbing the south-east face and finding beautiful mixed climbed that was never extreme. Each afternoon on the route they had snow showers and during their stay they did not experience stable weather.

In June Damien Gildea attempted a solo ascent of the south face of Chau Kang Nilda (6303m), meaning the 'Blue Moon in the Sky' in Spiti; he reached around 6,150m before being stopped by a large crevasse.

From 5 to 15 January 2019 the inaugural Piti-Dharr International Ice Climbing Festival was held in Spiti, where both novice and experts climbed and several first ascents were made. The potential for ice climbing in the region of the Himalaya is only just beginning to be explored.

Uttarakhand

In the Garhwal, the major ascents were the first ascent of Janhukot and the repeat of the original route on the north face of Changabang, already



Chombu (6362m) seen from the slopes of Pheling. (Nicholas Hurndall Smith)

described above. As with other areas in the Himalaya the post-monsoon weather was not stable. In the autumn Alex Gammeter and Philipp Bühler from Switzerland made the first ascent of Sri Kailas West (6803m) via the south face. After arriving at the start of October and acclimatising, they set off from a high camp on 20 October and climbed the south face with descent via peak 6617m's south face. In October the British team of John Crook and Dave Sharpe attempted the massive north-east ridge of Nanda Devi East (7434m) but were shut down at 6,300m by the large amount of snow that had fallen earlier in the month.

Sikkim

In 2018 there seemed to be very few expeditions to Sikkim, other than a British expedition made up of Derek Buckle, Nick Hurndall Smith and Nick Berry, who went to attempt the first ascent of Brumkhangshe (5635m). The team encountered deep snow, which hindered mountain activity. After establishing base camp the team went exploring, after being turned around by deep snow on an acclimatisation foray on Brumkhangshe (5635m), they then made an ascent of the trekking peak known as Pheling (5500m). Nick and Nick also came close to summiting Eagle Peak (5540m) and then made a determined attempt on Brumkhangshe in a single push reaching a col at 5370m.

Thanks to Alex Mathie, Hansjörg Auer, Tom Livingstone, Kaushal Desai, Beth Goralski, Anindya Mukherjee, Nick Berry, Nick Hurndall Smith, Derek Buckle, Malcolm Bass, Whitney Clark and Nigel Buckley for providing extra information.