

Masinagudi trip report

Day 1 (03/ 12/ 2021): It was a chilly morning with a fresh cool breeze in the air. The RHATC team packed up and got ready to leave for the trip early around 4 am. Driving at a speed of 70 kmph, Mr. Byju's car took the lead while the other three cars followed. Even though sleep deprived, everyone seemed to be in high spirits and the casual trip conversations in the cars have already started. Me being in Byju's car, I remember him starting up the talks by casually asking how's the course going on for everyone. With two of the most silent fellows in the car, i.e., Usha and I, the talks did not seem to progress much, but with Byju's interventions, it soon started to turn into a livelier situation. The talks started becoming more intense when Byju started talking about his encounters on dealing with unethical people in conservation, as guidance for us to be wary of these people and such situations. These small stories led me to realize the importance of being affiliated to a proper and trustworthy funding agencies and conservation organisations.

With constant conversations going on, the stories never seemed to end but unfortunately we had to take a stop since one of the cars had to get a tire puncture fixed. That's when one of the quieter members from our car has to swap seats with Supriyo from another car due to a bit discomfort regarding the air conditioning. Then the fun started. The Ghats started, the car windows were lowered, and fresh cool air was let in. With it came Supriyo's jokes. The atmosphere went vibrant. This is when Byju was given the nickname 'Chellam sir'. Fun and jokes aside, the view outside was mesmerising and we couldn't resist taking a stop to feel the vibe. We stopped beside a small waterfall and took a breather while waiting for the members from other cars to join in.

Another half hour drive and we soon reached the highest point in Ooty. The temperature drop was significant and our fellow car mates had to shut the windows to stop shivering. It was still early morning with minimal traffic and we decided to take another stop to rejoin with the car gang. Once rejoined we started off. Here Byju proved his car driving skills by taking on a different route to get us a glimpse of the golf course and still reaching back to the car gang on time.



Overtaking every other car, Byju again led the group. Crossing the police check post, we got into the area of beautiful Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. I could already feel the wildlife vibe looking at the vast stretch of lush green hills. I wanted to get off the car to get a closer look and luckily my thoughts were heard. We had to take a stop to wait for the other cars and Byju found us a good viewpoint for the scenery. The view was beautiful and we could not resist taking out our cameras and binoculars to capture it and get a closer look at it. The landscape, the birds, the bonnet macaques, the clouds, the sounds of birds and flowing water descending off a cliff; everything seemed mesmerizing. Well, on a side note, the funny guy Supriyo also captured a picture of Bonnet Macaques mating.

The car gang was back, so we bid our farewell to the macaques while one of

them desperately clung to our car but then soon let go as the car started off. The journey from here on was a bit slow paced. The Ghats have ended but the cars took small stops to look at groups of Spotted Deer and Wild Boars grazing close to the roads. Our hunger did not let us stop for a longer duration, so we drove off. Finally we reached the village, Masinagudi. Byju found us a good spot to eat. It was a small, friendly restaurant with a beautiful view of Ooty and a pretty looking temple just in front of it. We had a light breakfast, the menu included masala dosa, puri bhaji, and idlis. Then we headed off to our resting dorms at Sylvan dormitory to drop off our luggage and get prepared for the next outing.

After an hour of resting, we started off for our visit to Moyar Valley. This is one of the places where Byju has worked on

Vultures extensively over the past years. He has also written an excellent book called 'Valley of Hope- Moyar and Vultures' which he describes as a perspective of an environmental enthusiast and not a scientific or fictional one. Through this book he has tried to display the original inhabitants of the landscape, its diverse wildlife and the importance of vultures in the valley.

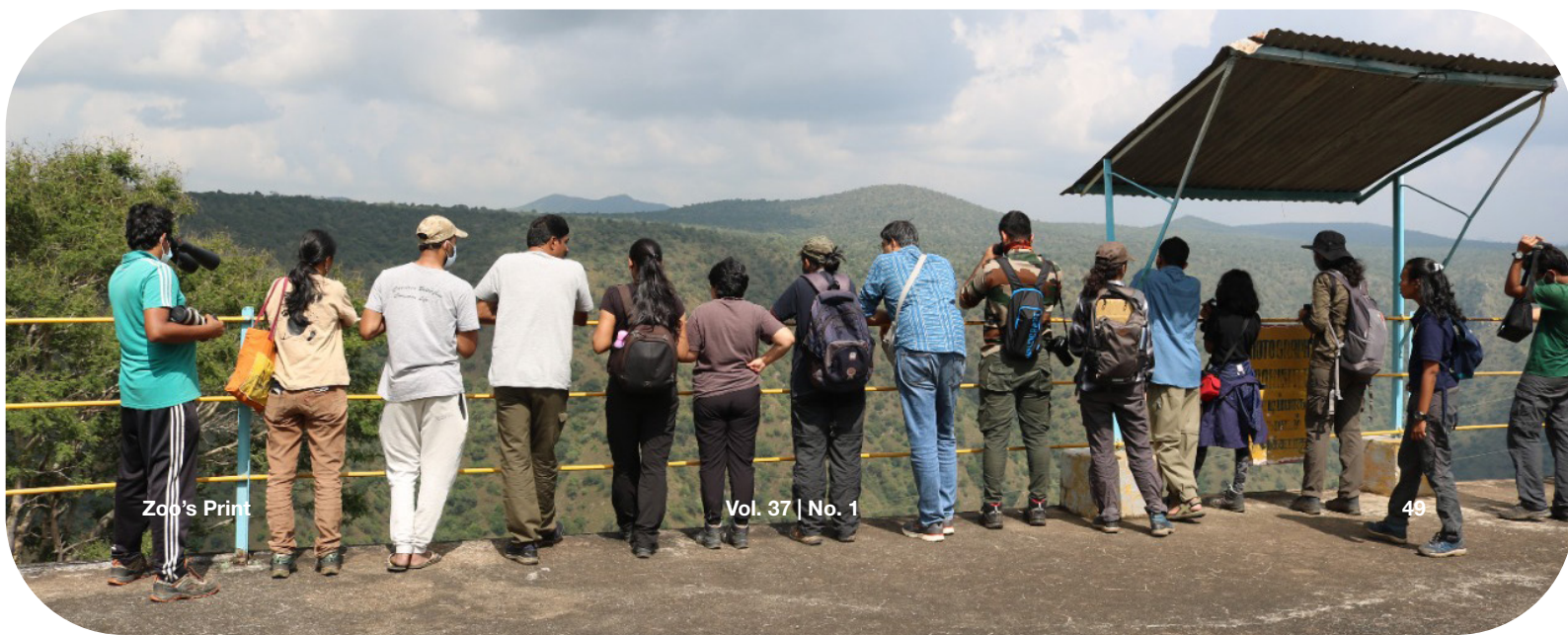
The sun was overhead when we reached the spot. One could sense the warmth in the air and the anticipation in the fellows. Everyone stood astounded at the view. The vast stretch of mountain with clouds floating over them giving varying shades to the underlying vegetation and a lone elephant in the wilderness feeding on the grass; all of it was so captivating that one would not forget it in a lifetime.

After enjoying the moment and clicking a whole load of pictures, we set out to get ourselves some lunch, but to our surprise we got an even better treat. Byju showed us a Cinereous Vulture which is one of the largest raptors and is a very rare find in this part of the country. It did fulfil our appetite but our stomachs were empty so

we returned to our usual temple food place and had a hearty meal to prepare for the next adventure which awaited us.

Our next destination lied in the core area of the reserve and the excitement kept on growing. Each of us were on our toes while Chellam sir kept on cracking his jokes to break the monotony. Silently moving through the jungle in our cars, we were able to spot numerous species of birds and mammals including the Crested Hawk Eagle, group of deer, pack of Dhols and the vulnerable Gaur. Every sighting was a thrilling experience. Unfortunately, the thrill soon ended as we reached a village where we had to take a halt. A break was very much required and we all took a good one by resting around a beautiful stream winding its way along the forest. Fresh air, fresh water, and fresh conversations; everyone was relaxed.

After a long refreshing break, we decided to head back to our accommodation. The night was falling upon us and it started to drizzle. As we rushed back to the dormitory in our cars, we could spot families of Gaur grazing along the side of roads, since they have become much more nocturnal due to





Day 2 (04/12/2021): The morning dawned. As usual, the RHATC fellows in our dorms took their own leisure waking up. Today's plan was a bit different. We had to visit Dr. Priya Davidar's place who is a conservation biologist, a researcher, and a retired professor from Pondicherry University, India. She has done her major work on island biogeography in the Andaman Islands and large scale patterns of tree distribution in the Western Ghats of India. She has also guided over 13 PhD and around 50 master's student in ecology and has published over 90 scientific research papers.

We reached the place around 9 am. It was an estate located deep inside the forest area and is considered an important wildlife corridor in the Sigur plateau of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. We could already see groups of Spotted Deer and Sambar grazing just a few yards from their home. Priya introduced herself, her husband Jean and her brother Peter to everyone in the RHATC group and vice versa. She briefly told us a few stories of them with the wildlife there and everyone was fascinated. Ah, and she also told us not to run when we see an elephant close by since elephants even come as close to their house's door sometimes. After the introductions, the RHATC fellows were assigned different tasks to perform in the area. One group has to do behavioural studies on the spotted deer which included feeding, alarm calls, fighting, sleeping, sitting, and scanning behaviours, while the other groups had to make species response curves for the butterflies, birds, fungi and invasive species of plants present

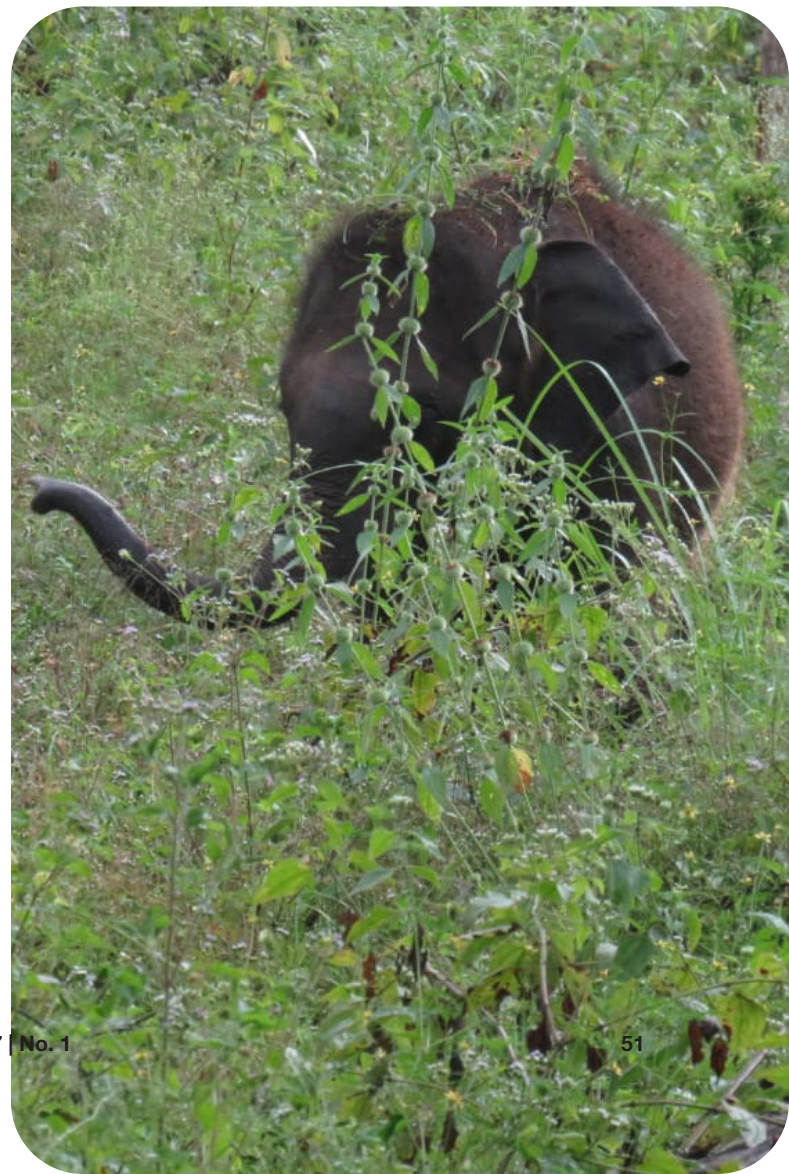
human disturbances in the area. We soon reached our cosy dorms, tired but happy from the trip we just experienced. The day ends.

Wait! There's more. It's Priyanka's birthday! The celebration is pending. Everyone gathered up at the men's dorms. It's party time. Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday dear Priyanka, Happy birthday to you, applauded everyone. The drinks started and so did the conversations. Everyone got the task to speak something about Priyanka and with it came the stories which included moments of sadness and moments of joy. What a way to end the night.

in the area. The various methodologies to carry it out were described and were left up to the groups to decide on which to choose out of those.

Before the groups were left alone with their tasks, Dr. Jean-Philippe Puyravaud took us near the stream in their place and explained to us how they managed to get the water flowing back in the stream which had helped a lot in the ecological and wildlife restoration of the area. He also told us that there are no life forms in the stream because the fishes are just not able to survive because of the small dams which had been created along the stretch of the stream. After that, he showed us various invasive species of plants which have invaded the landscape and how they are causing damage and loss to the ecology of the area. Most of it would have almost totally covered the area if Priya and Jean did not intervene and started mechanically removing them with the help of local labour. The problems which these invasive plant species had created are devastating. They form dense and impenetrable thickets and cover all the land area reducing the visibility of mammals and restricting the human access to the land. It poses a huge fire risk and in addition to this, its consumption is toxic to sheep and cattle. Priya showed us the bio control measure for *Opuntia* which was done in the form of cactoblastis moth whose larvae burrows in the cacti and eats its leaves and seed pods and finally kills the plant. It has been considered a successful control measure in the past but now it has itself become an invasive in many parts of the world and needs to be controlled.

After finishing up the tasks, the RHATC team left for lunch and returned soon after. It was time for us to get more knowledge and insights from Priya and Jean on their works. Jean started first with his presentation on the research he had done on landscape connectivity for the Asian Elephants in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve using GIS and models which took into consideration various variables such as habitat, resources and human disturbances just to name a few. He also demonstrated how deforestation has been leading to an increase in human elephant interaction. Next Priya gave a talk on the need to conserve plant-pollinator mutualism. She talked about various pollinators and how the flowers have evolved to attract the pollinators. Giving us a good example of Bt



brinjal, she also discussed the importance of crop wild relatives (CWR) which contain adaptive genetic variations missing from domesticated crops. Lots of questions and lots of discussions happened, after which a refreshing break was required. The break turned out to be an exhilarating one since we got to see an infamous tusker whose stories have often been discussed by Sanjay and Priya in their talks. We spotted it just a few yards across the stream at Priya's place. The evening went well. With heads full of information, everyone was tired. So we headed back to our dorms, had some nice dinner and took a good night rest to prepare for the next day's adventure.

Day 3 (05/12/2021): Safari! This was the first word which came into everyone's mind while waking up. Loaded up with binoculars and cameras, the RHATC team got ready early morning to experience some more wildlife in Mudumalai tiger reserve safari trip. We hopped on the bus and prepared ourselves for the thrill. The very first animal we saw were the chained camp elephants just as the trip started. Just a few minutes later, the driver spotted a Sloth Bear walking slowly into the wilderness. The foggy weather combined with the enormous stretch of invasive plants hindered the visibility, but we still managed to get a glimpse. The vehicle accelerated as we all waited eagerly to spot our next beast. Soon after, we came across groups of spotted deer, all grazing in peace. In fact, all throughout the safari we could see spotted deer in abundance. Next we spotted a herd of elephants with babies. One could already hear the rush inside the bus and

the sound of continuously shuttering cameras. After embracing the moment for a while, we headed on. For minutes on end we could spot nothing but invasive plant species all throughout the landscape. As wildlife conservationists, it was very sad for us to see this. "Tiger!" blurted someone and with it followed a sudden silence. Everyone went vigilant as their eyes kept on scanning through the bushes for the big cat. We waited and waited while the other passengers in the vehicle behind us kept on shouting at us to move ahead. 15 minutes in but the cat was nowhere to be seen, so we moved ahead in disappointment. A chance was missed but on our way back we got a wonderful view of an elephant family of three including a baby feeding on grass. Finally the trip ended.

Our next destination once again was Priya's place, this time to debate on whether it is better to promote conservation by just eradicating *Lantana camara* or by providing livelihoods using it. With agreements and disagreements, the fiery discussion went on for quite a while and the participants really got into it. Unfortunately, we were short on time since we also had to return back to Coimbatore that day. So bidding our farewell to Priya and family, we slowly started our way back.

The trip back home was as fun as the trip beginning. This time I travelled in Sanjay's car, accompanied by Payal and my RHATC fellow mates. There is always something that one can learn while travelling with Sanjay and Payal. Be it something related to wildlife, evolution, psychology, philosophy

or be it the stories and experiences he had gained all these years. They always have something in their treasure trove of knowledge which would intrigue anyone who is keen on learning. Oh, and of course their jokes. It's a great opportunity to be able to be in the same room as them.

With all the incoming insights and cool music playing in the background, one would never wish for the car trip to end, but unfortunately it had to. Before reaching back to Coimbatore, Sanjay and Payal gave us the biggest surprise of the day. We got to meet and share thoughts with the almighty Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian citizen to go into space. The emotions were indescribable.

With all these memories and emotions, we reached back to our place. We bid each other goodnight and went to sleep. It was a trip to remember.

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