

# The Sacred Source

## A Portrait of the Ganges 2007



Working DfN, *Directly from Nature*, in the Himalayas.

### Hard travel in amazing landscapes

May/June 2007

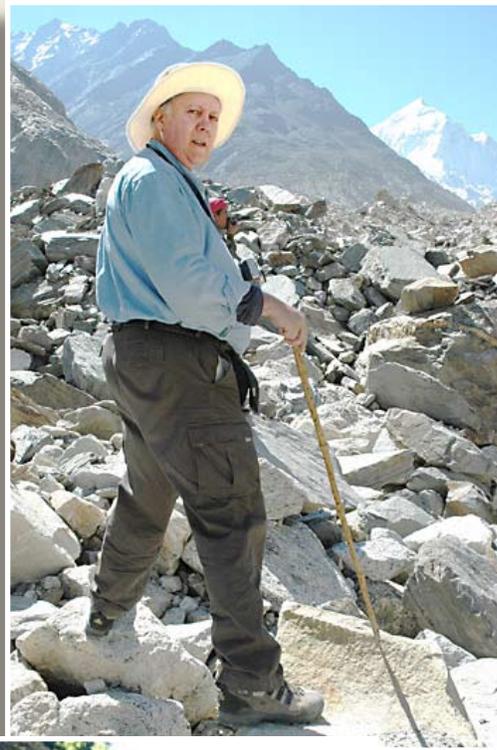
With all of my years of travel in India, and my numerous explorations of remote regions in the Kashmir Himalayas, this year's expedition was the most extreme, difficult, and artistically rewarding. The Ganges Himalayas was everything I had thought it would be and more.

However, the sheer physical effort of our explorations, much of it between 10,000-13,200 feet was at times grueling and exhausting. In the Gangotri region we trekked the 18 km up... and that same 18 km down.

And breaking camp and hitting the trail by 7:30-8am and not getting into camp until 3-4pm in the afternoon, left me fairly exhausted. Even when the trails were well marked and time-worn by millions of previous pilgrims, they were often very narrow, precarious, and dangerous. In a thousand places a sprained ankle or a accidental stumble in the wrong portion of the trail could easily prove life-threatening.

This expedition was designed to allow me to artistically study, sketch, photograph, video, and paint my way throughout this ancient and sacred region of the Himalayas.

But the sheer physical exertion and long days of travel made



**Photos:**  
Kelly Dodge

it very difficult to work in the way I normally do.

Because of this I tended to sketch and photograph more than I thought I would. We all shared video duties and came home with over 12-14 hours of raw video; which I am now busy editing down into bite sized segments and loading up onto the website.

We had thought we would be able to upload video and photos all along the routes. And in fact, amazingly enough, we discovered a "Cyber Cafe" sign on a building atop the Kedarnath plateau, at more than 12,000!

The problem was that editing video, even on the Macintosh laptops that we brought with us is time-consuming. But then finding and then uploading content to the web was not as easy as I had thought. We were able to do it at several places along the routes.

But in many instances, we were all simply too tired by the end of the day's travels to go through the process.



The trails throughout the Gangotri Glacier region are often only 3' wide at the most dangerous portion. And then they go from rocky & rugged, to extremely rugged, to... "Goat Worthy"!

The Artists for Conservation "Flag Expedition #2" ~ David Rankin's Watercolor Expedition into the Ganges Himalayas

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**The most beautiful landscape...  
difficult to paint!**

### High altitude sun light burns skin quickly!

The early June temperatures on the trail up to the Gangotri Glacier rose above 90° by noon with few clouds and no shade above the treeline; which is about 11,000 feet. The clear high altitude June weather requires careful layering of clothes, a good hat, and plenty of sunscreen. We had the right clothes. And I had a fabulous "Tilly Hat". But somehow Deanna & I had misplaced our sunscreen. So luckily, Ashleigh had brought two large tubes. Which saved our skin. Even so, I forgot to apply sunscreen to my lower lip. And thusly I had a large painful sun blister on my lower lip for the next 3 weeks!

Whenever we got somewhere long enough for me to relax a bit and get out my sketching gear, I'd do so. But it simply wasn't possible along the trail because the trekking was so physically demanding. So I'd take photos & video along the way, and sketch and paint whenever I had enough time and energy..

As you approach the Gangotri Glacier, climbing steadily & steeply up this enormous wide valley, you have these dramatic Bhagirathi peaks at the far eastern end of the valley as a constant companion. So they were one of the first things I sketched and painted once we got settled into our base camp at 13,125 feet.



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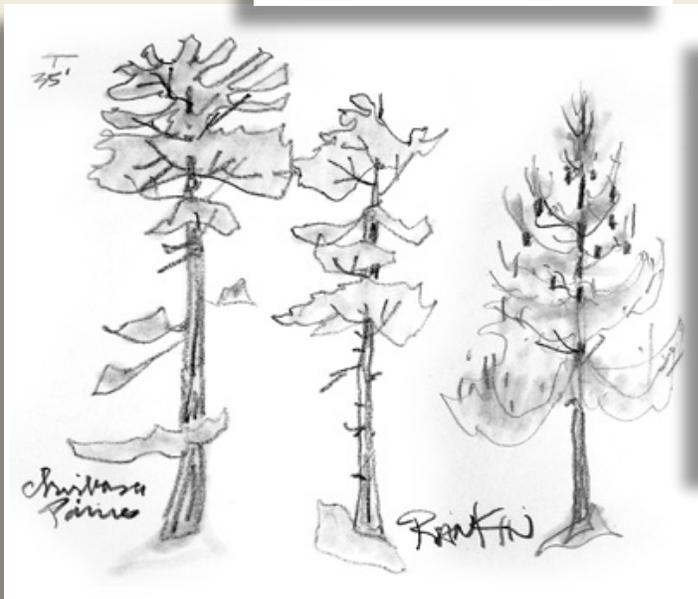
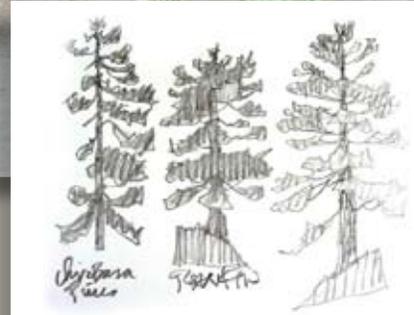
David sketching in camp.  
**Photo:** Kelly Dodge



Our camp "cook tent" was set up in a grove of sacred Bhujbasa birch at Chirbasa.

**Sketching trees** I carry a light weight aluminum clip-board sketchbook and 9B Woodless Graphite pencils for my very fastest efforts. In addition to the extraordinary drama of this glacial region, surrounded by numerous 20,000+ foot peaks, the trees and vegetation were a constant delight & fascination. This was partly because of all the rhetoric I had read and heard for the past 2 years. One is led to believe that the Himalayas have become completely stripped of all vegetation. But quite the contrary. In my observations I can attest to the fact that although there has been a lot of loss of natural fauna, it was far less than I had been prepared for. In fact, I have seen much worse deforestation in our own states of Oregon & Washington than virtually anywhere in our Himalayan travels. In fact, the high altitude forests in the Mandakini valley, leading up to Kedarnath were extremely dense, primeval, and impenetrable! Up in the Gangotri National Park I was constantly surprised by the beauty of the various types of pines at Chirbasa and giant ancient Deodar stood out in grand fashion all the way up the Bhagirathi tributary.

And even up in the most effected areas, along the approach to Badrinath, there were extraordinary groves and hillsides of very enormous trees all the way up to the treeline.



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### Drawing a Crowd in India! Sketching & Painting in crowds.

The first leg of our expedition brought us up from Delhi to the ancient pilgrim town of Haridwar, and Swami Rama's ashram on the banks of the Ganges north of town. This was my first plein air watercolor of the trip. And I was so focused on my procedures that after about 45 minutes I looked around to discover about 100 or so people gathered about quietly observing.

I like to sketch & paint in public, especially in India. The crowds are always very respectful of artists in India. And we met some very wonderful people along the way. The trick however, is to maintain one's focus; which can be daunting when there are dozens of people trying to watch what you're doing. But after you've worked DfN, directly from nature like this for some time you develop a kind of focus that allows you to



maintain your attention and still interact some with the crowds. It's actually quite a wonderful experience in India.

Deanna and Ashleigh with David as he paints, at Ram Kunj in Haridwar. **Photos:** Kelly Dodge

**Website:** davidrankinwatercolors.com

*From Elephants to Glaciers*

**Email:** ddrankin@sbcglobal.net

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### "Why is that white...?"

#### Crowd participation

An interesting thing occurred while I was finishing this painting. The guy standing over my right shoulder, in the horizontal striped shirt, in the photo on the previous page, watched intently for the whole painting. But as I reached the final stage of the painting he couldn't help himself. He bent down and with a rather insistent voice asked me... "Why is the white"? He was pointing to an area of the painting, the far shore across the river, where I had yet to add the brighter warmer sienna and Indian yellow. He obviously realized that I was nearing the end and wondered why I had left that area white?

Any artist who works in transparent watercolor is familiar with the tradition-

al watercolor procedure where we "paint around" certain areas leaving them white until we are ready to develop those areas. He obviously was unaware of this procedure and felt he had to point out to me that there simply was no large white area over on the opposite shore.

I told him that... "The painting isn't quite done yet!" I then encouraged him to watch this last phase of the painting as I completed that area. By the time I was finished he gave a sigh of relief as though had been very worried about the outcome.



Here is my initial 9B graphite study. This is how I start a watercolor.



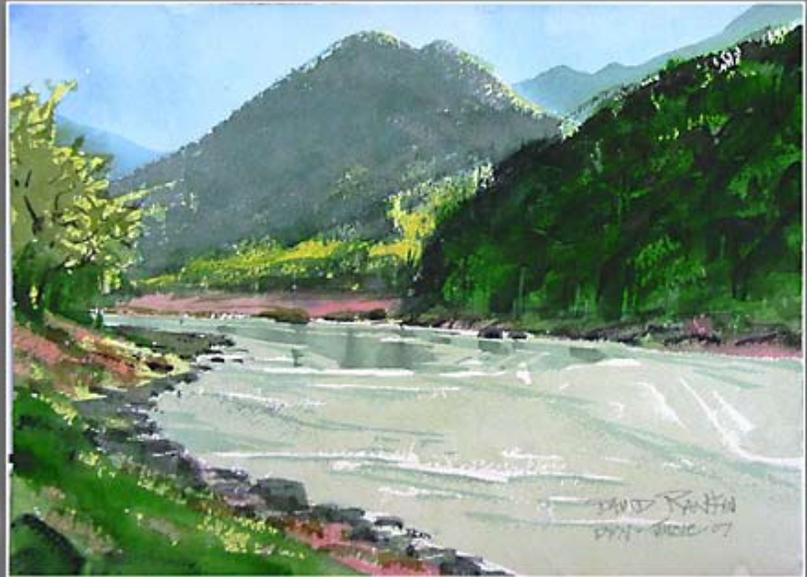
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**Painting the Ganges from the Glass House, 30km upriver from Rishikesh.**



**GPS: N30° 06' / E78° 26'**



Devout families immerse themselves in the Ganges the next morning.

### The low Himalayas

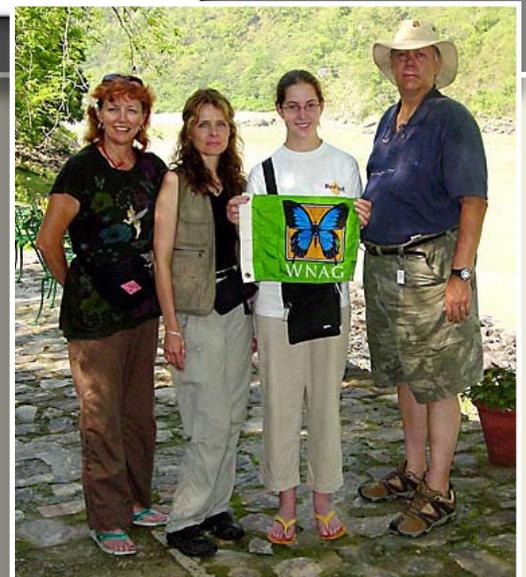
**The Glass House** The extreme drama of the Ganges Himalayas high country is balanced by the more accessible outer regions where the mountains are forest covered and rise from 3,000-8,000 feet. On our way down out of the high country we stopped at a wonderful tiny hotel right on the banks of the Ganges called The Glass House.

It is about an hour's drive above Rishikesh and this part of the lower Himalayas is heavily forested. The Glass

House has created a magnificent setting here in the jungle, with lots of fruit trees and manicured gardens filled with a wide assortment of flowers.

Every bush and tree limb is alive with birds. And I sketched a few as I set up to paint the view along the river bend in front of the hotel.

After a month in rugged high country the dinner here at the Glass House was a crescendo of the trip. The following morning we took our last "Flag Shot" by the Ganges.



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