

The Nilgiri Wild Life Association and Status of Wild Life in the Nilgiris

BY

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(With two plates)

INTRODUCTION

The Nilgiri Wild Life Association, for a long time known as the Nilgiri Game Association, was formed in Ootacamund in 1877 by a band of keen sportsmen, who feared that the indiscriminate shooting and fishing that was then taking place would exterminate all game and fish in the Nilgiris unless immediate action was taken. The stated objects were 'the preservation and management of the existing wild life in the Nilgiris District and the adjoining areas included under Madras Act II of 1879 and the introduction and preservation of other birds, animals and fish.' Beginning with restrictions upon themselves in the form of close seasons etc., the founders urged the Government to bring in legislation aimed at preserving game and fish. As a result, in 1879 the Government of Madras passed the Nilgiris Game and Fish Preservation Act, the first piece of legislation of its kind in India.

Almost from the start this body was associated with the regulation and management of shooting. In 1926 the management of the rainbow trout fishery, started at the Association's instance, was also entrusted to its care. And with that the Association had grown to its full stature. In the December 1939 issue of this *Journal* (41 : 384-396), the late Lt. Col. E. G. Phythian-Adams, from whom I took over as Hon. Superintendent of the Association in 1958 and continued till January 1964, reviewed the work of the Association. In the 90th year of its existence it is time that its position is reviewed again. These notes are written with this object.

CONSTITUTION

The holders of season shooting licences and until recently annual trout fishing licences of the Nilgiris automatically become members of the Association during the currency of their licences. On an average

there are 150 such members in a year. But with the taking over by the Government Fisheries Department of the trout fishery and the imposition of new restrictions prohibiting the issue of shooting licences to persons holding licences for other Forest Divisions in the State the membership is expected to drop to about 50. Besides, there are Honorary Members, most of them officials. The Collector of the Nilgiris is the President and the District Forest Officer, Nilgiris Division, is the Honorary Secretary. The affairs of the Association are managed by a committee consisting of not more than 24 members assisted by an Honorary Superintendent elected from among the members. Thus, although the Association is a private body, Government interests are fully protected and there is happy co-operation between officials and non-officials at the district level, which is most essential for successful wild life preservation.

FINANCES

The money obtained from the scale of shooting and until recently trout fishing licences is made over to the Association by Government and is the chief source of revenue. Rent from Game Huts, boat hire charges, profits on sale of maps, etc. are the other sources. With the loss of the income from the sale of trout fishing licences, the Association's finances are in a delicate position. Fortunately the Association is in a position to exist for a decade or two on its investments.

ACTIVITIES

The Association maintains a staff of game watchers for the protection of wild life and fish and generally assists the Forest Department in the enforcement of game laws. This includes prevention of offences and detection thereof when committed. It maintains two Anti-Poaching gates in the low country¹ to prevent motor car poaching, and pays rewards for the detection of crime.

It advises on the formulation of wild life and fish preservation rules and regulations, taking into consideration local conditions.

It runs an office for the convenience of resident and tourist sportsmen, which assists in the screening and issue of licences, maintains statistics and records, and has a small library. It prepares and sells maps, issues booklets on shooting, and publishes a printed report annually.

¹ The Nilgiris are made up of two plateaux. The upper plateau, with an elevation of 6000-8000 ft. above m.s.l., is referred to in these notes as the 'plateau', the lower plateau with an average elevation of 3000 ft. as the 'low country', and the slope between the two plateaux as the 'slopes'.

It acts as a liaison between the Forest, and Revenue Departments in this field at the district level.

The Association owns and maintains two game huts on the plateau, and plies a boat on the Mukerti Lake. It conducts census operation whenever necessary, and assists in research. It maintains a register of professional shikaris and regulates their profession. It pays rewards for the destruction of vermin, and has instituted prizes in Forest Colleges to promote the study of wild life and wild life preservation consciousness. It maintains certain tracks and approaches.

The Association represents wild life and shooting interests on the State Wild Life Board, and wild life and fish interests in the local tourists advisory committee. Its most important activity is the prevention of poaching through the activities of honorary Game Wardens and sportsmen, whose mere presence in the jungles is a deterrent to the poacher, both official and non-official. It acts generally as a watch dog in all matters connected with wild life management and preservation.

These are some of the more important of the Association's activities.

STATUS OF WILD LIFE

Elephant. Elephants are strictly protected and only those that are proscribed are allowed to be shot by licence holders. Such proscriptions are quite rare although about half a dozen people are killed by elephants every year. Solitary bulls raid crops and get peppered with buck shot, protection not extending to private lands, and when the wounds fester these pain-maddened beasts turn on their human tormentors. Fortunately in most cases this fit of madness passes with the healing of the wound. But solitary elephants are best avoided at all times. Elephants are found in the low country. But there have been rare cases of stragglers visiting the plateau by the Sispara Pass for very brief periods. As regards its status, there are more elephants now than there were 2 to 15 years ago, probably more than at any time before in living memory. Not all this increase is due to migrations from Mysore and Kerala as some people believe. The number of calves in each herd would show that there is really an explosion of elephant population. Unless some thing is done to check their numbers the Nilgiri elephants are going to make themselves a thorough nuisance.

Gaur. Confined to the low country and the slopes. Gaur are on the increase. The country around Mudumalai in the Sanctuary being more favourable, more are found there. Shootable bulls, that is bulls whose horns have a span of 33 inches and above or a girth of 18 inches and above, are not easy to find in the shooting area except on the difficult slopes.

There are some herds on the southern slopes both above and below Mettupalayam which falls within the area covered by the Nilgiris game licence. With the loss of shooting territory around Mudumalai efforts are being made to popularise this area to shooting and thus better preserve the wild life in the area. Already these efforts are bearing fruit.

Sambar. Writing in the December 1939 issue of the *Journal* Lt. Col. Pythian-Adams, wrote: 'Though a fair number are to be found in the low country the great majority are on the plateau where they have so increased in spite of ravages of tigers, panthers, and wild dogs. . . .'. Alas, the position of the sambar on the plateau is far from satisfactory today. Except in a few pockets where there are between half a dozen to a dozen animals, the sambar is very scarce. Estate labour with dogs killed quite a few. But poachers could not have accounted for all the missing sambar, for poaching never get out of hand in the Nilgiris as in the other districts. How they could have disappeared even from areas where no poaching took place is a mystery. However, it is comforting to know that there are more sambar on the plateau today than there were a few years ago. As soon as there is an appreciable increase, wild dogs invade the plateau from the low country in numbers and bring down the population. In 1960 there was such an invasion and in one bay of the Pykara Lake alone 14 sambar skulls were recovered. It is hoped that the new wattle plantations of the Forest Department on the plateau will provide more cover for the sambar and help it to some extent to make a come back. But this would depend upon the extent of grassland left for it to feed upon. In the low country sambar are definitely on the increase. But shootable herds continue to be shy and come out late in the evening and retire before dawn, when they cannot be legitimately shot.

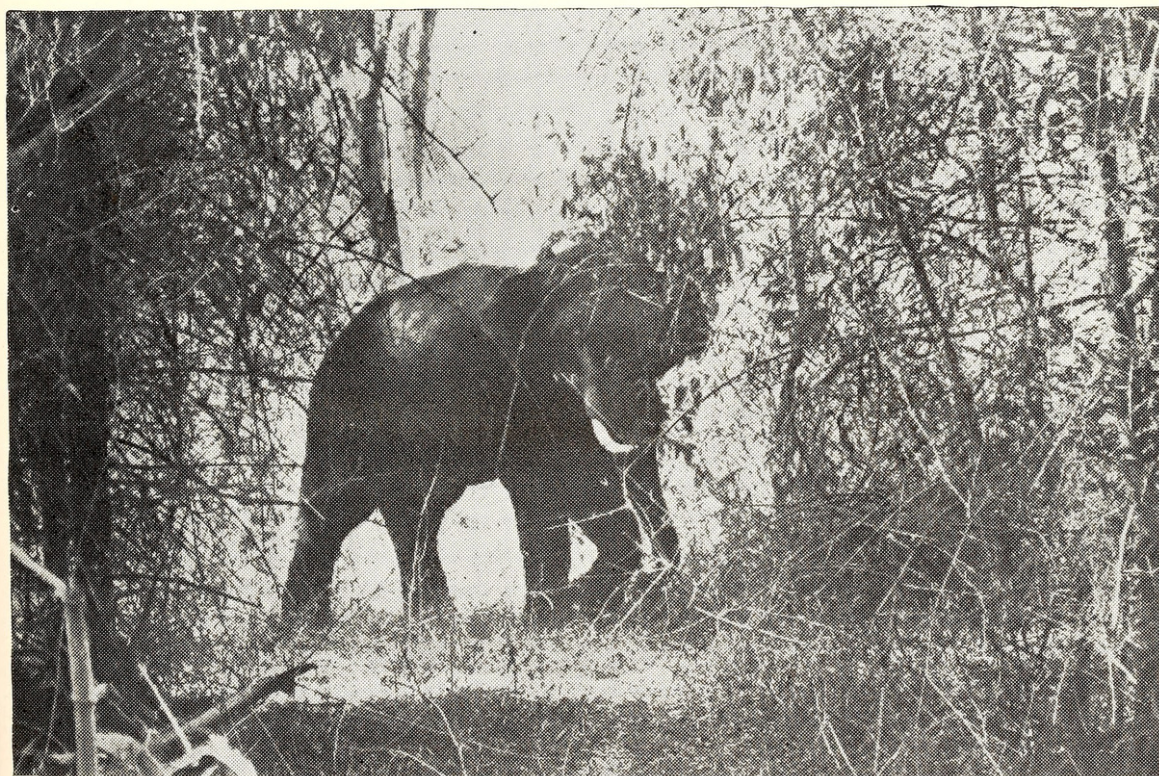
A 44½-incher, a record for the Nilgiris, was shot on the plateau in 1952.

The bag limit on an annual licence has been further reduced from two to one. The size limit remains at 28 in.

Chital. This species has recorded a spectacular increase. Herds of a hundred or more are not uncommon. In 1939 Lt. Col. Pythian-Adams wrote: 'The great majority of the stags shot come from the Mudumalai Forest'. Mudumalai is now in the heart of the wild life sanctuary of that name, but the concentration has moved east and large herds are now found around Masinigudi and Anaikatty. Stags with antlers of 35 in. and 36 ins. are obtained every year. 37 in. and 38 inches are by no means rare. This shows that the chital has improved not only in numbers but in quality also. Until about the end of the last century a 32½ in. head was considered a prize (*vide* SPORT ON THE



Solitary bull Gaur—Mudumalai



Wild Tusker in Bamboo—Sigur

(Photos : Author)

Davidar : Nilgiri Wild Life Association



Herd of Nilgiri Tahr—Bangitappal



Nilgiri Rainbow Trout on spawning bed—Avalanche
(Photos : Author)

NILGIRIS by F. W. F. Fletcher). A close season is observed between June and October and, during part of the open season, many of the stags are in velvet and cannot be shot. Two stags are allowed on an annual licence, but to prevent over-shooting the rule imposes a 30-day interval between the shooting of the 1st and the 2nd stag. Some culling may have to be done in the not distant future by sacrificing a few old does periodically in the larger interests of the species.

Nilgiri Tahr. The 1963 census (*vide* April 1963 issue of the *Journal*) revealed that there are not less than 300 animals living on the cliffs along the western face of the plateau. This stock was built from the few that were left at the end of the last century.

Only 'saddle backs' are allowed to be shot and their numbers vary from year to year. No spectacular heads have been obtained in recent years.

Roads have been formed under the Kundah Hydro-Electric Scheme right in the heart of the tahr country and thousands of workmen are living and working on the scheme in places where the tahr was the sole inhabitant. This is only a passing phase. After the project is completed only a skeleton maintenance staff will remain and peace will return. But the real danger to the tahr lies in the wattle and blue-gum plantations of the Forest Department which are spreading their tentacles far and wide and in many places right up to the verge of the cliffs. Depriving the tahr of its feeding grounds will certainly not be in the interests of the preservation of the animal. The Association has been trying hard for the reservation of a belt of grass along the cliff line, but the assurances given to it are repeatedly broken. The future of the tahr will depend upon what is left to it to eat.

Blackbuck. There were not many of these antelopes at any time. In 1951 a state-wide ban was placed on the shooting of these animals. Once the sportsmen lost interest even the few that were left vanished from their old haunts around Masinigudi, Moyar and Kargudi. Being partial to cultivation they must have fallen victims to the crop protection gun. A few are said to lead a precarious existence in the scrub jungle between the Bhavani and Moyar Rivers above the Bhavanisagar Reservoir. Here is a species which could be and ought to be reintroduced.

Barking Deer. This deer locally known as the 'jungle sheep', is more partial to the plateau than to the low country. The conditions on the plateau are so unsettled because of the work on the Kundah Hydro Electric Project and the extensive wattle plantations of the Forest Department that these deer venture out of the security of the sholas only late in the evening thus making it difficult to assess their

status. The cover provided by the new wattle plantations it is hoped will help the barking deer to propagate its species provided enough grassland is left unencroached. It is doubtful if this will be done.

The bag limit has been further reduced to two on an annual licence and to one on a monthly licence.

Four-horned Antelope. The few that occur in the low country are found chiefly in the light jungle above the Moyar Canyon. They are now protected. One of their enemies is the 'sportsmen' who cannot distinguish between the four-horned antelope and the barking deer !

Tiger. With the depletion of the vast sambar population on the plateau and on account of the disturbed conditions prevailing there few tigers are resident on the plateau. In the low country they are maintaining their strength. The vast area of sanctuary and the temporary protection now afforded them throughout the district there ought to be more tigers. In fact this does not appear to be the case although poisoning of tigers is not practised on a large scale. There have been only a few suspected cases. Particularly in the case of the larger canivore unless a realistic policy is adopted the 'protection' afforded them is likely to act to their detriment. Payment of compensation during the closed period would be a right step in this direction.

Nilgiri Tigers have a deeper coat and are prettier. Except for a very heavy tiger shot a few years ago there is no record of outsize tigers.

Tigers, panthers, and bears were classed as 'game' only recently. The shooting of these animals is now prohibited altogether.

Panther. There are more panthers in the low country than on the plateau. But they are by no means numerous and are very elusive. Black panthers are seen occasionally.

Bear. As in the case of gaur, the best bear country falls within the sanctuary and those that are in the shooting area live in difficult country along the slopes and are rarely met with during the day.

Hyena. These animals are not classified as game. Except for a few stragglers on the plateau hyenas mainly occur in the low country around Masinigudi and Anaikatti. Even there they are not numerous and are seldom seen except at 'kills'.

Pig. The pig population fluctuates. For some years they go on increasing then for some unknown reason their numbers go down. They are equally at home in the low country as well as on the plateau. They are also not classified as game and consequently there is no bag limit.

Wild dog. This animal seldom takes up permanent residence on the plateau. Some years they do not visit the plateau at all. They are

numerous in the low country and do considerable damage living mostly on young deer.

Small game. There are fewer jungle fowl in the plateau today chiefly because the natural sholas are either being destroyed or replaced with bluegum and wattle plantations. Some of the famous wood-pigeon sholas have also vanished. So far as the winter visitors namely woodcock and snipe are concerned there has been no appreciable change. But with the exodus of the resident European sportsmen who were chiefly interested in small game there are fewer pursuers of game birds now.

In the low country hare and jungle-fowl have increased as compared with a few years ago. Peafowl have registered a larger increase.

PROBLEMS FACING WILD LIFE

Among the many problems faced by wild life, indiscriminate slaughter on and around private lands continues to be the gravest.

Next on the list are the arm-chair conservationist and the unrealistic policy of the Government in closing of forests to shooting to placate him without affording special protection to wild life in the area resulting in wholesale slaughter.

Disturbed conditions prevailing in the various hydro-electric project areas, population pressures, increasing demands made on forest lands, denudation of forests, disturbance of natural conditions and forests by the planting of bluegum wattle and other such exotics on a massive scale, use of insecticides and pesticides, harmful to wild life, excessive cattle grazing and consequent soil erosion, and better transport facilities have not been conducive to the preservation and propagation of wild life. In spite of these handicaps wild life in the Nilgiris has not done too badly and in the case of certain species has shown a marked increase thanks to the wild life preservation consciousness and sportsmanship roused by the Association.

FISHING

Experiments in trout culture began as early as 1863 and continued at great expense to the Association and to private persons. But until 1906 when on the suggestion of the Association, the services of Mr. H. C. Wilson as Fish Conservator were obtained from Ceylon, it was still in the experimental stage. Mr. Wilson introduced the rainbow trout in preference to the brown trout and, in 1909, built a hatchery at Avalanche for its culture. By 1911 he had placed the Nilgiri trout fishery on a sound footing.

In 1926 the Association resumed control of the trout fishing on the plateau and managed it till 1965. It discontinued running the hatchery in 1956 as by that time every trout stream was overstocked with small trout. The main problem then was finding food for the trout.

Since then the conditions have changed. With the implementation of the Kundah Hydro-Electric Scheme and the extension of the Pykara Hydro-Electric Project almost all the trout streams have been dammed or are in the process of being dammed. The miles of spawning beds in every stream are now deep down under water and are useless and artificially hatched out and bred trout have assumed importance once more. As the Association could not run the hatchery with its slender resources it was made over to the Government Fisheries Department in 1958. A modern hatchery with a larger capacity is necessary if the trout fishery is to remain an attraction.

With the changed conditions the pattern of fishing has also changed. Fly fishing which was the only authorised method of fishing is being replaced by spinning. Wet-fly fishing is practised or rather anglers are compelled to practise this art in the few streams that are left and in the upper reaches of reservoirs.

For the first few years after each dam is built water backing up behind the dam floods fields and forests and thus provides more food for the trout and helps it to put on weight rapidly. It is then that the sport is at its best. But, once the food supply is exhausted, the fish start going back, and the loss of spawning grounds soon starts telling upon their numbers as well.

The Fisheries Department's idea of the introducing mirror carp into every likely water would have ruined the trout fishery altogether had not the Association got the Government to agree to the reservation of certain top level reservoirs exclusively for trout.

Every summer the reservoirs are almost drained dry and many trout are lost in this manner.

To compensate for the lost trout streams, the Association successfully introduced trout into every stream on the plateau capable of holding trout.

As in the case of game preservation, fish is also best preserved by associating anglers in the management of the fishery, particularly in a delicate sport fishery like the trout fishery which cannot stand much abuse. What the Association achieved with the expenditure of a few thousand rupees the Fisheries Department is unable to do in spite of spending enormous sums of money.

CONCLUSION

The experiment in associating the sporting public through the Association in wild life and fish preservation and preservation through well-regulated shooting and fishing has proved an immense success as a survey of the wild life and trout position in the Nilgiris as compared to other similar areas in south India would show.

Unless the problems facing the Association and wild life and fish preservation are appreciated and timely assistance rendered, the future for both is none too bright.

TABLE 1
BIG GAME SHOT BETWEEN THE YEARS 1940-1966

		Licences														
Year		Gaur	Sambar	Chital	Nilgiri Tahr	Black Buck	Tiger	Panther	Bear	Barking Deer	4-Horned Antelope	Season	Monthly	Weekly Big Game	Weekly Small Game	Daily Small Game
1940-42	..	6	17	13	8	1	5	6	1	35	..	46	6	2	7	..
42-43	..	8	9	8	3	..	9	3	..	9	..	60	27	20	31	21
43-44	..	3	25	18	2	..	5	6	2	23	..	62	44	38	27	25
44-45	..	5	18	15	1	1	4	2	1	19	..	71	51	67	22	12
45-46	..	..	7	4	1	2	3	4	..	28	..	86	46	47	25	36
46-47	..	1	10	11	3	..	1	6	2	23	..	101	40	50	11	49
47-48	..	1	9	6	3	1	2	4	1	23	1	109	21	21	7	17
48-49	..	2	9	15	2	C	10	8	..	34	..	100	25	13	7	6
49-50	..	5	9	9	1	C	6	12	1	57	1	99	17	9	4	2
50-51	..	7	9	17	2	C	6	10	..	38	1	129	20	10	11	7
51-52	..	4	13	16	2	C	5	8	1	40	..	106	16	17	4	8
52-53	..	1	4	5	2	C	2	7	..	30	..	89	23	9	11	12
53-54	..	..	7	11	..	C	5	4	..	8	1	82	6	8	3	13
54-55	..	5	3	10	1	C	3	4	..	12	..	81	20	13	4	8
55-56	..	4	5	21	1	C	7	6	..	16	C	101	..	4	4	..
56-57	..	1	7	16	5	C	3	5	2	29	C	110	..	..	..	..
57-58	..	3	3	22	..	C	5	3	1	32	C	110	14	..	4	..
58-59	..	2	7	28	2	C	6	1	1	32	C	97	18	..	5	..
59-60	..	2	5	49	6	C	4	..	3	27	C	107	22	..	1	..
60-61	..	..	6	54	1	C	6	3	..	16	C	109	32	..	6	..
61-62	..	3	12	46	..	C	..	1	1	12	C	123	25	..	6	..
62-63	..	2	14	38	3	C	4	6	1	20	C	115	20	..	8	..
63-64	..	..	10	32	3	C	5	6	C	13	C	111	20	..	2	..
64-65	..	4	9	30	2	C	C	C	C	8	C					
65-66	..	1	9	48	4	C	C	C	C	7	C					

NOTE. C=closed.

TABLE II
SMALL GAME SHOT BETWEEN THE YEARS 1939-1966

YEAR	Jungle cock		Jungle hen		Spur- fowl		Snipe		Wood Pigeon		Hare		Wood- cock	Mouse Deer	Pea- cock	Pea- hen	Par- tridge	Quail
	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Plateau	Low Country	Low Country	Low Country	Low Country	Low Country
1939-40	159	207	C	254	23	85	582	146	240	344	110	164	138	2	97	C	97	1
40-42	97	295	C	240	12	97	649	115	238	151	46	121	115	3	117	19	87	2
42-43	112	191	C	207	41	92	402	8	375	78	109	109	126	7	69	39	120	24
43-44	145	128	40	107	29	38	515	8	302	63	51	87	117	2	43	27	33	16
44-45	128	34	54	25	14	7	153	10	191	84	39	47	31	2	5	3	29	21
45-46	154	81	119	62	37	14	283	8	234	81	80	39	73	1	14	13	42	18
46-47	159	55	108	45	54	7	595	8	238	46	72	33	7	7	20	14	40	31
47-48	138	138	103	124	62	33	167	4	316	44	93	71	68	12	18	28	45	59
48-49	147	136	133	114	83	26	252	53	216	57	124	82	89	21	56	33	58	37
49-50	200	116	115	87	58	26	346	116	465	4	155	44	124	13	28	43	76	45
50-51	174	116	151	77	56	20	244	30	362	14	200	28	81	22	39	13	53	38
51-52	180	119	170	116	69	35	180	8	240	87	188	55	71	24	C	C	75	35
52-53	93	70	60	107	85	8	286	134	413	83	74	32	85	23	C	C	46	42
53-54	122	59	69	52	45	15	216	34	186	33	77	70	45	10	C	C	33	6
54-55	55	103	43	51	26	15	232	58	171	17	42	47	53	20	C	C	19	9
55-56	87	59	48	39	33	25	98	68	81	27	53	22	55	18	C	C	12	18
56-57	98	48	73	49	24	18	132	92	112	27	80	43	54	19	C	C	14	17
57-58	107	42	65	44	31	12	190	78	221	10	47	27	73	10	C	C	29	6
58-59	132	75	64	54	32	32	42	5	257	49	85	26	86	C	C	C	43	23
59-60	100	56	54	27	30	10	89	115	187	70	74	48	79	C	C	C	54	5
60-61	87	82	56	76	14	37	63	219	113	40	73	83	55	C	C	C	27	2
61-62	67	94	25	59	16	15	57	309	86	14	73	38	49	C	C	C	43	32
62-63	61	81	29	86	7	33	20	212	156	5	62	45	36	C	C	C	27	13
63-64	77	125	40	129	7	42	49	307	157	23	39	85	50	C	C	C	29	20
64-65	74	80	31	80	15	26	18	8	81	30	48	42	22	3	C	C	27	32
65-66	54	52	36	60	10	22	11	8	52	14	46	30	10	3	C	C	24	13

C=closed.



Davidar, E R C. 1968. "The Nilgiri India Wildlife Association and Status of Wildlife in the Nilgiris India." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 65, 431–443.

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