

# India: Western Ghats 20<sup>th</sup> January – 4<sup>th</sup> February 2023

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Trip Report by John Wright. Email: [johnpwright1500@gmail.com](mailto:johnpwright1500@gmail.com)

We had all visited India more than once over the years. We chose the Western Ghats – visiting the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala – mainly to look for the endemic mammals. But we were, of course, pleased to see a whole bunch of other species during the trip. We had all been to Sri Lanka as well and there is some overlap of species between the two. We engaged the services of Ravi of Ficus to work on an itinerary with us that ensured the best chances of finding the mammals on our hit lists. We travelled in two cars with drivers which ensured room and comfort. This was another trip that had been postponed for two years due to the Covid pandemic.

Everything was extremely well organised by Ravi, and it all went very well. Ravi is an excellent guide and a great travelling companion; we would have no hesitation in using him again and can recommend his services.

We flew overnight from London to Bangalore; I was on a different flight to the others and landed around four hours after them at 09:00.

The weather was generally warm and sunny but early mornings were often chilly particularly at higher elevations, for example in Pampadum Shola. We also had a few rain showers but nothing that stopped us going out. It got light around 06:30 and started getting dark around 18:30.

**Itinerary:** Galibore; Kabini; Bandipur; Valparai; Chinnar; Pampadum Shola; Periyar; Thattekad

**Friday 20<sup>th</sup> January. Galibore Nature Camp.**

Having landed at Bangalore ahead of me Karen, Mark and Phil went ahead in one of the vehicles to Galibore arriving late morning. I arrived at Galibore in the other vehicle early afternoon. We had arranged to meet Ravi the following day at Kabini. Galibore tented camp is nicely located besides the River Kaveri. When I arrived the others had seen a Grizzled Squirrel, which surprisingly turned out to be the only one seen on the trip. There was a troop of Bonnet Macaques hanging around the camp – our first endemic mammal species, although not strictly a Western Ghats endemic it is endemic to peninsular India. Late afternoon we went out on a short safari drive, we saw a Wild Boar, two or three Spotted Deer, a couple each of Three-striped Palm Squirrels and Tufted Grey Langurs. After dark we only found a House Rat and saw a few small bats that weren't identified.



Grizzled Squirrel



Bonnet Macaques

JW

**Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> January.** Galibore – Kabini.

A short pre-breakfast walk along the river was interesting but didn't produce any mammals. However, Bonnet Macaques were around the camp on our return. After breakfast we departed for Kabini, on the drive through the reserve we saw a Grey Mongoose and a Wild Boar.

We arrived in Kabini early afternoon staying at the Kabini River Lodge for three nights. It was good to meet Ravi after two years of only emails. We had six safari drives booked in the Nagarhole National Park in the park vehicles.

Afternoon safari drive, 15:30 – 18:30 in zone B of the park. Zones A and B are separated by a public road running through the reserve which is closed to traffic at night.

A female Tiger was the highlight of the drive which showed exceedingly well, close to our safari vehicle. Eventually she wandered off but appeared again by a lake where she proceeded to lay in the shallows. Then as she moved on and

walked along the edge of the lake three Smooth-coated Otters swam toward her and began mobbing her - bobbing about and calling and even getting out of the lake to harass her. Although mobbing/harassing a predator by potential prey is a behaviour that is well known you certainly don't see it every day between these two species.

Other species seen on the drive were Spotted Deer (Chital) which were very common, one Sambar, lots of Bonnet Macaques, four Wild Boar, eight Gaur, two Ruddy Mongoose, two (Malabar) Indian Giant Squirrels. We also saw about ten Black-footed Langurs which was our second endemic mammal of the trip. Nagarhole National Park was the only site on our itinerary where we could see this species.

After our evening meal and in our own vehicles we went for a night drive for a couple of hours on some of the roads surrounding the lodge. We came across three Wild Boar, six Black-naped Hares and a Small Indian Civet.



Tiger



Above: Tiger

JW

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> January.** Early morning safari drive 06:30 – 09:30 in zone A.

We came across a few Elephants, many Spotted Deer, three Sambar, four Wild Boar, quite a few Bonnet Macaques and Black-footed Langurs, two Ruddy Mongoose, four Indian Giant Squirrels. But the outstanding highlight was watching a pack of five Dholes for around 15 minutes which we had to ourselves as no other vehicles were around.

Back at camp we had breakfast and then mooched about birding and butterflying, the only mammals being the ubiquitous Bonnet Macaques.

After lunch we went out on another safari, 15:30 – 18:30.

We again went into zone A which is bigger than zone B with more tracks to follow and is more forested. You don't always get a choice as to what zone to go in as the driver is allocated a zone by the reserve HQ personnel. Although if you are there for a couple of days you will get to visit both zones. We also learnt that zone B had just been closed because the female Tiger we saw

yesterday had sadly killed a local villager (who was allowed to walk in the reserve). It appears the villager had unintentionally come across the Tiger and surprised her and was then fatally attacked. The Tiger was not killed because of this incident.

On the drive we saw nine Elephants, three Wild Boar, many Spotted Deer, three Sambar, a few Bonnet Macaques and Black-footed Langurs, two Stripe-necked Mongoose, two Ruddy Mongoose. The highlight, however, was a male Tiger – a bit distant but it looked superb just loafing around on the far side of a lake. Back at the lodge in the evening we saw a couple of Wild Boar and a Brown Rat.



Tiger and Smooth-coated Otter



Black-footed Langur

PT

**Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> January.** Safari drive zone A, 06:30 – 09:30.

It wasn't long before we found a male Leopard which we watched for five minutes before it walked off into thick cover. A little later we found a 'pack' of three Dholes and once again enjoyed super close views of this beautiful canid. Our driver got a call about a Tiger with two cubs, we went for them but unfortunately, they had gone by the time we got to the location.

Other wildlife seen on the drive were ten Gaur, one Sambar, many Spotted Deer, 18 Wild Boar, two Ruddy Mongoose, singles of Stripe-necked Mongoose and Three-striped Palm Squirrel and a few Black-footed Langurs.

Back at the lodge for breakfast and lunch the only mammals seen were Bonnet Macaques.

Afternoon safari 15:30 – 18:30, zone A. A similar set of mammals as seen on the morning drive: 12 Elephants, one Wild Boar, one Three-striped Palm Squirrel, one Ruddy Mongoose, 13 Gaur, four Sambar, many Spotted Deer,

Black-footed Langurs and Bonnet Macaques. We also had great views again of the pack of five Dholes – the same pack which we saw yesterday.

In the evening PT and KB caught a House Mouse in their chalet.



Dhole

PT

**Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> January.** Kabini – Bandapur.

Our final safari drive, 06:30 – 09:30, in Nagarhole National Park, produced two Elephants, 18 Gaur, three Sambar, lots of Spotted Deer, five Stripe-necked Mongoose, Black-footed Langurs, Bonnet Macaques and a single Indian Giant Squirrel.

After breakfast we departed Kabini and drove to Bandapur, arriving at the Bandipur Safari Lodge early afternoon. A Grey Mongoose was seen on route, and one was seen in the grounds of the lodge along with Bonnet Macaques.

The Bandipur National Park is adjacent to Kabini and hosts virtually identical wildlife, albeit in lower density, and in hillier terrain. Like Nagarhole a public road goes through the park which is closed to traffic over night.

Afternoon Safari drive 15:30 – 18:30. Tufted Grey Langurs, Bonnet Macaques, eight Elephants, nine Gaur, six Ruddy Mongoose, 15 Sambar a single Wild Boar and a few Spotted Deer.

After dinner we did a night drive in our own vehicles around surrounding roads from 19:00 to 20:30. We saw two Black-naped Hare, six Spotted Deer and we had a brief view of a Sloth Bear as it crossed the road in front of us.



Leopard

KB

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> January.** Safari drive 06:30 – 09:30. Bandipur National Park.

It wasn't long before we found a female Tiger which we had to ourselves for ten minutes before it melted away into thick cover. Apart from seeing our third Tiger of the trip we also saw an Elephant, six Sambar, Spotted Deer, Tufted Grey Langurs, singles of Indian Giant Squirrel and Stripe-necked Mongoose. We

drove around an area in the reserve where Chousinga (Four-horned Antelope) are sometimes seen but had no luck.

Back at the lodge for breakfast and lunch and then out again for an afternoon safari, 15:30 – 19:00.

Nine Elephants, six Sambar, Spotted Deer, one Indian Muntjac, Tufted Grey Langurs, Bonnet Macaques, three Ruddy Mongoose, one Indian Giant Squirrel. Again, we did an area in the hope of coming across a Chousinga but drew a blank. On the way back to the lodge on the public road, but still in the reserve we hit a traffic jam caused by a very obliging and showy Sloth Bear. A fitting end to our safaris in Bandipur National Park.

After dinner we did a short night drive in our own vehicles and came across two Black-naped Hare, five Wild Boar a few Spotted Deer and an unidentified mouse ran across the road.



Elephant



Sloth Bear

KB



Sloth Bear

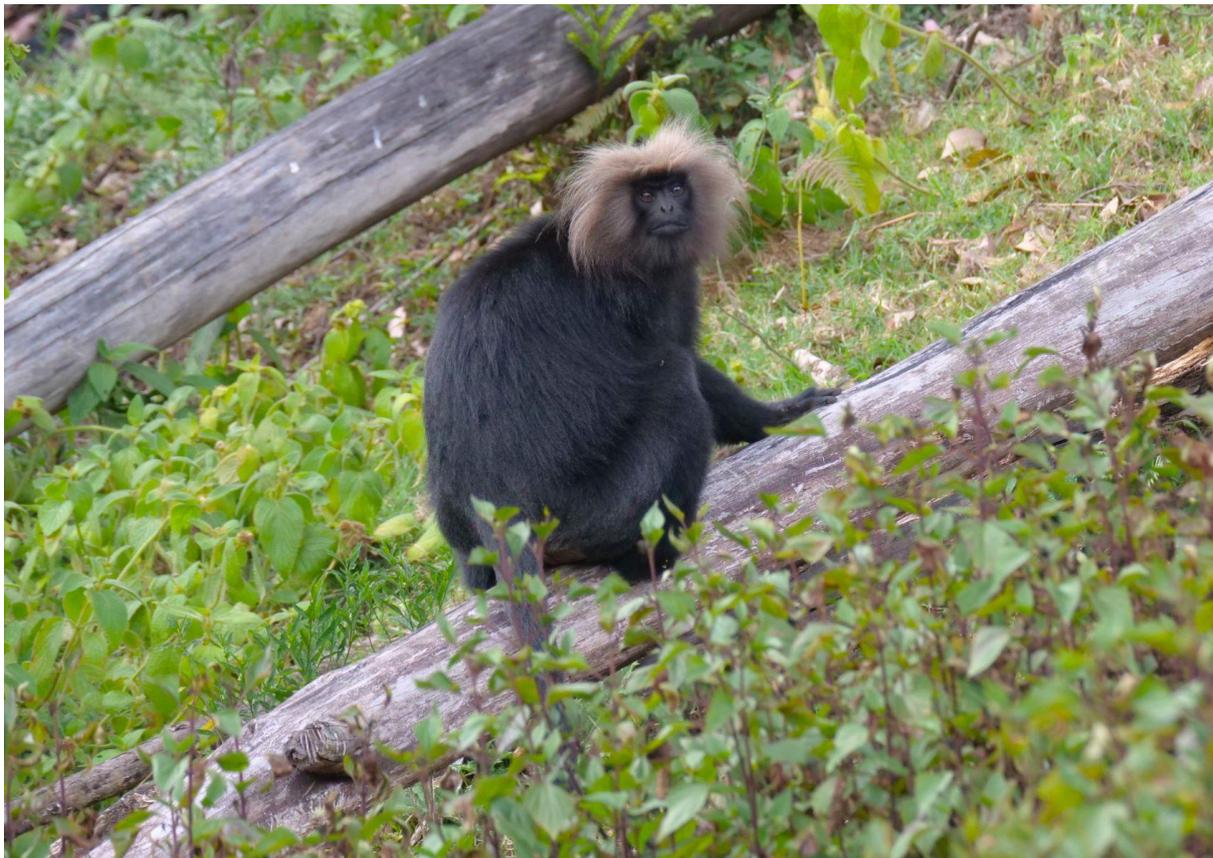
PT

**Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> January.** Travel day, Bandipur - Valparai.

We departed Bandipur soon after 06:00 and made for Valparai. Driving out of the reserve we saw an Elephant and a few Spotted Deer. We stopped at Ooty for a few hours finding some endemic birds and a Sambar. We also had breakfast in Ooty before moving on. We stopped for lunch on route and met up with a longtime friend of Ravi's – Ganesh - who was joining us for a week. Ranesh is a great guy and very keen on his wildlife and wild places.

We drove through the Anamalai Tiger Reserve on a public road getting brief views of Nilgiri Langurs – our third endemic mammal, plus Bonnet Macaques and a Wild Boar. We were now at a higher elevation and in a tea growing area and were staying for one night in a tea plantation bungalow called Tahr Trails. At dusk and not far from the bungalow a 30 strong herd of Gaur were grazing. We arrived at Tahr Trails bungalow after dark at 19:30.

One of the reasons we were staying over-night at Tahr Trails was for Brown Mongoose which had been seen regularly in the garden of the house. We did a night search using my thermal imager but had no luck.



Nilgiri Langur

**Friday 27<sup>th</sup> January.** Tahr Trails and Monica Bungalows, Valparai.

We checked the garden from first light for a couple of hours. But no sign of Brown Mongoose but did see a Stripe-necked Mongoose and around six Jungle Palm Squirrels, our fourth endemic species, although not strictly a Western Ghats endemic as its distribution extends a little further north out of the region. We departed Tahr Trails at 11:00 to make our way to Monica Bungalow a couple of hours drive away but still in the Valparai area. We again traversed the Anamalai Tiger Reserve on the public road seeing a few Nilgiri Langurs. We arrived at Monica Bungalow in time for lunch at 13:00. From the bungalow grounds we saw Nilgiri Langurs and Bonnet Macaques.



Nilgiri Tahr

JW

In the afternoon we headed for the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. Before we got to the reserve, we came across ten Lion-tailed Macaques – our fifth endemic. Then along the winding, hilly public road in the reserve we found Nilgiri

Langurs a few Tufted Grey Langurs, Bonnet Macaques, three Indian Giant Squirrels and a Stripe-necked Mongoose. We then came across our sixth endemic – three Nilgiri Tahrs. They weren't difficult to see as they just grazed along the edge of the road and were obviously habituated as they allowed a close approach. If you don't like seeing them on the roadside the high elevation grassland of Eravikulam National Park isn't too far away and holds good numbers of Tahr. You get to the top where the Tahr are in a shuttle bus and by all accounts are easy to see being habituated to the buses and the many tourists. We didn't get time to visit, however.

A night drive not far from the Monica Bungalow was productive. We found 16 Indian Giant Flying Squirrels, plus two Brown Civets – our seventh endemic. The first civet was a bit distant and difficult to see at times, the second one was a better view but wasn't seen by everyone. We also saw two bat species that went unidentified. Back in the grounds of the bungalow we found an Indian Giant Squirrel and a few Brown Rats and House Mice.



Nilgiri Tahr



Nilgiri Tahr

JW



Stripe-necked Mongoose.

PT



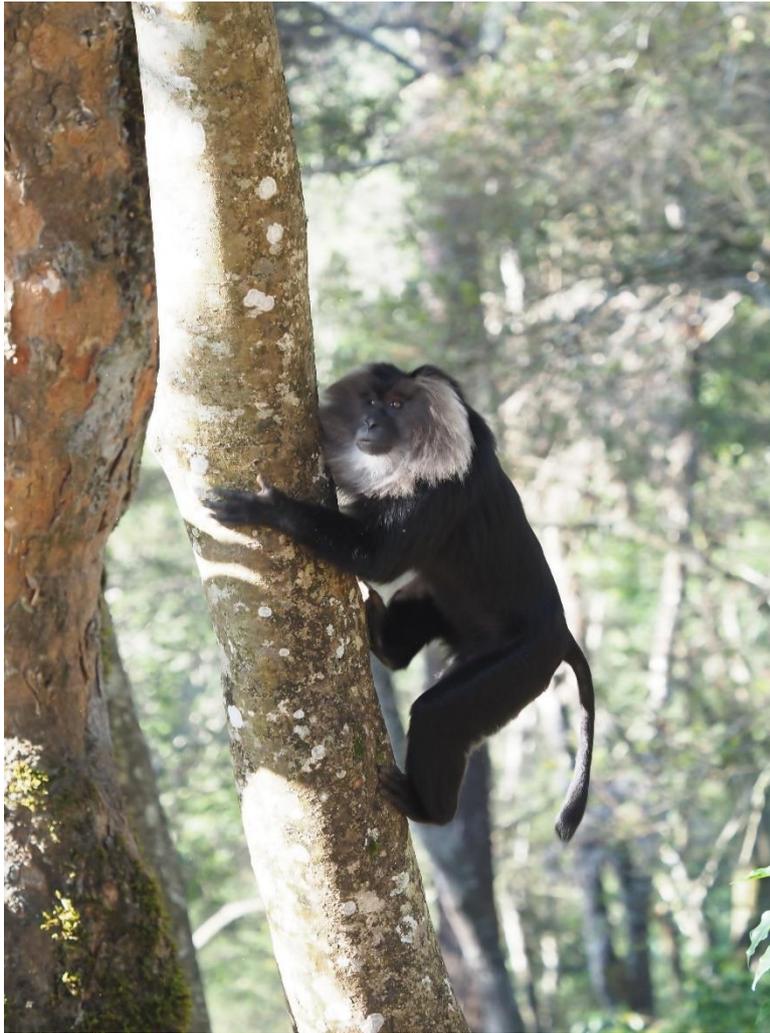
Lion-tailed Macaque

PT



Gaur

KB



Lion-tailed Macaque

KB

**Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January.** Valparai.

We drove a few miles to another tea plantation associated with the Monica bungalow. We walked the grounds from 07:00 – 10:00. We watched a large troop of Lion-tailed Macaques which oddly was accompanied by a single Bonnet Macaque which appeared to be acting as a member of the troop. We also saw a single Indian Giant Squirrel, three Jungle Palm Squirrels and a pair of mating Indian Muntjac.

After breakfast we just relaxed around Monica bungalow birding and butterflying until lunch. Bonnet Macaques being the only mammals seen in the grounds. In the afternoon we drove around looking for wildlife. Finding Bonnet Macaques, a couple of Stripe-necked Mongoose and a couple of Jungle Palm Squirrels. In a nearby town (Roti Kadai) a troop of Lion-tailed Macaques loafed

around the buildings. This was our third troop of Lion-tailed Macaques, there are four troops inhabiting the Valparai area.

Before it got dark, we returned to the tea plantation we visited in the morning. We staked out a fruiting fig tree and soon after dark we found what we were hoping for - a Brown Palm Civet. It showed exceedingly well as it munched on the figs. Apart from some small bats sp. emerging from a building there were Short-nosed Fruit Bats flying in and picking off the figs. We also saw six Sambar.

**Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> January.** Travel day Valparai to Chinnar.

After breakfast we departed Monica Bungalow, on route not far from the bungalow, we saw Nilgiri Langurs and a sounder of Wild Boar with stripy youngsters crossing the road. We passed through Roti Kadai, again seeing the Lion-tailed Macaques loafing around the buildings.

Arriving at the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary mid-afternoon we saw a single Elephant, Bonnet Macaques, Tufted Grey Langurs and a Three-striped Palm Squirrel. We also went on a short, guided walk and although didn't see any mammals the ancient rock paintings were interesting and well worth the walk. We left the sanctuary around 18:00 and drove the hour or so to our overnight accommodation at the Talayar Valley Bungalow in another tea plantation.

**Monday 30<sup>th</sup> January.** Chinnar – Pampadum Shola.

A brief pre-breakfast visit to the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary produced Indian Giant Squirrel, Bonnet Macaques, Tufted Grey Langurs and an Indian Muntjac.

We departed Talayar Valley Bungalow around 11:00 and made for Pampadum Shola National Park, arriving around 15:30. We stayed two nights in wooden huts, they were basic but perfectly situated in a great location in the park itself.

On a late afternoon drive in our own cars, we saw three Stripe-necked Mongoose and a Nilgiri Striped Squirrel - our eighth endemic species. We also saw three Brown Mongoose. One was a quick view as it ran across the road, but the other was a prolonged view as a pair foraged through a small pile of rubbish behind a hut by the park entrance gate.

After dark as we were having our evening meal at the kitchen hut a short walk from our huts, we watched two Indian Porcupines snuffling around. Even better was a Brown Palm Civet that also showed up on and off for ten minutes.



Brown Mongoose above, Elephant below

KB





Brown Palm Civet

KB

**Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> January.** Pampadum Shola National Park.

We walked and drove the roads throughout the day in the hope of coming across a Nilgiri Marten, but no luck. So, it was rather galling when the reserve entrance gate warden showed us a video of a Nilgiri Marten attacking an Indian Chevrotain, which eventually escaped. The video, taken on his phone, was from a couple of months earlier at mid-morning on the road by the entrance gate. Currently Pampadum Shola is probably the best location to find this elusive mustelid. We did see Bonnet Macaques, Nilgiri Langurs, two Brown Mongoose - again by the entrance gate, three Nilgiri Striped Squirrels and two Indian Giant Squirrels.

In the evening as we were eating our evening meal an Indian Porcupine showed up again. But we missed the Brown Civet this time as it appeared five minutes before we arrived for our meal.



Indian Porcupine

KB

**Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February.** Pampadum Shola – Periyar.

A walk at first light found us the usual Bonnet Macaques and Nilgiri Langurs. We left Pampadum Shola at 08:30 for Periyar, stopping for breakfast on route.

We arrived in time for lunch at around 14:00 at our hotel the Aranya Nivas, situated next to Periyar lake in the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The hotel was nicely located to explore the fantastic forests around Thekkady.

We were under the impression that Periyar Lake (formed by the damming of the Periyar River) was a bit of a hot spot for Small-clawed Otters. So, with that in mind we booked an afternoon boat trip on the lake. However, it wasn't quite what we expected, the boat was a double decker that was tightly packed with passengers, as were the other two boats that set off. You couldn't move from your seat or stand up and it was compulsory to wear a very bulky life vest which meant it was hard to lift binoculars or a camera. Out on the lake we were somewhat off from the shore, so all wildlife was a bit distant. We did manage to log 20 Sambar, eight Guar, one Wild Boar and a Stripe-necked Mongoose. Suffice to say we didn't book another boat trip. But they were very popular with Indian tourists so that was nice to see.

Regarding the Short-clawed Otters we made enquiries and asked all the guides we met about seeing them, but none had ever seen or heard of the species being seen in the reserve. Only Smooth-coated Otters which were seen occasionally.

A walk in the late afternoon through the hotel grounds produced Bonnet Macaques, Nilgiri Langurs, a Sambar and an Indian Giant Squirrel.

We booked an evening wildlife walk from 19:00 – 21:30 in an area of forest a couple of miles from the hotel. Although we saw six Sambar and a Small Indian Civet the guide wasn't very good and totally uninterested in what he was doing and spent most of the time on his mobile. Maybe he was just bored doing the same walk and seeing the same stuff every night! On the drive back to our hotel we saw two Indian Porcupines and another Small Indian Civet.

**Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> February.** Periyar, Thekkady Forest.

On a pre-breakfast guided forest walk, 07:00 – 10:00, we saw Indian Giant Squirrel and a Jungle Palm Squirrel. It was an interesting stroll through prime forest habitat. It was reached by crossing an arm of the lake in a small boat pulled across by rope. Back in the hotel grounds after the walk there was around 20 Nilgiri Langurs.

Before lunch Mark and I were walking the grounds and met a wildlife guide named Raj, he was switched-on when it came to wildlife so were pleased when he said he was the guide for our afternoon walk.

Afternoon guided walk with Raj 14:00 – 17:00. We found three Indian Giant Squirrels, two Jungle Palm Squirrels, six Sambar, eight Wild Boar, Bonnet Macaques and Nilgiri Langurs. Raj showed us two bat roosts in hollow trees one of Lesser Woolly Horseshoe Bats and one of Short-nosed Fruit Bats.

Raj wasn't due to guide our night walk, but we knew it would be good to have him, so a few phone calls were made to the powers that be by Ravi and Raj and the deal was done - we got Raj for our night walk.

Night walk, 19:00 – 22:00. A much better walk than the previous night. We came across six Porcupines, one Wild Boar, four Black-naped Hare, 15 Sambar, two Indian Muntjac, one Indian Giant Flying Squirrel, one Small Indian Civet and one Common Palm Civet.



Indian Giant Squirrel

PT



Jungle Palm Squirrel

PT



Ruddy Mongoose

KB

**Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> February.** Periyar – Thattekad.

Morning walk 07:00 – 09:00. Not with Raj but with a very good guide, nevertheless. It was a time limited walk as we were departing Periyar later in the morning. We saw two Elephants, two Wild Boar, one Indian Muntjac, three Jungle Palm Squirrels, Bonnet Macaques and Nilgiri Langurs.

We said our goodbyes to Ganesh who was leaving for home today. We departed Periyar at 10:45 arriving at Hornbill Camp, Thattekad at 14:00. Located in a beautiful location beside the River Periyar the Hornbill tented camp is more glamping than camping and is mainly a birding venue.

Guided afternoon/night walk 16:00 – 21:30 in Thattekad forest. Apart from Nightjars, Owls and a Frogmouth we saw a Common Palm Civet and a Grey Slender Loris.

**Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> February.** Guided walk in nearby Thattekad forest, 06:30 – 12:30.

Some very good birds seen along with five Indian Giant Squirrels and a few Bonnet Macaques. The rest of the day was spent relaxing and exploring the Hornbill Campground. I departed, along with Ravi, at 16:00 for a two hour drive to Cochin International Airport for my evening flight back to London. Ravi had a two hour flight back to his home town. I arrived in London early the next morning on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February.** Hornbill Camp – Cochin.

Mark, Phil and Karen saw four Indian Flying Foxes over the camp before they departed for the airport at 06:00 for their flight back to London.

Following the itinerary, we found six Western Ghats endemic mammal species and two peninsular India endemics as follows:

**Bonnet Macaque:** ubiquitous seen at every location (peninsular India endemic).

**Lion-tailed Macaque:** Anamalai Tiger Reserve and surrounding area, Valparai.

**Nilgiri Langur:** Anamalai Tiger Reserve; Valparai area; Pampadum Shola National Park; Thekkady/Periyar

**Black-footed Langur:** Nagarhole National Park.

**Nilgiri Tahr:** Anamalai Tiger Reserve.

**Brown Palm Civet:** Valparai area; Pampadum Shola National Park.

**Jungle Palm Squirrel:** Tahr Trails, Valparai, Anamalai Tiger Reserve (almost but not quite a Western Ghats endemic).

**Nilgiri Striped Squirrel:** Pampadum Shola National Park.

## **Systematic List, 39 species.**

1. Slender Loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*)
2. Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)
3. Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca Silenus*)
4. Nilgiri Langur (*Semnopithecus johnii*)
5. Black-footed Langur (*Semnopithecus hypoleucus*)
6. Tufted Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus priam*)
7. Indian Muntjac (*Muntiacus muntjac*)
8. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)
9. Spotted Deer (*Axix axis*)
10. Gaur (*Bos gaurus*)
11. Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*)
12. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)
13. Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)
14. Leopard (*Panthera pardus*)
15. Common Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus hemaphroditus*)
16. Brown Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*)
17. Small Indian Civet (*Viverricula indica*)
18. Grey Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*)
19. Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)
20. Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*)
21. Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes fuscus*)
22. Dhole (*Cuon alpinus*)
23. Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*)
24. Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutra perspicillata*)
25. Black-naped Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*)

26. Indian Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)
27. Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*)
28. Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*)
29. Indian Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis*)
30. Three-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*)
31. Nilgiri Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus*)
32. Jungle Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus tristriatus*)
33. Asian Elephant (*Elaphus maximus*)
34. House Rat (*Rattus rattus*)
35. Brown Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)
36. House Mouse (*Mus musculus*)
37. Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bat (*Cynopterus brachyotis*)
38. Lesser Woolly Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus beddomei*)
39. Indian Flying Fox (*Pteropus giganteus*)