

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

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Tiger Sundari who travels between Mudumalai and Bandipur. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

A quintessential summer day in Tamil Nadu's five major tiger reserves sees the dry rustle of grasslands, trickles of streams, and the occasional wild forest fire. Animals like elephants, deer and panthers step out of the shadows to lounge near water bodies and small birds ride piggyback.

"We begin preparing for the heat right from November onwards. There is a fire management plan in place. Large water troughs are constructed and regularly replenished so that the animals are taken care of," says C Vidhya, Deputy Director of Nilgiris' Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (Core Area).

A map of the tiger reserves in Tamil Nadu

Although summers only last one or two months in most of these reserves, the Forest Department is cautious of this particularly tricky season where animals migrate out of their habitats across highways and State borders in search of fodder. Forest guards, watchers and rangers, are tasked with patrolling the large forest grounds, spending gruelling hours amidst dense cover.

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Despite tiresome moments, Forest personnel press pause and take pleasure in the simple joys of Nature to replenish their spirits during the summer months. "The water in the troughs gets hot in the afternoons. This year, we saw a bunch of tigers splashing about in the pool, playing among themselves. It was such a lovely sight," says Vidhya.

Ahead of World Environment Day, a look at how the tiger reserves in the State have tackled the dog days.

The SMTR, notorious for its raging forest fires, welcomed a young calf to its six-member elephant herd, endemic to the Meghamalai forest this season.

"Amidst all the chaos and sleepless nights, this was quite a momentous occasion. Our team was overjoyed watching the birth. We've also been keeping track of its growth," says S Anand

Deputy Director (DD) of the reserve.

The guards also ended up sighting a massive total of 61 elephants gathering around the Udupiyaar river bed in Vannathiparai reserve. “They were hydrating and cooling off both in the mornings and evenings, between their excursions to the neighbouring hills part of the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Kerala,” the DD adds.

A Nilgiri Tahr seen in one of the Forest Ranges in Grizzled Giant Squirrel Sanctuary in Srivilliputhur. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

The habitat is now green and welcoming of animals like elephants and deer from the neighbouring reserves, all part of the newly created tiger corridor across Tamil Nadu. Although there have been some instances of animals straying out of the forest into farmland for food, the team has been able to manage the situation without extensive man-animal conflict. There has been an increase in the sighting of mouse deer and the flying squirrel this summer and the reserve is preparing for its yearly pre and post-monsoon tiger census.

Summer months at STR see herds of gaur and elephants travel upwards to the hills of Hasanur to get respite from the raging heat of the forests. “The lower ranges of the STR tend to become hot. There are between eight and 10 highly fire-sensitive areas in the reserve so animals like the leopard, hyenas and black panther also seek shelter in the cooler elevated regions of the tiger reserve that is at a 900m elevation. It is common to spot pugmarks all around water bodies, says Devendra Kumar Meena, District Forest Officer, Hasanur Division and Deputy Director of STR.

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“Water supply is an issue here and there is some animal conflict in the fringe villages. When there is a resource crunch, the tigers tend to come out to feed on domestic cattle but this is not particularly abnormal behaviour. This year, we have created solar borewells and strengthened our existing water bodies by desilting to ensure that there is enough supply,” he says. He adds that the reserve has focussed its manpower on creating effective fire lines in the region to ensure that fires can be quickly stopped.

The Nilgiris forest division has become a refuge for resident tigers, a file photo of a tiger in Niligiris. | Photo Credit: M. Sathyamoorthy

“KMTR is known as the river sanctuary with 11 perennial rivers springing from here including the Thamirabarani. There is no water scarcity during our summers. We have several hundred metres of wet evergreen forests. We hardly break a sweat,” says Deputy Director of KMTR’s Ambasamudram Division, S Senbagapriya.

Animals in the reserve tend to remain deep inside the forest during the summer. Since much of KMTR is placed at a high elevation with difficult, uneven terrain, it becomes a task for the department to track the migration of animals. However, traps placed in the region show tigers moving between this reserve along the corridor leading to SMTR and PTR. The elephants from KMTR often move to Kerala during this season and spotted deer herds can be found foraging in big herds.

Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Summers in KMTR are a time when water birds arrive. “We have 135 species of birds and 350 species of butterflies here. There is a lot of chatter and colour,” the DD says.

A long national highway cuts across the MTR, seeing the movement of hundreds of animals inching towards the Moyar river in search of respite from the heat.

“There is a drastic difference in the way the forest looks before and after the rain. Between March and May, animals like the Indian gaur, elephants and tigers move towards water bodies. This is when they cross the highway heading to Mysore. People tend to stop and take selfies with the animals but do not realise the risk” says Vidhya. A major challenge that the department deals with is ensuring the safety of these animals, particularly from road accidents both during and after the summer, she says.

The summer season has started in lower Nilgiris due to this water level is coming down. A common langur descending from a tree to drink water at Moyar in the buffer zone of Mudumalai tiger reserve. | Photo Credit: M. Sathyamoorthy

Vidhya adds that jumping fires from the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka and Wayanad in Kerala also require consistent surveillance. When a fire goes out of hand, it destroys the fodder available to the prey base, creating a difficult couple of months until the monsoon. “We have created real-time monitoring systems and meticulous fire lines that take into account the sensitive areas to ensure effective safety. Even light smoke can be detected by our team,” says Vidhya. They have also engaged the help of 40 tribal fire watchers, she adds.

Besides this, there is also great vigilance to ensure that poaching does not take place.

The Valparai plateau located in the centre of ATR is a sight to behold. While dense forests form the periphery, well-manicured tea plantations lie smack in the middle, becoming a hotbed for animal conflict. A source from ATR says that nearly 180 elephants frequent their tiger reserve between January and April. May is the season for leopards, they add.

“It is common to hear of instances of conflict in this region because most people, especially the labourers, do not know what to do when encountering elephants and leopards. Over time though, our personnel have educated them. We are proud that there have barely been any casualties in the last two years. We also do not use any firecrackers to drive the elephants as we are conscious about the impact on the animal,” the source says.

Elephant handlers bathe camp elephants in a stream at Kozhikamuthi elephant camp in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. | Photo Credit: M. Periasamy

The region also lends itself to tourism during the summer. To ensure that tourists have a good time without disturbing nature, ATR has conducted a hornbill and primate festival this summer.

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