

LISTEN TO THE STRANGE CALL OF A POSSIBLE NEW MAMMAL SPECIES FROM AFRICA

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

The tree hyrax song may continue for more than twelve minutes, and it consists of different syllables that are combined and repeated in various ways. Credit: Hanna Rosti.

When Hanna Rosti, a researcher from the University of Helsinki, set out to Taita Hills in Kenya, her main aim was to look for and study dwarf galagos, which are small nocturnal primates endemic to Africa. She recorded their calls and played them to Emeritus professor Simon Bearder from Oxford Brookes University, who told her that it was the call of tree hyraxes and probably a new species. [The findings were published](#) last month in the journal *Diversity*.

Click to listen to [the 'strangled thwack' scream](#) and the [song of the tree hyrax](#).

Tree hyraxes are small nocturnal mammals that feed on leaves and fruits and are native to Africa. "Their ecological niche is the same as sloths in South America and koalas in Australia. Interestingly, tree hyraxes are relatives of elephants and even have little tusk-like teeth. Another peculiar thing about this animal is that they can climb almost 50-metre tall trees with three sausage-like toes. They can call very loudly, and have a very large repertoire of different calls," writes Rosti in an email to *The Hindu* from the Taita forests. She is now studying tree hyrax behaviour, population size, diet, acoustic communication with thermal imaging cameras.

When asked how we can confirm if the call was from a new species, Rosti explains: "Confirming the species status requires a dead animal....if and when we find animals that have died of natural causes or by roadkill, then the description of the new species would be possible. We are now continuing our research based on behavioural and acoustical studies."

She adds that in Taita Hills tree hyraxes have only three-square kilometres of indigenous forest left and the small size of the habitat may lead to inbreeding or loss of the whole population due to diseases. Conservation of these forests and reforestation is very important to prevent the extinction of the species.

"Indigenous and ancient (about 30 billion-year-old) forests of Taita Hills have been cleared almost completely and replaced by small scale farming and tree plantations. We are hoping that as this tree hyrax species is recognised, it will lead to significant conservation measures in the area. Conservation of this and all other species is only possible if local people will benefit from it economically. This may happen through sustainable ecotourism or/and compensations paid for the reforestation," she adds.

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