



Slaty-breasted Rail
© Aidan Fonseca

The fascination with Goa's natural history does not stop at the sea from where much of its political and cultural history has been shaped. From the birds of the deep sea like the pelagic birds to every avian family possible, the bird life in Goa is a fascinating story for birders around the world who have been flocking to Goa since the 80's. The tiny state hosts almost 5% of the bird species of the world. Surprising, because of a limited geographical spread and yet because of a diverse range of ecosystems ranging from coastal, mangrove, estuarine grassland, wetland and the unique Western Ghats complex. The species count goes to almost 500 including 17 species endemic or near-endemic to the region. Key birds include the Malabar Trogon, Malabar Parakeet, Malabar Grey and Malabar Pied Hornbill, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Vigor's Sunbird, Orange Minivet, Lesser Adjutant Stork, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Brown-backed Needletail, Oriental Bay Owl, Red Spurfowl, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Grey-headed Bulbul, Square-tailed Bulbul, Wynaad Laughingthrush, White-bellied Woodpecker, White-bellied Blue-flycatcher, White-bellied Treepie, eight kingfisher species including Collared, Oriental Dwarf, and Blue-eared, and a host of shore birds.



Square-tailed Bulbul
© Savio Fonseca



Jerdon's Nightjar
© Aidan Fonseca

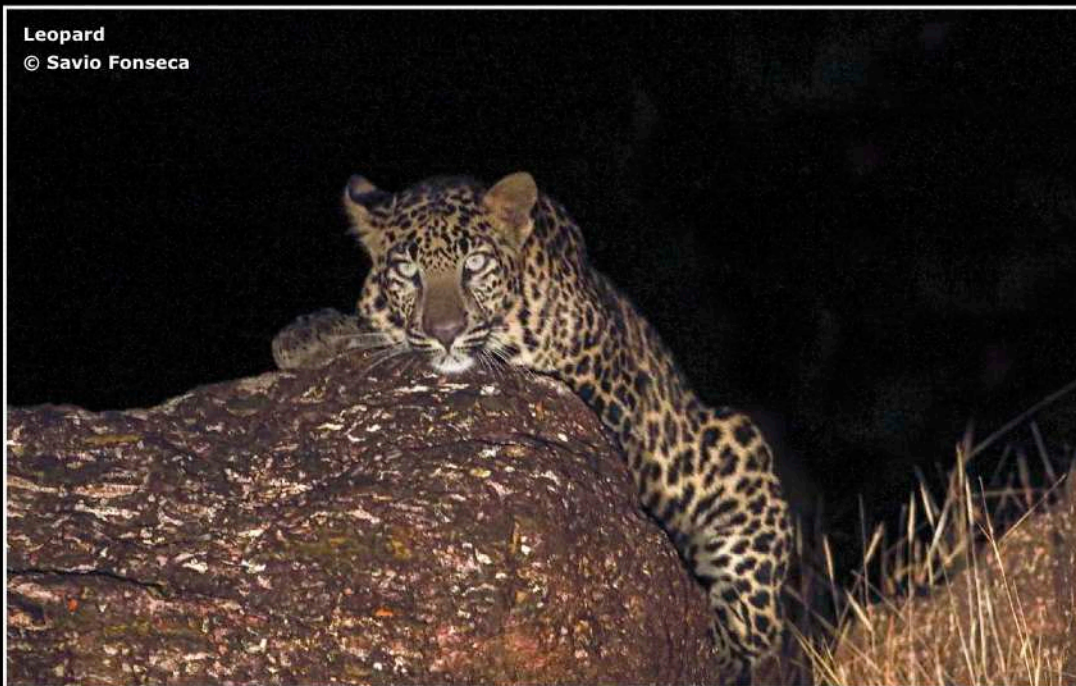


Velvet-fronted Nuthatch
© Savio Fonseca



Gaurs on trail
© Aidan Fonseca

Leopard
© Savio Fonseca



Malabar Giant Squirrel
© Savio Fonseca

Among the animals found are the Leopard, Monkey, Cheetal or Spotted Deer, Sambar, Barking Deer, Mouse Deer, Jungle Cat, Indian Civet, Gaur or Indian Bison, Sloth Bear, Indian Porcupine, Pangolin, the rare and endangered Slender Loris, Wild Boar, Striped Hyena, jackal, Wild Dog and Mongoose. In addition to these, the canny visitor can also hope to spot the jackal, Bonnet Macaque, Malabar Giant Squirrel, Flying Squirrel and Smooth-coated Otter. Monkeys are found all across Goa. The most common species is the Pink-bottomed Macaque, followed by the Hanuman Langur.

Goa has four species of bats, the Fruit Bat, the Dormer's Bat, the Horseshoe Bat, and the Malay False Vampire Bat. Flying Foxes are also present in large numbers. Most of these are found in the rural interior areas. The Malabar giant squirrel, the smaller Three-striped Squirrel and the Five-striped Palm Squirrel are also found in most areas. There are four species of deer, the cheetal or spotted deer, the sambar, the barking deer and the mouse deer. Predators prey on the smaller deer: the striped hyena, the jackal, and the wild dog.



Spotted Deer
© Savio Fonseca

The state is a huge attraction for herpetologists since it features a large variety of snakes including all of the 'big four' of Indian venomous snakes which are the King Cobra, Indian Krait, Russell's Viper, Saw-scaled Viper and Spectacled Cobra. The state is also home to a number of amphibians including the endangered Marbled Ramanella, the vulnerable Maharashtra Bush Frog, Beddome's Leaping Frog (Beddome's Indian Frog) and Malabar Gliding Frog. There are also a number of endangered caecilians (legless amphibians) most notably Nadkarni's Caecilian, Mhadei Caecilian and the Goa Caecilian.

Goa has a large reptilian/amphibian population. This includes the ubiquitous Common House Gecko, the Chameleon, a variety of frogs and the rare Monitor Lizard. Two species of crocodile are mostly found along the banks of a few inland waterways. Besides, it is the adopted home of the Indian Mugger Crocodile, which has adapted to its saline environment. The crocodile has gone further to be worshipped by locals, and has not been known to attack humans or livestock and it has restricted its diet to the abundant fish around.

The parade of colour continues with the unfolding of species in Goa. Not amongst the least in the pageant of exotic pastels, the 300 species of butterflies stand out in their fleeting flashes of colour! Amongst these are the Southern Birdwing which is the largest butterfly in south India, Striped Tiger, Common Jezebel, Common Indian Crow, Blue Mormon and the Blue Tiger which can be seen till the start of the monsoons. There are also endemic species that an enthusiastic lepidopterist will thrill at the sight of, the Malabar Tree Nymph and the Tamil Yeoman.

The natural history round up of Goa would be incomplete without visiting another aspect. Describing Goa geologically, some of the oldest rocks on the Indian subcontinent landmass are found in Goa. Called the Trondjemeitic Gneiss, they are estimated to be 3.6 billion years old. It would be relevant here, to mention that the age of the Earth is about 4.6 billion years.



Altas Moth
© Grenville Decosta



Tamil Lacewing
© Nelson Rodrigues



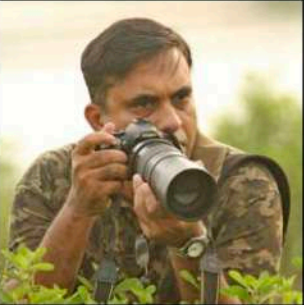
Southern Birdwing
© Pankaj Kuduchkar



Hump-nosed Pitviper
© Mangirish Dharwadkar

However, the assets of such natural history are as much in danger as elsewhere due to habitat destruction and poaching. There are serious attempts to preserve the wealth and much is being helped by better awareness and a better-informed population. It is with considerable thought that it is unanimously

acknowledged that tourism can sustainably help such conservation given that Goa has world-class tourism infrastructure in place within a 90 minutes drive from any location in the state. And it remains without doubt, that the future of Goa's tourism lies in its natural history!



**Savio Fonseca is
from Panjim, Goa.**