

Must-see Malabar pitviper

Read about a snake that can morph into an incredible four colours!

By Sanjay Sondhi

The year was 2005. I was visiting the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, established by Rom Whitaker, better known

as India's Snake Man. Located in Shimoga district of Karnataka, the area is best known for the research being carried out on the King Cobra. Agumbe, situated on the crest of the Someshwara ghat. Because of

the heavy rainfall it receives, it is often called the Cherrapunji of South India.

It was the month of August when I landed up at Agumbe, and I knew it would be raining heavily. So I was prepared, with

appropriate rain gear, for myself and more importantly, my camera! It was my plan to spend a few days searching for interesting "herps" in the area. "Herps" is slang for herpetofauna, which refers to amphibian and reptilian fauna.

In the wild

I spent 5 days and nights wandering around the reserved forest at Agumbe, mostly alone! I ate my food at a local dhaba

among local folks, who thought I was crazy to be wandering around in the forest alone, at night, looking for frogs, lizards and snakes! I didn't disagree with them entirely – anyone who does this must have a streak of madness, right! Or a real passion for the wild!

Among the many interesting sightings that I had at Agumbe, one creature that intrigued me was the snake – the Malabar Pitviper *Trimerisurus malabaricus*. This pitviper was extremely common during the time I visited. I was not surprised, because this pitviper is supposed to be quite common during the monsoon, and not so common in other seasons.

Nocturnal snake

The Malabar pitviper is a nocturnal snake. It is venomous,

and its bite, while not fatal, can cause a great deal of pain and swelling.

It is normally found on bushes, lower branches of trees and on the ground. The snake's venom is primarily meant for hunting its prey, and unless you alarm or threaten the snake, it is unlikely to bite humans.

Now the interesting thing about the Malabar pitviper is that the snake appears in numerous colours. During my visit, I spotted three of the colour forms (or morphs, as they are called) – green, yellow and brown.

Colour changes

The snake is supposed to have a fourth colour form, which is orange, but I have never seen this. The reasons for the colour morphs of the Malabar pitviper still remain unexplained. It has been observed that the green forms are more likely to be seen amidst green foliage, while the brown form is more likely to be seen on brown branches or on the ground. Hence, it does seem that the snake's colour determines what micro-habitat it prefers. Choosing a terrain that has a colour similar to the snake, helps to camouflage it. Pitvipers mostly

ambush their prey, hence camouflage helps them to hunt successfully. Yet this phenomenon is not clearly understood. Do seasons, temperature and humidity play a role in colour morphs of reptiles? What about genetic variation?

Or are there other factors that we are yet to understand that causes such a significant variation in the colours of snakes? Mysteries like these in nature keep me ever interested, and curious. What is Mother Nature going to throw up next!

(The series is coordinated by Kalpavriksh)



Malabar pitviper's yellow form.



Malabar pitviper's green form. PHOTOS: SANJAY SONDHII.

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