

Shrinking tree cover and increasing tourist arrivals create an existential crisis for the lion-tailed macaque and other denizens of the forest in Valparai

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The setting sun sends slanting shafts of smoky beams to stroke the tops of neatly cropped tea bushes, strobe-lighting the dance of the dust mites. The tea bushes on the rounded peak remind me of the stylised sculptures of the Buddha, his curly locks neatly arranged in concentric circles around the topknot. At this hour, the sun seems to be on the back foot in his daily duel with mist. The nocturnal chorus of the cicadas will soon begin when the sun loses the duel. The otherwise raucous birds of rainbow plumes have also fallen silent in anticipation.

Then she emerges from the far side of the tea bushes, carefully picking her way through the paths that stitch the bushes into a patchwork quilt of deep green. In tow is her young one. A third, another younger female, stands on the edge of the forest, waiting for the matriarch to chart a safe course through the bushes. They are on their way to the forest on the other side for which they must cross the road that slices what must have once been a contiguous territory for them to roam at will. Now she has to defer to the encroachers, scanning both sides of the road for that speeding automobile that has maimed many of her tribe.

Having spotted the majestic mother elephant at the turn of the hill, I had already stopped my car at a respectable distance, rolled down my window and positioned my protruding lens in her direction, leaving enough room for her to cross the road safely in front of me. Still she hesitates, looking back at her offspring. Meanwhile, another car overtakes mine and comes to a screeching halt just where she might have crossed. And a third and a fourth line up ahead and behind me, effectively blocking her exit. She lifts her trunk and lets out an annoyed trumpet, backing off a few steps.

This is daily drama in Valparai where elephants, lion-tailed macaques, bisons, bonnet macaques, Nilgiri tahr and other creatures of the jungle are forced to share their shrinking turf with ever expanding tea estates and the steady stream of traffic spawned by tourism. Wildlife in this area has to navigate a minefield of traffic and pick their way through barbed-wire fences and concrete obstacles in order to survive.

Valparai, a somewhat obscure hill town 100 kilometres from Coimbatore, had, for decades, remained hidden from the hordes of tourists who invade nearby Ooty (Udhagamandalam). Not any longer. Tourists ever in search of uncharted lands have “discovered” Valparai in recent years, persuading tea estates to double up as resorts and homes to sprout concrete extensions that reinvent themselves as homestays and hotels; they cater to a demanding clientele that drives up in noisy SUVs from the parched plains of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

I, too, am guilty of this invasion of what was once primordial haven for wildlife, having driven all the way from Bengaluru through Coimbatore to Valparai, primarily to glimpse lion-tailed macaques, a unique species of primates endemic to the Western Ghats. En route, we drove through Pollachi, an unassuming town where roads are enveloped in the embrace of ancient tamarind trees whose overgrown branches spread out like a giant hood; the trees sport shiny fruits much like baubles on Christmas trees. Pollachi is indeed a beautiful introduction to what lies ahead up the slopes. We cross Aliyar dam without stopping and proceed up the winding macadam towards Valparai to reach our homestay before sunset.

The drive serves up tantalising glimpses of scenery fit for glossy tourist brochures; a distant, silent lake formed by a dam is framed by fecund bottle-green vegetation that sets off the striking blue skies; tea estates interspersed with stately forests cast coin-sized chinks of fading light on the macadam, an occasional waterfall, noisy and swollen by the abundant rains of the past few weeks, sends out fine sprays; tall cypresses host whistling thrushes singing with full-throated ease. My navigator, the trusty Google map, goes on the blink from time to time for want of a signal, but I am unlikely to get lost; there are no branching diversions from this single black python of a road wrapped around the hills.

Even before I reach my homestay, Valparai has already unwrapped its first gift—the magnificent matriarch elephant leading her two charges across my path. She strides purposefully away from the procession of cars and bikes, trumpets a warning in our direction and leads her charges majestically into the tea bushes on the other side and soon disappears from sight. This is a good sign that portends many more such sightings over the next few days.

The Western Ghats, whether in Valparai or elsewhere, seldom disappoint. Endless evergreen forests dense with promise of creatures weird and wonderful; deep dark green woods resonant with mellifluous birdsong; spice estates redolent of the scent of cardamom, cloves and nutmeg; tea and coffee estates offering aromatic brews; myriad cataracts rejoicing in an abundant monsoon, and much more. Above all, the promise of sighting weird and wonderful creatures—bisons, elephants, lion-tailed macaques, leopards, tigers, crocodiles, hornbills, slow lorises, king cobras, translucent frogs with disproportionate vocal cords and an army of insects of different stripes and digits, as venomous as they are vain.

On this trip, which covered a large part of the Western Ghats apart from Valparai over a period of ten days, I came across divergent ecosystems. While in Valparai vestigial forests still peep from behind the tea estates, Munnar on the other side of the Sholayar range is stripped bare of trees and completely manicured with tea gardens. It sports songbirds and snakes, but few other wildlife. Hillock after denuded hillock has been commissioned to grow that cheering drink we all so relish, at the cost of biodiversity. En route to Ooty, one comes across a stretch of tall bamboo forests that all but screen off sunlight during the day.

The next day, I go in search of Puthuthottam, a tea estate that is the favourite haunt of lion-tailed macaques, classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as endangered. Reduced to a few thousands thanks to their picky eating habits in a shrinking rainforest, these handsome primates are found in clusters along a limited spine of the Western Ghats. Benny, my homestay host, tells me they come to forage in the trash heaps of Valparai market too. They seem to have split into manageable tribes and spread themselves over a fairly large area of the Western Ghats.

As I drive into the tea estate, I spot them, a dozen or so, clambering over a car already parked under the shade of tall trees. One preens himself in the rear-view mirror while the other plays with the wiper blades on the windshield. Soulful eyes set in a face framed by a luxuriant black lion's mane regard me quizzically as if to ask whether I have brought bananas or peanuts for them. Once they realise I have nothing to offer, they ignore me. I watch them play, preen, snarl and sprawl. We spend a convivial hour or two in each other's company before I pack my lenses and leave.

Lion-tailed macaques are so named not for their lion-like mane but for their bunched tails. Shy, exclusively fruit-eating, arboreal primates which, until recently, seldom came down from their lofty canopy perch, they have now been reduced to foraging near human habitation. Distinctly different from their close cousins, the Nilgiri langurs, the lion-tailed macaques are in danger of extinction unless we ensure their habitat is protected.

But this realisation does not seem to have dawned on the visitors. Traffic on Valparai roads and elsewhere might still defer to elephants, bison and other big game, but lion-tailed macaques perish by the dozens, crushed under the wheels of impatient vehicles. Now there are a few local volunteers who station themselves wherever these macaques are found to direct oncoming traffic away from their path. The local administration has constructed aerial bridges at habitual macaque crossings so that these creatures do not have to come down from the canopy in order to cross the road into the far-side forest. The shy Malabar giant squirrel, too, takes advantage of these bridges to glide to safety.

The next couple of days bring in more excitement. A big herd of shiny handsome bison, or the Indian gaur as they are called, block my way as I drive around the hillside. These are usually found in large herds of several dozens, sometimes, even hundreds. Occasionally, one comes across an adult male evicted from the herd by the alpha male. Wild bison are said to live up to 30 years on average, and those evicted from the herd spend the rest of their lives in solitude.

As I wait for the herd to move on, I notice how healthy they look. The creamy shank on their foreheads looks like a crown; each male specimen could weigh up to 1,500 kilograms. I had been warned they could be dangerous, but they seem benign and placid. We wait patiently for them to amble across the road. After about half an hour or so, the herd splits into two groups to enter the tea bushes on either side of the road and shuffle among the tea bushes. Some scooter-borne visitors alight and venture into the tea bushes to take their selfies as I watch with bated breath, worrying about their safety. But

Valparai's wildlife seems to have taken human intrusion in their stride, mostly ignoring us and trying to get by on whatever little is left for them. Benny assures me there have never been any serious attacks on humans in this stretch of the Western Ghats.

On one of my drives, I spot a pair of hornbills hovering like helicopters against a blue sky. They are too high up for me to get a good shot. The Malabar pied hornbill, with its black plumage, white belly and a large and ungainly yellow beak with a black casque, is endemic to this region. Their big beaks enable them to crack open nuts and berries; they relish poison figs capable of felling a grown human. King cobras, too, call this area home, but there was little chance of spotting any in Valparai. A few years ago, at Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, I had had a close brush with a 11-foot-long specimen. ("In the king's own country" *Frontline* June 10, 2016). At night, I go in search of slow lorises, shining a torch on tree trunks to spot their glinting eyes, but find none.

Two days later, I drive to Athirapally waterfalls through a badly potholed and lonely stretch of about 80 kilometres of pristine Vazhachal rainforest. Leaving around 5 a.m. when it was still dark, I had high expectations of encountering some wildlife on this stretch of "shola" forest, similar to those found in the higher elevations of the Nilgiris, Anamalais, Munnar, Palani hills, Meghamalai and Agasthyamalai. Interspersed with montane grasslands, the shola forests are a unique habitat nurturing the fabled biodiversity of the Western Ghats. Mahogany, myrtle, bishop wood, cluster fig and rhododendron populate the canopy while a variety of stunted shrubs sprawl on the forest floor to shelter a variety of organisms, not all of which have been documented yet.

The mindless introduction of non-local species of vegetation such as eucalyptus and lantana threatens this rich biodiversity. But during the entire three-hour drive through this hushed and dark jungle, I did not come across any big game on my way to the falls.

Athirappilly is a tiny village where the Chalakkudy river, which originates in the Anaimudi ranges, plunges 90 feet down in a spectacular torrent. Malayalam cinema, which features this waterfall, seems to have inspired busloads of day-trippers from Kochi, 70 kilometres away, and beyond. Wayside eateries do brisk business. After an hour or so at the falls, I trace my way back to Valparai, hoping to spot some spotted or striped cat.

Wildlife or not, the drive through dense Vazhachal forest is an unmitigated delight. The jungle is deep and dark, the thickets so full of promise. I had been told that few people cross this jungle without sighting big game.

The light is already fading and I have not seen even deer, leave alone big cats. My eyes are peeled for a yellow flash among the green thickets. And then, there it is, in a small clearing in the jungle, a golden flash among the bushes. My car is already past the spot, but I reverse and peer through the foliage into a small clearing where a magnificent full-grown tiger is resting on the forest floor, his sides heaving. I brake and stare in disbelief at a full-grown tiger at such close proximity. I am hesitant to roll down my window for a good shot, but eventually, I pluck up the courage, keeping my finger on the button that would raise the glass in an instant. Of course, my car window is no match for the power of a tiger's paw.

Perhaps the beast sensed my awe and respect. For a few intimate moments suspended in time, we stare at each other in hushed silence. I feel so privileged to be in the company of this majestic cat who seems to be in his prime, judging by his glossy coat. Perhaps he is resting after feeding, but there is no sign of the kill. There is no aggression in his eyes either. After a few clicks, I decide to move on. After all, this is a lonely stretch and I did not want to take any chances with a matchless predator, however awe-inspiring.

Back in Valparai, I go in search of Nilgiri tahr, a kind of wild sheep endemic to this region. I was directed to Loams Point, a bend on the road down to Pollachi where there is plenty of grazing. Hours of waiting in this scenic spot yielded nothing. The herd seems to have moved to other grazing pastures.