

Chronicles of the wild

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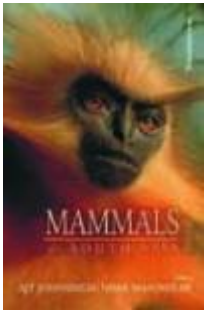


P. Jeganathan

Mammals of South Asia: Volume 1

By A.J.T. Johnsingh & Nima Manjrekar

Rs. 1,750



Mammals are a fascinating group of animals and the South Asian region is bestowed with some amazing species — ranging from the tiny Pipistrelle Bat, which weighs less than three grams, to the large Asian Elephant which could weigh three-six tonnes.

However, unlike birds, we have relatively very few books on mammals of this region which give details of their distribution and description of their ecology and behaviour. The *Mammals of South Asia, Volume 1*, edited by A.J.T. Johnsingh and Nima Manjrekar, fills this huge gap.

Dr Johnsingh is one of the most experienced wildlife biologists of India who pioneered field research on mammals with his study of Bandipur's wild dogs. He has travelled extensively in South Asia and has a particular fondness for Sambar Deer, which always gets a special mention in his talks and lectures. Nima Manjrekar, who studied the Asiatic Black Bear and the Himalayan Ibex, was a student of Dr Johnsingh at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun. This teacher and student combination, along with 44 experts on various taxa (a group of one or more populations of organisms), has produced a landmark book. The countries covered and referred as South Asia in this book are India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Burma.

Mammalogy (the study of mammals) in this region started way back in the early 19th century. Thomas Hardwick, Brian Hodgson, Edward Blyth, R.S. Tickell, W.T. Blanford, R.I. Pocock and T.C. Jerdon are some of the prominent naturalists who contributed much to the taxonomy (the classification of organisms in an ordered system that indicates natural relationships) and distribution of mammals of this region largely through collecting specimens for museums. Books such as *The Mammals of India* by Jerdon (1874), *The Fauna of British India: Mammalia* by Pocock (1939), *The Book of Indian Animals* by S.H. Prater (1948) and *Mammals of Pakistan* by T.J. Robers (1977) are considered

classics. These works of colonial era give information on taxonomy, distribution and habitat of mammals but lack ecological and behavioural data based on observations in their natural habitat.

Recent works such as *Bats of the Indian Subcontinent* by P.J.J. Bates and D.C. Harrison (1997) and *Marine Mammals of India* by Kumaran Sathasivam (2003) do have ecological information but are for a specific group of mammals. By covering 547 species of mammals of South Asia (in two volumes), with most of the species dealt with in great detail and describing even species which are new to science, such as Arunachal Macaque and Leaf Deer (which will appear in the second volume), this work stands out from the rest in its comprehensiveness.

This tome starts with an introduction where a brief description of the taxonomic order of mammals, a list of mammals (including the endemic species) that are found in this region, and the zoogeography of South Asian mammals is given. Primates (chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans, monkeys), canids

(dogs, wolves, foxes, coyotes, jackals), bears and cats dominate this volume. Each species' account begins with a beautiful illustration by Maya Ramaswamy, an artist known for her keen interest in natural history and conservation. This is followed by a description for field identification, taxonomy and distribution of species, with a clear map, black and white as well as colour photos of the species in its habitat, and its behaviour, ecology and conservation. It is heartening to see the amount of information gathered and presented by various field biologists (mostly from this region), especially on primates, canids and large cats.

It will be very apparent to a reader that we know very little about several groups, especially the ones that are not so charismatic, such as small carnivores, that include faunal groups like mongooses, civets, otters and martens, and small cats such as Leopard Cat, Jungle Cat, Rusty-Spotted Cat etc. These lesser-known mammals play a vital role in dispersing the seeds of various forest trees and they act as predators for rodents and bird species.

A beautiful Golden Langur adorns the cover of the book for a change as most books on mammals invariably have large cats. Another important feature of this book is its foreword. It is written by none other than George B. Schaller who pioneered the scientific field study of the tiger in India. His work, *The Deer and the Tiger* (1967), revolutionised field biology in India. And he was the inspiration for Dr Johnsingh to become a wildlife biologist and continues to inspire younger biologists even today. This book is the first of a two-volume series. The second volume will be on marine mammals, elephant, rhinoceros, cervids (deer family), bovids (cloven-hoofed, ruminant mammals), rodents and lesser-known

mammal species. This work is a repository of scientific references of various taxa of mammals covered and will be invaluable for wildlife researchers, protected area managers, naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts as also the lay reader who is interested in the peculiar behaviours and current conservation status of several mammals of South Asia.

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