

Bindu Gopal Rao

“W

ait, that is a draco; it seems to be showing its dewlap,” says Bhargavi S. Shekar, a naturalist at The Leela Forest Sanctuary in Coorg, during a morning walk. I scramble for my camera and peer intently at the tree she is pointing towards, but all I can see is the brown bark.

“It’s still there,” she tells me. As I continue to stare, I suddenly notice a movement and a flash of yellow, and get my first glimpse of the Draco lizard, also known as the flying dragon.

The flash of yellow comes from its dewlap, which flares open when the lizard is gliding or attempting to attract a mate.

One of the most remarkable ecological hotspots in Karnataka’s Western Ghats, Kodagu, or Coorg, is home to an extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna. The region reportedly accounts for about 25% of the plant species found in India.

With its scrublands, moist deciduous forests, tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests, and shola-grasslands, its biodiversity is nothing short of remarkable.

As we walk along, we stop beside another flowering shrub. With its mauve flowers, this is an Impatiens plant. Yes, you read that right. Its small green seed pods burst open when touched or squeezed, dispersing their seeds.

The stories here are as fascinating as the landscape itself. Many tall trees have bark covered in a whitish, moss-like growth identified as lichen. Its presence can indicate a healthy forest, as lichens are often associated with ecological continuity.

I also learn that Coorg, once known for its oranges, saw farmers shift towards coffee after pest attacks damaged orange cultivation. Faced with a choice between growing coffee and oranges, many opted for coffee because of its higher commercial value.

Birdsong & more

Another lesser-known aspect of Kodagu is its rich avian diversity. The region is home to more than 356 bird species, of which 275 are resident species, while 16 are endemic to the Western Ghats.

Birdwatchers can look out for an impressive array of species, including the Malabar Trogon, Malabar Whistling Thrush, Nilgiri Laughing Thrush, Malabar Grey Hornbill,



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FROM FOREST CANOPIES TO COFFEE CUPS, EMBARK ON A REFRESHING JOURNEY THROUGH THE WESTERN GHATS’ NATURAL TREASURES



Asian Fairy Bluebird, Orange Minivet, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, White-bellied Treepie and Verditer Flycatcher.

Coorg is a delight for bird lovers, particularly in winter, when several migratory species also make an appearance.

The region is equally fascinating for its other wildlife. One example is the Coorg Yellow Bush Frog, a tiny, brownish-hued frog with blue eyes.

“This is just 2.5 cm long, and it turns yellow during the mating season,” explains Aranya Bagchi, hospitality manager and resident naturalist at BeForest’s Poomaale Estate in Kakkabe.

During the nature walk, Bagchi also points out a Brown-cheeked Fulvetta. If you are lucky, you might even spot the Nilgiri



Marten, a species native to southern India.

Coffee time

Once you have had your fill of nature, there is always coffee. Coffee plantations dot the landscape, and a guided walk through an estate offers an insight into the journey from bean to cup. It is also an opportunity to appreciate the hard work that goes into preparing your morning brew.

Rishwin Devaya of Riverside Estates & Coffee, Coorg, explains the process, from hand-picking ripe red coffee cherries and washing them to sort the best ones to drying them on raised beds in the sun. The beans must be turned regularly to prevent mould before undergoing the subsequent stages of processing, including hulling, pulping, fermentation and grading, before being roasted.

Interestingly, Devaya is also betting on a coffee variety beyond the traditional Arabica and Robusta: Excelsa.

“This is a coffee plant that grows like a tall tree and is locally called ‘mara coffee’ and is used in the fence of the plantation. We realised that this is a climate-resistant variant, and as it has a lower caffeine content, that makes it a unique varietal,” he adds.

Many coffee-focused stays in Coorg also offer tasting sessions, allowing visitors to appreciate the finer nuances of the brew.

Jungle calling

To round off a nature-led holiday in Coorg, head to the beautiful forests of Nagarhole National Park. Its dry deciduous forests are home to the famed tiger, with the park also designated as a tiger reserve, as well as leopards and a variety of other mammals and birds.

The forest is also home to the elusive dhole, or wild dog, and the smooth-coated otter, which can be spotted during a river safari on the Kabini.

The park boasts more than 250 bird species, including the Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Lesser Whistling Duck, White-rumped Vulture, Black-headed Ibis, Oriental Darter, Woolly-necked Stork, Lesser Adjutant, Bar-headed Goose, Indian Roller, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Common Iora, Yellow-billed Babbler and Purple-rumped Sunbird. The fresh, crisp air of Coorg offers the kind of respite from urban life that many of us need. Experience it for yourself on your next visit. Ditch the usual sightseeing itinerary and immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of nature. It is the kind of break that can do you a world of good, rejuvenating your mind, body and soul.