

Spirit Mountains

Ian Lockwood captures the ethereal beauty of south India's own cloud forests, the threatened *shola*

A LONG THE UPPER SPINE OF the Western Ghats—the range of south Indian hills and mountains that plays a key role in the peninsula's hydrology—is a belt of forest patches harbouring multitudes of unique life forms. *Sholas*, the cloud forests of the monsoon, speak to you in gentle drips of rainwater, the meandering call of the Malabar whistling thrush, and the deep resonance of the Nilgiri langurs. The pungent odour of humus and decomposing leaf litter permeates their dark, damp interiors.

Upon closer inspection, *sholas* bear living jewels, scattered from the lower tiers to their broccoli-like canopies. Winds, whipped into a frenzy by the area's two monsoons, have shaped and stunted *sholas* into dwarf rainforests sheltering for the most part in small patches in the folds of valleys, and at times extending over larger areas. Changing climatic conditions have marooned temperate species with Himalayan and Gondwanaland connections in these south Indian "sky islands". Rhododendron trees, laughing thrushes, tree ferns and other rarities are all relic *shola* species with ancient tales of a very different world in their genes.

The last century or so has been unkind to these high-elevation habitats, as plantations of non-native timber species (eucalyptus, pine, wattle, etc) have been introduced into montane grasslands, which once formed a mosaic landscape in ranges such as the Nilgiri, Palani and Anamalai hills. Today, *sholas* remain fragile. They are vulnerable to the ambitions and appetites of the human species. The photographs here provide a brief glimpse into the complex, threatened world of the *shola*.



Photographs: Ian Lockwood

Shola on the Escarpment Edge
Palani Hills



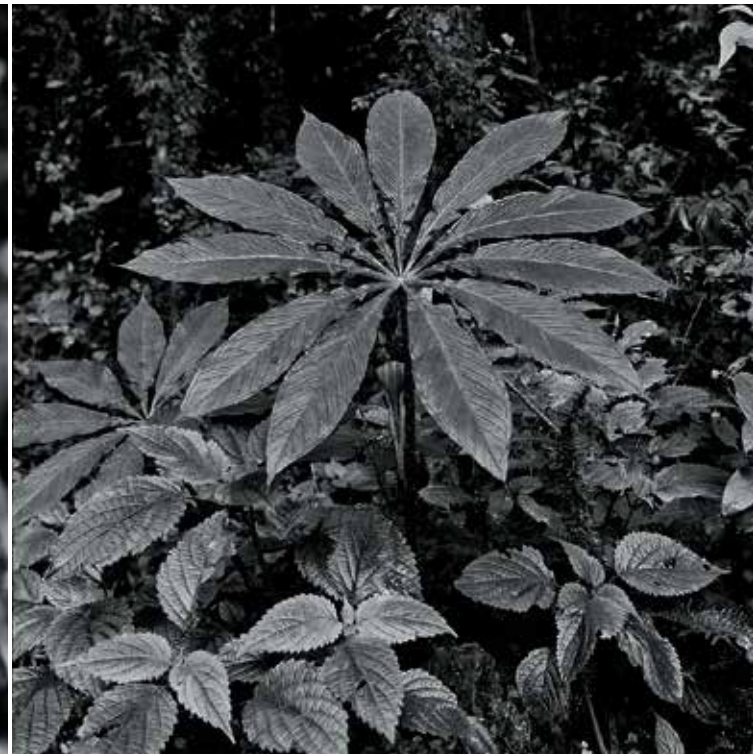
Shola Interior
Vaccinium sp.



Large-scaled Pit Viper
Trimeresurus macrolepis, Palani Hills

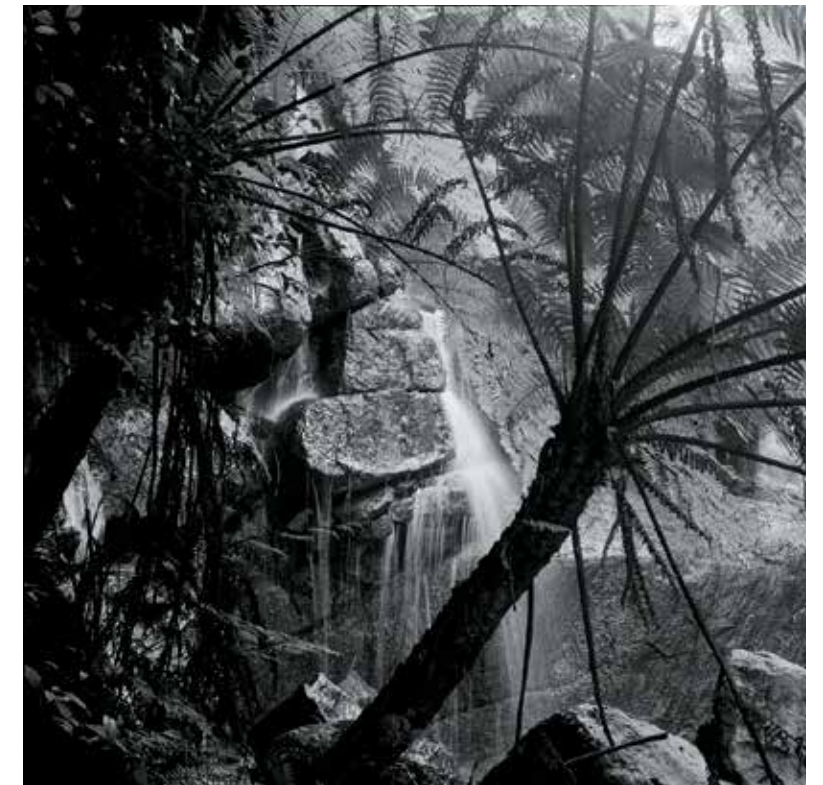


Gaur
Bos gaurus, Palani Hills



(From left to right)
Ferns Kodachadri
Cobra Lily *Arisaema sp.*, Palani Hills
New Growth Kodachadri

Rhododendron Arboreum
Palani Hills



Tree Fern
Cyathea nilgirensis, Palani Hills