

Over 1,700 giant squirrels in Bhimashankar: Survey

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Prachi Mehta

Pune: A survey conducted by the state forest department has put the number of giant squirrels, locally called shekaru, between 1,306 and 1,742 in the Bhimashankar wildlife sanctuary. The study also identified as many as 10,451 active nests of the giant squirrels in the sanctuary.

"We had conducted such surveys earlier too and were not satisfied with the results. The data we gathered this year was through a block count of all the nests in the sanctuary. It can be used as a baseline data for research. We enlisted 10,451 active nests in the sanctuary," said MK Rao, chief conservator of forests (wildlife), Pune.

Each giant squirrel has about six to eight active nests, so it means there are between 1,306 and 1,742 squirrels in the sanctuary. The density of the giant squirrel population was found to be about 15 per sq km, Rao said.

Last year, the authorities had relied on a line-transect technique to map the nests. This year's survey also included density mapping of the nests to evaluate the areas within the sanctuary preferred by the giant squirrels.

The nest density was found the highest in Sakar-machiwadi, Sakeri, Kondwal, and Ghatghar within the sanctuary. The Nigadale plateau, Ahupe, Patan, and Velholi areas were found to have lower nest density, Rao said.

"The low density could be because of disturbances from human habitation. The Indian giant squirrel is a shy animal. There are also problems if there is less tree cover," he added. The data suggests that planting trees to fill the gaps in Patan area may improve nest density, he added.

The findings are consistent with an independent survey carried out by the city-based Wildlife Research and Conservation Society which estimated the Indian giant squirrel population density at 15.9 per sq km.

"Bhimashankar has the highest density of the Indian giant squirrel in Maharashtra," said Prachi Mehta, executive director (research) of the society who conducted the study in the Western Ghats in Maharashtra.

The average density of the Indian giant squirrel dropped from 15.9 per sq km in Bhimashankar to 2.9 per

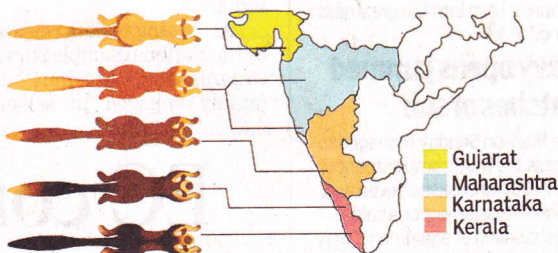


ARBOREAL ANIMAL

The Indian giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*) has five recognized sub-species based on their pelage colour. The palest and albinistic form *Ratufa indica dealbata* used to be found in the Dangs in Gujarat, but they have been hunted to extinction.

The Indian giant squirrel is an arboreal animal and very rarely ventures onto the ground. It builds several nests and leaps from one tree to another marking its territory with a unique scent. Thus, unless there is a dense patch of trees, the squirrel will not be able to survive.

Distribution of the Indian giant squirrel in the Western Ghats



- ▶ *Ratufa indica* has five recognized sub-species based on their pelage colour
- ▶ The palest and albinistic form *Ratufa indica dealbata* (Dang's squirrel) has been hunted to extinction
- ▶ The Bhimashankar squirrel has a darker pelage colour and as you go down the Western Ghats, this pelage colour grows further dark

The squirrel population will decline if the forest areas are fragmented. Saving the Indian giant squirrel will automatically save the forests

M K Rao | CHIEF
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS
(WILDLIFE), PUNE

sq km in the rest of the Western Ghats, Mehta added.

The International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists the Indian giant squirrel as a species of least concern "because of its wide distribution, presumed large population, occurrence in a number of protected areas and it is unlikely to be declining at nearly the rate required to qualify for listing in a threatened category."

"The study was done to know if it really is a species of least concern," said Mehta. The low density of the animal in the Western Ghats is indicative of degradation, fragmentation and canopy breaks, the moist forests in the region are not able to sustain a larger population. A sub-species of the Indian giant squirrel has already become extinct, she said.