

## Starscapes at Pollachi

Post Sriram Murali's session on fireflies in Coimbatore a field visit was planned to see the fireflies. Sriram has been documenting and photographing fireflies for more than five years. He planned our visit to Iyal Thottam at Sethumadai at the foothills of Anamalai hills. This place is located approximately 70 km from Coimbatore. The farm belongs to Saravanan, an organic farmer for the last 14 years. Saravanan has been hosting and facilitating organic farming workshops in that area. Soon after meeting Saravanan we met Bala from 'Attral', an organization that carries out nature camps for environmental education. At his lab we saw different equipment and gadgets they use to demonstrate fundamental concepts in physics to people.

Most of the day was spent in and around the farm with Sriram and Chandrasekhar, firefly conservationists, Dr.

Anusha Shankar from TIFR Hyderabad, and her post-doc Harsha. There we learned about their ongoing study on how they test out acoustic monitors at the farm, check their performance, and deploying them for monitoring during the light retrofitting project.

It was great to learn about fireflies and stars and other celestial bodies from Sriram and Chandrasekhar. Their love and passion for the species and the landscape is clearly palpable. We also visited a stream nearby that runs through Iyal Thottam to see the firefly habitat, fireflies, and their larvae. While we were embracing the beauty of the area at dusk, the fireflies became active slowly entralling all of us. The Zooreach team accompanying us collected a few native grass species and other aquatic plants for the nursery back in Coimbatore.



Fireflies sparkling around the Iyal farm. © Gokul K.

Once it started getting dark we could see a few larvae sparkling at the edges of the stream. Sriram and Chandradhekar told us that the fireflies live in moist soil and leaf litter undergoing complete metamorphosis through egg, larval, pupal, and adult stages. They also spoke about the phenomenon of firefly bioluminescence which takes place between luciferin and oxygen, catalyzed by enzyme luciferase creating an unstable, high-energy product (oxyluciferin). This reaction is devoid of thermal components and entire energy is converted into light. They shared many more such interesting insights about the firefly ecology from the experience over the years of working on them.

The night sky was dark and we noticed much less light pollution. There was light spills from Coimbatore and Pollachi city. This instigated a long conversation about light pollution and light spills from urban areas and what all ways it can affect the wildlife even at the distance. The team has been working with TN government on changing the lightings in the core wildlife areas making it wildlife friendly.

It was 14 December, the last day of Geminid Meteor Shower. Sriram being an astrophotographer shared his knowledge about stars, Geminid shower, and star photography. He and Chandrasekhar taught us the adjustment of aperture and shutter speed while taking the star/fireflies pictures at night. We attempted to capture the fireflies and stars and shooting meteors but barely succeeded.

A wonderful homely dinner was arranged at Sarvanan's farm. Post dinner we again sat for some time watching meteor showers. In the darkness,

sitting at the foothills of Anamalai, we could hear the crackers bursting in the distance reminding us of the elephants in the area and the negative interactions in or near human habitations.

We all enjoyed our time at the farm, learnt about stars, fireflies, photography, enjoyed a delicious dinner, and witnessed beautiful star scape & fireflies.

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Starscape from Iyal Thottam. © Gokul K.