

# City NGO to conduct study on Indian Giant Squirrel

## To Find Out The State Animal's Population, Distribution And Threats To It

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**Pune:** Rampant poaching and habitat destruction of the Indian Giant Squirrel has driven city-based NGO Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (WRCS) to start a survey covering the entire Western Ghats of Maharashtra. The survey will find out the state animal's population, distribution and threats to it.

The last study on the animal was carried out by Renee M Borges from the Indian Institute of Science in 1995-96.

The study was initiated to re-assess the status, distribution and population of the Indian Giant Squirrel. It also aims at protecting the animal and suggest conservation measures for it. It is supported by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), New Delhi, and Ruffords Program, United Kingdom.

Prachi Mehta, wildlife biologist and executive director of WRCS, who has initiated the study along with Jayant Kulkarni of WRCS,



Indian Giant Squirrel

said that the Indian Giant Squirrel ('Ratufa indica'), endemic to the Western Ghats, is facing habitat destruction and intensive poaching in

some pockets. Poaching is carried out by tribals for meat and the ears of the animal are used as necklaces.

"Not much study has been carried out and there is no population estimate. This study will cover the entire Western Ghats of Maharashtra from Harishchandragad in Nashik to Amboli in Sindhudurg, including the protected areas and reserve forests," Mehta said.

In the previous study, Borges reported substantial hunting for meat and pinnae (external ears) by Mahadeo Koli, Katkari and Thakur tribals in Nashik, Junnar and Wadgaon region. The study pointed out that that population of the species is declining because of hunting and habitat degradation.

One of the major threats to these animals is the upcoming windmills, Mehta said. She cited the windmill projects outside the Bhimashankar sanctuary, saying that it can lead to road construction and thus cutting of trees. It is a cause of concern as the Indian Giant Squirrel, which is arboreal (animals that spend most

or all of their time in trees), needs continuous canopy. If these squirrels come to the ground they might get caught by dogs, she added.

M K Rao, chief conservator of forest, Pune, said that the study will look into threats to the Indian Giant Squirrel, like habitat, occupancy, corridor connectivity, etc. These inputs will be helpful in declaration of ecologically sensitive areas in Western Ghats, he added.

Kulkarni said, "We have already lost two sub-species - 'Rafuta indica dealbata' from Western Ghats in Gujarat and 'Rafuta indica bengalensis' from Brahmagiri, near Kodagu, Karnataka. It is high time that we protect the remaining sub-species."

To find out distribution of the Indian Giant Squirrel, occupancy survey method will be used that will look for visible signs. For population estimation, line transect method and distance sampling will be used. The study is expected to be completed by June, 2012, Kulkarni added.