



AMBOLI

Hidden herp haven

A world-renowned herpetologist, and Director of a Sindhudurg-based NGO called 'Nature', Dr. Varad B. Giri has contributed enormously to our knowledge and understanding of Indian reptiles and amphibians. In 2011, in honour of his immense contribution, a newly-discovered snake species *Dendrelaphis giri* was named after him.

"Take your rain gear," advised local nature enthusiasts, *Kaka* alias Mahadev Bhise, Rohan Korgaonkar and Hemant Ogale, who have been my constant companions and expert consultants on all my visits to Amboli over the last decade. Our plan that rainy evening was a night trail on Chowkul road. The trip was fruitful, as expected during the monsoons, when amphibians and reptiles are at their most active.

My rendezvous with Amboli and its many amphibians and reptiles, some of which are endemic to the region, began in 1999. With its picturesque landscapes and breathtaking waterfalls, Amboli is located in Sindhudurg district, close to the Maharashtra-Goa-Karnata tri-state border in the Western Ghats. The forest is predominantly semi-evergreen, interspersed with lateritic plateau. Though the Reserved Forest is relatively well protected, nearby forest patches remain degraded thanks to human use.

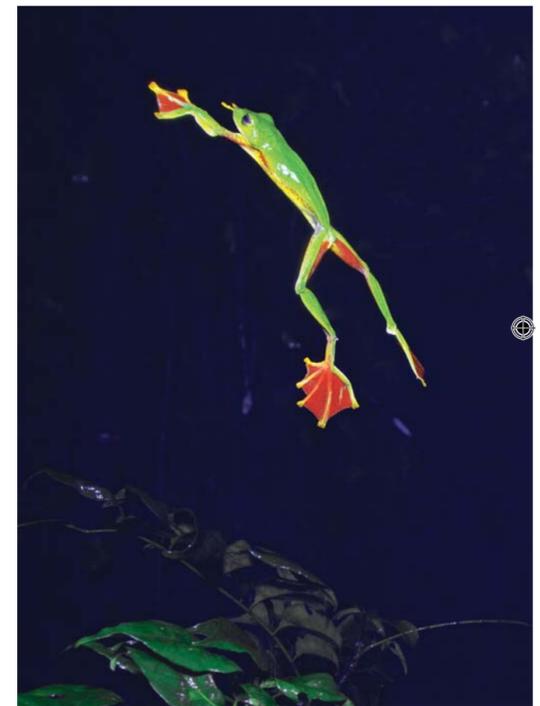
In the last decade, Amboli has undergone tremendous metamorphosis in terms of public awareness. People have discovered that this is a first-rate biodiversity-destination, rich in amphibian and reptilian life. Explorations and studies have resulted in new discoveries, new locality reports and range extensions. Notable among these are the discovery of a new genus *Xanthobryne*, (in the form of the endemic Amboli toad *Xanthobryne tigrinus*) and two new species of frogs Amboli bush frog *Pseudophilautus amboli* and Daniel's night frog *Nyctibatrachus danieli*.

Two new species of snake, Giri's bronzeback and Castoe's coral snake have also been listed! These treasures aside, many interesting butterfly species have also been reported from Amboli, which is truly a biodiversity wonderland.

AMBOLI'S TRAILS

Most new species and other interesting herpetofauna are reported from a 10 sq. km. forest area surrounding Amboli, and can be sighted on the three main forest trails that cut through this pristine forest. The trail to Parikshit Point starts from a small and recently-developed recreational tourist site called Forest Park, and is ideal for sighting the Malabar gliding frog, a beautiful specimen that is drawn by the presence of four man-made freshwater tanks and the many trees they use for breeding. The Parikshit Point trail runs through a comparatively undisturbed patch of semi-evergreen forest and ends on a small rocky plateau. I have explored this trail in all seasons and encountered seasonal variation in its faunal diversity.

During the monsoon, the trail is 'flooded' with leeches and interesting herps like the bicoloured frog *Clinotarsus curtipes*, a species endemic to the Western Ghats for which Amboli appears to be the northernmost distribution limit. An interesting gecko of the genus *Cnemaspis*, displaying unique morphological characteristics, seems to me to be an undescribed species, and is also largely encountered along this trail. Walking this route I have also spotted other endemic herps of the Western Ghats like the Malabar pit viper, Travancore



One of the wettest regions in the country, Amboli ghat (facing page, bottom) is a natural hotspot for the playful, moisture-loving herpetofauna that thrives in this refreshing hilly habitat. In such nurturing surrounds, endemic life thrives – this mating pair of night frogs *Nyctibatrachus* sp. represents one such species. The female is much larger than the male who will take care of the eggs until they hatch. The more attractive Malabar gliding frog *Rhacophorus malabaricus* (above) is also found only in this region. It is able to locomote by gliding over 100 times its length, from bough to bough, by stretching the webbing between its digits while leaping.



HOW TO GET THERE:
BY AIR: Belgaum (64 km.).
BY RAIL: Sawantwadi (28 km.).
BY ROAD: Mumbai is 549 km. by road. Pune is 390 km. State Transport buses ply from Vengurla, Sawantwadi, Ratnagiri and Belgaum.
BEST TIME TO VISIT: March to September.

wolf snake, Giri's bronzeback, Beddome's keelback, Prashad's gecko, white-banded ground gecko, Amboli caecilian, Amboli toad and Chorla giant-striped caecilian. The plateau, however, is dominated by the Amboli toad, famous for breeding in the small pools of water that accumulate in the lateritic rocks here. The other herps commonly seen here are Indian saw-scaled vipers, Beddome's snake-eyed lacertids and Günther's snake skinks.

The second forest trail leads to the popular Mahadevgad Point. Although this is a motorable road, it is always rewarding if you conduct a search at night. I have been able to spot the Malabar pit viper and common vine snake here, and the small streams along this road are breeding sites of the recently described Daniel's night frog. With luck, you could well encounter the gaur or a mouse deer too.

The third and longest trail is the one that takes you to Chowkul village. You start at an open patch of grassland with degraded forest, a popular breeding ground for cricket frogs, Indian bull frogs, burrowing frogs, ornate narrow-mouthed frogs and skittering frogs *Euphlyctis* sp. The trail then takes you to a pristine patch of semi-evergreen forest, which, after sunset, comes alive with calls of night frogs *Nyctibatrachus* sp. One of the perennial streams we frequently visit here is *Manduscha obol*, frequented in large numbers by endemic species like the Bombay night

frog and bronzed frog. Further along, you come to a large lateritic plateau which, like all others, appears barren during the dry season but transforms into a breeding site for various cricket frogs and an endemic Amboli toad during the monsoons. We have also reported one interesting caecilian from this plateau.

The Amboli bush frog, as the name suggests, is commonly seen among bushes throughout the region, and has a wider distribution in other parts of the Western Ghats. The large and beautiful Prashad's gecko is also seen in Amboli, with large adults of this species commonly seen in houses, while juveniles are mostly seen on trees. Endemic to the Western Ghats, this gecko is only known from Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra. Another endemic species to the Western Ghats, the rare olive forest snake, is also counted among the denizens of Amboli. The Amboli caecilian appears to be widely distributed in other parts of the Sindhudurg district, a few sites in Kolhapur district and Goa. It is obvious that though Amboli is a small forest, it is packed with herps and is a veritable hotspot for amphibian and reptile fauna.

LOVING AMBOLI TO DEATH?

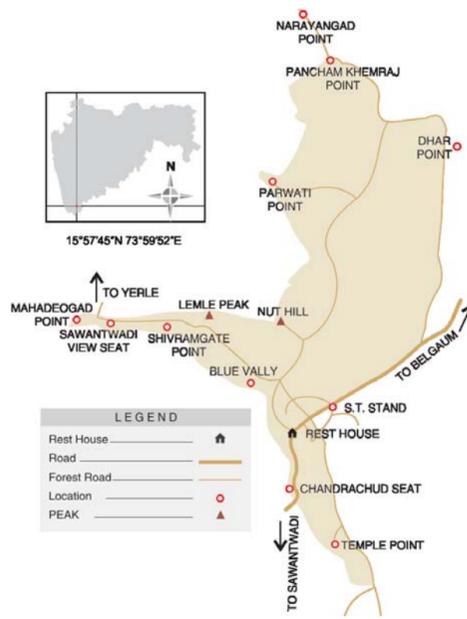
One of my favourite places in Amboli is an open patch of lush grassland, with a small seasonal stream, which runs near the Amboli village. This patch was a breeding ground for four different species of frogs

of the genus *Fejervarya* – fungoid frog, burrowing frog, common Indian toad and Amboli toad. In the past, I have seen hundreds of these frogs and toads at this idyllic spot, but recent 'developmental activities' have disturbed the site. Today, my visits reveal that the amphibian life here has almost completely disappeared, and I found only some rough-tailed snakes *Uropeltis* sp. and *Melanophidium* sp.

Accessibility to Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa now results in roughly 15,000 tourists visiting Amboli every weekend between July and September. Though their activities are confined to the motorable roads, they litter without a care and it breaks my heart to see the number of road kills, which, in my view, are changing the very dynamics of this once-pristine forest. We have also seen many 'over-enthusiastic' nature lovers who lift herps and carry them into their hotel rooms or even outside Amboli to photograph them.

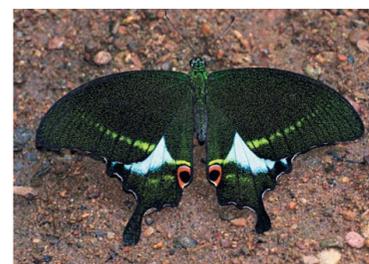
Organisations such as the Malabar Nature Conservation Club are doing all they can to painstakingly document Amboli's biodiversity and they also work to protect this fragile habitat. Hemant Ogale has been documenting butterflies while founder member Mahadev Bhise, a local newspaper reporter, is actively involved in conservation issues. But this is clearly not enough. We need more volunteers and more support to consolidate their good work.

Amboli's uniqueness lies in the fact that though it is a part of the northern Western Ghats, it also has several components of the southern Western Ghats. It could in fact be a 'corridor' between these two sections of the Western Ghats. The species I have described in this short piece are just the tip of the iceberg, covering only a small portion of this area, much of which remains unexplored. I am sure that there are more species yet to be reported from this region, provided, of course, that the habitat is protected.



Walking through the Amboli undergrowth, it is impossible not to develop a fascination for the frogs, toads and snakes that less aware people consider slimy, unattractive and dangerous. The moisture-laden undergrowth of Amboli throbs with life and colour that is imparted by species such as this red helen and blue mormon (above), both rain-loving members of the large swallowtail butterfly family. In such prime habitats, species like the ornate flying snake (top) also flourish. This reptile's ability to contract its ventral muscles and parachute itself across tree tops is enthralling! Harmless to humans, these snakes feed on smaller creatures including toads and frogs, when they can catch them. The extremely rare Koyna toad *Xanthophryne koynayensis* (facing page, top left) and the endemic bush frog *Pseudophilautus amboli* (facing page, top right) are found here in this mysterious wilderness.

LOOK OUT FOR:



PARIS PEACOCK PAPILIO PARIS

FLORA: *Ceropegia jaini*, *Coelachne minuta*, *Decaschistia trilobata*, *Schizachyrium paranipyeaunum* and *Smithia agharkarii*.
BIRDS: Scarlet Minivet, Paradise Flycatcher, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, bulbuls, sunbirds, kingfishers, babblers and thrushes.
REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS: Malabar pit viper, pied-bellied shieldtail, Prashad's gecko, cat snake, Giri's bronzeback, Daniel's caecilian, Amboli toad, Amboli bush frog, Daniel's night frog and bicoloured frog.
MAMMALS: Sambar, gaur, barking deer, sloth bear, Indian crested porcupine and Hanuman langur.