

Amphibian and reptile workshop at MCBT

Samir Kumar Sinha*

Learning to identify snakes and turtles, feeding crocs, listening to herpetologists and field biologists, walking in a rainforest, and sharing the experiences with amateurs as well as experts and naturalists . . . everything rolled up together during 6 days workshop "Trails to Tails" organized by Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT) during 25-30 June 2012. The workshop was the second in the series; the first one was in the first week of June, 2012.

The workshop endeavored to improve the understanding of participants on ecology, biology and taxonomy of amphibians and reptiles through presentations, hands-on experience and interaction with experts. The workshop was divided into two parts and started at Madras Crocodile Bank Trust at Chennai, an ideal place for exposure to a variety of captive as well as free-ranging herpetofauna. In the later part the participants experienced the natural complexities and diversity of rainforest in Agumbe in Shimoga district of Karnataka. The second part was hosted by Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, established by well-known herpetologist Romulus Whittaker in 2005 to promote researches on various aspects of rainforests.

Taxonomy of crocodylians, snakes, lizards and chelonians was discussed in detail, with sessions on identification of snakes and turtles using standard keys. The MCBT facility houses 18 out of 23 crocodylian species found worldwide. Participants got the privilege of visiting the crocodile pens in a tour guided by Colin Stevenson, Director of MCBT and enjoyed feeding the crocs under guidance of Dr. Gowri Mallapur, Assistant Director, MCBT. The experience of observing nest-guarding behaviour of crocodiles was something special for the participants in the age group of 11 to 50 years. Nikhil Whittaker, Curator of MCBT helped the group in developing the skills of chelonian identification, while Dr. Mallapur and Mittal Gala did so with the snake specimens. Shakthi Sritharan guided the group in conducting abundance survey of fan-throated lizard *Sitana ponticeriana* in their natural habitat. Followed by the sessions with trained scientists, the Irula tribes possessing unparalleled traditional knowledge, conducted the session on snake tracking.

The next session at Agumbe was much more than the experiences with animals in captivity. The presentation on insights on behavior of king cobra studied through radio-telemetry helped the participants in understanding the ecology of the magnificent predator. Morning, evening and night walks with all fair chances of being hurt by hematophagous leeches, were fascinating with singing cicadas, chirping Malabar whistling thrushes and jumping Indian giant squirrel, in the rainforest in Agumbe. Frequent encounters with Malabar pit vipers were enough to make the walks more adventurous. Patches of meadows in the rainforest during monsoon were full of frog and toad eggs and were appropriate place to demonstrate the ecology of amphibians. Overall the workshop was successful in meeting its objectives.



Participants experiencing a snake



Snake identification workshop



Handling a baby crocodile

*103 B, Sharda Lok Apt., Gandhi Path, Nehru Nagar,
Patna – 800013 (Bihar). samirksinha@rediffmail.com