

A sighting of Nilgiri Marten *Martes gwatkinsii* in Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary, southern Western Ghats, India

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Abstract

A Nilgiri Marten *Martes gwatkinsii* was observed for 45 minutes, photographed and filmed, at Bonacadu in Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala, India, on 5 January 2013. It was sighted in a tea plantation located around 400 m from the nearest forest patch.

Keywords: Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve, locality record, tea plantation, vocalisation

ഇന്ത്യയിലെ, ദക്ഷിണ പശ്ചിമഘട്ട മലനിരയിലെ പേപ്പാറ വന്യജീവി സങ്കേതത്തിൽ നിന്നും നീലഗിരി മാർട്ടിനെ *Martes gwatkinsii* കണ്ടെത്തിയതിനെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള ലേഖനം

സഹ്യപർവതനിരകളിൽ മാത്രം കണ്ടു വരുന്ന അപൂർവ ഇനം ജീവി വർഗമാണ് നീലഗിരി മാർട്ടിൻ *Martes gwatkinsii*. 2013 ജനുവരി 5നു നീലഗിരി മാർട്ടിനെ അഗസ്ത്യമല ബയോസ്ഫിയർ റിസേർവിലെ പേപ്പാറ വന്യജീവി സങ്കേതത്തിൽ ബോണകാട് എന്ന പ്രദേശത്ത് വെച്ച് കാണുകയുണ്ടായി. കാട്ടിൽ നിന്നും വിട്ടുമാറി ഏകദേശം 400 മീറ്റർ അകലെ ഉള്ള തേയില തോട്ടത്തിൽ നിന്നുമാണ് നീലഗിരിമാർട്ടിനെ കണ്ടത്. 45നിമിഷത്തിലെ നിരീക്ഷണത്തിൽ ഇവയുടെ ചിത്രങ്ങളും ലോകത്തിലെ തന്നെ ആദ്യത്തെ ചലനചിത്രവും ലഭ്യമായി

Nilgiri Marten *Martes gwatkinsii* is the rarest and least-known species of marten. It is endemic to the Western Ghats of southern India (Wirth & Van Rompaey 1991). It is listed in *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* as Vulnerable (Choudhury *et al.* 2008). Its preferred habitats seem to be evergreen and montane forest (sholas), but it has been reported even from moist deciduous forests and plantations adjoining evergreen forests (Madhusudhan 1995, Gokula & Ramachandran 1996, Kumar & Yoganand 1999, Mudappa 2002, 2013, Balakrishnan 2005). It is reported from an altitudinal range of 350–2,200 m (Krishna & Karnad 2010, Mudappa 2013). It is mostly carnivorous, including birds, reptiles and small and medium-sized mammals in its diet, but it also eats fruit, invertebrates and honey raided from bee-hives (Hutton 1944, Christopher & Jayson 1996, Kurup & Joseph 2001, Mudappa 2002, Balakrishnan 2005, Kumara & Singh 2007).

Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary is a part of Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve, in the southern Western Ghats of Kerala. On the evening of 5 January 2013, my tracker and I were walking back to the base camp along a road built across a tea plantation in Bonacadu, which lies within the Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary. All of a sudden, what looked like a Indian Giant Squirrel *Ratufa indica* ran across the plantation. It is unusual for a giant squirrel to run for any extended length on the ground, so I photographed the animal and when I zoomed in on the photograph, to my surprise and elation, I saw that it was a Nilgiri Marten. I took six photographs (Fig. 1) and a 31-second video of the animal, using a Canon SX 40 HS. The sighting occurred at 17h15 at a distance of 22 m from where I stood. The animal was at 8°40'26"N, 77°10'10"E (datum WGS84), at an altitude somewhere within 700–800 m. A temporary stream lay 10 m from the animal. The clear evening sky offered good light to observe the animal with the naked eye.

I observed the animal for 45 minutes. The plantation was covered with creepers and grass, with scattered self-sown trees (of an unknown species). The Marten was running across the rocks, but when it spotted us, it stopped moving and stared at us for about 5–10 minutes. It seemed quite calm and unruffled. It then started running between the shrubs and rocks, and climbed to the top of a rock from where it started calling with a quiet 'creeeek creeeek...' sound. It always stretched its neck while calling. This lasted for about 7 minutes. Then it ran back to the plantation and started digging under the trees, as if searching for something. It sniffed in and around the rock cervices for more than 30 minutes, finally sprinting into the nearest natural forest patch. This forest patch, a part of Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve, is 200 m from the plantation and about 300–400 m from the original location of the Marten.

There is a previous report of Nilgiri Marten from Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary (Christopher & Jayson 1996). During another recent sighting of the species, in Mukurthi National Park, Tamil Nadu (about 11°16'N, 76°28.5'E) on 21 June 2012 (Iyer 2012), the animals were also surprisingly confiding: the photographer, R. Prakash, noted that "we clicked pictures for quite some time and it was surprising that they [a presumed pair] lingered on".

Many carnivore species in the Western Ghats such as cats (Felidae), Nilgiri Marten and civets (Viverridae) are poorly known (Johnsingh 1986, Nowell & Jackson 1996, Mudappa 1998). This is a major drawback in their conservation (Kumar & Yoganand 1999). Among them, Martens seem always to have been seen only rarely, and such long observations of Nilgiri Marten are very rare. Accumulating the details of such sightings would surely provide more clues about the conservation needs of this enigmatic species of marten.



Fig. 1. Nilgiri Marten *Martes gwatkinsii*, Bonacadu, Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala, India, 5 January 2013 (two views).

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank Dr S. Bhupathi (Senior Scientist, Salim Ali Centre for research in Ornithology and Natural History; SACON) for the chance to work under his project and thus observe this animal; Jins V. J. and Madhumitha Panigrahi in SACON for their support and help in the field and desk; Shaiju the field guide; Rajkumar K. P, Vishnu Vijayan, Parthasarathi Mishra, Piu Ghosh, Architha Bannerji, Sruthi Naidu, and Ferns Naturalist Society Wayanadu for correcting the manuscript and providing literature.

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