The Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius* Ogilby, 1838) occuring on the Palani (Pulney) Hills, Tamil Nadu

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Schaller (1971) had summarized the available database on the Nilgiri Tahr, *Hemitragus hylocrius* Ogilby, and Daniel (1971) reported both on his survey of the High Range in Kerala and, in a less detailed fashion, on the occurrence of this endemic goat on the southernmost hills of the Western Ghats. Schaller (1971: 371) did not visit the Palnis in late 1969, but quoted a 1970 letter from the now late Raja of the erstwhile Pudukkottai Princely State (in Trichinopoly District then) informing him that "there are still a few Nilgiri Tahr left in the Palni Hills, may be there are about a 100 to 150 on the whole roaming about the cliffs."

He also stated in summary: "However, a precise estimate of the total number of Nilgiri Tahr surviving in the wild cannot be made until the status of the species has been determined in the Anamalai and Palni Hills as well as in the region lying to the south of the High Range". Daniel (1971: 542) had concluded his paper by writing: "The High Wavys, Palnis, and other hills to the north should also be immediately surveyed. It may be that about half the tahr population is found outside the Nilgiris and the High Range."

Schaller estimated that the total number of tahr surviving on the southern Western Ghats could be in the range of 1,000; 300 on the Nilgiris, 530 or so on the High Range and most of the remainder (*ca* 170) on the Anaimalais and possibly on the Palni Hills. Rice (1984) worked on his doctoral research at Eravikulam National Park (Kerala) and stated that "Current estimates indicate that the wild population totals about 2,200 tahr. In addition there a few collection of Nilgiri tahr in zoos, totaling 55 animals". Recently, a popular article appeared in *Hornbill* magazine, of Meena (2009) who saw a few tahr in 2000 on the Palnis near the Kudraiyar cliffs, which is the most recent observation of tahr on these hills.

Every month during the past 10 years or so I have been trekking to the Kookal (or Kukkal) cliffs (*ca* 40km northwest of Kodaikanal) in search of this tahr and other mammals. On almost every such trek I have either sighted the tahr, or found their droppings/resting places in caves or rock crevices on these mountain tops. This note is therefore a confirmation of the extistence of about 25-30 tahr near Kookal and is the latest record of the occurrence of the Nilgiri Tahr on the Palni Hills since the above quoted papers were published. The Kookal cliffs are a 5km or so north-south ridge that forms the political boundary between the Coimbatore and Dindigul districts of Tamil Nadu. The peaks here range from 1,800 to 2,200m in altitude and are an extensive montane grassland habitat amidst rocky terrain that the tahr prefer to inhabit and have adapted to survive on. I also have confirmation of tahr occurrences here from Chellian, an old shikari of the Raja of Pudukkottai, who acknowledges tahr populations existing here for many decades.

The main peaks are Pappalamman Malai (2,202m) on the Dindigul District side and Chinnamudian (1,836m) and Periyamudian (or Mudi Malai 1,903m) on the Coimbatore side. This area is devoid of any roads nearby which prevent easy access to humans, and the local Forest Department staff is vigilant to curb any such activity and poaching. The sholahs in the ravines and sheltered slopes of these mountains are also thus mostly free of human presence, though cultivation activity of a 'ganja' drug for nine months each year near here is a danger and disturbance to wildlife.

Some trapping of wild animals also goes on and needs to be curtailed through legal imposition or by suitable education and information imparted to local villagers to stop this and instead assist in conservation and protection activity in collaboration with the Forest Department. Some token financial payments to such poachers-turned-'rangers' would help the process. The population of tahr on Kookal cliffs approximates about 5-6 males, 10-15 females and 6-8 kids. I have also observed annual breeding of tahr here (6-8 young born each year) during the months of July and August. Large 'saddleback' males have also been observed by me. The tahr population here is found all year round but there may be some movement from the Kookal cliffs east to the Samikanal Block, which needs to be confirmed through more field surveys, which could be possible if financial help from the government is forthcoming and this would indeed be appreciated and increase our database on wildlife here.

The Kookal Sholah and grassy cliffs, I have noticed, are home to a large variety of mammal species, from tiger, leopard, sloth bear, gaur, sambar, muntjac, elephant, wild boar, mouse deer, wild dog, liontailed macaque, nilgiri langur, porcupine, giant squirrel, several lesser wild cats, civets and mongooses, etc. (see also Matthew 1994: 11-13). The bird diversity here is also rich (see Fairbank 1877; Terry 1887; Nichols 1937, 1944-1945), as well as butterflies (*vide* Evans 1910; Ugarte & Rodricks 1963), other insect fauna and arthropods.

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The montane flora here has been treated, besides others, by Matthew (1959), Gupta (1960), and Blasco (1971). To find out more about the biota of this rich ecosystem, wedged between the Anaimalais, Palnis and High Ranges, research activity of specialist scientists needs to be requested and funded/encouraged by the Forest Department, in collaboration, with sampling permits from the Ministry of Environment & Forests sought and provided.

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