

AGUMBE

Wildlife Photography Tour by Darter Photography

Tour Highlights – June 10–12, 2016





© Apurv Mukherji

Agumbe – a paradise in the Western Ghats of India...



© Tharini M

Amidst lush green rainforests with beautiful streams...



© Rohini Srivathsa

Where raindrops glisten on every leaf...



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

And snails set the pace of life...



© Saikat Sen

Where frogs add to the symphony of the raindrops...



© Akshay Tripathi

Under the lurking gaze of the Malabar Pit Viper...



© Akshay Tripathi

Where the spider spins the web of life...



© Saikat Sen

As a glistening beetle watches...



© Dinesh Kumar J.

Where the colours of the forest erupt at every step...



© Akshay Tripathi

Bringing the photographers to their knees...

AGUMBE

Wildlife Photography Tour by **DARTER**
PHOTOGRAPHY



The destination...

Along the western coast of India runs one of the world's oldest mountain chains – the Western Ghats. Over 2000km long, the Ghats help life thrive in peninsular India. They stand in the way of the monsoon clouds, ensuring heavy rainfall, giving birth to all the major rivers in South India – Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri and Tungabhadra.

Set midway in this mountain chain, in the state of Karnataka, is Agumbe. With an average of over 8000mm rainfall every year, this place has rightfully earned the moniker – Cherrapunji of the South. The lush rainforests in this area are famous for another reason – King Cobra – the longest venomous snake in the world. With a local culture that reveres this snake, it is no wonder that renowned herpetologist Gowri Shankar has set up the Kālinga Foundation here to study these snakes, along with the secrets of the rainforests where it thrives.

So, as the monsoons loomed over coastal India in early June 2016, a small group of photography enthusiasts and nature lovers set off to this wondrous forest on a photography tour organized by [Darter Photography](#) – one of the pioneers of photography expeditions to the Western Ghats. Shreeram MV, the photography mentor, has been visiting these forests for the past 8 years and is known for the balance he strikes between ethical photography and knowledge about the forest.



Source - <http://www.scidev.net/global/biodiversity/multimedia/the-biodiversity-of-the-western-ghats-in-pictures.html>



© Tharini M



© Tharini M

The idyllic environs of Kālinga Centre for Rainforest Ecology (KCRE)

Day 1

The group landed at Guddekere – the nearest village to the campsite – early in the morning. After half an hour's drive through forest tracks and small hamlets, they arrived at Kalinga Centre for Rainforest Ecology – home for rest of the weekend.

Set in an areca nut plantation, the campsite is set in the midst of pristine rainforest. To reduce the footprint on the forest, facilities are kept simple – permanent structures for the kitchen and the washrooms, a simple open dining-and-meeting place and tents pitched on elevated platforms to sleep in.





© Akshay Tripathi

After breakfast, we had a recap session about the basic concepts of photography, followed by some tips and ideas on rainforest photography. And then it was time for our first rainforest photography outing. The setting – the campsite itself! A great place to come across a host of organisms that call the rainforest their home. And a great place to get used to one's camera gear too.

A **Roux's Forest Lizard** *Calotes rouxii* (right) showed up in its brilliant colours. As we observed the lizard, it slowly changed colour in front of our eyes to a duller shade.



© Ritu Singh



At every step, we stumbled upon something interesting, from **Slugs** (left above) taking their own sweet time to crawl every inch to **Signature Spiders** (left below) waiting patiently in their webs for the next prey to fly in to the fastest running insects in the world – **Tiger Beetles *Cicindela duponti*** (centre below).

We also saw the first snake of the tour – a **Common Vine Snake *Ahaetulla nasuta*** (right below) blending into a small bush and eagerly seeking out a snack.





© Dinesh Kumar J.

These beautiful **Bird's Nest Fungi (Cyathus sp.)** were fruiting over a large area under some shrubs. Each of the "eggs" or peridioles contains spores. When a drop of water lands on the "nest" with sufficient force, the "eggs" are dispersed.

The pond is home to many **Common Skittering Frogs** *Euphlyctis cyanophlyctis*. We came across this one basking on the embankment. And it posed away, much to the delight of the photographers...



There was a lot of croaking from the bushes around the pond. Tracing the source of one of the croaks, we struck gold! A **Golden Frog (Indosylvirana sp.)** amidst some leaves. As we were clicking away, we heard another croak, this time behind us. Turned out to be another **Golden Frog** – right out in the open!





© Rohini Srivathsa

Dragonflies, like this **Pied Paddyfield Skimmer *Neurothemis tullia***, are very favourable to clean perches. They use them as a base to mount aerial sorties to hunt their prey – small insects – mid-air!

Related to dragonflies are **Damselflies**. These dainty insects hold their wings along their bodies at rest, unlike the dragonflies that hold their wings perpendicular (like a cross-bow) to their bodies.



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar



© Akshay Tripathi

Another insect that has a presence all around the campsite is the humble **Grasshopper**. Many species, in myriad colours – not just browns and greens, keep the vegetation in check.



© Akshay Tripathi



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar



© Dinesh Kumar J.



© Dinesh Kumar J.

Some photographers went beyond the obvious to harness their creativity, like this interesting composition with a couple of flower buds.



© Rohini Srivathsa

And soon, it was time for lunch! This **Fishing Spider (family Pisauridae)** was one of the last species we photographed that morning. And what a morning it had been – hardly any time to put the camera down as we discovered the abundance of life in the rainforest. Of course, this was only the beginning...



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

After a sumptuous lunch and a brief nap, the photographers were all charged to get going for the afternoon walk. This **Jewel Bug (family Scutelleridae)**, just outside the dining area, gave us an excellent start.



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

On the steps leading out of the campsite was a wonderfully camouflaged **Reddish Burrowing Frog** *Zakerana rufescens* (left above) – almost blending with the laterite of the steps.

A short climb and we were stopped in our tracks by a **Pill Millipede (Order Sphaerotheriida** – left below). Have you ever touched a Pill Millipede?

Amidst some **Memecylon sp.** flowers, we came across a pair of **beetles** mating (right below).



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar



© Rohini Srivathsa



Clinging on to the exposed roots of a huge tree were these tiny **Bees** (left). They would fly out with the gentlest of disturbance and come back to the same perch.

Another group that was thriving on the forest floor were these beautiful **Fungi** (below) – adding some contrast to the dull brown surroundings.





© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

A **Giant Golden Orb Weaver** *Nephila pilipes* was enjoying a meal in its raindrop-adorned web. Soon, the heavens opened up and there was a very strong downpour. We headed back to the camp site. A film about King Cobras that evening helped us get a better understanding about the elusive snake as well as the forests around Agumbe.



© Dinesh Kumar J.



© Akshay Tripathi

Night Walk

Life in the rainforest really erupts at night. Crickets and Frogs take over the orchestra from the Cicadas and Birds. Nocturnal species are out to make the most of the long night.

One thing that must be remembered here is that many species of the night are adapted to negligible light conditions. They don't like prolonged exposure to light or frequent flashes of high-intensity light.

So, the following ground rules were followed for the night walks:

1. All flash settings were checked before heading out for the walk, using a tree trunk or a leaf as a subject. This ensures minimum experimentation with settings while photographing an animal.
2. Photographers were allowed only one photograph per animal, to minimize exposure to flash. In the odd case that the first photograph wasn't satisfactory, settings had to be adjusted and a second photograph could be attempted.
3. Low intensity torch-light was used to illuminate the animal.
4. Photography of roosting animals, like Common Vine Snakes and Agamids, was strictly prohibited.

Left above – **Huntsman Spider (Family Sparassidae)**
Left below – **Long-horned Beetle (Family Cerambycidae)**



© Akshay Tripathi

Golden frogs (*Indosylvirana* sp.) were calling loudly from a small water body. With over fifty frogs, it was a huge congregation. This pair was in amplexus, surrounded by calling male frogs that were also vying for the attention of the female frog.



© Dinesh Kumar J.

A Cranefly (Family Tipulidae) showed off its perfect geometry.



© Apurv Mukherji



© Rohini Srivathsa

One of the most recognizable symbols of the Western Ghats is the **Malabar Gliding Frog** *Rhacophorus malabaricus*. These beautiful green frogs congregate near small pools in monsoons to breed. The webbing on their feet allows them to glide from the canopy to short shrubs, giving them their name. On the left is a female frog and on the right is a (smaller) male frog.



© Akshay Tripathi

As we started heading back to the camp, we came across this **Travancore Wolf Snake** *Lycodon tranvancoricus*, possibly looking for geckos on one of the “walls” along the path. It had just shed (evident by the dry skin sticking to it) and was glistening in its new skin. What a way to end a long and eventful day!

Day 2

We woke up to someone whistling away leisurely that morning. Turned out it was the Whistling Schoolboy! A beautiful Western Ghats endemic bird called the **Malabar Whistling Thrush**.

With the sun out, the campsite was abuzz with activity. **Southern Hill Mynas** and **Greater Racket-tailed Drongos** played out an assortment of calls. A **Malabar Giant Squirrel *Ratufa indica*** materialized into the open at the canopy level giving us some great sights as it had a leisurely breakfast.

Very soon, the dragons started flying out of the forest and settling down on the areca nut trees to bask in the sun. The **Southern Flying Lizard *Draco dussumieri*** (left above) extends its skin on the abdomen to glide from tree to tree. Yellow flaps under the throat of the male to attract female lizards.

The dining area had a surprise too – fruiting bodies of **fungi** were out covering a large area like a carpet (left below).



© Akshay Tripathi



© Tharini M



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

With the sun out, all the creatures of the rainforest seemed to be basking in the warmth. A **grasshopper** seems to be curious about its reflection in the photographer's lens.



© Dinesh Kumar J.

Hungry **caterpillars** munched on juicy leaves.



On the morning trail, we decided to walk down a stream near the campsite. With the monsoons yet to pick up intensity, there was very little flowing water in the stream.



© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

Masters of Camouflage – The activity in the stream, though, was quite high. We came across 3 species of Western Ghats endemic frogs – **Kottigehara Dancing Frog *Micrixalus kottigeharensis*** (left above), **Niluvasei Dancing Frog *Micrixalus niluvasei*** (left middle) and **Kempholey Night Frog *Nyctibatrachus kempholeyensis*** (left below).

On the leaf litter on the track, **Bicoloured Frogs *Clinotarsus curtipes*** added to the puzzle on the rainforest floor (right below).



© Rohini Srivathsa



© Akshay Tripathi



© Rohini Srivathsa



This **Fishing Spider (Family Pisauridae)** was positioned a few centimetres from the water surface, possibly waiting for its next meal to come by.



© Akshay Tripathi

A large **freshwater crab** made a hasty retreat into its burrow by the stream. The areas around the campsite and the stream are full of holes made by crabs, both big and small.



© ThariniM

As we walked along in the leaf litter, we came across this eruption of colour on the forest floor. A beautiful **fungus!**



© Dinesh Kumar J.

Our destination that morning – a beautiful stream that winds down the forests. It was amazing to immerse our feet in the water and have the tiny little fish nibble at the dry skin.



© Rohini Srivathsa

As we set out for our afternoon trek up a nearby hill, this stunner of a **Praying Mantis** stopped us in our tracks and held us in its spell for quite a while.



© Rohini Srivathsa

As we ascended onto the hill, we came across a tree full of these colourful hoppers (**Kalidasa sp.**)



© Apurv Mukherji

Every now and then, we'd pause to catch up with our breath. And to admire and photograph the wonderful views that kept evolving as we climbed higher.



© Apurv Mukherji

Unusual for the first half of June, the sun was shining brightly with blue skies and traces of clouds on the horizon. The view from the top of **Akki Battha Rashi Gudda** were truly mesmerizing, showing us not just the forest canopy but also how human interventions were fragmenting the rainforests of the Western Ghats.



© Tharini M



© Rohini Srivathsa

It wasn't just the views that were captivating. We came across 2 **Common Vine Snakes** (left above) on top of the hill! And this master of stealth – a **Bark Mantis** – (right above) that blended onto a tree trunk.



© Tharini M

The night walk started off with a beautiful **Indian Bull Frog** *Hoplobatrachus tigerinus* stopping us on our tracks inside the campsite. These frogs can grow quite large and are known to even feed on small birds. They are however threatened due to illegal hunting as their legs are considered a delicacy.



© Tharini M



© Tharini M

More frogs that night! A **Western Tree Frog** *Polypedates occidentalis* (above left) was in typical tree frog position on a branch high above the ground. An **Amboli Bush Frog** *Pseudophilautus amboli* (above right) was perched on a leaf calling out to its potential mate.



© Akshay Tripathi

The star of the evening was this tiny frog – a **Malabar Tree Toad** *Pedostibes tuberculosus*. Endemic to the Western Ghats, this is an Endangered species that one comes across very rarely in the rainforest. This one was on a shrub next to a small stream.



This **Malabar Pit Viper** *Trimeresurus malabaricus* glided in at the fag end of the night walk, ending the day on a high. This snake was high on everyone's wish-list.

Many morphs of the snake – brown, green, orange, yellow – can be seen in the Western Ghats where it is an endemic species. A venomous (and typically nocturnal) snake, it relies on its heat-sensing pits, located in front of its eyes, to sense its prey.



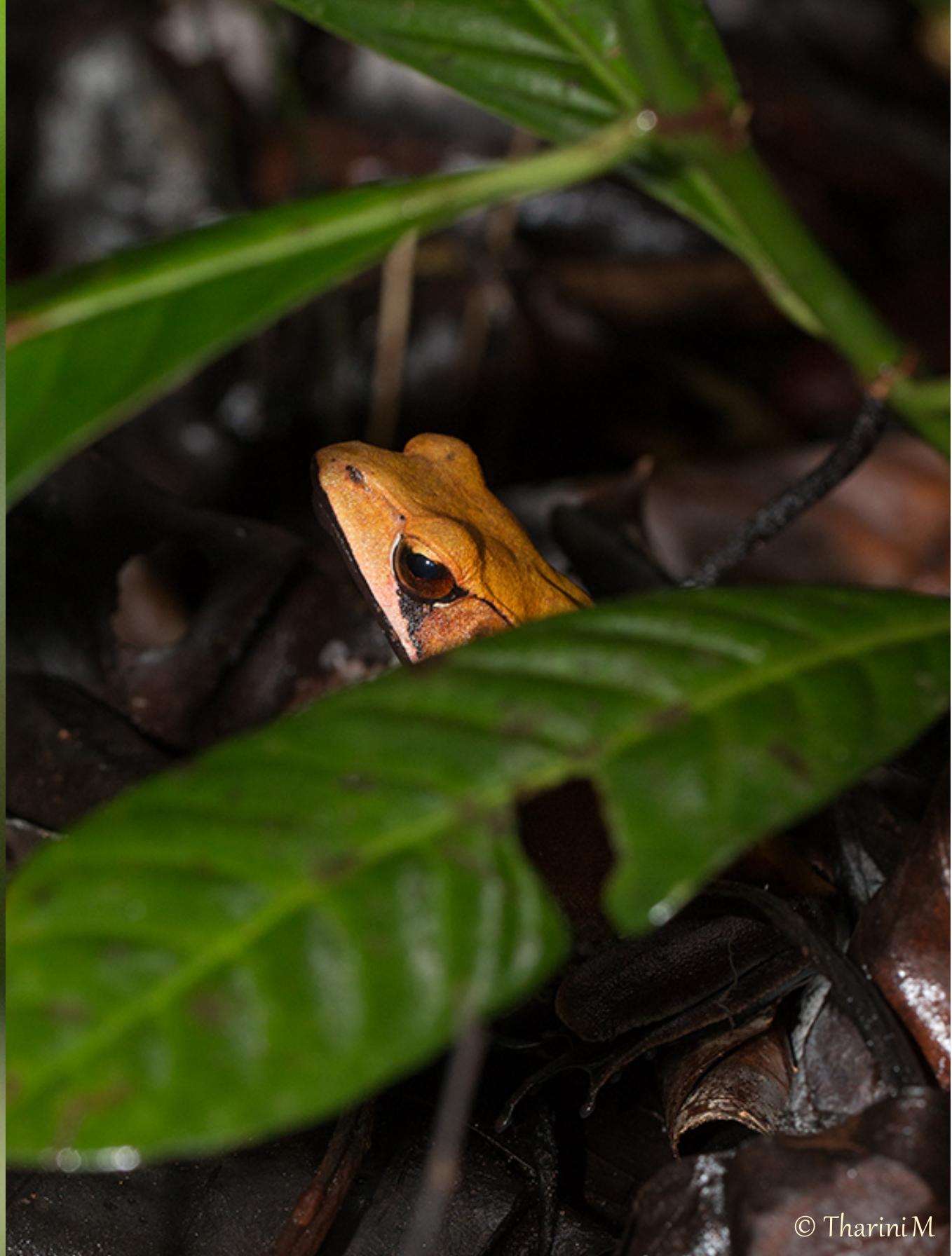
© Saikat Sen

Day 3

Day 3 started with this huge **Scorpion (Heterometrus sp.)** being discovered inside the makeshift kitchen. It was placed outside so that breakfast could be prepared in peace, offering the photographers an opportunity to get up close. Of course, minding the sting.



© Saikat Sen



© Tharini M

The morning walk was through prime rainforest, navigating along a barely visible track. We came across an exoskeleton of a **Cicada** (above left). Insects have an external skeleton; when they outgrow it, they make a small opening and climb out of it leaving behind the empty shell. The leaf litter also provided excellent camouflage for the **Bicoloured Frogs**.



© Akshay Tripathi

Spiders had spun webs all along the rainforest trail. This orb-weaver had gotten lucky with a meal!



© Rohini Srivathsa

Navigating through the rainforest, we reached human habitation. There was a well with a Rat Snake and a Checkered Keelback living inside it. As we tried to locate the snakes, we came across a third one – a **Malabar Pit Viper** resting on one of the logs on the boundary of the well!



© Akshay Tripathi

Butterflies were also about – like this **Pierrot**.



© RituSingh

More colours erupting out of the forest floor...



© Akshay Tripathi

While walking back to the camp, we came across this tiny **Leaping Frog (Indirana sp.)** in its hide-out.



© Tharini M

And this huge **Skink** basking on a log of wood!



© RituSingh

A constant presence in the rainforest, especially during the wet season – **A Leech!** Finally captured on camera as the tour drew to a close.



In addition to the time spent on the field, we spent time indoors to get a better understanding of the place too. A session about Rainforests on the afternoon of Day 3 helped put a structure to observations and photographs on the field.



Photographs by participants were reviewed during breaks through the tour. On Day 3, we had an extended review to go through the entire set of photographs clicked during the tour and to choose the set of photographs that have been incorporated into this tour report.



And, introducing the photographers behind the wonderful images in this report!
From left to right – **Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar, Rohini Srivathsa, Saikat Sen, Akshay Tripathi, Ritu Singh, Tharini M, Apurv Mukherji, Dinesh Kumar J.**



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Agumbe with **DARTER** P H O T O G R A P H Y

Darter Photography, founded in **2011** by professional photographers **Arun Bhat and Shreeram M V**, has been at the forefront of photography training and travel. We've conducted over **130 photography tours** to over **30 destinations**, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Bhutan, Ladakh, Kutch, Andaman and Tal Chapar. The rainforests of the Western Ghats have held a special place in our heart. And it all started with **Agumbe**.

Agumbe was one of the first wildlife photography destinations for Darter Photography. Shreeram M V had been visiting this place for a few years and was already addicted to it. It was a simple choice to make – an extended weekend in the lap of nature, with myriad forms of life and almost unlimited photography opportunities. The scope to learn, both in photography and natural history, was of course the deal clincher. Since 2011, we have been conducting multiple photography tours to Agumbe to experience the rainforest in all the different seasons.

Please visit www.darter.in/photography-tours/wildlife/agumbe to know about our upcoming tours of Agumbe!

Some candid moments from the tour...





© Dr. M.G. Satish Kumar

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www.darter.in

Darter Photography is one of the pioneers of rainforest photography tours to the Western Ghats. Since 2011, we have conducted over 25 photography tours to various places along the Western Ghats.

To join us on our next Rainforest Rendezvous tour of Agumbe, please visit www.darter.in/photography-tours/wildlife/agumbe