

**Seasonal Stories  
for  
the Nepalese Himalaya**

**2011**

**by Elizabeth Hawley**



**Spring-Autumn 2011: The Supreme Master God-Angel Prays Atop of  
Everest for Hours?  
American David Gottlieb Knocks Off His Third Unclimbed Nepalese  
Mountain**

The year 2011 produced its share of unusual ascents and massive number of Everest summiters, several of whom were most unusual. The total number of Everest summiters was 526, all in the spring season and most on just two days, the 20th and 21st of May.

The unusual summiters:

1. According to his supporters, a 30-year-old Nepali from the southeastern district of Udayapur, Bhakta Kumar Rai, reached the top of Everest on 20 May and stayed there for 32 hours, 27 of which were devoted to praying for world peace, sitting out in the open all through the day and night, using bottled oxygen for only 11 hours. Amongst his followers, he is known as “Supreme Master God-Angel” after founding a sect, the Heavenly Path, at the age of just 18. He is credited with performing miracles from an early age; his sojourned atop Everest is only the latest one. However, the Nepalese government, which grants permits to climb Everest and other high peaks, credits Rai, together with three teammates, as gaining the summit, but does not endorse the 32-hour record.
2. Rather much more credible is the ascent by foot and the descent by a non-powered paraglider claimed by two other Nepalis, Sano Babu Sunuwar, the pilot of the tandem paraglider, and his passenger, Lakpa Tsheri Sherpa. They reported that they climbed to the top of Everest on 21 May by the standard southern route via the South Col, then lifted off from the 8850-meter summit in the paraglider and achieved a record-breaking altitude of 8865 meters, encircled the peak, and landed 45 minutes later at the nearest airfield at Shyangboche, 3780m, above the area’s largest towns, Khumjung and Namche Bazar. In early June, they continued downwards in a kayak on the Kosi River to the Ganges, Kolkata (Calcutta) and the Bay of Bengal. They named their expedition the Ultimate Descent Summit to Sea.

Notable climbs by more normal methods of going up and down mountains was the first ascent of Pangbuk Ri in the Rolwaling range just west of Khumbu, and a new route on Changwathang, in Humla district’s northwestern corner of Nepal close to the Tibetan border. No one used bottled oxygen or Sherpa helpers.

A small team of only two American climbers made the first ascent of 6716m Pangbuk Ri in the Rolwaling on 11 November in a BC-to-BC roundtrip of just one week. They left behind on the mountain four pitons, two stoppers and one ice

screw—no fixed ropes, for the simple reason they didn't fix any.

David Gottlieb, for whom this was his third first ascent of a Rolwaling peak, and Chad Kellogg, who plans a record-breaking speed ascent of Everest in 2012, separately explored the south and west aspects of their mountain and each concluded that the south face presented the best route. Up they went, setting up their advance base camp on 2 November at 5300m at what they thought was a good site, but it turned out to be exposed to daily rock fall at 6:00 am onwards (Gottlieb's hard hat took a direct hit, which smashed his hat but not his head.) Next day they moved camp up to 5700m below a large overhanging rock formation, and spent the next few days waiting for the full moon and watching the rock fall.

Finally, at 4:00 am on the 10th of November, they started up the south face and kept moving up till at 2:20 pm they reached the east (summit) ridge. Here they lowered themselves a meter and a half or so into a crevasse for protection from the wind for the night. At 6:30 am on the 11th they climbed out of their shelter onto the ridge and walked along the glacial ridge to the large flat area that was the summit.

They realized it would not be easy to rappel down their ascent route, so in 20 rappels in 14 hours the southwest face they arrived at the bottom of the face at midnight of the 11/12th. Some of the rappels were "tricky," said Gottlieb; "we had to be super-careful." Without pausing to sleep, they trekked 15 km. to their base camp, moving very slowly because they were very tired, and returned to base at 6:00 am on 12 November for the third sunrise of their climb.

It had been the most technical climbing on snow and ice of their careers, and the 50 hours they had spent moving without interruption, including their time in the crevasse keeping their circulation flowing, was the longest such period each man had endured.

Changwathang was tackled via a new route by a French team led by Paulo Grobel whose ascent was very quick. The previous climbs in 2000 by Japanese had been on the west face and in 2008 also by Japanese via that south face. But the French made their base camp on 25 September at 5400m near a small lake east of the mountain, and ascended the northwest ridge and descended the west ridge. The base camp was quite high, so they needed no higher camp. Grobel and Jean-Pierre Arles climbed on 26 September up a north glacier, which began with some crevasses, then they moved to the upper col of Changwathang (5960m) and from there up the northwest ridge, which started steep but became flat but very exposed. They were on the 6125m top at 2:30 pm that day and returned to base camp via the ridge to the mountain's lower col (5772m) the same afternoon.