

Shola Grassland Depletion Threatens Endemic Birds in Western Ghats

A new conservation study found that the decline of shola grasslands and exotic tree invasions in the Nilgiris severely impair endemic bird movements.

Shola sky islands are unique high-altitude montane forest-grassland mosaics in the Western Ghats hosting specialized endemic wildlife.

KEY EXAM POINTS

- A study conducted in the **shola sky islands** of the southern **Western Ghats** revealed that land-use modifications have disrupted bird connectivity.
- The **Nilgiri pipit**, the sole grassland specialist bird in the study, was found to be the most adversely affected by woody plant invasions.
- Colonial-era exotic plantations of **Acacia**, **Eucalyptus**, and Pinus have extensively invaded the native shola grassland ecosystems.
- The study recorded that between **1973 and 2017**, the shola sky islands lost **516 sq km** of grasslands and 63 sq km of natural forests.
- While forest-specialist birds navigated through woodland-invaded corridors, grassland specialists faced severe **habitat isolation** and mobility barriers.

DID YOU KNOW..!?

Shola forests are tropical montane wet temperate forests found in high-altitude valleys separated by rolling grasslands above **1500 metres**.

The Nilgiri Pipit (**Anthus nilghiriensis**) is an endemic bird of the high-elevation grasslands of the Western Ghats, listed as **Vulnerable** by the **IUCN**.

The **Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve** was established in **1986** as the first biosphere reserve in India under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere programme.

Article 48A of the Indian Constitution directs the State to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife.

The **Tamil Nadu Forest Act** was enacted in **1882** to control, manage, and protect reserved forests in the Madras Presidency.

Mukurthi National Park was established in **1990** in the Nilgiris primarily to conserve the endangered **Nilgiri Tahr** and montane grassland ecology.

The **Wildlife Protection Act** was passed in **1972** to provide a legal framework for protecting wild animal and plant species across India.

REVISION FLASHCARD

Shola sky islands in Nilgiris lost 516 sq km grasslands between 1973-2017, severely threatening the endemic Nilgiri Pipit.

Syllabus Relevance: Relevant for questions on Western Ghats ecology, Shola vegetation, Nilgiri biosphere, and TN endemic fauna in Paper 1 and Prelims.

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