

Getting high on THC '23 in Honey Valley

Hidden snugly in the midst of the emerald carpets of coffee plantations, surrounded by the misty forest of Coorg, with meandering streams bubbling with laughter to the secrets murmured by the waterfalls lies the beautiful Honey Valley homestay. With its diverse array of moths, butterflies, spiders, frogs, leeches that give love bites, and a zillion other wildlife, the whole place is a delight to any nature lover. It is at this wonderful place that the first of three workshops as part of the Tropical Herpetology Course was conducted from the 11 to 13 August 2023.

Headed by herpetologists Vivek Philip Cyriac, Shubham Prashanth Soni, and naturalist Amatya Sharma, the first three-day workshop was focused on introducing the diversity and distribution of herpetofauna. Participants from diverse fields took part in the course. The juvenile Beddome's Keelback which we found right outside our accommodation gave the workshop an exciting start. Vivek started off the course by introducing herpetology with a lively presentation giving global perspectives of the distribution and diversity of amphibians with interesting stories about the evolutionary history weaved in through



THC_23 team. © Anonymous.



Anuj talking about geographic ranges and distribution maps. © Shubham Soni.



Cat Skink. © Swathi Na.



THC_23 team looking at a Ponmudi bush frog.
© Priyank Shah.

it. He also gave a brief overview of the morphology and identification features of the broad families of frogs in India correlating them with their ecology. This was followed by Shubham's interactive session on the various methods of documentation and the importance of documentation. He highlighted the numerous ways in which this data can be used for research and analysis if documented properly. He also stressed about the ethics that should be maintained during the process.



Cnemaspis wynadensis. © Swaathi Na.

After lunch, we did a fun activity where we analysed a few specimens of frogs to try and guess their preferred habitat and family-level identification by looking at their morphological characters. As the sun set over the horizon and the cacophony of cicadas slowly started dying out, the chorus of frogs began. Armed with the knowledge we had gained from morning and having had enough of seeing these beautiful creatures in pictures, we stepped into the darkness, filled with anticipation to see them first-hand. Inspired by hearing a few snippets of the talks,



Juvenile Beddomes Keelback. © Nisha BG.



Kodagu Striped Caecilian. © Nisha BG.



View from Honey Valley homestay. © Shubham Soni.

a few other people who had come on a vacation to the homestay joined us for herping. The night rewarded us with Wayanad Night Frog *Nyctibatrachus grandis*, *N. minimus*, Malabar Torrent Toad *Blaira ornata*, Elegant Dancing Frog *Micrixalus elegans*, Cricket Frog *Minervarya* sp., Skittering Frog *Euphylyctis cyanophylctis*, various species of *Indosylvirana*, several species of bush frogs, *Monilisaurus* sp., shieldtail snake *Uropeltis* sp., and a Malabar Vine Snake *Ahaetulla borealis*.



Mrunali Raut presenting her thesis work. © Shubham Soni.

The second day started with the melodious note of the Malabar Whistling Thrush and Vivek giving a global perspective about reptiles. The infectious enthusiasm he has when he speaks about snakes will make anyone fall in love with these amazing creatures. He spoke about reptile diversity, their distribution, morphology, and scale counting. He showed us examples of the important role that scalation plays in differentiating between two species.

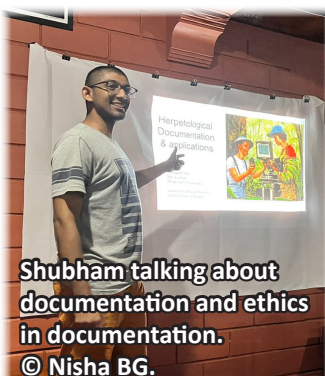


Looking at the morphology of the specimen to try and identify the species. © Priyank Shah.

The fascinating world of skinks was introduced to us by Aniruddha Datta-Roy. The talk was given not on the basis of the diversity but on their biology which ensured we started admiring these beautiful creatures from a whole new lens. One of the interesting facts he told us was that some skinks have this amazing ability to be both gravid and pregnant, which means they can lay eggs and give birth to live young ones simultaneously.



Resting near the stream after a herp walk. © Nisha BG.



Shubham talking about documentation and ethics in documentation. © Nisha BG.



Striped Coral Snake. © Lohit, Y.T.



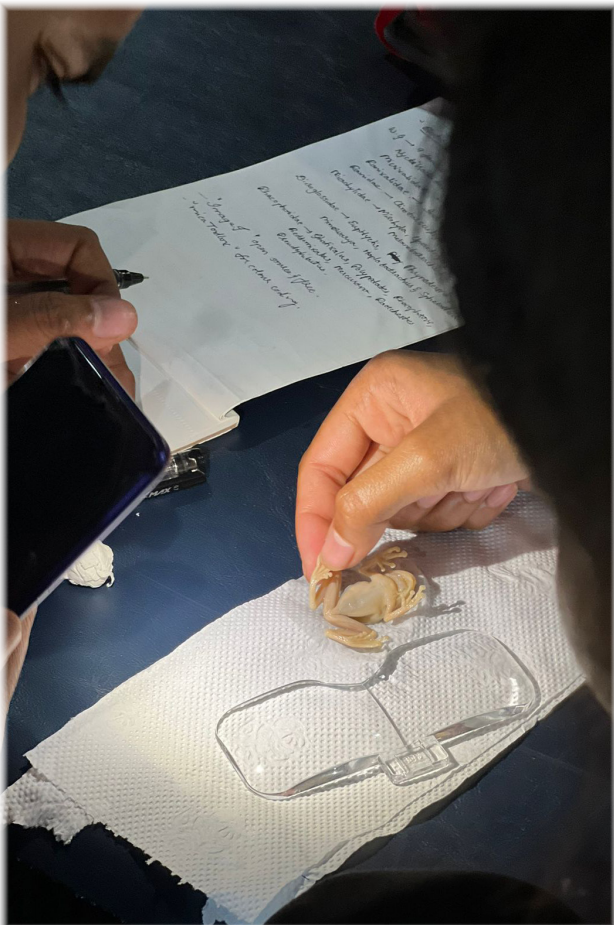
Searching for wildlife during the herp walk. © Priyank Shah.



Travancore Wolf Snake. © Nisha BG.



THC_23 team with Aniruddha Datta-Roy after his talk on skinks. © Shubham Soni.



It was impossible for us to stay inside after listening to Roy's talk about skinks. The weather outside was sunny and just perfect for sighting skinks. And sure enough, we saw two species of skinks, Bronze Grass Skink *Eutrophis macularia*, a cat skink *Ristella* sp., and other reptiles like WYNAD Day Gecko *Cnemaspis wynadensis*, Beddome's Keelback *Amphiesma beddomei*, and a Striped Coral Snake *Calliophis nigrescens*. The genus *Ristella* gets its name of cat skink because of its retractable claws. The skinks were photographed at different angles, which we later used to learn about dichotomous keys and how to identify a species using them. Our initial plan was to go to the nearest shola patch, but we got sidetracked by these amazing finds and ended up near a waterfall.

After this refreshing walk, we gathered back to hear about the work of Anuj Shinde, a master's student from Tel Aviv University in Israel, and Mrunali Raut, a postgraduate from Mumbai University. Anuj spoke about geographic ranges and distribution maps and why we should think twice before relying on any distribution map. He also showcased how much work can be done by utilizing the secondary data obtained from citizen science initiatives. He also encouraged all of us to start recording our observations in other citizen science initiatives such as the Shieldtail Mapping Project, IBP (Indian



Vivek explaining the concept of species delimitation. © Shubham Soni.

Biodiversity Portal), iNaturalist, etc. Mrunali presented her thesis - oviposition site preference and hatching success of the Indian Golden-backed Frog *Indosylvirana indica*. It was fascinating to hear about the hard work that was put in from her side and that you don't need fancy, expensive equipment to design and implement a good research project. Amatya Sharma's initial observation of the egg clutches played a vital role in shaping the research which highlights the significance of a collaboration between naturalists and wildlife researchers. The second night of herping proved to be just as fruitful as the first night. We got to see a Kodagu Striped Caecilian *Ichthyophis kodaguensis*, a Travancore Wolf Snake *Lycodon travancoricus*, and several frog species.

The final day ended with an intriguing talk on species delimitation, the various different species concepts, and the problems with overestimation and underestimation of species diversity. Vivek also spoke about the rules of nomenclature, the process behind describing a new species, and the problems behind contemporary species delimitation.

Apart from the actual course content, and seeing approximately 30 species of herps, the whole experience turned out fabulous because of the passion the entire group had for herpetology. It was three full days of herp talks, herp walks, and even gossiping sessions were productive because it was about herp taxonomy. The workshop was made more special because of the extra care that the mentors took to make sure we understood everything, answered all our questions with patience, and followed up with their word by sending extra reference materials and fun reads on herpetology.

Acknowledgments

I thank Suresh uncle, his wife, and the entire Honey Valley homestay team for their passionate efforts in maintaining the place as a haven for wildlife and nature lovers. I am thankful to the organisers, Vivek Cyriac, Shubham Soni, and Amatya Sharma for conducting this wonderful workshop, for introducing me to Honey Valley, and for setting my base in herpetology right. I am grateful to Sanjay Molur who pushed me to write about the whole experience. I credit Shubham Soni for coming up with the hashtag, "High on THC'23". I thank Anuj Shinde, Chinmay C. Maliye, Dhananjay Kumar, Jyotsna Nag, Lohit Y.T., Mrunali Raut, and Nisha B.G., for the interactions I had with them and for making this a memorable experience.

Tropical Herpetology Course

It is a comprehensive course on amphibian and reptile biology which includes field visits to three different places in the Western Ghats, research talks by experts, hands-on activities, and lots more. The course has three main mentors – Vivek Philip Cyriac, an evolutionary ecologist and herpetologist who has predominantly worked on uropeltid snakes, Shubham Prashant Soni, an ecologist and herpetologist interested in understanding behavioral processes that underline the evolution of herpetofauna, and Amatya Sharma, a naturalist & wildlife photographer interested in documenting reptile and amphibian behaviors.

In 2023, the course has been split into three individual workshops.

Workshop 1 – Honey Valley Homestay, Coorg (11–13 August) – Diversity & Distribution.

Workshop 2 – The Niche, Sirsi (8–10 September) – Natural History & Field Surveys.

Workshop 3 – Chikkamagaluru (location & date TBA) – Behaviour & Publishing.

Swaathi, NA., Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore.