

A MEETING WITH THE KING!

Fieldwork is something that every field biologist eagerly waits for, and if you are a herp nerd in the Western Ghats, nothing calls out to you more than the monsoons. Fieldwork had hit a major bump with the pandemic, but I finally got my turn at the end of July as the travel restrictions were lifted. As a biologist studying fossorial shieldtail snakes that mostly live underground, ensuring that my field trips coincide with the monsoons is key. The monsoons in the Western Ghats provide a short window for finding these snakes above ground. Unfortunately, this window has narrowed with monsoonal patterns changing over the last few years. So, I was desperate to head out to the field and look for these snakes before my window closed. Thankfully, Praveen (an IT professional by day and a crazy amphibian fanatic by night) and Daniel (a naturalist and an insane macro photographer) invited me to join them on a week-long herping trip around Karnataka. After a few discussions, the plan was set along with a list of frogs and shieldtail snakes as our target species. Amatya, a fellow herpetologist who runs a beautiful homestay in Sirsi called 'The Niche', kindly offered to drive us throughout the whole journey.



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The Kudremukh landscape.
Bottom left: The whole team (from left: Me, Amatya, Praveen and Daniel).
Bottom right: The Indigo bush frog (*Raorchestes indigo*).



Lifting logs and digging under them is how we look for shieldtail snakes.

In this picture, Praveen (center), Amatya (right) and I are trying to lift a huge log in Sirsi .

Our first stop was the Kudremukh National Park. We started the trek to Kudremukh peak early in the morning, looking for all sorts of herps on the way. Our main targets were the Indigo bush frog and the elusive Canera shieldtail. The Canera shieldtail is one of the most gorgeous snakes in the Western Ghats. Since its discovery in the late 19th century, this snake had not been reported until only recently. I was fortunate to find an individual of this beautiful species during one of the several trips I had made to the Kudremukh landscape in the recent past. Although we couldn't see this snake on this trip, we did see the Indigo bush frog and several other fascinating herps. Being in that landscape once again brought back some fond memories.

The next few days, we explored the forests and plantations around Chikmangalore and Agumbe, all the while digging for fossorial shieldtail snakes. To maximise our chances of finding herps, we drove on the roads throughout the night. We stumbled upon several herps; vine snakes, cat snakes, keelbacks, the uncommon olive forest snake, to name a few, but had no luck finding a shieldtail!

I still had hope as we headed off to Sirsi. Amatya had found several individuals a few weeks earlier, just as the monsoon had begun, so I was bound to find a few.

As we reached Amatya's property, I was delighted to see that the place was surrounded by a beautiful forest patch. We started the evening by exploring a small stream patch. Praveen was quick to spot a male Jog night frog (*Nyctibatrachus jog*) perched on a rock and calling out to a female sitting right next to it. Soon enough, all I could hear were these beautiful frogs calling from every nook and cranny of the stream. Road cruising back, we found several other frogs and snakes but still no shieldtail snakes.

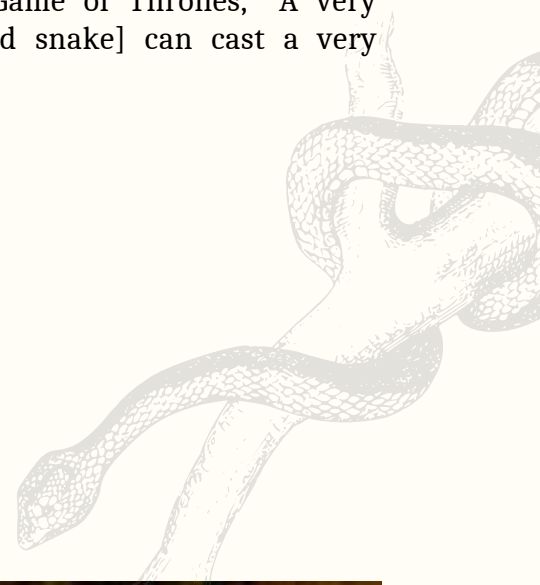
We spent the next day digging around the forest patch next to the property, but in vain. I was desperate by this point!

That evening we headed out road cruising again. An hour or so had passed with no snakes in sight. Just as we were beginning to lose all hope, Amatya stopped the car suddenly, yelling, "king, king, it's a king". I looked out the window, and I couldn't believe my eyes; there it was, just lying on the side of the road, a large king cobra! In over 10 years of exploring the Western Ghats, I had never seen a king cobra in the wild before. I had seen individuals being rescued from human habitations but never had I imagined coming across one in the wild, that too at night! King cobras are strictly diurnal, so seeing one moving around at 8:30 pm is very unusual.

We got out of the car slowly; Praveen and Daniel began taking pictures. Sadly, before we could have our eyes' fill, we saw a bike approaching. I quickly went on to stop them, thinking that the snake would cross the road. However, the snake, perhaps wary of all the movement, disappeared into the forest. At that moment, I forgot all about shieldtails and my worries about finding them. We spent the next day digging for shieldtails again. It was our last day on the field and despite not finding any shieldtails, I was still content.

A meeting with the King was more than I could have asked for! That evening, as the weather seemed perfect, we headed out road cruising one last time. About half an hour into it, Amatya, again, stopped the car suddenly. He turned on his flashlight and yelled, "It's a shieldtail!" I jumped out of the car, and there it was! A beautiful shieldtail snake of the genus *Uropeltis*. I immediately

put the snake safely in a container with some soil and leaf litter and kept it firmly in the bag. I could not contain my happiness and started dancing in the middle of the road involuntarily. As a herpetologist working in the Western Ghats, I had always imagined that a meeting with the King would be the ultimate experience. But I realised that the joy of finding a tiny shieldtail was immeasurable and more exciting to me than anything else. As Lord Varys says in Game of Thrones, "A very small man [read snake] can cast a very large shadow".



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There it was, just lying on the side of the road, the majestic King cobra!

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