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NOTE

A NEW SIGHT RECORD AND RANGE EXTENSION OF THE GRIZZLED GIANT SQUIRREL *RATUFA MACROURA DANDOLENA* (MAMMALIA: RODENTIA: SCIURIDAE) IN THE EASTERN GHATS OF SOUTHERN PENINSULAR INDIA

Sivangnanaboopathidoss Vimalraj, Kothandapani Raman, Damodar Atmavadan Reddy, Bakhavachalam Harikrishnan, Bawa Mothilal Krishnakumar & Kanagaraj Muthamizh Selvan

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Ratufa macroura dandolena (Pennant, 1769) is one of the Near Threatened giant squirrel species of the peninsular region and occurs in southern India and Sri Lanka (Menon 2014). It is arboreal and wary in nature, solitary but found in pairs during the breeding season (Nowak 1999), and has a small home range (Umapathy 2000).

Omnivorous in nature, it feeds on tender leaves, fruits, bark, flower, pollen, birds eggs and insects (Nowak 1999; Menon 2014). Largely confined to a riparian habitat, the vegetation is profusely dominated with *Terminalia*, *Tamarindus*, *Mangifera*, *Pongamia*, *Albizia* and *Syzygium* (Thorington et al. 2012). Owing to habitat loss and poaching it has been categorized as Near Threatened by the Red List (Joshua et al. 2017), CITES has listed it under Appendix II, and the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 provides protection under Schedule I. The precise localities on the rain shadow area of the Western Ghats in southern India is known from Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary (Ramachandran 1989) in Kerala; Anamalai Tiger Reserve (Kumar et al. 2002), Theni forest division (Babu et al. 2013), Palani Hills (Davidar 1989) in Tamil Nadu and isolated reports on the Eastern Ghats in Sirumalai Hills (Sathasivam et al. 2008), Aathur in the district of Salem and Dharmapuri (Paulraj 1991; Paulraj & Kasinathan 1993), Cavery Wildlife Sanctuary (Karthikeyan et al. 1992; Kumara & Singh 2006), Hosur forest division (Baskaran et al. 2011). The most recent reports on the distribution of this species were in 2014 from Tiruvannamalai Forest Division (Babu & Kalaimani 2014), which was an easternmost record

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Sivangnanaboopathidoss Vimalraj¹, Kothandapani Raman², Damodar Atmavadan Reddy³, Bakthavachalam Harikrishnan⁴, Bawa Mothilal Krishnakumar⁵ & Kanagaraj Muthamizh Selvan⁶

¹65, Second Cross Street, Kurunji Nagar Ext. Lawspet, Puducherry 605008, India
²4/739, Dr. Ambedhkar Street, Kandamangalam (Post), Villupuram, Tamil Nadu 605012, India
³16 Victor, Simonel Street, Puducherry 605001, India
⁴4, Pazhanisamy Nagar, Villianur, Puducherry 605110, India
^{5,6}Department of Ecology & Environmental Science, School of Life Science, Pondicherry University, R.V.Nagar, Kalapet, Puducherry 605014, India
¹vimalraj29@gmail.com, ²ramwild4@gmail.com, ³atmavadan@gmail.com, ⁴haitomh6@gmail.com, ⁵krishnakumarnympha@gmail.com, ⁶tamildove@gmail.com (corresponding author)

(Fig. 1). Herein we report an additional site locality in an offshoot of the Eastern Ghats from Gingee.

Gingee is a heritage town in the district of Villupuram and lies on the north-east of Tamil Nadu (Muralidharan & Narasimhan 2012). An offshoot of the Eastern Ghats located to the south-west of Gingee town as isolated hillocks (Image 1C), were notified as seven reserve forest (RF) as Ganagavara RF, Thandavasamudram RF, Poolanjimalai RF, Pakkamalai RF, Siruvadi RF, Muttukkadu RF, Padipallam RF and a Reserve Plain namely Karai by Tamilnadu Forest Act, 1882 (Arulappan et al. 2014). In addition to the Tamilnadu Forest Act,

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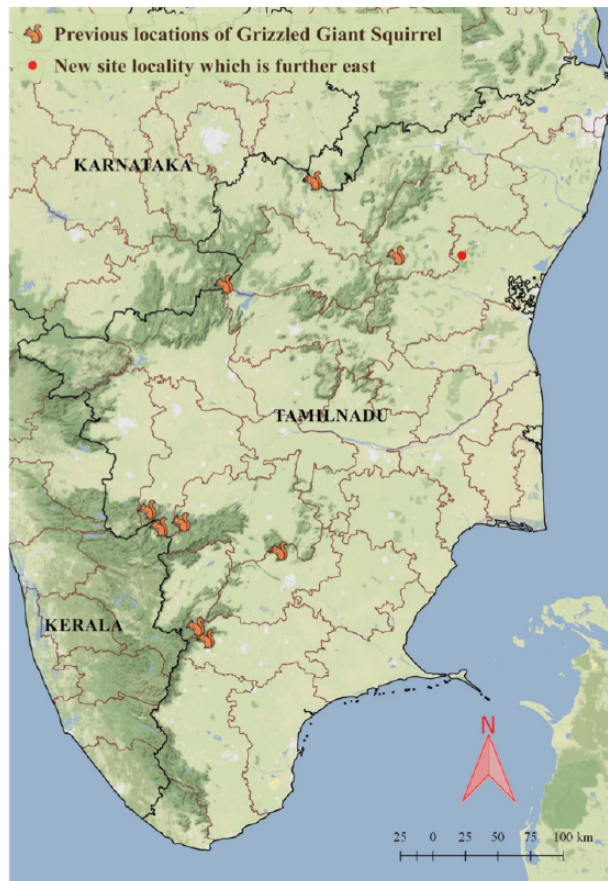


Figure 1. Map showing former distribution and new site record of *Ratufa macroura dandolena*

the Pakkamalai Reserve Forest has been protected as a Sacred Grove due to a Durgai Amman shrine located within. On our visit to the Durgai Amman shrine on 09 June 2016, we came across a pair of Grizzled Giant Squirrels on a tamarind tree, which leaped away when we approached (79.29896°E & 12.17615°N). We had photographed an individual before it disappeared among the trees (Image 1A). The sighting of the Grizzled Giant Squirrels was surprising as it had previously not been recorded; further, the forest isn't contiguous with an earlier record of Sathanur Dam (Babu & Kalaimani 2014). In addition, we have sighted seven dreys on branchlet of *Tamarindus indica* and *Pongamia pinnata* (Image 1B).

The continued observation of this species in a different location in the Eastern Ghats accentuate that a detailed survey is required on its distribution. Habitat shrinkage, hunting for fur and bushmeat by local dwellers were considered to be major threats to this species but a recent raid by Wildlife Crime Control Bureau of the southern region found Grizzled Giant Squirrel under illegal trade for pets (Times of India 16 December 2010),



Image 1. *Ratufa macroura dandolena*. A - Live individual, B - Drey of *R. macroura dandolena*, C - Habitat of at Pakkamalai Reserve Forest, Gingee

which adds to the existing threats impacting this species. A further survey is required nearby Gingee to document whether these species occupy public lands.

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