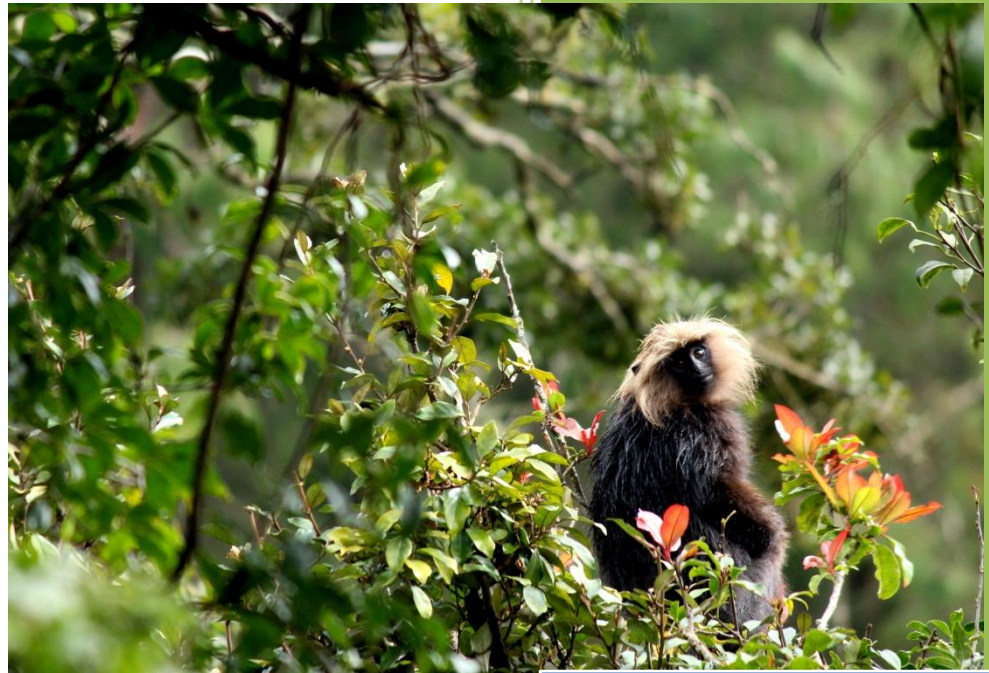


GROUP III

NILGIRI TAHR



AUTHORS:

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Trek Report

91st Foundation Course

GROUP 32001

Introduction

“In every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks.”

— John Muir



Trekking is one of the most exciting activities of the Foundation course. This became amply evident a session about expectations from FC when many OTs responded that they are eagerly waiting for Nilgiris Trek. After completion of the trek we all feel that wasn't an overstated emotion. Nature has a strong power to attract. It compels us to breach our physical and mental limits. Trekking in natural landscape provides that opportunity to test your physical and mental calibre and to bring one closer to oneself. Most importantly when this task of trekking is done in a group it also teaches group dynamics. It tells how to lead and how to be led also when to lead and when to be led. Extending hands to friends forges a bond of affection, care and belongingness in a group. This lesson of esprit de corps is best learnt through a challenging task like a trekking activity. As a team named 'Nilgiri Tahrs' we not only learnt that lesson but we lived that lesson. That is one best learning we all wish to carry forward in our professional and personal life.

Why 'NILGIRI TAHRS'

It was agreed that our team will be named as Nilgiri Tahrs based on few important characteristics of this mountain goat species. They are extremely quick and sure-footed over precipitous ground. They can easily manoeuvre across steep slopes. But the two most important considerations for the group are its social behaviour and adaptability. Tahr is a social animal living and foraging in mixed herds, which exhibits the dynamics of a team.

Second, this animal is highly adaptable to the climatic conditions.



Our TEAM

“When there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.”

Our Group comprised of Total 25 members including 21 OTs and 4 STF personnel. On the daily basis we were joined by forest guards or watchmen who remained as part of our team for the respective days. Team included a Group Leader, Assistant Group Leader and Treasurer as assigned by academy to facilitate coordination and decision making. Names of the team members are given below.

Officer Trainees

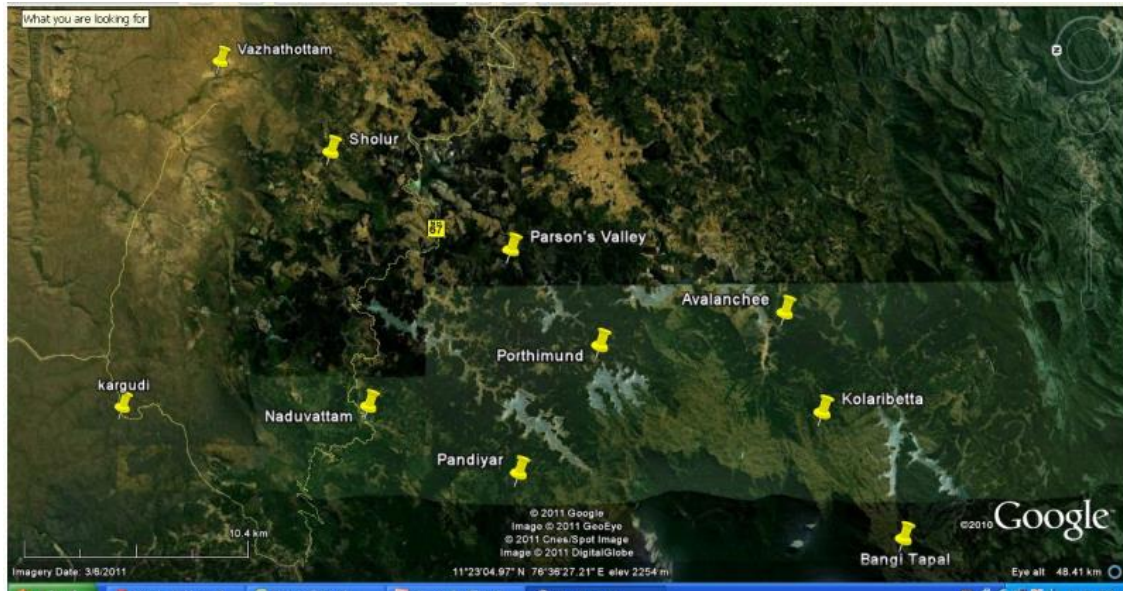
- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Agneeshwar Vyas (GL) | 15. Manju Mary Kaul |
| 2. Bishop Sarkar (AGL) | 16. Suneel Kumar |
| 3. Ayushi Chand (Treasurer) | 17. Rayees Akhtar |
| 4. Ravali Priya | 18. Girpo |
| 5. Mukund Bihari | 19. Priyanka Nigam |
| 6. Chahat | 20. Shipra Srivastava |
| 7. Neha Singh | 21. Kaushik Dhara |
| 8. Priyobrato Roy | STF Personnel |
| 9. Vineet Jaiswal | 22. Thangraj |
| 10. Priya Sarraf | 23. Ishwaran |
| 11. Jasleen Kaur | 24. Muthu |
| 12. Goonjan Kumar | 25. Naga |
| 13. Rajendra Meena | |
| 14. Chandrashekhar | |

The group was an amalgamation of officer trainees from different services, backgrounds, cultures and experiences. It had OTs from Indian Forest Service, Indian Police Service, Indian Economic Service, Indian Statistical Service as well as Royal Bhutan Police Service. The officer trainees coming from different states and diverse backgrounds & culture made this journey an interesting expedition. We all stayed together as ‘one’ during this trek and shared experiences, fun and hardships. All the trekkers helped each other in the best possible way. There were as many as 10 members in the group who trekked for the first time in their lives. These members were – Shipra Srivastava, Jasleen Kaur, Kaushik Dhara, Mukund Bihari, Suneel Kumar, Rajendra Meena, Priyanka Nigam, Ayushi Chand, Chahat and Neha Singh. Successful

completion of trek with each other's support turned out to be a great achievement and a life-time experience for all of us.

"I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees" — Henry David Thoreau

DAILY TREK AND ROUTINE



A typical forest trail through Nilgiris crosses emerald blue lakes, milky waterfalls, massive reservoirs, huge dams, rich green grassy meadows, tea plantations and gigantic eucalyptus trees. This is one such trail. Rarely used by humans, it is often crossed by wild animals like Nilgiri langoors, the lion-tailed macaque, tigers, bison, etc.

Low, gentle slopes, where dense forests of shola trees alternate with tea estates, orange groves and coffee plantations; a land where tribes like the Todas, the Kurumbhas and the Irulas still live in a way which has changed little over the past centuries. The Nilgiris are interspersed with tiny villages, with tranquil blue lakes and elegant cottages where teatime is still the hour for hot buttered crumpets, scones and strawberry jam.

This long expedition trail begins and ends in Ooty. It covers Parson's valley, Porthimund, Mukurthi Dam, Pandiar Hills, Sholur, Porthimund Dam and Madumalai National Park.

Each of these untainted expanses has its own story to tell. Parsons Valley is the famous Western Catchment and flaunts huge reservoirs and green valleys. It consists of the Parson Dam, Porthimund Dam and Porthimund village embedded deep in the hills. Mukurthi, a well-known wildlife preserve, is dominated by the Mukurthi Peak (36 km from Ooty). It got its name because it resembles a human nose.

The Mukurthi National Park is a dense forest, inhabited by lion-tailed macaques, leopards, elephants, tigers, the highly endangered Nilgiri tahr, and the more common deer, monkeys, birds, and reptiles. Pandiar Hill atop the highest point of the trek showcases the Nilgiri mountain range with a view of Mukurthi dam below.

Trekking in the Nilgiris is a spectacular experience for trekkers, naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts. Also, being close to the Queen of Hills, Ooty, the whole range is easily accessible.

DAY 1 (Pandiyar to Naduvattam)

Resource Person: Stephen, Forester

This was the first day of our trek and excitement in the group was at its highest crest. The members were beginning to know each other and a new family was about to be formed.

The distance from Pandiyar to Naduvattam has rocky and slippery terrain. The route goes through mostly well laid roads and tea gardens. The area is fully infested with leaches and one has to be very careful of the same. The trek is mostly down-hill and passes through good forest area. One on the way, one may encounter Sambar, deer, wild squirrels, monkeys etc. After crossing these beautiful tea gardens one has to cross a very small water stream before reaching Naduvattam. It is a small hamlet on the road leading to Mudumalai and Mysore-Ooty Highway. It is located at an elevation of 1953 metres above mean sea level. From this place, spectacular scenery of nature is visible. While standing in front of the Naduvattam camp site, a community hall, one can see an extensive ground with lush green grass and cattle grazing on it. At the other end of this ground, the trees look beautiful. On all other sides of the ground, views of the mountains and clouds changing their colors can be seen.



DAY 2 (Naduvattam to Kargudi)

After a good night's sleep at Naduvattam, the members were itching to hit the path again. This time the destination was Kargudi. The group was all the more excited as it had to pass through the very famous Mudumalai national park, which was known for its wildlife.

Kargudi lies north of Naduvattam. The route from Naduvattam to Kargudi has many scenic landscapes, tea gardens, coffee plantations, forests with very tall Eucalyptus trees, black pepper climbers and banana gardens. After crossing all these places full of diverse natural vegetation, one arrives at Mudumalai National Park. The trek to Kargudi includes a stretch of around 10 km in this sanctuary. This route consists of well laid roads. The entire route is full of different varieties of flora and fauna including elephants. Then comes the Kargudi camp site which is at 1140 metres above mean sea level. It is situated amidst deep forests and there is a adventurous safari to Mudumalai Sanctuary, which is located about a kilometer away from the camp site



DAY 3 (Kargudi to Sholur)

Resource Person: Vinoth, Beat Guard.

Apprehensions were high as probably the toughest part of the trek besieged the team. The path upto Sholur was famous for its steep slopes, scorching sun and hostile environment. But the group was determined to beat all odds and be successful in all its endeavours.

The trek route from Kargudi to Sholur is one of the toughest one can hope to trek on. It is here that one encounters one of the steepest inclines of around 2500ft. As one rises above the cultivated lands that surround the Tiger Reserves, the agricultural land gives way to grass and forest. As the hotter, drier flat country gives way to the cooler, well-watered green country of the temperate Nilgiri Plateau. one can see the obvious change in surroundings. The trek to Sholur is tough, and forces one to tap into one's energy reserves. The views can compensate the strenuous upward ascent. As the Sholur hamlets get nearer, the entwining forest gives way to cultivated hills. Almost like an intricate patchwork, the undulating hills have been converted into toiled farmlands



DAY 4 (Sholur-to Parson's Valley)

Resource Person: Shiva , Anti- Poaching Wather

Post the journey to Sholur, the team's confidence was sky-high. No more obstacles in the path seemed insurmountable, and cheerfully the team began the journey to Parson's valley. And the journey too proved to be a cakewalk. The gradient was lower, there were beautiful meadows around where the team indulged in some childish activities like rolling on the grass or forming human smileys. Ranks and egos were left to the valleys and meadows as it was clear that the team had graduated into a family.

Vertical rows of tall silver oak trees stand gracefully in between the tea gardens, providing shadow to the bushy tea plants. Group of tribal women plucking tender tea leaves using an aluminum square shape cutter which can be operated with both the hands & collecting these leaves in baskets or bags on their backs

make a beautiful sight. The road through these tea estates, though pucca , are with great twists and turns, making it a pleasant trek. One also comes across a tea factory on the route.

Further on the trek route, there are splendid savannas. One finds variations in humidity and moisture levels in the atmosphere here. These grasslands with the scenic back drop of magnificent misty mountains - the pristine landscape, continuously attract filmmakers especially for romantic duets & dance sequence shooting

On both sides of the highway, there are forests consisting of tall pines, cinnamomum & stunted rhododendrons. This road finally leads the trekker to Parson's Valley. Parson's valley is a small town located at 2295mts above mean sea level. As compared to Sholur which has a tropical climate - warm & dry, Parson's valley has a temperate climate-cool and pleasant. Parson's valley is famous for its multipurpose dam serving the purposes of storage, supply of drinking water to the nearby areas and hydroelectric power generation.



DAY 5 (Parsons Valley to Porthimund)

Resource Person: Sakthivel, Beat Guard.

It was the second last day of the trek and the group started on a relaxing note. The route was a comparatively shorter one and it was almost entirely through the jungle. Scenic meadows, beautiful shola forests, tea gardens, deep valleys, magnificent mountains and vivid shades of blue haze of rivulets surrounded the path.

Although it was not in the route, but the group decided to take a stroll to the dam and back. The ravishing beauty of the dam will leave the team spellbound. Reflections of the forest in the clear blue waters are so clear and untouched. After spending time here, they proceed towards the trekking shed.



Day 6 (Porthimund to Pandyar)

Resource Person- Ponabalam, Beat Guard.

This being the last day of the trek, nostalgia had already set in. At the same time, the members were also enthusiastic to meet their comrades whom they had left at Ooty. The team was further bolstered by the presence of CC Madam who went with us upto the Mukurti Dam

The trail gradually climbs up the hill and passes through splendid shola forests with the stream below. In a few minutes, the trail opens up in huge grassland. The team continued on the trail walking towards the



right of the stream. The trail from here gradually climbs up the ridge and reaches a bridge in around 15 – 20 minutes. The area near Mukurthi dam is very beautiful. The team had lunch there and then they started towards the final destination, i.e Pandyar. It was getting late, but the enthusiastic team members made a superhuman effort of trekking almost 12 Kms uphill in just four and half hours, inspite of the fact that one of them had twisted her ankles. Finally the vehicles were waiting for the team at Pandyar, from where they were taken to Ooty.

GROUP DYNAMICS

As rightly said by Henry Ford:

Coming together is a beginning.

Keeping together is progress.

Working together is success.

From food, water, ground sheet; to clothes, luggage...we **shared** everything. Like a family, we were well-coordinated, understood each other's problems, stood by them and helped them in every possible way.

Though we started as separate individuals, we were all united by a bond till the end. We played games, cooked and ate together, and thus the bonds of interpersonal interactions linked the group members together. This **cohesiveness** brought positive feelings and increased our ability to cope with problems.

Each and every member of the group had a strong sense of belonging to the group. The barrier between the leaders and to be led was broken down.



We all **moved together**. Some members had a fast pace, while some had a slow pace. But once we used to start the day trek, the whole group had a common pace. The Group Leader ensured that no one was left behind. The skills and abilities of the group members meshed to allow optimal performance.

CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE TREK :

WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER!!!

The best way to really get to know a place is to explore it on foot and our trek experience was enriched by the people we met, the flora and fauna we came across and the fun we had as a group. Nevertheless, we did face several challenges on the way- challenges which made us cry in pain, which made us stronger as individuals and helped us cross our limits, which made our bond as a group stronger.

The challenges began to show the day we reached Pandyar, our base camp. The cold weather accompanied with dense fog sent a chill down our spines during the night. The blankets and the sleeping bags did not seem to be sufficient to cover the cold. So, we tried to beat the cold by singing songs and huddling up together in the small rooms at the camp.

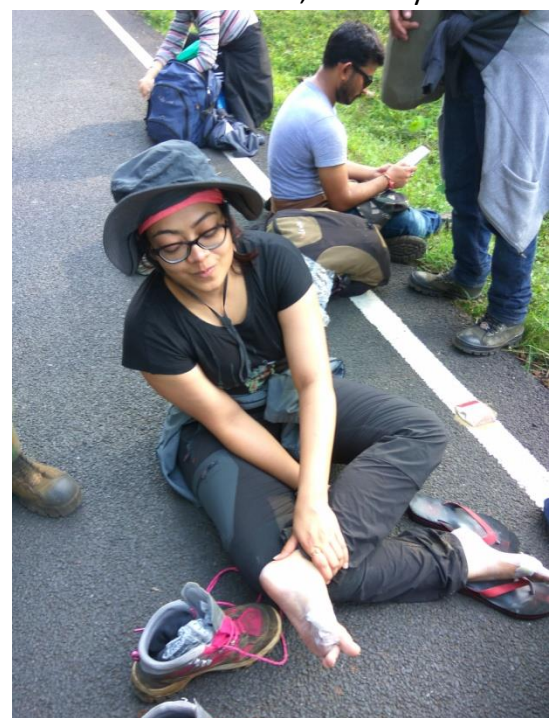
On the first day of the trek, we were welcomed by a slight drizzle early in the morning. So, all of us decked up in raincoats and ponchos.

The drizzle transformed into heavy rainfall along the way, which meant that we had to be extremely careful on the slippery paths down the slope. However, we were mesmerized by the beautiful landscape and lush green tea estates and that made us enjoy the rains in full spirit.

Due to the heavy rains, we were unable to find a place to have our lunch- therefore, our very efficient STF guards quickly gathered resources- bamboo sticks and groundsheet to build a makeshift tent for us to have lunch.

Extreme caution while walking meant more leeches on our shoes. The walking feet were soon to be covered in salt and tobacco to save ourselves from the much-feared leeches. The slow pace quickly converted into a sprint as soon as one of our group members got a leech bite.

The second day again saw rain and mist along the way. The challenges were multiplied by the continuous downward slope we had to traverse that day. What is more difficult than walking on an upslope is going downslope. And that was well proven that day. A major portion of the trek route through the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve involved walking



along concrete road. As a result, by the end of the day, most of us got blisters on our feet. However, the indomitable spirit of the group and the focus on reaching the destination made the journey easier.

Another wave of fear was generated by the loud elephant trumpets we heard along the way. So much so, the STF had to cock their rifles for protection. With excitement to spot a herd and a little fear in our hearts, we treaded on.

Though we didn't get to see any elephants, we did encounter a swarm of bees- which probably had been disturbed earlier but chose to attack us instead. The STF ensured we were at a safe distance from the angry bees and went on to fight them on their own. A few moments of awaited breath and several stings later, the track was safe for us to continue our journey.

Inspite of the adverse conditions, none of the group members stayed back and decided to continue the trek next day.

The third day from Kargudi to Sholur was the steepest route of all. This time, both physical and mental strength of the members was put to test. Steep slopes and the shining sun continuously drained our energy, but, the major problem was scarcity of water. Continuous dehydration and shortness of breath over the slope meant that our water reserve got over within 2.5 hours of starting the trek. However, we found a solution to that soon enough. We decided to stop near a natural water stream for lunch. We quenched our thirst, filled our bottles and treaded ahead on the steep slopes. We justified the name of our group and reached the beautiful Sholur village well in time to enjoy with the local people in front of a bonfire.



We justified the name of our group and reached the beautiful Sholur village well in time to enjoy with the local people in front of a bonfire.

By the end of the trek, we had successfully faced leeches, blisters, ankle twists, muscle cramps. In addition, we had also found quick solutions to torn rucksacks, sleeping bags and leaking raincoats. All through the journey we stood together as a team. Each Tahr came forward to help others in time of need. There was no shortage of hands to help. This deep bond and camaraderie made the trek a journey to be remembered for a lifetime.



CULTURE & PEOPLE:

The region of Nilgiris majorly has 5 tribes:

- Hill Irulas
- Badagas
- Todas
- Kurumbas
- Kotas

During the trek we could interact with different components of the first four tribes: **Irulas, Badagas, Todas** and **Kurumbas**

We came across a Toda temple and learnt through interaction the customs and the patriarchal values carried by the largely Hindu driven tribe, while child marriage is common they are subdivided by the basis of **Kulas** and follow Monogamy and exogamous marriage patterns as a tribe. All the Nilgiri tribes are similar in their marriage patterns and also follow cousin marriages. They have a lot of open defecation problems and there has been an observation of stunted growth among the children there due to these reasons. They are majorly cattle rearing tribes and live in the landforms that are dominated by the grasslands. As learnt from the interactions with the Forest guards there, during the British rule, as a scheme of gradual assimilation of tribes into the main stream economy the land was divided into agricultural land, grazing land and pine forests. Due to the changes in the Government schemes after independence the grazing lands got slowly engulfed into the wild and the tribes have lost some of their buffaloes to the wild as they tend to assimilate to the wild buffalo patterns and develop a subsequent herd mentality.



Dwellings and Vicinities



Gone Wild



The People



The Rituals

On the way to *Sholur* and at *Kargudi* we had the opportunity to interact with the other three tribes. The Badagas, in comparison to the Todars were found to be a little less patriarchal and allow their girl children to go to school. The Badagas are distinguished by their head gear turban known as '**Mandaray**'. Due to the initiative of an IAS Officer they speak very highly of, they have been allocated concrete houses phase wise since 2012 and they have reached 100% residence in concrete houses in the year of 2016. The same is true with the Kurumbas and Irulas in case of education a school through the initiative of a bureaucrat a school has been sanctioned and has been functioning since 2006.

ECONOMY:

The traditional occupations of the tribes like cattle rearing and rat, snake catching professions have been replaced majorly by the occupations in tea estates. However, it is commendable to note that there have been no traces of Child Labour whatsoever. The employees in the tea gardens work from 0800hrs till 1600hrs daily and are paid a meagre wage of *Rs.240 per day per person*. This almost always rules out the concept of savings for most of the families. They do not own any real estate or property of the sorts as they are provided accommodation by the landlords at higher altitudes as it is not completely suitable for tea growth. Their health matters are not taken care if adequately and most of the leaf picking is done by the women whereas men are engaged in other activities like logistics and security etc. We could also collect some really interesting information about the Forest Department's involvement in improving the forest produce and its marketing. It was also interesting to know that the patterns of production of White tea to Normal Tea was almost 1:12 and thus there is a need for the optimization of the rates thereof.

All in all, it was a great and different experience to interact with people from different cultures and those engaged in activities so varied from those people we interact on a daily basis in the urban silos.



NATURE OBSERVATIONS:

Observation of natural elements in the surrounding is one of the key elements of any trek programme. It becomes all the more important if the trek is being carried out in an area rich in biodiversity. Our trek into the Global Biodiversity Hotspot of Western Ghats also compelled us to inquisitively observe the landscape, ecosystem, flora and fauna. A brief summary of the observations made during trek are given below.

Landscapes

Nilgiris is dominated by the Shola Forests. These forests were prominently visible during our trek from Porthimund to Pondiyar. They contained grasslands interspersed with forest patches with medium sized trees. Ecologically they represent a type of Climatic Climax.

Dry deciduous teak forests were observed in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. They represent the typical Tiger habitat. They were rich in Teak associates in middle story of forest and ground vegetation. Dry scrub forest and bamboo brakes were observed from Kargudi to Sholur.

Pine forests were observed during trek from Parsons Valley to Portimund. It was characterised by absence of dense Pine Tree stands with almost nil ground vegetation due to shade and fallen pine needles.

Tea gardens and coffee estates were other prominent landscape elements in the area. Tea gardens were most frequent in our trek from Pondiyar to Naduvattum. Coffee plantations were prominent from Naduvattum to Kargudi. They contained coffee plants as well as black pepper vines on the trees.



Flora

Plants and trees from all the major plant groups were observed during the trek. Algae were seen in several water bodies. Bryophytes in the form of mosses were present all around in moist and low light areas. Fungus in the form of wood rot fungus and mushrooms were present in the forest. An interesting mushroom species called *Amanita muscaria* was sighted in the pine forest on the way to Pondiyar from Portimund. This is a poisonous mushroom which also believed to be source of an intoxicant drink Somras as mentioned in Rigveda. Good numbers of fern species were present in the area. Major gymnosperm sighted during the trek was *Pinus patula*, which is Pine species native to Mexico and was introduced in the Nilgiris by British to meet the rising demand of pulpwood. Several angiosperm species were present in the region and their composition varied with Change is Altitude. Above 1500mtrs Rhododendron was present. Wattle (*Acacia mearnsii*) and Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*) were present abundantly in the region.

Fauna

Direct sightings and indirect signs of the wild animals enriched our trekking experience. Common butterflies sighted in the region included- Common Crow, Common Jezbel, Striped Tiger, Common Yellow etc. One endemic butterfly sighted there was Nilgiri Fritillary. We also observed Cicada, an insect responsible for the sound in the forest. Giant wood spiders were also common in the forest.

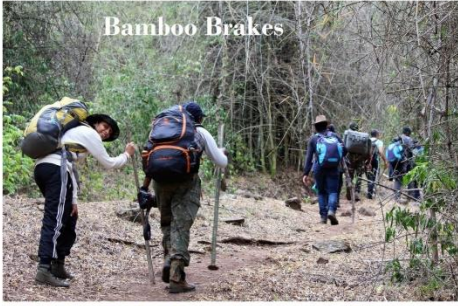
Amphibians- Frogs were common around streams. One green coloured frog with mottled pattered was interesting sighting on the way to Portimund from Parsons Valley.

Reptiles- Squinks, Lizards and Snakes were the common reptiles sighted. We were able to sight a garden lizard and Perrotets Wood Snake. This medium sized non venomous snake was sighted as one dead specimen and a live specimen on the way to Portimund from Parsons Valley. It is learnt that this snake in endemic to the region.

Birds: Nilgiris is rich in avifauna many of which are endemic to the region. Several such birds were sighted by us during. Few important birds sighted during trek are enlisted below.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| ✓ Rufous Shrike | ✓ Grey Jungle Fowl |
| ✓ Nilgiri Flycatcher | ✓ Red Jungle Fowl |
| ✓ Indian Blackbird | ✓ Larks |
| ✓ Oriental White eye | ✓ Common Sparrows |
| ✓ Pied Bushchat | ✓ Doves |
| ✓ Nilgiri Laughing Thrush | ✓ Starlings |
| ✓ Flame back Woodpecker | ✓ Jungle Crow |

Mammals: Elephants, Tigers, Leopards and herbivores are the major mammalian species in the region. We were able to observe indirect signs of most of them could sight a few. Tiger pugmarks and scats were observed during trek from Parsons valley to Portimund and Portimund to Pondiyar. Elephant dung was common in Mudumalai and from Kargudi to Sholur. It was also learnt that due to very less rains in the region in this monsoon Elephants are moving towards tea gardens. A herd of Spotted dears were sighted in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. Indirect signs of Sambhar and barking deer were also observed. We were lucky to sight three endemic species to the region- Nilgiri Giant Squirrel, Nilgiri Langur and Brown Mongoose (Endemic to Western Ghats). We also observed signs of porcupine and wild boar.



Bamboo Brakes



Coffee Estate



Tea Estate



Teak Forest



Pine Forest



Shola Grassland



Fern



Mosses



Moss Capsule



Black Pepper



Amanita muscaria



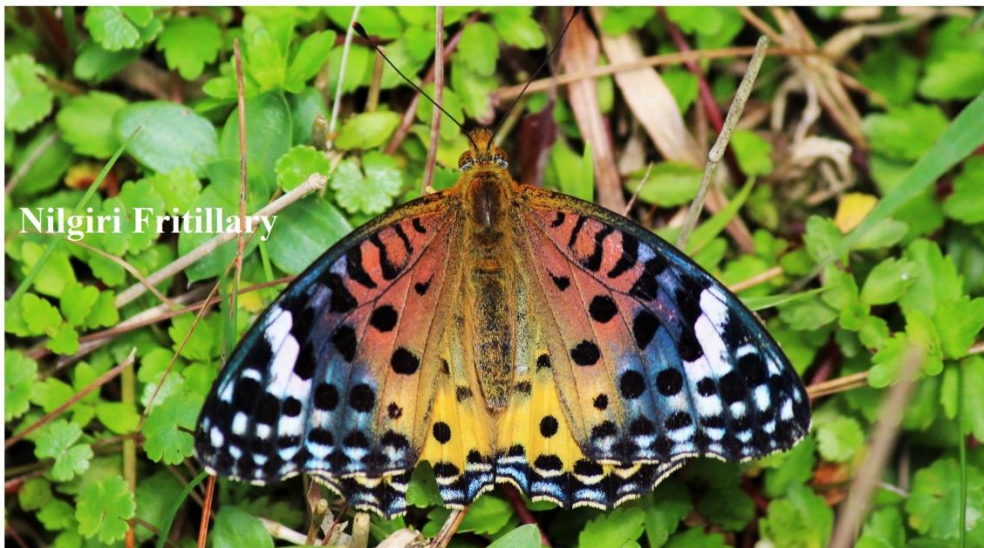
Perrotets Wood Snake



Frog



Nilgiri Langur



Nilgiri Fritillary



Pied Bushchat

Nilgiri Flycatcher



Spotted Deers



Giant Squirrel



Brwon Mongoose



Cicada





मंज़िलों की चाहत में दूर तक निकलना है,
राह है बड़ी मुश्किल हौंसले से चलना है!

राह वो ही लो जिसपर तुम यकीन करते हो,
भीड़ में ज़माने की चलना भी क्या चलना है!

साथ ले चलो रिश्ते जो यहाँ पे बन जाएँ,
साथ कुछ ना आया था, आया जो वो जलन है!
मंज़िलों की चाहत में दूर तक निकलना है....

"अग्नीश्वर व्यास "



Whenever I watch a movie like Gravity or Interstellar or read a book like The Martian, that feeling of insignificance of a being in this universe engulfs me. Something so eerily similar happened surprisingly when I started seeing these little components from mosses, ferns and lichen. If something so small can have such a complicated textural being.. Woah! What a wonderful paradox it is, we should be so complexly insignificant. We should be so helpless yet wonderfully capable. Looking at all the overwhelmingly wonderful things that surround us somewhere we realise that we are but tiny insignificant specks who can strive hard to change the whole world, Aren't we?

Under the great sky full of stars that put the city lights to shame.. We all found a part of ourselves that we never knew was there! Speaking of stories that surround you, something, somewhere incredible is waiting to be discovered.

-Ravali