

The Great Ghats Scene

A wildlife-spotting trip in the hills of South India

By Margaret Hartman



An attempt at birding atop an elephant

Our 18-day trip to South India was a wildlife-spotting trip, with the emphasis on birds, but we were also on the lookout for mammals. Our 11-member group began in Bangalore and ended in Kochi, spending time in three different habitats: the deciduous forests of the interior plateau, the mountains and the moist, evergreen coastal forest. The focus of this article is the mountains, called the Western Ghats.

The Western Ghats is a mountain range along the west coast of India, extending north about 1400 kilometres from the southern tip of the sub-continent almost to the Pakistan border. It is subdivided into a number of 'hills'. We visited three of the most southerly: Nilgiri, Anaimalai and Cardamom.

A study of the distribution map for each species of bird (such as the maps found in *The Birds of India* by Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp) reveals that many bird species found in the Western Ghats are also found in the foothills of the Himalayas, but nowhere in between, indicating that individuals of these species routinely cross the lowland gap between the Ghats and the Himalayas. In contrast, many other bird species are found only in the Western Ghats. Indeed some species are confined to only one or two of the 'hills'.

The Indian government has established a series of parks that form a continuous, protected reserve within the Western Ghats. Much of this reserve is not accessible by road. Where the road does go it is through large tracts of native forest, but cars and buses are not allowed to stop except in designated areas at the edge of the road. We stopped when we could. The bird-watching was good because it is easier to see birds at the edge of the forest rather than deep inside it, but it was not good for mammal-sighting.

We reached the highest point by road in the Nilgiri Hills at 2800 metres and saw the first endemic highland birds and our first endemic mammal, a primate called the Nilgiri langur. We then returned to Ooty, the best-known hill station



Serene view of the Western Ghats



Laundry day



A Nilgiri taur

in the Western Ghats, to spend the night at the Taj Savoy Hotel. Constructed in 1829, the Prince of Wales stayed here during his visit to India in the 1870s.

From the Nilgiris we drove to the Anaimalai Hills. There is no good accommodation at the top, so we stayed at the bottom and drove to the top during each of the next two days. We could only find birds in the morning until about 11:00 am and again in the afternoon after 3:00 pm, because birds are quiet in the middle of the day. Several of us took advantage of the midday break to try birding during an elephant ride, but discovered to our chagrin that looking through binoculars from the back of a moving elephant is nearly impossible.

Our third location in the Ghats was the Cardamom Hills. We spent two nights at the hill station in Munnar and one day in the National Park, where we saw the Nilgiri taur, a species of mammal more closely related to sheep than other

taurs. Unfortunately our day in this park was a Sunday and we had a lot of human company.

On the trip we saw 17 species of mammals, 250 species of birds and a plentiful supply of one animal we weren't looking for – the leech. There are tigers and leopards in the Western Ghats and although we didn't see any, we heard them. The trip provided an excellent opportunity for wildlife viewing. A knowledgeable nature guide is essential to make the experience worthwhile.

Margaret Hartman has been a member of FOM since 2001. An educational consultant with a doctoral degree in biological sciences, she particularly enjoys FOM Study Tours with an emphasis on nature. She and her husband, Bob Zahary, are organising and leading the FOM Study Tour to Bhutan in June.

Photos by the author

Editor's note: In addition to its wildlife reserves, South India provides many opportunities for cultural exploration. This is the home of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam dance; the source of Ayurveda, the traditional medicine native to this part of the Indian subcontinent; the serene 'backwaters' which can be explored by houseboat; historical Cochin and its old Jewish quarter; the enormous traditional 'Chinese' fishing nets that dot the coastline; the tea and cardamom plantations of Munnar; a distinctive cuisine quite different from that of Northern India; herb, pepper and vanilla farms; the beaches of Goa.

For more information about travel to India and the Western Ghats, please go to:

www.india-tourism.com
www.keralatourism.org



Houseboat on the backwaters near Kerala
inset: Kathakali dance performer applying
face paint; photos by Susan Hunter