

A Newsletter on the Natural History, Ecology and Conservation of the Agasthyamalai region, Western Ghats, India

AGASTHYA

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Special focus:
Forest



ASHOKA TRUST FOR RESEARCH IN ECOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Cover page: View of the wet evergreen forest of KMTR (Kothayar). **Photo:** P. Prasanth

Back cover: Agasthyamalai Community Conservation Centre. **Photo:** S. Thalavaipandi

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Agasthya is a tri-annual newsletter by ATREE's Agasthyamalai Community Conservation Centre (ACCC) aimed at highlighting issues of research and conservation concern in the Agasthyamalai Region, Tamil Nadu

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Editorial

Dear readers,

Welcome to another edition of AGASTHYA, where we document rich experiences from the Agasthyamalai region, shared by researchers and students. In this issue, we bring you personal anecdotes that paint a vivid picture of life in the field, with a special focus on **Forests**.

The stories in this issue, filled with wonder and discovery, highlight the joys and challenges of working in the marvellously biodiverse Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR). Routine journeys often transform into unforgettable experiences, reminding us of the forest's ability to surprise and fill us with awe. We also recognize that fieldwork comes with its share of challenges. Navigating dense undergrowth and coping with unpredictable weather require constant vigilance to stay safe and avoid disturbing the habitat. However, these obstacles are overshadowed by the exhilaration of discovering new species, understanding complex ecosystems, and contributing to vital conservation efforts.

It is safe to say that the forests of the Agasthyamalai region are a haven, not just for their diverse flora and fauna, but also for the curious minds that venture into them and emerge enlightened.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. We invite you to immerse yourself in these articles and reflect on your own sense of wonder for the natural world.

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Crested Serpent-Eagle

Photo: R. Sankaranarayanan



Typically an anthill raider, a sloth bear looks on after gulping down lamp oil.
Photo: A. Thanigaivel

Karadi and the Lamp

Accompanied by Thanigaivel, Ajith and Peter, I took part in a biodiversity and social survey at the Athrinathar Temple in Kadayam. We had finished a short trek up the Athri Hills to document birds and visit a stream nearby. The famous Athrinathar temple is located amidst the lush semi-evergreen forests of Athrimalai near the forest rest house. The temple, similar to most temples in South India, was surrounded by huge *Ficus* and mango trees. Once every year, thousands of pilgrims visit this place during *Chitra Pournami* (April) as they believe it is an auspicious day to seek the blessings of the Lord.

After the trek, we sat down to have a nice warm meal with the forest guards accompanied by the calls of brown-headed barbets and junglefowls. The guards mentioned to us about a resident sloth bear in the region that regularly visited the temple compound to drink oil from lamps.

It is not strange for wild animals to visit human settlements for food or shelter. We hear many instances, sometimes daily, of elephants raiding rice godowns in Hassan, sloth bears visiting dumpsters in Kotagiri, and leopards entering homes in Mumbai. But this information was new for me to process and I could not help but wonder, “Sloth bears drink oil?!”

On the day of the festival, Peter and I were at the foothills interviewing pilgrims and documenting information about their beliefs about the temple and the festival. When we got back to the rest house, Thanigai Anna showed us a video which completely took me by surprise. In the video, the bear slowly made its way up the temple steps and scanned the surroundings for food. As the festivities were just over, the lamps were all still burning. The bear went near one of the lamps, blew the flame off with a few breaths and slurped the oil. It was an unbelievable sighting. I wished I was there to see it happen in

front of me. The next day after work, Peter and I were photographing some dwarf geckos (*Cnemaspis* sp.) on the bark of a huge cluster fig tree (*Ficus racemosa*) near the rest house. One of the forest guards alerted us of the bear approaching the temple. I was thrilled.

Just like the other day, the bear slowly made its way up the steps of the temple, approached the lamp near Lord Ganesha statue and started to slurp up the oil, as if carefully following a blueprint. While it was having its fill, I think it realised that its act had gathered curious audience members. It took a brief look at us, and continued on its quest for oil near other statues.

With the other lamps empty after the festival, it made

a brief stop by an idol near the *Ficus* tree behind the temple, hoping for some last drops of oil before heading back into the forest.

The next day, we visited the bear's den and found its scat filled with bugs and ants of various genera. The forest guards told us that the bear had never caused harm to anyone till date. It was fascinating to witness this feeding behaviour of the sloth bear and I wondered how these animals adapt to live in areas with increasing human presence.

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Memories from the Field



Tamil Yeoman basking on the road
Photo: S. Thalavaipandi

I started to photograph & document butterflies in and around my village after my higher secondary school examination using the ACCC field station camera. Eventually, I documented most of the butterflies in the landscape that surrounded me. Then, I moved on to moths, which has been my main focus ever since. Although there has been a long gap, I remember each butterfly and its sighting. After my graduation I got a chance to be involved in the research work done by ATREE in KMTR.

Indeed, KMTR is a unique place, as it is one of the few places in India where the lower elevation forests (700m asl) contain a mix of both evergreen and deciduous trees. These forests are also home to many endemic and rare butterflies.

On July 7th, the 2024 cohort of ATREE's PhD students visited KMTR to learn about its different forest types. I was driving the jeep, and during our journey through the Tirunelveli semi-evergreen forest, I spotted a Tawny Rajah butterfly. I stopped the vehicle to show it to the team. The butterfly fluttered around before finally settling on some mammal scat. In that area, we observed about 25 butterfly species, including the Southern Birdwing, Tamil Nadu's state butterfly, the Tamil Yeoman, and the colourful and beautiful Common Banded Peacock. This experience brought back sweet memories of my first solo butterfly expedition on ACCC campus, in the forest, and along the ecotone, where I captured and identified butterflies with my camera.

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Educational Venture with Roversians!

I was fortunate to experience both the morning bliss of the dry deciduous forests of Kalakad and its gloominess at dusk. As a part of an educational expedition, we stayed at Kalakad Forest Guest House for four days in December 2022. The crew included the Rovers team and children from four different schools accompanied by their teachers.

We used to wake up early and go around the guesthouse to glimpse some interesting moments. One morning, I was captivated by a pair of beautifully coloured Crimson-backed Sunbirds and my ears heard the slow “Tsee Tsee” notes of the Common Iora. In the absence of tourists, I could hear the call of Coppersmith Barbets at the park adjacent to Thalayanai Dam and see the sparkling metallic blue colour of an Ashy Drongo. Then, I saw a small mixed hunting party of Orange Minivets, Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Rufous Treepies, Black-rumped Flamebacks, White-rumped Munias, and a migratory Rusty-tailed Flycatcher on the flowers of Teak and other trees. When children are not in the park, birds have their hunting “party”. In contrast, Bonnet Macaques parade around the park without bothering about human presence.

Then we came across an aggregation of predominantly lycaenid butterflies while they were mud puddling. The group included African Babul Blues, Peablues, Lime Blues, Zebra Blues, Banded Blue Pierrots, Common Pierrots, Forget-me-nots, Pointed Ciliated Blues, Tailless Line Blues and more. Their kaleidoscope count exceeded ours!

We also saw a few Grey-fronted Green Pigeons on our trail near the elephant pool. Students were excited to see “green” pigeons. We stumbled upon



A selfie of the Rovers team
Photo: P. Maria Antony

an interesting orchid, *Habenaria roxburghii*, which looked to me like a different kind of candelabrum. Just one new plant is not enough for me! I also saw a Leafless Goglet flower (*Ceropegia juncea*). I was quite amazed to witness the strategies these plants employ in attracting their pollinators. Some more interesting sightings on the trail included a Golden-backed Frog, Begonia sp. and Stinkhorns (*Mutinus bambusinus*). Mushrooms, Trametes and Earthstars were also notable observations in the forest.

After a bath and a consolidation session, the school children returned to their homes. Meanwhile, we returned to the guesthouse and saw several moths on our moth screen at night. The teak pest, *Pagyda salvalis*, dominated the screen, which came as no surprise since we were surrounded by teak trees. Other species observed were *Traminda mundissima*, *Micronia aculeate*, *Cnaphalocrocis trebiusalis*, Swan Plant Flower Moth (*Chabulina onychinalis*), *Naarda* sp., Common Owl-moth (*Erebus macrops*), *Heterostegane* spp., Tobacco Cutworm (*Spodoptera litura*), Beet Webworm (*Spoladea recurvalis*), *Miltochrista* spp.,



Pearl Grey Moth (*Poliobotys ablactalis*), *Ischnurges* spp., *Hypena obacerralis*, *Chiasmia eleonora*, *Herpetogramma* spp., Legume Pod Borer (*Maruca vitrata*) and *Scopula* spp. I want to end this article with an excerpt from a poem, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, written by Robert Frost.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep*

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Human-Wildlife Interactions Along the Shencottah Corridor, Kerala and Tirunelveli Division, Tamil Nadu

Fragmentation of habitats isolates populations and restricts gene flow between them, leading to inbreeding and demographic uncertainties. Wildlife corridors therefore play a crucial role in establishing gene flow within fragmented forests.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) has highlighted several wildlife corridors and critical links in India, including the Shencottah corridor and the Tirunelveli division. The Shencottah corridor, situated on the windward side of the Western Ghats, connects the Ranni and Konni forest divisions with the Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary. This corridor is characterised by a mosaic of plantations such as rubber, pineapple, and coconut. The Tirunelveli division, located on the leeward side of the Western Ghats, serves as an important link between the Sivagiri forest range and Achankovil. This area is predominantly used for cultivating crops such as maize, sugarcane, paddy, and coconut. The presence of human settlements surrounding both corridors often leads to interactions between local communities and wildlife, most of which are negative.

During our visits to these corridors, we conducted questionnaire surveys with the locals to understand

the dynamics of these negative interactions. In the Shencottah corridor, locals mentioned frequently encountering elephants, wild boars, leopards, dholes, bears, macaques, and gaurs around their properties. These animals have caused significant damage to plantations. In response, residents have installed solar-powered fences to protect their crops. Carnivores such as leopards, tigers and dholes also attack their livestock. Similarly, in the Tirunelveli division, elephants, gaurs, and wild boars frequently damage crops, leading to substantial economic losses for local farmers. Long-term monitoring of wildlife behaviour and their movement patterns are essential for developing targeted management strategies. Policies that balance conservation needs with human livelihoods, combined with economic incentives for adopting wildlife-friendly practices, can support sustainable solutions.

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Seed Dispersal in Forests

Forests are often considered a paradise on Earth due to their diverse array of trees, animals, insects, and other life forms. During my recent stay in the KMTR forest for phenology work, I observed many fallen seeds and wondered whether their presence was a natural occurrence or the result of animal activity. I find the life cycle of trees, particularly seed dispersal, to be fascinating. Seed dispersal in forests can occur through various mechanisms, including wind, water, animals, insects, birds, and gravity. Generally, seeds disperse to different locations through these methods, either naturally or with animal's intervention. In forest environments, wind dispersal is challenging because of the dense canopy, and close spacing of trees limit wind flow. Consequently, seeds may not be effectively carried by the wind within the forest. Water dispersal can also be problematic. Although seeds might be transported by water, they often face issues with insufficient sunlight and prolonged moisture, which

can lead to fungal growth and seed decay. Gravity plays a natural role in seed dispersal, but not all seeds that fall to the ground will grow successfully. Manual seed dispersal, which involves animals, birds, and insects, is particularly intriguing to me. These agents often play a crucial role in dispersing seeds. Different animals that consume seeds from trees may deposit them differently which aids in proliferation. Mammals like bats and civets, and various bird species including bulbuls and drongos, contribute to seed dispersal. Despite these dispersal efforts, not all seeds survive in the new location due to factors like shade and moisture. While seed dispersal in all forms is vital, it does not guarantee survival.

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An Elephant's Last Walk



A tusker crossing the 80 feet canal from the forest. Photo: A. Thanigaivel

Among the various remarkable landscape features surrounding the ACCC is the Manimuthar reservoir, the largest dam in the Tirunelveli district. This reservoir's primary '80 foot' canal irrigates the Nanguneri and Sathankulam regions. This canal's bank offers an ideal natural trail, delineating a unique transitional zone that separates the forest from farmlands and is rich in biodiversity, with frequent human-wildlife interactions. Elephant activity is often observed along this path, evidenced by signs such as broken trees, chewed young palmyra palms, footprints, mud rubbed on trunks, and fresh dung.

In November 2022, I accompanied Dr Seshadri on a morning nature walk on this trail. We paused near the Pachayaru bridge to observe tadpoles in a small pool of stagnant rainwater, marvelling at how frogs could complete their life cycle in such a temporary habitat. Suddenly, we noticed a giant creature silently crossing the path just a few metres away. It was a male elephant, identifiable by its broken tusk

tip, attempting to descend into the canal. It soon disappeared into the scrub jungle, leaving no trace of its presence. Witnessing a wild elephant in its natural habitat was a moment of pure joy and awe. We learned that the local people spoke fondly of this particular male elephant, describing it as a gentle soul that never harmed anyone. They recounted how it would often come down from the forest during the palmyra fruiting season to feast on young leaves, only to return to the forest by morning.

A month later, we received a call from the Forest Department informing us that an elephant had died near the Pottal area, within an uncultivated palmyra grove. We rushed to the scene and discovered that it was the same gentle giant with the broken tusk, now tragically electrocuted by a live power line. I never imagined that the elephant I hoped to see again would meet such an end. We believe that the tusker tried to eat the tender palmyra leaves and fruit and, in the process of uprooting the 30-foot tall

tree, accidentally fell onto the aerial bunched electric cable. The live power line remained intact, allowing electricity to continue passing through the tree. In its eagerness to finish its meal before dawn, the elephant was electrocuted and died on the spot in this heartbreaking manner. It drizzled throughout the day, and after the mandatory post-mortem, the carcass was buried near Manimuthar Dam. Witnessing the post-mortem left me with memories that are hard to digest, lingering in my heart as a painful reminder of this tragic loss.

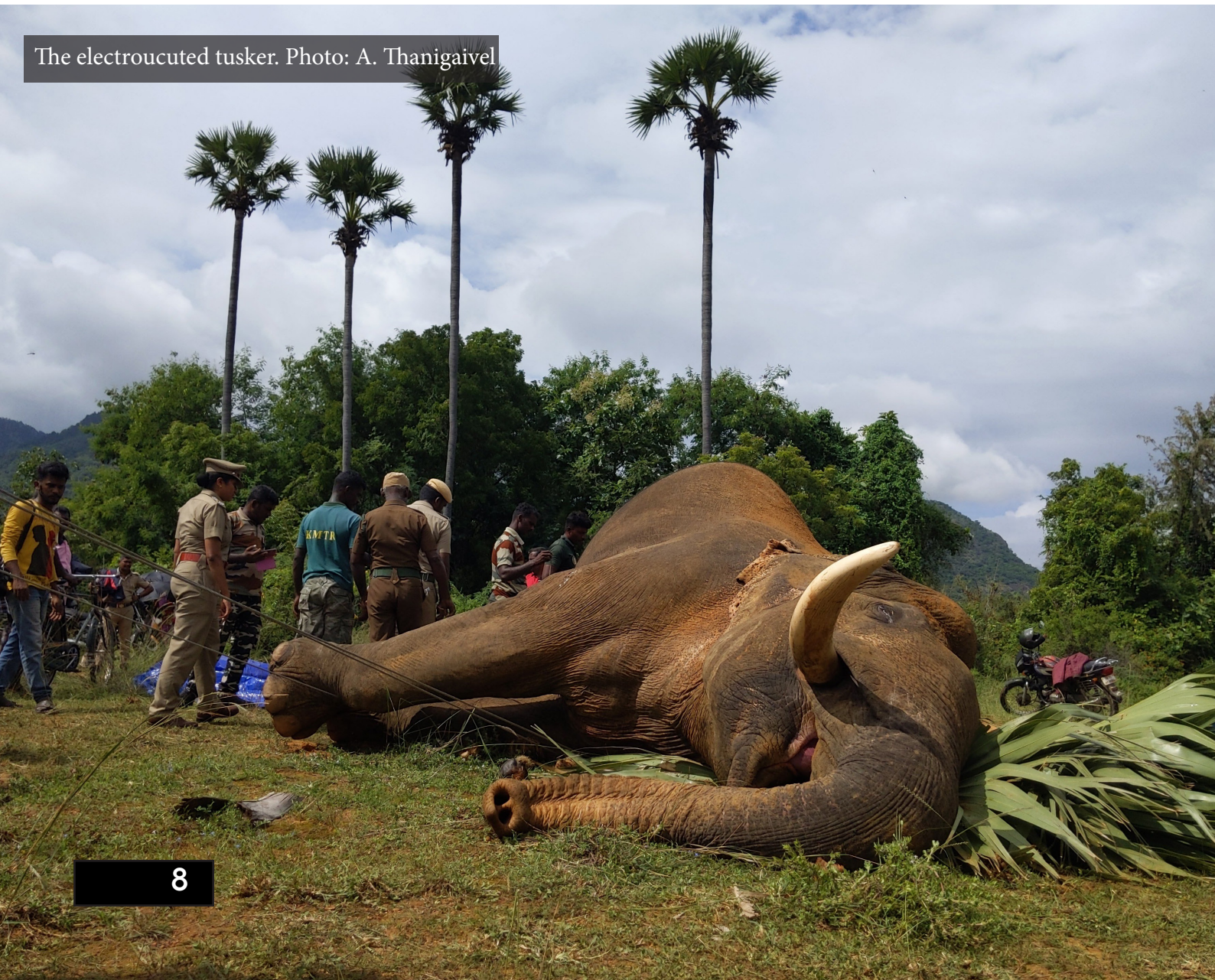
This ecotone, a highly conflict-prone area, is increasingly being converted to farmlands. To facilitate irrigation and other farming needs, the government has installed aerial bunched electric cables. Although these cables are intended to meet the electricity needs of agriculture, they pose a deadly

hazard to elephants, despite their intelligence and gentle nature. The tragic death of this elephant raises a crucial question: who bears the responsibility? This incident starkly highlights the delicate balance between conservation and development, and the urgent need for measures to prevent further elephant fatalities. Both the Forest Department and farmers are now grappling with finding solutions to prevent further loss of life. The story of this elephant's death underscores the challenges of conserving this unique ecosystem while accommodating the needs of the people who live alongside it.

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The electrocuted tusker. Photo: A. Thanigaivel



From Riverbanks to Clouds: An Unforgettable Day in KMTR

Our adventure began at 8 AM from the Agasthyamalai Community Conservation Centre (ACCC) campus. Excitement and enthusiasm filled the air as we embarked on our first visit to KMTR. Divided into two groups, each in different vehicles, we were accompanied by Dr T. Ganesh and Dr Arvind, and ACCC staff. We anticipated a day full of learning and discovery.

Upon reaching the gate, we were greeted by the stunning landscape of the Manimuthar river to our right. The sight of the river and the dam set the stage for engaging field stories. One tale described how packs of dholes prey on buffaloes that come to graze on the riverbank.

As we gradually ascended the hill, the diverse landscape of KMTR unfolded before us. The transition from scrublands and dry deciduous forests to woodland savannah and finally to wet evergreen forests at the highest elevations was magnificent. Along the way, we encountered a small spring where tourists enjoyed the morning, under the watchful eyes of bonnet macaques.

We then came across the teak trees in their 'sweet sixteens', which were originally about 100 years old. Despite their age, their growth had halted due to dry conditions, resulting in lean trunks. This forest patch is also called Zamindar forest because it historically belonged to the Zamindar of Singampatti. Sandwiched between Kalakad and Mundanthurai, this area beholds a diverse landscape, including a plateau at the top elevations that experiences both the southwest and northeast monsoons, resulting in lush wet evergreen vegetation.

After passing the scrublands and teak trees, we noticed numerous *Strobilanthes* plants. These peculiar flowering plants bloom after long intervals. For instance, *Strobilanthes kunthiana*, endemic to the Western Ghats and known as Neelakurinji for its blue flowers, blooms once every 12 years and is listed as Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List.

We also observed the fascinating *Helicteres* plant, whose flowers change colour characteristically—from bluish-grey to red to dark red—an adaptation to avoid predation and attract pollinators. As we





Students observe and take notes as Dr Ganesh explains
Photo: S. Selvakumar

continued ascending, the air became noticeably cooler. We stopped to admire an *Erythrina indica* tree standing alone amidst the greenery with its bright red flowers. Moving on from the dry evergreen forest, we reached the woodland savannah. Dominated by *Cymbopogon* grasslands, we learned that locals use the florets during the *Karthigai* Festival. We spotted a *Careya arborea* tree which has a black trunk and stem. Its flowers attracted bats. Other important fire-resistant tree species included sandalwood and Indian gum tree. Opposite us was a big hill range with rocky terrain, known for its beehives and Nilgiri Tahr sightings. Continuing upward, we entered the moist deciduous forest and eventually reached the Manjulai tea estate. Near the bungalows, we saw Nilgiri langurs, filling us with joy. The vegetation had now completely transformed into evergreen.

Finally, we reached the plateau, where a Fern House marked the start of our trek. As we climbed the hill, we saw many mushrooms, mosses, and dead logs. The large buttresses of the *Cullenia* tree captivated us. Learning about its interactions with lion-tailed macaques, bats, and other wildlife was fascinating, and seeing the tree in person was a highlight. The tall

trees seemed to touch the clouds. *Cullenia* seeds are hard to germinate and require multiple mediators, like lion-tailed macaques, bats, bonnet macaques, and dormouse. Another important species was the *Palaquium* tree. We saw its seeds accumulated in the ground in one place, later discovering that bats pluck the fruits and bring them to their roosting sites, where the seeds fall to the ground. These two dominant species have fascinating phenologies that influence the ecosystem balance, supporting many associated species.

The day ended with our home-packed lunch near a stream, where small fishes gave us a natural foot pedicure. All in all, it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, made possible by the course and our knowledgeable guides. The immense learning in one day left me feeling content and proud. Friends and a good team truly bring out the best in a trip, a lesson reinforced by this experience. On our way back, we made one last attempt to spot the Nilgiri tahr but were unsuccessful. Nonetheless, I was more than satisfied and content.

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Unravelling a Curious Pollination Syndrome

I remember following Rani M. Krishnan, a pioneer in understory pollination studies in India, through the wet evergreen forests of the KMTR. The environment was dark, dull, and gloomy, and the understory plants had minuscule flowers with occasional pollinators. This drove me up into the canopy with high hopes of seeing more activity above ground. At that time, anything we did felt like a pioneering effort, which was incredibly exciting.

I set out to study the lofty tree species of the genus *Elaeocarpus* (Rudraksh) that had piqued my interest. Of the four species belonging to the genus, *E. serratus* proved to be a challenge. As a pollination ecologist, before determining if the species was self-pollinated or outcrossed, I needed to establish the anthesis (time of flower opening) so that my hand pollination would coincide with the period of high receptivity. The second rule was that visitors during this receptivity period are the ones that qualify as pollinators. All this had to be done at a height of no less than 15 metres from the ground.

At that time, single rope access equipment had not yet arrived for our team, so my access system consisted of rickety ladders nailed to the trunk and spiralling up the canopy. Along with my field assistant, I laboriously climbed these trees and started tagging the buds. I accessed the tree continuously for a week at 5 AM and spent a couple of hours recording anthesis based on observations of its congeners at the site. Unfortunately, the week passed with no success due to cold and rainy weather.

One particular day, we decided to stay in the canopy longer than usual, as the sun finally appeared after



The inflorescence of the Ceylon olive
Elaeocarpus serratus Photo: R. Ganesan

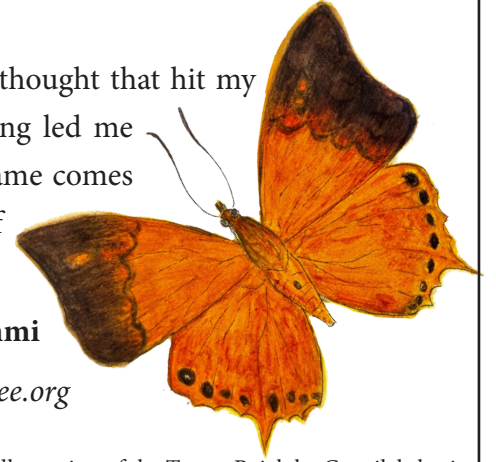
a week of rain. Around 10 AM, we were struck by a strong smell of cow dung emanating from the tree. We scanned the area for Gaurs but were astonished to find that the flowers of *E. serratus* emitted the dung odour. Soon, a cloud of flies (Diptera) of various colours, shapes, and sizes colonised the flowers. This confirmed both the anthesis timing and the pollinators.

Interestingly, in the same site, *E. tuberculatus* had crepuscular anthesis and attracted moths and nocturnal beetles, while *E. munronii* and *E. vensustus*, with dawn anthesis, attracted the giant and Eastern honey bees, *Apis dorsata* and *Apis cerana*. The diverse pollination strategies within a genus living in the same habitat help to minimise competition among pollinators.

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Who is Tawny Rajah?

Tawny Rajah would be the perfect name for a gangster was the first thought that hit my mind. But then I wondered, why is it called a *rajah*? Intense googling led me nowhere with the only information available online being that the name comes from its “regal” appearance. Royalty have historically loved paintings of themselves and therefore I decided to paint this rajah.



Gourilekshmi

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An illustration of the Tawny Rajah by Gourilekshmi

News and Events

- ACCC facilitated a Natural Science Methods course for ATREE's 2024 PhD students at KMTR from 08 - 20 July 2024
- Field methods course for students from the Kerala University of Digital Sciences, Innovation and Technology was facilitated by the ACCC from 22 - 27 July 2024
- Pre-visit to ACCC for the course work by Maria, Dhara and Nishanth from the University of Michigan, USA from 02 - 03 August 2024
- Conservation Connect's first four-day residential workshop conducted at Virudhunagar from 24 - 27 July 2024.

Snippets

- A barred tree skink was spotted on a mango tree in the Athrinathar temple premises in Kadayam by **Dr Thanigaivel** on 24 April 2024.
- Common Iora was found nesting near ACCC community hall by **Thanigaivel** on 27 June 2024
- The elusive smooth-coated otter was spotted in Nadhiyunni by **Peter Christopher and Ajith** on 22 July 2024
- A jungle cat was caught in a camera trap placed in the ACCC campus on 30 July 2024
- Large-scaled pit viper was spotted in Kakkachi by the **Phenology team** on 06 August 2024
- Male fan-throated lizard spotted inside the campus by **Thalavaipandi** on 11 September 2024.

Research Highlights

1. Subbaiah, T., & Antony, P. M. (2024). First record of a Yellow-green Catsnake, *Boiga flaviviridis* Vogel and Ganesh 2013 (Colubridae), from Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu, India. *Reptiles & Amphibians*, 31(1), e21446. <https://doi.org/10.17161/randa.v31i1.21446>

This study recorded the first known distribution record of the Yellow-green Catsnake from the southern Western Ghats region in KMTR, Tamil Nadu.

2. இரா.சங்கரநாராயணன். வெட்டவெளிப் பறவைகளின் நிலை என்ன? இந்து தமிழ். 03 ஆகஸ்ட் 2024.

<https://www.hindutamil.in/news/supplements/uyir-moochi/1289686-what-is-the-status-of-open-space-birds.html>

IWEC'24

The Agasthyamalai landscape was well represented at the inaugural Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference (IWEC) organised by the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bengaluru from 14th - 16th June 2024

Arjun Kannan presented his work on the wintering habitat selection of migratory Montagu's Harriers (*Circus pygargus*) in India at the Raptor Ecology open session

Dr T. Ganesh presented preliminary results on the long-term phenology monitoring work in KMTR at a symposium titled "Plant Phenology: Synthesising Phenological Response to the Environment in India"

Sneha Shahi spoke on the hydrology and social significance of the Tamiraparani river at the River Ecology symposium

R. Sankaranarayanan presented a poster on the preliminary results of the study on the effects of wind farms on bird communities in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu



Raptor Special Interest Group

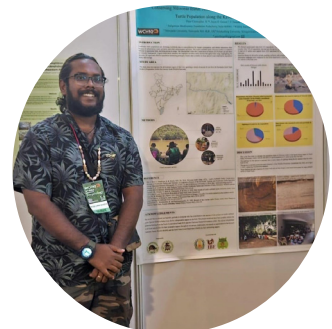
At the IWEC'24, Dr Ganesh also co-chaired the Raptor Special Interest Group titled 'Sultans on Wings' with Dr Prachi Metha from the Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (WRCS), Pune.

At this special interest group, Aditya Ganesh presented his work on the effects of land use change on Indian eagle owls (*Bubo bengalensis*) in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.



WCH'24

Peter Christopher was awarded the Best Poster Award for his poster titled "Conserving *Nilssonia leithii*: Assessment of the Critically Endangered Leith's Softshell Turtle Population along the Kaveri River, Tamil Nadu, India" at the 10th World Congress Herpetology (WCH) at Borneo, Malaysia.



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