



Nilgiri Marten - On the Brink of Extinction

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Editorial

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Introduction

In Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, inside the Anamalai Wildlife Division, is the Valparai Shola National Park. Its undulating terrain, filled with the shola grasslands and temperate forests trees, forms the ideal habitat for several animals endemic to the Western Ghats. One of them is the Nilgiri marten. Belonging to the same family as the badgers and weasels, this Indian marten is a small carnivore, found exclusively in the Western Ghats. Nilgiri martens (*Martes gwatkinsii*) are endemic to the Western Ghats mountain range of southern India, which is found within the oriental geographic range.

Physical Description

Nilgiri martens average around 2.1 kg. Their body lengths are anywhere from 55 to 65 cm, with their tail length being anywhere from 40 to 45 cm. As a marten, they have a high basal metabolic rate. Their coat color is brown with a very distinct yellow or orange throat patch. Nilgiri martens are similar in size and appearance to yellow throated martens. Nilgiri martens are distinguished by their slightly larger size and by the structure of their skulls. Nilgiri marten braincases are flattened above with a prominent frontal concavity.

Reproduction

The reproductive habits of the Nilgiri martens have not been studied. As Nilgiri martens closest relatives of yellow throated martens, they are presumed to share many biological and behavioral traits; therefore it is likely that Nilgiri martens are also monogamous.

Nilgiri martens reproductive habits have not been exclusively studied. However, we can presume similar reproductive behaviors to close relatives yellow throated martens. Yellow throated martens breed between either February and March or between June and August; Nilgiri martens may follow a similar reproductive schedule. Gestation periods of yellow-throated martens last between 220 and 290 days.

Lifespan/Longevity

The lifespan of Nilgiri martens is currently unknown. However, a close relative, yellow throated martens, has been known to live on average 14 years in captivity. Other martens have been known to live on average 10 to 18.1 years in captivity.

Behavior

Nilgiri martens are thought to be diurnal and mostly arboreal expect for hunting and foraging excursions. Nilgiri martens are thought to be social creatures. It has been seen interacting and even hunting in groups. Nilgiri martens often preys upon small mammals such as mouse deer.

Home Range

Little is known about Nilgiri martens home ranges. However, martens often require among the largest home range in areas per unit body weight of any group of mammals.

Communication and Perception

Given Nilgiri martens presumably social nature, they likely communicate both vocally and chemically, through

scent marking, similarly to other martens. They likely use sight, scent, touch, and sound to perceive their environment, although little is currently known about their communication.

Food Habits

Martens are omnivorous. Nilgiri martens are partly frugivorous and insectivorous. They are believed to be good hunters and frequently kill and eat small mammals and birds. There have even been reports of Nilgiri martens hunting chevrotains, monitor lizards, crow, Indian Giant Squirrel and cicadas. They have also been known to consume nectar in the form of honey.

Predation

Nilgiri martens have no known natural predators. However, as a small carnivore it could be vulnerable to predation by any larger predators in the area. Large predators in the Western Ghats region of southern India include leopards, sloth bears, dholes and tigers.

Ecosystem Roles

Martens mainly impact their environments through their effects on prey populations. "Given their strong associations with structural complexity in forests, marten are often considered as useful barometers of forest health and have been used as ecological indicators.

Economic Importance for Humans: Positive

Nilgiri martens have been reported to be hunted for human consumption. However, due to the rarity of the species, it is unlikely that Nilgiri martens are an important food source. It is also unlikely that the fur of Nilgiri martens is valuable.

Economic Importance for Humans: Negative

Nilgiri martens have been reported raiding local bee hives and therefore have been considered a pests by local bee farmers. However, the scarcity of Nilgiri martens leads researchers to believe that the impact on the local honey industry is minimal.

Conservation Status

Nilgiri martens are listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List and is listed under Appendix III under the CITES appendices. "This species is listed as Vulnerable because its entire extent of occurrence is less than 20,000 km², its distribution is severely fragmented, and there is continuing decline in the extent and quality of its forest habitat in the six discontinuous national parks where it occurs. In addition, remaining populations are severely fragmented due to a continuing decline in the extent and quality of habitat (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 2012).

