

# HOW THE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED ANIMALAI FLYING FROG GOT A NEW HOME

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

The critically endangered Animalai flying frog | Photo Credit: [Hadlee Renjith](#)

In a corner of a sprawling cardamom plantation at Pothamedu in Munnar, a small but inspiring story unfolds. A critically endangered frog species, the *Racophorus pseudomalabaricus* or Animalai flying frog, is getting a new home.

Naturalist, frog enthusiast and Kerala Tourism guide Hadlee Renjith, who leads herping tours in Munnar, constructed two ponds at Windermere Estate to restore the habitat for the Animalai flying frog. He struck upon the idea on one of his photography tours at the 60-acre property, when he caught a glimpse of the frog in a cement tank previously used for irrigation.

Hadlee sought support from the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), which took it up as its first rapid action project for amphibian conservation and offered to fund it. Fortunately, the plantation owners readily agreed, demarcating an area, which they pledged to leave undisturbed.

“Trees and the undergrowth in a cardamom plantation offer the perfect environment for these frogs to hibernate,” says Hadlee. “Everything they need for survival — trees, rain and a water pool — are right here, so we can re-create a favourable ecosystem.”

Endemic to the southern part of the Western Ghats, the numbers of these frogs have declined rapidly due to the loss of habitat. When the grasslands of Munnar were converted to tea plantations, some of the Shola forests became cardamom plantations. Munnar has an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 hectares under cardamom cultivation, and while trees are protected, undergrowth is usually cleared leading to the habitat loss of several frog and reptile species.

Hadlee set to work with two friends, his wife and daughter, digging the earth for ponds. The bigger pond is about 10-feet-long, three-feet wide and 2.5-feet deep. They lined these with jute sacks and tarpaulin to hold water through the dry period. They then added pebbles and planted vegetation to create natural hiding spots for the frogs.

“We created awareness among the plantation supervisors to refrain from clearing undergrowth just before harvesting cardamom,” adds Hadlee, who is working on a field guide on frogs in Munnar, for which 30 species have been identified.

A conservation experiment such as this on a private plantation builds conversations around sustainability and biodiversity preservation, says Vivek Menon, founder-trustee and executive director of WTI. It is also triggering a movement to revive habitats of endemic species and encourage the idea of organic cultivation and lesser pesticide use, he adds.

“We support individual initiatives such as this and are also planning a long-term project on amphibian recovery in Southern Western Ghats. We aim to focus on three to four threatened amphibian species,” Vivek says.

The project has helped dispel myths surrounding the frog. “There is a popular misconception that these frogs feed on the cardamom pods. They don’t feed on the pods; they feed on insects and other pests instead,” says Simon John, owner of the Windermere Estate, where naturalists

take guests on herping tours.

Hadlee is pleased that his first attempt at conservation has yielded results. "I spotted seven tadpoles in one of the ponds. And this means there could be more."

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A pair has been sighted at Theosophical Society, fuelling speculation about the species expanding its range into the metro. Over the last seven months, sightings of the bird have been reported from Adyar, Thiruvanmiyur and ECR

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