

Soaring beyond the coast: a record of White-bellied Sea-Eagle in the highlands of the Western Ghats

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Ichthyophaga leucogaster* is a large, distinctive raptor widely distributed across coastal and inland water bodies from India through southeast Asia and Australia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In India, it is typically seen along the east and west coasts, as well as large inland lakes.

On 29 July 2024, at 1051 h, we observed a single adult White-bellied Sea-Eagle soaring above the Mullaiperiyar reservoir (9.514633 N, 77.262344 E, 900 m) inside the core zone of Periyar Tiger Reserve, Idukki, Kerala. The sighting occurred while on a boat patrol across the reservoir's central expanse. The eagle's distinctive white head and underparts, contrasted with dark grey upper wings and inner primaries displaying a white panel and a pale buffish breast band, clearly indicated that the bird was an immature individual, made identification unmistakable.

This observation is unusual but not unprecedented. While breeding adults are largely sedentary, juvenile White-bellied Sea-Eagles are known to be dispersive, with some recorded movements exceeding 3,000 km in Australia (BirdLife International 2020). The species may also follow large rivers or move



The White-bellied Sea-Eagle soars. © Arjun Suresh.

inland when coastal or wetland habitats become unsuitable. It occupies a wide range of habitats from inshore marine environments and estuaries to terrestrial wetlands and lowland rainforest, occurring up to elevations of 1,500 m (Grimmett et al. 2011).

In Kerala, the White-bellied Sea-Eagle is commonly sighted in northern coastal areas, particularly around Kozhikode, Kannur, and Kasaragod. However, this inland record from Periyar reservoir, located over 100 km from the nearest coastline, expands our understanding of its distribution. The Periyar landscape, in the southern Western Ghats, is characterized by a mosaic of montane tropical forests, including tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests, interspersed with high-altitude grassland patches and extensive freshwater bodies (Gubbi & MacMillan 2008).

The eagle's presence here likely reflects occasional inland dispersal, a behaviour supported by its known ecological adaptability. This sighting highlights the ecological value of highland wetland habitats and emphasizes the need for continued monitoring of raptor movements within protected areas of the Western Ghats. Such observations contribute to a broader understanding of the species' habitat use and distribution patterns in peninsular India.

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