

Occurrence of Indian Giant Flying Squirrel in the northern Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, India



Image 1. Indian Giant Flying Squirrel observed near Maredumilli.

The Indian Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista philippensis* (Elliot, 1839) belongs to the family Scuridae and sub-family Petauristinae (Oshida et al. 2000). It was earlier classified as a sub-species of *Petaurista petaurista* but first recognized as a distinct species by Corbet and Hill (1992) based on phylogenetic analysis and renamed *Petaurista philippensis* (Oshida et al. 2000; Johnsingh & Manrekar 2015). The Indian Giant Flying Squirrel is a frugivorous, nocturnal, arboreal mammal that nests in tree holes in well-vegetated habitats (Umapathy & Kumar 2000; Nandini & Parthasarathy 2008). Although currently classified as Least Concern (LC) by the

IUCN, their population is decreasing and sightings are becoming rare. They are also listed under Schedule II (Part II) of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 which prohibits their hunting.

P. philippensis is distributed across southeastern and southern Asia in Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and India (Srinivasulu et al. 2004; Walston et al. 2016). In India, its distribution was previously recorded across the northeast, Rajasthan, southern Western Ghats of Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, and patchily across central India (Johnsingh & Manjrekar

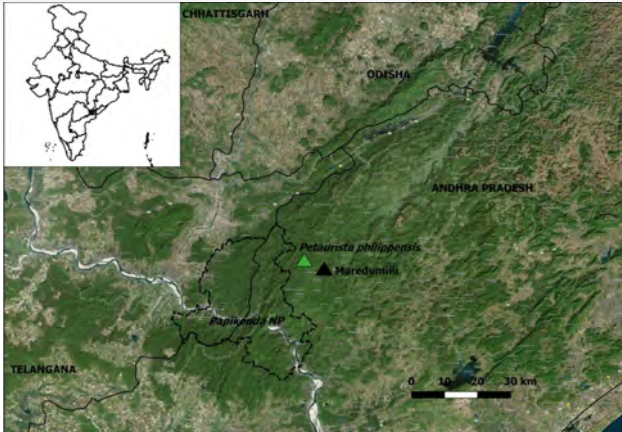


Figure 1. Location of *P. philippensis* recorded near Maredumilli, in the northern Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh.

2015; Walston et al. 2016). Studies on their occurrence, population abundance, ecology and behaviour have been done in the Western Ghats and Rajasthan (Umapathy & Kumar 2000; Kumara & Singh 2006; Nandini & Parthasarathy 2008; Babu et al. 2015). However, no sighting or photographic evidence of this species has been reported from Eastern Ghats before (Srinivasulu et al. 2004; Aditya & Ganesh 2017). We present the first photographic record of the occurrence of *P. philippensis* in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh (Figure 1). The sighting was made in the northern Eastern Ghats (NEG), spread between 18.491–19.181° N and 79.541–83.233° E. The NEG has an altitudinal range from 20m at the Godavari River to 1,690m at the Jindhagada peak, with steep undulating hills. The forest cover is largely of tropical dry and moist deciduous type (Aditya & Ganesh 2017).

The sighting and photograph of the flying squirrel was obtained from a coffee plantation near Maredumilli Village, East Godavari District, in the NEG landscape at

15.28h on 20 May 2020, by the first author (Images 1–3). The shade coffee plantation is managed by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Development Corporation (APFDC) since 1996 and is located approximately 7km from the nearest boundary of Papikonda NP (Image 2). Although largely arboreal, the squirrel was found at a burrow of an entrance next to the road.

The coffee plantation is bounded by dense canopy moist deciduous forests on all sides except the east where it borders revenue lands of Maredumilli Village. Papikonda NP stretches west and south of the plantation. The coffee plantation is densely wooded with large trees providing habitat for the squirrel and surrounded on all sides by forest.

The animal was observed to have a cataract in the right eye (Image 1). The finding of *P. philippensis* that was previously recorded from Western Ghats and northeast India (Johnsingh & Manjrekar 2015; Walston et al. 2016) adds evidence to the immense biological diversity of the Eastern Ghats and highlights its conservation importance, particularly in the face of various



Image 2. The surrounding habitat of the coffee plantation where the species was observed.



Image 3. Indian Giant Flying Squirrel on the ground.

development projects that are causing rapid landscape change and habitat loss (Aditya & Ganesh 2017). As *P. philippensis* largely prefers forested habitats, this finding emphasizes the need to streamline conservation efforts in the Eastern Ghats to mitigate long-term land cover changes (Nandini & Parthasarathy 2008).

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