



# Small Is Beautiful

EVERYONE GOES INTO THE FOREST HOPING TO SEE THE BIG ANIMALS—THE TIGER, THE LEOPARD OR THE ELEPHANT. BUT PAY ATTENTION AND YOU WILL FIND IMMENSE BEAUTY IN THE SMALLER THINGS, SAYS **ASHISH KOTHARI**

“Tiger!” I whispered. Immediately, the students gathered around me in the forest snapped to attention, following the direction of my gaze. “Where, where?” came a chorus of whispers, as they could not see any striped cat. With a silent, somewhat wicked smile, I pointed to a butterfly fluttering past and told them it was the ‘plain tiger’, thus named because of its tawny colour and striped wings. I guess if looks could have killed, I would have dropped dead with the collective glare I got. But over the next hour, as I pointed out one striking butterfly after another, and a host of lovely dragonflies and damselflies and caterpillars, disappointment turned into new-found interest. The students began seeing beauty and wonder in small creatures ordinarily not given a second glance.

How many times have you been disappointed that the tiger or elephant you were looking for in a forest did not deign to make an appearance? A forest might appear to be particularly lifeless if our only focus is some big animal—but peer into the bush, look closely at a moss-covered branch, turn over a boulder, or scrape the leaf litter, and you will see an explosion of life. Gather around a light source outside your house in the monsoons, and witness the marvel of all manner

of moths. Keep your ears wide open early morning or at dusk, and hear a dozen different kinds of insects, frogs and birds.

It is a tragedy that wildlife has come to mean only big mammals and birds. In actuality, most Indian wildlife consists of small creatures (including plants). There are over 90,000 species of fauna in our country; more than two-thirds of these are insects. Non-flowering plants like ferns, fungi, algae and lichens make up over two-thirds of the over 45,000 species of plants. And it’s not only in forests that these are found. They can be encountered on mountains, in grasslands, deserts, even city gardens... and not to forget the sea, which has incredible diversity if one cares to look below the surface.

Why should we pay attention to the small things in life? Well, take your pick from amongst the following reasons. There is incredible beauty and grace in them, and even those that look ugly to the biased human eye have hidden depths. For instance, the recently discovered purple frog (*Nasikabatrachus sahyadrensis*) looks like a bloated doughnut, but its rarity has made it an international celebrity in some circles. Second, these creatures play crucial roles in maintaining the forests, the lakes and the seas as living entities, and also the food web without which even the tiger and the elephant and whale would not survive. Did you know that 70 per cent of the earth’s oxygen, without which we’d all be dead, is produced by tiny marine algae? Third, many of these animals or plants are severely threatened, some much more than the tiger. For instance, the amazing horseshoe crab (*Carcinoscorpius rotundicauda*), considered a ‘living fossil’ for having been around in the same form for over 500 million years, is in danger because of

**The smaller creatures play crucial roles in maintaining the health of ecosystems and food webs. Few people realise that 70 per cent of the oxygen on Earth is produced by tiny marine algae**

massive port-building along the coast of eastern India. And last, since small wildlife can be found anywhere, including inside/around our houses, it is much more accessible than the tiger and the elephant, and can be enormously useful to learn about nature to create appreciation for life in children (and adults!).

Despite all this, small wildlife rarely gets conservation attention. There is no Project Dragonfly or Project Frog to give them the focus that Project Tiger and Project Elephant give to their recipients. The status of many small creatures is not even well-known. Almost never does an insect or reptile get named the state animal or feature on the logos of

NGOs or government agencies.

Fortunately, this is beginning to change. The Zoo Outreach Organisation brings together research and conservation actions on a range of smaller animal groups. Several other groups organise walks and camps for people to watch, identify and enjoy butterflies and moths, dragonflies and damselflies, amphibians, reptiles, plants and other smaller wildlife (see list below). And popular field guides for such wildlife are coming out so that amateurs can identify what they see and appreciate these tiny wonders even more.

May these initiatives gain strength so that these small wonders can finally get their place in the sun. 🌞

**SOME ORGANISATIONS FOCUSED ON SMALLER WILDLIFE**

**Titli Trust**, Dehradun, titlistrust.org

**Foliage**, Pune, facebook.com/Foliagers

**Pugmarks**, Pune, pugmarks123.com

**Bombay Natural History Society**, bnhs.org

**NatureMates**, Kolkata, naturematesindia.org

**Herpactive**, Goa, herpactive.com

**Diversity India**, diversityindia.blogspot.in

**Pawalgarh Prakriti Prahari**, Uttarakhand, pawalgarh.org

**Devalsari Paryavaran Sanrakshan**, Uttarakhand, devalsari.org

**Phuarung Bird Tours**, Eaglenest Wildlife

Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh

**Siju & Karawani Ecotourism & Conservation Society**, Garo Hills, Meghalaya, samrakshanecotours.blogspot.in

**Zoo Outreach Organisation**, Coimbatore, zooreach.org

# The Small Five!

**Look out for these tiny creatures wherever you travel:**



**Millipedes and centipedes:**

Found in almost any forest and many agricultural landscapes, these

creatures are fascinating for the sheer number of legs they have and for unique defence features, such as that of the pill millipede which rolls up into a tight, hard-surfaced ball when threatened.



**Orchids:** With over 1,200 species found in India, you could come across these beautiful and often threatened flowers in the

Himalaya, the northeastern states, the

Western Ghats and elsewhere. Many also grow in greenhouses in other parts of India. But please don't pluck them in the wild.



**Hermit crabs:** One of the few creatures that carry their home around, these crabs look for abandoned shells and latch on to them, changing into new ones once they outgrow them.

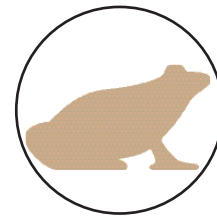
If you find a shell suddenly begin to move seemingly on its own on a beach, bend down and you'll see claws and a crab head sticking out.



**Carnivorous plants:**

Plants that eat insects? Yes, in many parts of India, you can find the tiny drosera, the bigger pitcher plant and

the venus flytrap, which make a meal of insects that are attracted to their sweet smell, not realising the sticky sap inside is a trap. Slowly, the plant digests them. As with the orchids, please don't collect them from the wild; you may well be driving a species to extinction.



**Frogs and toads:**

You find them ugly? Well, consider that they might think the same of you. But give

this a thought: two-thirds of Indian amphibian species are found only in this country, making them unique; and over 50 per cent of them are endangered because of pollution, toxins and loss of habitat. Look out for tree frogs clinging to twigs and leaves, or balloon frogs that bloat up to scare you away, or legless amphibians that look like snakes.