

Spirit of the High Ranges

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Rajamalai in the Kerala hills is probably the only place where one can watch the Nilgiri tahr at close quarters.

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Just a few miles away from the manicured tea estates of Munnar, a hill station in the Western Ghats of Kerala, lies a dramatically different world. It is a wilderness of windswept grasslands and untamed forests. This is the Eravikulam National Park, where the natural habitat has been preserved for the sake of one of the most endangered species of mammals in India, the Nilgiri tahr. The Nilgiri tahr is a wild relative of the goat that is exclusively adapted to living in the hilly grasslands of the Western Ghats. Previously found throughout the high hills of southern India, the Nilgiri tahr is now confined to just a few pockets in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Since I was in Munnar for a few days, I decided to try my luck at spotting this rare animal.

As I found my way through the tea estates of Munnar, the imposing rock face of Rajamalai, a peak at the edge of Eravikulam, loomed up unexpectedly in front of us, decorated by patches of olive-green grasslands and clinging patches of forest. The road progressively became narrower and soon I found myself driving through the entrance gates of Eravikulam National Park. Meanwhile, the scenery changed dramatically and I was enveloped by the coolness of the forest. The monotony of the tea bushes had given way to the chaotic tangle of stunted rainforest trees

intermixed with the shrubbery of ferns, tree mosses and grass and the air hung heavy with the fragrance of forest plants.

Enchanting landscape

I found myself in one of the most enchanting natural landscapes still to be found in the Western Ghats of southern India... the shola-grassland mosaic. At altitudes of above 1500 metres, one comes across rolling natural grasslands interspersed with thick clusters of rainforest (locally called shola) that bewitch you with their picture-postcard quality. Sadly, this habitat is shrinking fast mainly due to expanding tea and coffee plantations at this altitude.

In the tourist zone of Rajamalai, I was delighted to run into four Nilgiri tahr grazing near a small waterfall. On seeing our group, they climbed nimbly up the slope, scarcely 20 or 30 feet away. Delighted at my luck in so quickly spotting this elusive animal, I watched and photographed the animals. I could hardly take my eyes off their soft and silky coats, which were a rich shade of fawn. The easy movement of the tahrs along the cliffs and crags as they grazed, showed their natural adaptation to living in the steep and rocky terrain of the high ranges.

Safe and secure

Later, a chat with the forest guards of this area revealed that Rajamalai is probably the only place in the Kerala hills where one can watch the Nilgiri tahr at such a close distance. Safe and secure from hunters and poachers, these animals do not feel threatened. Rajamalai has now become a popular tourist spot where people come to catch a glimpse of the Nilgiri tahr in its natural habitat.

One would think too many tourists might drive away this shy animal but forest guards keep a strict watch and do not allow anyone off the winding sanctuary road. Tourists are not allowed to walk into the grasslands or to go too near the tahrs. Attentive forest guards are quick to reprimand careless visitors who sometimes litter the area. Back in the crowded streets of Munnar, it was hard to believe that the rare tahr, lived in its picturesque wilderness just a few hills away. The spirit of the high ranges, the Nilgiri tahr desperately needs our help to stay alive.

What can I do?

- In a wildlife sanctuary, take care not to disturb the animals by approaching them too closely.
- Do not feed wild animals.
- Take care not to litter their habitat with plastic or any other garbage.
- Only with your care will these animals survive in the wild.

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