

# Anamalais (South India) Jan-Feb 2019



Brown Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*) in the Valparai landscape. A regional endemic and one of the highlights of the trip.

This report is based on a guided mammal watching oriented trip to the Anamalai mountain range in the Western Ghats of south India

**Dates:** 31st Jan to 3rd Feb 2019

**Tour Locations:** In and around the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, including Sethumadai, Top Slip and Valparai. [Map of tour locations](#)

**Tour Participants:** Stuart Chapman and Nick Cox, both senior conservationists working for the Worldwide Fund for Nature

**Naturalist:** Ravi Kailas (of [Ficus Wildlife and Natural History Tours](#))

**Driver:** Babu\*

*\*Highly recommend Babu (mobile - 9994588446) for his well maintained Toyota Innova, safe driving, etiquette around wildlife sightings (bare minimum honking!), flexibility for the inevitable early starts and late nights and spotting skills, for your wildlife vacation in this region.*

## Highlight sightings

The visitors, keen mammal listers, had a pre-trip target of a minimum of 5 new mammals to their life lists, on their first visit to southern India. Happily both their lists were enhanced by 10 plus new additions with ease, among the **23 mammals\*** we saw on this trip. A good proportion of these were Western Ghats or regional specialities including **Lion-tailed and Bonnet Macaques, Brown Palm Civet, Nilgiri and South-eastern Langurs, Nilgiri Tahr, Dusky and Jungle Striped Squirrels, Stripe-necked Mongoose**, a distinct race of the **Indian Giant Squirrel**, among more widely distributed animals such as **Asiatic Elephant, Indian Giant Flying Squirrel and Ruddy Mongoose**.

This list can realistically rise to 30 plus species (with the potential inclusion of Tiger, Leopard, Dhole, South-western Langur, Smooth-coated Otter, Slender Loris and Grizzled Giant Squirrel among others) by visiting the wildlife rich forests of the Nilgiris at Kabini and Bandipur north of the Palghat Gap, and the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary to the south of the tour locations.

## Detailed Report

**Day 1, Sethumadai/Top Slip:** Our trip began around noon at the Coimbatore Airport, our first stop Sethumadai, an agricultural landscape bordering the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. After a brief rest and lunch, it was time to head to the forest check-post, before the late afternoon closing time, to enter the Anamalai Tiger Reserve towards Top Slip. The road to Top Slip climbs through 10 KM of varied forests, where we enjoyed our first mammal sightings of the trip, including of Three-striped Palm Squirrel, Indian Giant Squirrel (a ubiquitous forest squirrel in the southern Western Ghats), South-eastern Langur, Bonnet Macaque and interbred troops of Nilgiri and South-eastern Langur. At Top Slip and beyond, towards the Kerala border, via an enticing patch of evergreen forest, we saw the endemic, highly arboreal Nilgiri Langur, Munjtac, Spotted Deer and Wild Boar. A few moments of excitement were provided by simultaneous alarm calls of Nilgiri Langur, Barking Deer and Sambar - all confusingly from different directions, but in hill forests such as these, the chances of tracking carnivores with calls are typically poor. It was getting towards dusk by the time we started our way back down to the plains, with a tantalising possibility of Sloth Bear or Leopard activity by the road. However, it turned out to be a quiet drive barring an unlikely sighting (thanks to Stuart's sharp eyes) of the diminutive, endemic Dusky Striped Squirrel (normally found at higher elevations) and Sambar Deer.

Later that evening, a post dinner, abridged exploration of the coconut grove/forest edge habitat was productive only for Black-naped Hare and Gaur, but with a bit more effort (a restful night beckoned early though), we could have sighted nocturnal regulars of this landscape such as Slender Loris, Common Palm Civet, Small Indian Civet and Indian Porcupine.



Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)



A distinct race of Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica maxima*), restricted to the southern Western Ghats

**Day 2, Top Slip/Valparai:** Not an especially early start this morning (by crepuscular mammal standards) to arrive at the forest check-post by 700 AM (official opening time)/entrance to Top Slip (retracing the road from the previous evening). Unfortunately, we were delayed by a rather lackadaisical forest guard posted for duty at the gate, who turned up only at 730 AM. The drive up was uneventful, with repeat sightings of commoner mammals, but the birdlife was typically excellent with the open, dry season, light filled canopy aiding sightings of Great Pied and Malabar Grey Hornbills, Red Spurfowl, Crested Serpent Eagle and Oriental Honey Buzzard among others with little effort.



The Anamalai Tiger Reserve is one among few in India, where walking is permitted. While there are a handful of trails of varying durations, we chose a short walk towards Mt Stuart Rest-house from Top Slip, via parts of the evergreen, bamboo and Teak forest, primarily in hope of locating a potential bat roost near our destination. While the abandoned building near rest-house was sans bats, there was evidence from fresh droppings that they likely used them at night as a temporary feeding spot. Incidentally, it was also very evident from the floor covered with their droppings, that the cool interiors of the dilapidated structure was a regular haunt for Sloth Bear. The walk itself was productive sightings of Nilgiri Langur, several Indian Giant Squirrel and Spotted Deer, in excellent morning light, and typically robust morning bird activity.



Nilgiri Langur (*Semnopithecus Johnii*) are endemic to the hills of south India



Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*), classically silhouetted against the sky, while traversing this steep hill slope

Post lunch, it was time to climb the somewhat busy mountain road towards Valparai through a forest-plantation matrix. The initial part of the climb, on the slope facing the plains, is almost always productive for the endemic Nilgiri Tahr, but it seemed this was one of those rare occasions where we would miss seeing them during the climb. However Nick saved the afternoon by brilliantly spotting an individual, its classic shape silhouetted against a bright sky as it perched precariously on a distant rocky slope - very satisfactory as Tahr sightings go! Further down the road, in progressively wetter forest, it was Lion-tailed Macaque territory. We saw a troop in the first potential forest patch, feeding on the tubular flowers of the *Cullenia exallirata* (a favourite food for Lion-tailed Macaque and a keystone tree in these forest). The rest of the drive was peppered with sightings of the locally abundant, endemic Jungle Striped Squirrel and a solitary Bull Gaur, non-nonchalantly grazing in the middle of a tea plantation, before we reached Stanmore Garden Bungalow around sunset.



The endemic Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) has been a flagship species for rainforest conservation in the Western Ghats

After a brief rest it was time to look for creatures of the dark and we spent the evening searching in the woodland surrounding the Monica Garden Bungalow - a known spot for some local specialities. A casual wave of the flashlight in a tall tree caught on to the bright eye-shine of an Indian Giant Flying Squirrel, one of the target species - a good start to the evening. Things got better (as much as they realistically could actually), when Stuart, with his thermal sensing equipment, picked up shapes akin to civets. The first one turned out to be the widely distributed Small Indian Civet, but another pair of shapes turned to be the much rarer Brown Palm Civet - an endemic, uncommonly seen through its range. There were murmurs from the bungalow staff that an Indian Pangolin (which would have been the icing, the cake and the ice cream all in one) had been seen a few times

around the property, but we seemed to have exhausted all our luck on a productive evening otherwise.



Brown Palm Civet as seen in a woodland patch within the Valparai landscape

**Day 3, Valparai:** Waking up to the pleasing, pervasive call of the Malabar Whistling Thrush, it was time for, potentially, three species of mongoose - regular visitors around guesthouses attracted to scraps of goodies from the kitchen. Having checked some potential sites, without luck, we moved on to our planned walk in the Puthuthottam Estate - a stronghold of Lion-tailed Macaque (LTM), where 100 plus individuals of these range restricted animals are easily seen. Almost as soon as we entered the estate, we were greeted with a sighting of LTM's, moving through the plantation. Further on, where we began our walk, a few more individuals, non-nchalantly going about their business, in the warmth of the morning sunshine. The walk was also productive for the endemic Stripe-necked Mongoose, foraging where tea plantation meets forest, Barking Deer, Indian Giant and Jungle Striped Squirrels, a pair of Crested Goshawks and Malabar Grey Hornbill.

After resting out the typically unproductive mid-day hours, we set out (with sightings of LTM and Nilgiri Langur en-route) towards the Anamalai Club, located at the base of a shrubby hill slope, where the staff had suggested that two species of Mongoose (hoping that one them would be the rare Brown Mongoose) were regular visitors in the evening. Sure enough, watching a regular feeding spot from a distance, we saw a grey, furry shape in a depression, soon chased away by Stripe-necked Mongoose. The flash of grey that disappeared into the thickets, giving way to the larger species, appeared to be a Ruddy Mongoose, but none of us had a good enough look to confirm. After watching the remaining mongoose, and it us, warily, for a few minutes we moved back to the Monica Bungalow at



dusk - the scene of action the previous night, with the tantalising possibility of Indian Pangolin. While we did have good sightings of Stripe-necked Mongoose, Brown Palm Civet and a pair of Indian Flying Squirrel, the Pangolin did not show.



Jungle Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus tristriatus*) a forest squirrel endemic to the Western Ghats



Indian Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis philippensis*) as seen in a woodland patch within the Valparai landscape

**Day 4, Valparai/Coimbatore:** Our final day plans to visit the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, a regular spot for the patchily distributed regional endemic Grizzled Giant Squirrel, was dropped since one of the visitors fell sick. As such we spent a large part of the morning looking for mongoose in the shrubby thickets around the

Anamalai Club and were duly entertained by a pair of Ruddy Mongoose until mid-day. Later a climb up a nearby hillock - with evidence of porcupine and elephant on the way - provided a birds-eye perspective of the plantation forest matrix of the Valparai landscape. Late afternoon, we started our drive back down, to the Coimbatore airport with sightings of a solitary Nilgiri Tahr by the roadside, South-eastern Langur, Bonnet Macaque and a charming herd of Asiatic Elephant, out for a drink in the cool of the evening, near the Aliyar Reservoir. We reached the airport in the evening, culminating a whirlwind trip that was productive for a bulk of the mammalian specialities of the region, but without luck for larger carnivores and a couple of rarer endemics.



Striped-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*) is a large forest mongoose endemic to the hills of south India



Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)



## **\*List of Mammal Sightings**

Three-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*)  
Jungle Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus tristriatus*)  
Dusky Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus*)  
Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica maxima*)  
Indian Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis philippensis*)  
South-eastern Langur (*Semnopithecus priam*)  
Nilgiri Langur (*Semnopithecus Johnii*)  
Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*)  
Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*)  
Chital (*Axis axis*)  
Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)  
Muntjac (*Muntiacus muntjak*)  
Indian Wild Pig (*Sus scrofa*)  
Gaur (*Bos gaurus*)  
Indian Hare (*Lepus nigricollis nigricollis*)  
Black Rat (*Rattus rattus*)  
Indian Field Mouse (*Mus booduga*)  
Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*)  
Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*)  
Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)  
Brown Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*)  
Small Indian Civet (*Viverricula indica indica*)  
Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)

*Nomenclature as per Menon, V., 2014. A Field Guide to Indian Mammals. Hachette India.  
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