

Nothing symbolises the state of Indian wildlife more than the tiger. The plight of this supreme predator encapsulates the enormously serious challenges confronting wildlife conservation efforts in India. As the apex species, the presence of tigers assures that the rest of the lower food chain and habitat is healthy.

The fate of the tiger is threatened by poaching for the Chinese medicine trade and to a lesser extent habitat loss. The combination of these effects has caused a precipitous collapse in tiger populations across India and other countries where the species and its sub-species are found. Today, after several tumultuous years of maligned surveys and censuses, some experts have estimated that there are only 1,411 tigers left in India. Just four to five years ago officials were confidently estimating there to be about 4,000 individuals. Extinction has unfortunately become a very real possibility for this majestic sentinel of India's wildlife.



TIGER

There were once eight sub-species of tiger in the world; three are already extinct. The Bengal tiger was historically found across the length and breadth of India and into Southeast Asia. To this day tiger populations—albeit much depleted—are found on the western fringes of the union where scrub forest gives way to desert in Rajasthan's Aravalli Hills. They are found south along the forested ridges, valleys and plateaus of the Western Ghats, right down to just

north of Kanyakumari. To the north tigers have been found above the snowline in the Himalayas. In the east they thrive in the mangrove swamps of the Sunderbans and remnant rainforests of the northeastern states. Visitors can still get a chance to see tigers in the large protected areas of Kanha and Bandhavgarh in central India.

Tigers feed on large herbivores such as chital, sambar, barasingha, nilgai and even the occasional gaur, the Indian bison. Their palate is quite flexible and they are even known to hunt smaller prey such as langurs and peacocks.

Find out more about efforts to protect this charismatic king of the cat family from the Indian Government's Project Tiger (www.projecttiger.nic.in) and the Wildlife Protection Society of India (www.wpsi-india.org). — Ian Lockwood

▼ A Bandhavgarh tiger bares all



Scientific name
Panthera tigris
IUCN Red List status
Endangered
Range
Across India
Online
[www.iucnredlist.org/
search/details.php/
15955/all](http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/15955/all)

East India

SUNDERBANS NATIONAL PARK



◀ An October sky in the Sunderbans

There are few places in the world like the Sunderbans. Named after the sundari tree (*Heritiera fomes* and *littoralis*), Sunderban translates literally as “beautiful forest” in Bengali. Formed by the delta of three gigantic rivers (the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna) the Sunderbans is the world’s largest halophytic mangrove forest. Its estimated 10,000 square kilometres of waterways and forest is spread between Bangladesh and India. Roughly two thirds of the forests lie within Bangladesh, the least disturbed of the entire area. From a wildlife point of view, the Sunderbans is thought to support one of the most secure habitats for tigers to breed in. Tigers that habitually kill people, as well as the large estuarine crocodiles and king cobras, have added to the allure (and hysteria for some) that the Sunderbans present visitors.

Not only do the land and sea meet in the Sunderbans but they mix with the sky to create a vast, complex and mysterious ecological system. Visiting the Sunderbans is a formidable challenge, since there are no roadways or train links—let alone paths to walk on. Everything is dependent on waterways that snake their way to the sea through Kolkata, Khulna and Dhaka. In recent years river cruise boats that used to move people and cargo on the great rivers have been retrofitted to take visitors into the heart of the Sunderbans. It can take one to two days of travel before you’re in the deep forest near the sea. Smaller *nokhas* (country boats) take you through the maze of channels giving you an intimate feel of the forest. It is unlikely that most visitors will set foot on land during a visit to the Sunderbans. On the Indian side, the pathways from the forest bungalows are encased in wire mesh to discourage tiger attacks. In the

Bangladesh Sunderbans things are less guarded and several beaches are open to visitors. Walking on beaches crisscrossed with an array of chital and tiger footprints is an experience not to be forgotten!

In truth, most visitors are unlikely to see tigers in the Sunderbans although encounters are not unheard of. The presence of pugmarks, scat, claw marks and the cat-like odour on marked trees leaves little room for doubt about their presence. For naturalists there are plenty of other remarkable things to observe and experience. Mudskippers crawl up on the tidal flats, as if trying to evolve the way our ancient ancestors did. The variety of mangrove trees dripping with ferns and epiphytes is stunning. In certain seasons bioluminescent algae can light up the channels in the deep depths of the night’s darkness.

The Sunderbans hosts some of the most colourful and obscure birds in all of South Asia. Seven kingfisher species can be found: brown winged and black capped are plentiful while the ruddy kingfisher is a rare treat if observed. The most unique bird is surely the masked finfoot, which makes its home in a few mangrove habitats in South and South East Asia. Lucky visitors can also seek out Pallas’ fishing eagles, grey headed lapwings, the lesser adjutant stork and the very rarely seen mangrove whistler.

— Ian Lockwood

■ WHERE

West Bengal

■ AREA

1,330 km²

■ HOW

Access is through Kolkata (Calcutta) or Khulna if you are visiting the Bangladesh side.

■ WHEN

December to March. April and May can be interesting with the mass flowering of the Sundari trees. The monsoon (June–September) is also an incredible time to be in the forest.

■ ATTRACTIONS

Unusual habitat, tigers, chital (spotted deer), king cobras, and amazing bird life.

■ EXTRAS

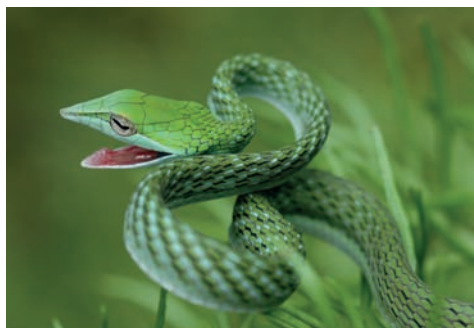
For an unforgettable experience take a mud bath at low tide on one of the mud paths. If you can put aside thoughts of crocodiles and tigers in the water, you will find yourself reinvigorated and cleansed like never before! To get a better feel for the Sunderbans, Sy Montgomery’s “The Spell of the Tiger” and Amitav Ghosh’s “Hungry Tide” are both essential.

■ ACCOMMODATION

All based on riverboats. In West Bengal there is a hotel at Sajnekhali, which is on the edge of the forest. The West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation’s two- or three-night river cruises (www.wbtourism.com) can be recommended. Help Tourism has a new eco-safari camp on Bali Islands in the north Sunderbans. On the Bangladesh side The Guide Tours Ltd. offers excellent three-, four- or five-day river tours with knowledgeable naturalists.

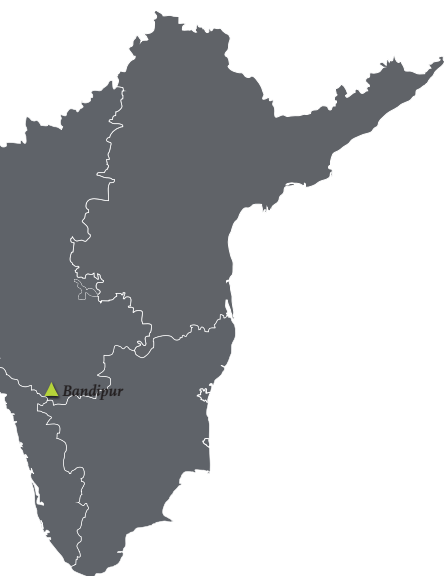
■ ONLINE

www.sunderbansnationalpark.com and www.kolkatabirds.com/sunderbans.htm



South India

BANDIPUR NATIONAL PARK



North of the Nilgiri Hills on the tri-junction between the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka is an extensive protected area that offers one of the most secure habitats for India's two high-profile animals, the tiger and elephant. Bandipur Tiger Reserve falls in the state of Karnataka and provides a bridge to Mudumali and the Nilgiris to the south and Nagarhole National Park to the north. The protected area is further buffered with Kerala's Wynaad Wildlife Sanctuary in the west. All of these are part of the vast Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, a grand plan to protect the large and diverse regions around the uplands of the Nilgiri plateau.

Like many forest areas in India, Bandipur was once the private hunting grounds for royalty, in this case the Maharaja of Mysore. For a period of time, elephants were traditionally caught in Keddha (stockades) on the banks of the Kabini River. This controversial practice was stopped in the early 1970s, although the old stockade is still visible during the dry season on the Kabine reservoir. Bandipur became a National Park in 1973 soon after the passage of the landmark Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972).

Although there are huge mountains overshadowing Bandipur, it is a park of rugged and low hills averaging 700 metres. Rainfall is relatively light (600–1200 millimetres) depending on proximity to the Western Ghats. Because it falls in the rain-shadow of the Western Ghats, Bandipur is dry and characterised by dry deciduous scrub and moist mixed deciduous forest. The moist deciduous forests are dominated by *Terminalia* species but they also host rose wood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) and teak (*Tectona grandis*). Sandalwood (*Santalum album*) grows well in its dry climate and its poaching remains a major conservation threat. Invasive lantana and eupatorium now dominates much of the undergrowth, a fact that has negatively affected the park's herbivores.

Bandipur and Nagarhole are famous for their nearby congregations of elephants whose numbers swell to some of the largest Asian elephant gatherings in the world. Being migrant animals they move in and out of the three states and across boundaries with unprotected lands. Bandipur's elephants are most likely seen during the wet season when they are evenly distributed. During the dry season, they congregate on the banks of the Kabini at the park's northern boundary with Nagarhole. The prey base of Bandipur and Nagarhole is very healthy and

they host one of the healthiest predator populations in India. Tigers, leopards and wild dogs are all found within the area. Like many protected areas in India, there are specific tourist zones and then there are core areas that are out of bounds to most visitors. Bandipur can be disappointing if you are confined to the forest department's tours; the private hotels are able to organise jeep rides that allow for better wildlife viewing.

Bandipur offers great bird-watching opportunities. As well as a number of other species, several of the 16 Western endemics are found here, including the malabar grey hornbill, malabar parakeet, grey junglefowl, rufous babbler, and the grey-headed bulbul. Other rarities include the heart-spotted woodpecker, white-bellied minivet, changeable hawk eagle, and the spot-bellied eagle owl.

— *Ian Lockwood*

■ **WHERE**
Karnataka

■ **AREA**
874 km²

■ **WHEN**
Open all year,
but March–
September is
the best time.

◀ The fearsome-
looking but only
mildly venomous
green vine snake

▼ The Western
Ghats reflected in
wetlands

■ **TRIVIA**
Veerapan, the
now deceased
but once noto-
rious poacher
and criminal,
used the forests
in and around
Bandipur as a
safe haven for
over a decade.

■ **ONLINE**
[www.kolkata
birds.com/
south/
bandipur.htm](http://www.kolkatabirds.com/south/bandipur.htm)

■ **HOW**
Bandipur is located between
Mysore and the hill-station of
Ooty (Udhagamandalam). It
is under 3 hours by bus/taxi
from Mysore, which has good
access to Bangalore.

■ **ACCOMMODATION**
Bandipur Safari Lodge
(www.junglelodges.com) or
Tusker trails ([www.nivalink.com/
tuskertrails](http://www.nivalink.com/tuskertrails)) are excellent choices.

■ **ATTRACTIONS**
Large mammals (elephants,
gaur, sambar, spotted deer,
dhole) and birds.



Periyar National Park offers some of the finest opportunities to experience large animals and a plethora of other species unique to the Western Ghats. Many of the endemic birds, animals and plants in this biodiversity hotspot can be seen on a visit to Periyar. The park surrounds a large artificial reservoir in the Cardamom Hills that diverts its waters eastward to the dry plains of Tamil Nadu near Madurai. When it was built in 1895 under British colonial administration, the surrounding forests were protected as a “game sanctuary”. In 1950, shortly after independence, Periyar was declared a wildlife sanctuary and in 1978 it became a “tiger reserve”—the highest and best-financed level of protection within the Indian protected areas network. Today, Periyar has a unique brand of park management that has effectively blended conservation strategies with community involvement.

The low undulating hills that surround the lake host tropical evergreen, moist-deciduous forests as well as tropical grasslands. Rainfall can be quite high (over 2,500 millimetres annually on average). The different habitats provide a home to the elephant, gaur, sambar, Indian wild dog, tiger and others. Despite its name, tigers are rarely seen in Periyar owing to the thick vegetation and their secretive habits. Perhaps less appreciated are Periyar’s tremendous bird-watching opportunities, which are best sampled on the walks with tribal watchers.

Most visitors converge on the dock that provides daily boat trips out onto Periyar Lake from the Thekkady entrance. These can sometimes be noisy and crowded experiences but they provide an unparalleled opportunity to see large animals and get a sense of the landscape. Much of the rest of the park is more difficult to access. The morning “nature walks” led by tribal guides that can be organised from the docks are one of the best ways to see bird life and small mammals such as the Nilgiri langur and malabar giant squirrel. These three- to four-hour walks provide an excellent opportunity to see Western Ghats winged specialties. Great hornbills, so familiar to birders in South East Asia, are also encountered on these paths.

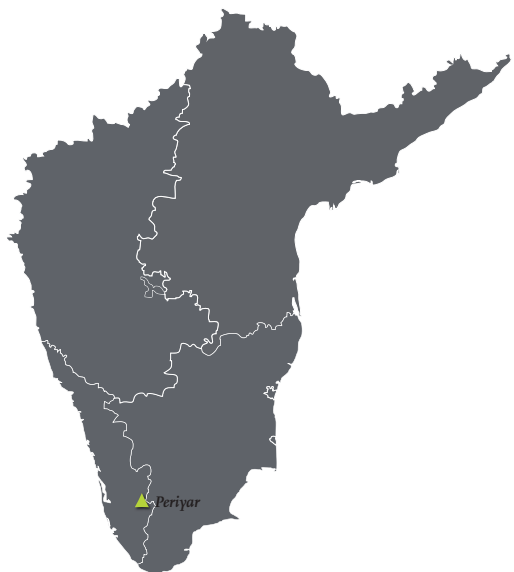
The “Tiger Trail” programme provides a more sustained sense of adventure and the habitat of Periyar’s interiors. Interestingly, former poachers working with the reserve’s staff lead visitors on a two- to three-day treks through the deeper, least accessed parts of the park. The more difficult-to-see wildlife such as king cobras, lion-tailed macaques and Nilgiri tahr as well as evidence of tigers (scat and pugmarks) are the potential highlights.

The Sabarimala temple in the western portion of Periyar is an enormously popular pilgrimage site during the fleeting winter months every year. While official literature sites October to April as being the best months to visit Periyar, a monsoon visit between May and September can also be a worthwhile experience since human crowd levels plummet when the rains come.

— Ian Lockwood

South India

PERIYAR NATIONAL PARK



South India

PERIYAR NATIONAL PARK

■ **WHERE**
Kerala

■ **AREA**
350 km²

■ **HOW**
Entry to Periyar is through Kumily, a small border town with bus access. Madurai (Tamil Nadu) is 5 hours away and Cochin (Kerala) is 6 hours away. The park entrance is at Thekkady, less than a kilometre from Kumily.

■ **WHEN**
The recommended time is October–April, but can be crowded with people.

■ **ATTRACTIONS**
Forest walks and boat rides allow one to experience southern India's wildlife, including large Indian mammals, and 13 of 16 endemic Western Ghats bird species: the malabar parakeet, waynaad laughing thrush, white-bellied treepie, rufous babbler, broad-tailed grassbird, and others.

■ **EXTRAS**
Taking the Tiger Trail trek with ex-poachers is the surest ways to avoid the weekend crowds and focus on the area's natural history.

■ **ACCOMMODATION**
Kerala Tourism has three different places to stay at: Periyar House is for the budget conscious and is located away from the boat landing; Aranya Nivas overlooks the noisy boat landing and is pricier; the deluxe Lake Palace is located a boat ride away and has unparalleled views of the lake and forest (www.ktdc.com). Spice Village (www.cghearth.com) on the road to Thekkady offers superb luxury eco-tourism and great buffets if you can't afford the rooms.

■ **ONLINE**
www.periyartigerreserve.org and www.ktdc.com

▼ Nilgiri tahr are found in the hills of Periyar





South India

Nagarhole National Park

India's prime biosphere reserve encompasses the protected areas of Nagarhole, Bandipur, Mudumalai, Wayanad and Silent Valley. Nagarhole's deciduous forests, denser and taller than Bandipur's, boast an impressive abundance of wildlife. Like Bandipur, though, Nagarhole has some of the best remaining habitats for elephants in the country.

Other choice animals include the world's only four-horned antelope, several species of deer, gaur, porcupines, pangolins, sloth bears and over 250 species of birds. The hot, dry season in Nagarhole promises excellent animal sightings.

Where Karnataka

How Mysore is 94 km from Nagarhole. There are one or two 3-hour daily bus rides between Mysore and Nagarhole.

When Open all year, but February–May is the best time.

Area 643 km²

Accommodation

Reservations for the few rest houses in the park should be made early to avoid disappointment. Kabini River Lodge (www.junglelodges.com) and Water Woods (www.jungleinnnagarhole.com) are recommended.

Online

www.india-wildlife.com/nagerhole-national-park.html



South India

Mudumalai National Park

The first wildlife sanctuary in southern India, Mudumalai supports a wide variety of flora and fauna. The most prominent resident is the *dhole* or Asiatic wild dog, which is commonly seen in the eastern side of the park.

Other animals in the park include the elephant, tiger, bonnet macaque, striped-neck mongoose, hyena, sloth bear, sambar deer, giant flying squirrel, otter, python and mugger crocodile. There are over 200 species of birds, such as the king vulture, crested hawk eagle, malabar whistling thrush, spotted babbler, green pigeon, brown dove and peacock.

Where Tamil Nadu

How The nearest airport is at Coimbatore, 160 km away.

The nearest railway stations are Udhamandalam (65 km away) and Mysore (95 km away). The nearest town is Gudalur (16 km away), which is situated along the Udhamandalam–Mysore highway. The sanctuary can be reached from Mysore as well. There are regular buses from Udhamandalam, Mysore and neighbouring towns.

When September–May is the best time to go.

Area 321 km²

Accommodation

Forest rest houses and guesthouses are available at Masinagudi, Kargudi, Abhayaranyam and Theppakkadu.

Online

www.indiawildlife-resorts.com/wildlife-sanctuaries/mudumalai-sanctuary.html

▲ Nagarhole

▲ Mudumalai

▲ Mukkurthi

▲ Silent Valley

► Pangolin

►► Western Ghats scenery

►►► Nilgiri tahr

►►►► Indian peafowl





South India

Mukkurthi National Park

Look out for the butterflies that thrive in this park. Located at an altitude of 2,400 metres, Mukkurthi is home to species like the blue admiral, hedge blue, Indian fritillary and Indian cabbage white. The park is also home to the endangered Nilgiri tahr, a close relative of the sheep.

Other animals include the jackal, barking deer, Nilgiri marten and jungle cat. Also found are birds such as the laughing thrush, wild pigeon, woodcock and black eagle. You can fish for trout in the rivers of Mukkurthi, but you will need to obtain a permit in advance to do so.

Where Tamil Nadu

How The nearest airport is at Coimbatore (140 km away) and the nearest railhead is Udagamandalam (45 km away). The park is also connected to Udagamandalam by road.

When February–May and September–November are the best times.

Area 78 km²

Accommodation Forest rest houses at Avalanche and Pykara are available.

Online www.bharatonline.com/tamilnadu/travel/nilgiris/mukkurthi.html



South India

Silent Valley National Park

As part of the Nilgiri Biosphere, Silent Valley is home to the country's last significant stretch of tropical evergreen forest, the closest to virgin forest as the Western Ghats offers. As such, its remoteness and tough terrain mean that it harbours some fantastic wildlife. There are over 100 species of butterflies and some 400 species moths, including many rare endemic varieties.

There are a multitude of mammals too: tiger, leopard, Nilgiri langur, flying squirrel, Indian pangolin, wild boar, deer and elephants. Rare raptors including the Indian black-crested baza, rufous bellied hawk eagle and shaheen falcon have also been spotted here. Permission to enter the area must be obtained by the Forest Department.

Where Kerala

How The park is 40 km from the nearest bus station at Mannarkad. Coimbatore is the nearest airport (115 km away).

When March–September is the best time.

Area 90 km²

Accommodation The Forest Department has a rest house inside the park.

Online www.keralaforest.org





South India

Eravikulam National Park

Lying at an elevation of around 2,000 metres, Eravikulam is home to the largest population of the endangered Nilgiri tahr (or ibex) and the atlas moth, the world's largest moth. Other animals include the elephant, tiger, civet cat, sambar deer, Nilgiri langur, stripe-necked mongoose, Indian porcupine, Nilgiri marten and small-clawed otter. Also found are over 100 bird species such as the black-and-orange flycatcher, Nilgiri pipit, white-bellied shortwing and Kerala laughing thrush.

Where Kerala

How The nearest town is Munnar (13 km away), which is well connected by road to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The nearest airports are Kochi (in Kerala, 148 km away) and Coimbatore (in Tamil Nadu, 175 km away). The nearest railhead is Aluva (115 km from Munnar).

When Year round, but closed during the monsoon period from June–August.

Area 97 km²

Accommodation Guest houses, rest houses and private lodges are available at Munnar and Devikulam.

Online
www.eravikulam.org



South India

Gulf of Mannar Marine Park

A marine paradise off the east coast of Tamil Nadu, this national park comprises 21 islets with coral reefs and mangroves. The abundant sea grass is an important food for the rare dugong and the endangered green turtle and olive ridley turtle. Here you can find the bottlenose dolphin and finless porpoise, as well as over 500 fish species such as the parrot fish, clown fish and squirrel fish.

Treat yourself to a display of reef invertebrates: shrimp, lobster, crab, sea cucumber, sponge and other molluscs. You can tour the park in a glass-bottomed boat available from Mandapam. Access to some of the islands is prohibited.

Where Tamil Nadu

How The nearest airport is at Mandurai (150 km away) and the nearest railheads are at Mandapam and Toothukudi.

When Year round.

Area 6.2 km²
(islands only)

Accommodation
Hotels at Mandapam are available.

Online
www.indiatourism.com/wildlife-tamilnadu/mannar-marine-national-park.html

Eravikulam

► Hooded grasshopper

►► Fungoid frog

►►► Sloth bear

►►►► Flying fox

