



The

# MUDUMALAI

# SANCTUARY

BY

M. KRISHNAN

A tusker at a waterhole in the bamboo jungles

**M**UDUMALAI is in the Nilgiris, on the border of Madras State where it touches Mysore. A sanctuary for wild animals was founded here some thirty years ago, but it is only recently that the Sanctuary has received the publicity it deserves, and that a rest-house for visitors (Abahyaranyam) has been built. The Sanctuary is spread over 114 square miles of undulating hill-forests, with an average elevation of about 3000 feet, but its focal point for the visitor is Kargudi, where the rest-house is.

Kargudi is right on the Mysore-Ootacamund road (one of the pleasantest roads in India) and is easily reached by car or bus, either from Mysore or from Ootacamund. However, it is nearer Ootacamund, being only 40 miles from that salubrious hill-station; approached from Mysore, Kargudi is five miles from the Madras-Mysore border. There are a number of buses passing Kargudi.

The intending visitor should book his accommodation at Abhayaranyam (the rest-house at Kargudi), at the District Forest Office, Ootacamund, or at the Office of the Chief

Conservator of Forests, Madras; a riding elephant should also be arranged. There is no catering provided at Abhayaranyam, though a kitchen is there; adequate provisions should be taken, for Kargudi is miles from the nearest market and civilized amenities. At present the only transport provided at the sanctuary is the elephant; there is an Elephant Camp at Kargudi, maintained for timber work at the forest depot, and some of these elephants are made available to the visitor, so that he can have a ride through the Sanctuary.

### Unspoilt Deciduous Forest

One may ask, why go all the way to this sanctuary where modern amenities have not yet been provided? The question contains the answer. If you want to see a typical, unspoilt South Indian deciduous forest and its denizens, the way it is best seen (from elephant back), you cannot give yourself a fairer chance than a three-day visit to the Mudumalai Sanctuary during summer. At other times of the year the grass and undershrub is too high, and visibility is not so good.

The riding elephant can take one

only through a few miles of jungle in the course of a morning or evening outing, and it is impossible to predict how many wild animals one may see in the course of such a ride. That is why I suggest a three-day visit—one's chances are thereby thrice improved. I have spent the whole day in the jungles of Mudumalai without seeing anything beyond chital (very common near the rest-house) and some forest birds—and I have also seen, in the course of one outing, almost all the major wild beasts of the Sanctuary, a tiger, a she-bear with two cubs, a herd of gaur, chital, sambar and langur!

Mudumalai is one of the loveliest and most natural sanctuaries I have seen. The charm and variety of its deciduous forests are wholly unspoilt—here one can hope to recapture the fascination of the Indian hill-jungles as Sanderson and the other old-timers knew it. The early morning ground-mist covering the hills, the blaze of red and yellow and white of forest trees bursting into bloom, the plentiful bird life (so typical of a South Indian hill-top), and the near presence of all the finest wild animals of Peninsular India combine to endow Mudumalai with

an attractiveness that few other Indian forests have.

The visitor usually looks forward to seeing the wild beasts of the Sanctuary, and, with average luck, this expectation should be fulfilled in some measure. However, the varied flora and avifauna, and the lesser life of the Sanctuary, are no less interesting—even the Elephant Camp here is something unique in its way.

It is not possible, in the course of a short article like this, to provide a comprehensive account of the Sanctuary. The notes appended are merely indicative, and not descriptive, and are intended to provide the visitor with some idea of what to hope for, and look for, at Mudumalai.

### The Flora

The forests are typical deciduous hill-top forests, not too dense and not too open, with a number of valuable timber-trees, chief among them being teak. Other trees of value and interest are the ven-teak (*Lagerstroemia lanceolata*), the rose-wood (*Dalbergia latifolia*), the gumkino which yields a handsome timber and the sap of which is almost blood-red (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), the Ter-

Gaur Cow surprised while grazing



minals (*Terminalia tomentosa*<sup>lar</sup>), the commonest of these, attains a large size here—it is easily recognized by the crocodile-skin pattern of its bark), the red silk-cotton (magnificent in bloom), the beautiful Indian Laburnum (*Cassia fistula*), the white-flowered 'udi-mara' (*Dolichandrone sp.*) whose blooms the langur loves, the Nelli tree whose acid fruits many animals like, *Anogeissus latifolia* with a pale grey bark flaking in circles, and *Schleichera oleosa* which is exploited in lac-cultivation. A small tree growing by itself which surprises one with its beautiful, opulent, many-stamened pink-and-white flowers is *Careya arborea*. Clumps of giant bamboo are a feature of most parts of the Sanctuary. The undershrub consists almost entirely of lantana in places, but is quite varied in most areas, and is interestingly herbaceous in the more moist localities. Tall grasses grow in the interspaces between blocks of jungle; it is this grass that provides the larger herbivores (in particular the elephant and the gaur) with the bulk of their fodder. *Pandanus* (the screw-pine) forms a hedge along the jungle water-courses, and towards Mudumalai proper (some miles from Kargudi) there are swampy flats alternating with wooded hillocks.

The flora reflects the soil-moisture in most places—the jungle is thin and dry towards the Mysore border (the Moyar block) and richest, with an admixture of evergreens, at Benne (on the Kerala border). In the thicker-wooded areas even where the jungle is dominantly deciduous, a number of epiphytes, chiefly ferns, and lianas feature the growth. The botanist can never find Mudumalai anything but fascinating, at whatever time of the year he chooses to visit it.

### The Avifauna

The jungles of Mudumalai are a paradise for the bird-watcher during summer, and even the layman cannot fail to notice the richness of the bird life—the jungles are loud with the tonking of the barbets and the joyous calls of the grackles, the high dawn-song of the Racket-tailed Drongo, the drumming of the woodpeckers, and a variety of other bird-calls.

There is no space here even for a list of the commoner birds. However,



Malabar Grey Hornbill

the following, typical of the local bird life, are common: The Tree-pie and the Grey Tit; the Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, babblers, thrushes and bulbuls, the Iora and Jerdon's Chloropsis, the Paradise Flycatcher, wood shrikes, minivets, drongos (the large, handsome, assertive Racket-tailed Drongo in particular), the Southern Grackle (the finest talker among cage-birds), green barbets and woodpeckers (in particular the large Malabar Great Black Woodpecker), cuckoos, parakeets, the Malabar Grey Hornbill (look for this bird, and many others, where a tall tree, known to your Mahout at the 'gulmavu'—*Machilus macrantha*—is in fruit), owls, vultures, the Serpent Eagle with its axle-creak call and unmistakable flight-contour, and the fiercer Crested Hawk-Eagle, doves, and the Grey Junglefowl, whose cheery, brave crow is among the first bird-calls heard on waking.

### The Mammals

Except the wild elephant, which is common here, it is safe to approach

all other beasts on elephant-back.

The *Langur* is the common monkey of the area; occasionally one may see parties of the Bonnet Monkey. There are a number of tigers and leopards in the Sanctuary, but being nocturnal, and very wary, it is not often that one sees them—however, this is mainly a question of one's luck. The Sloth Bear (the bear of Peninsular India) is also to be found here, but is not often seen, being crepuscular and nocturnal in the main—but one may hope for a sight of this most interesting creature during a long stay at the Sanctuary. Wild dogs, in small parties, may be seen in summer.

The commonest rodent of the area is the diurnal Malabar Squirrel (the local race of the Indian Giant Squirrel, largest and handsomest of all squirrels), which is entirely ~~nocturnal~~; porcupines and flying-squirrels are nocturnal; a number of field-mice are commonly seen after dark, and the Black-naped Hare occurs in the drier reaches of the area.

Except during the driest months,

perhaps, there are always wild elephants in the Sanctuary—in Benne and Mudumalai proper, large herds arrive with the first rains, about April.

Nowhere does the Gaur (miscalled the Indian Bison), the tallest and handsomest of all wild cattle, attain nobler proportions than in this Sanctuary. Herds of these magnificent animals, and big lone bulls, are not at all uncommon, and are to be found here all the year round.

The forest-loving sambar (the largest of Asiatic Deer), and herds of Chital (or Spotted Deer) are also to be found here all the year round. Chital are quite common, and are less shy of daylight. In places one may see a Barking Deer, and the dinky little Mouse Deer (or Indian Chevrotain) lurks in the bamboo coverts, though it is mainly nocturnal. Towards the Moyar block, the uniquely Indian Four-horned Antelope may be seen occasionally. Pig may be chance-met anywhere.

#### The Lesser Life

Mongoose and civets, the monitor

lizard (so often miscalled the iguana!) and the remarkable little Flying Lizard (inconspicuous, but look for it on teak and Terminalias) are the chief of the lesser attractions of the Sanctuary. Those interested in insect life will find plenty to keep them occupied—but it is wiser to keep one's distance when studying the round, papery nests of the wasps, built fairly low in small trees!

A last word. Photography is allowed at the Sanctuary, on payment of a nominal fee. Take plenty of film and your longest lenses, and practise to handhold the camera steadily—fast film is best for such work. Wild-life photography is, perhaps, the most difficult of all branches of photography, and I believe that it is specially difficult in our jungles, and needs much technical skill—but like all true wild-life photographers I believe that everyone else's luck is better than mine, and this highly-specialized branch of photography is as much dependent on luck as anything else.