

THE GOLDEN LANGUR: AN ENDANGERED GEM OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

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Introduction

The golden langur (*Trachypithecus geei*) is among the most unique and visually captivating primates found in South Asia. This endangered primate is native to a small area in north-western Assam, India, and parts of Bhutan. Because its habitat is so limited, it is considered endemic, meaning it is not naturally found anywhere else on Earth. This species is admired for its distinctive golden fur and tree-dwelling lifestyle. However, despite its beauty and ecological value, the golden langur is under serious threat from habitat loss, human expansion, and environmental pressures. As a result, protecting this species has become a major focus for conservationists.

Taxonomy

Phylum: Chordata

Sub-phylum: Vertebrata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Primates

Family: Cercopithecidae

Sub-family: Colobinae

Genus: *Trachypithecus*

Species: *Trachypithecus geei*

Two distinct subspecies of this primate have been identified, primarily separated by variations in coat color and their geographic ranges: *Trachypithecus geei* *geei* (southern Bhutan and India). However, *T. g. bhutanensis* has not yet been formally described in accordance with the rules of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN).

Physical Features

This species is medium-sized and easily recognized by its golden to pale cream-colored coat. In adult males, the fur varies from a creamy shade to a rich golden tone, while females and younger individuals generally display paler coloration.

The coat also shifts with the seasons, appearing lighter and cream-colored during summer and becoming darker, with a golden hue, in winter. They have a black hairless face, surrounded by long, flowing hair that enhances its striking appearance and possess a long tail, which plays a crucial role in balance as it moves through treetops. Its slim limbs and lightweight body are well-suited for life in the forest canopy. They show clear sexual dimorphism with males being noticeably larger and stronger than females.

Geographical Range

Golden langurs are found only in a limited area, primarily in western Assam and neighbouring regions of Bhutan. Their habitat is naturally bordered by rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Manas and Sankosh. This narrow distribution makes the species especially vulnerable to environmental disturbances and habitat changes.

Habitat

These primates inhabit tropical and subtropical forests, including semi-evergreen and riverine ecosystems. Being strictly arboreal, they rely heavily on continuous forest cover. When forests become fragmented, their movement is restricted, leading to isolated populations. Bhutan provides relatively stable conditions due to its extensive forest conservation efforts.



Feeding habits

They are herbivores. Mainly consume leaves, making them primarily folivorous. However, their diet also includes fruits, flowers, seeds, and young plant shoots. Occasionally, they feed on crops grown by nearby communities, which can lead to human-wildlife conflicts. Their digestive system is specially adapted to process fibrous plant material.

Behavior and Social Structure

These langurs are active during the day (diurnal) and live in social groups that usually consist of one adult male, several females, and their young ones. Group sizes typically range from three to fifteen individuals. They spend most of their time feeding, resting, and grooming. Generally shy in nature, they prefer staying high in the forest canopy.

Major Threats

The survival of the golden langur is threatened by several factors. The most serious issue is habitat destruction due to deforestation for agriculture, infrastructure, and settlements. Habitat fragmentation poses a significant threat as it isolates groups and leads to decline in breeding activity. Additional threats include road accidents, electrocution from power lines, attacks by stray dogs, human encroachment and conflicts with humans over crops. In some areas, interbreeding with other langur species also poses a risk to their genetic purity.

Conservation Status

Due to its declining numbers and restricted range, the golden langur is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and is protected under Appendix

I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). In India, it receives the highest legal protection under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (amended in 2022).

Conservation Efforts

The golden langur in India requires immediate and focused conservation efforts because it is found in a very restricted range and depends closely on forest habitats. Conservation measures have mainly focused on protecting its habitat through the creation of protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries and national parks in both India and Bhutan. In India, the Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary is especially significant as it serves as the primary protected habitat, supporting a stable population of the species. In Bhutan, important parts of its distribution occur within protected regions like the Royal Manas National Park, Black Mountain National Park, and Phipsoo Wildlife Sanctuary. In addition to habitat protection, legal enforcement has helped reduce hunting pressure on the species. Ongoing scientific studies and monitoring programs are used to understand population status and trends over time. Furthermore, awareness programs in local communities encourage people to support conservation efforts and promote peaceful coexistence with this endangered primate.

Future Strategies

To ensure long-term survival, several actions are necessary. These include stopping deforestation, installing insulation on power lines, controlling stray dog populations, creating forest corridors to reconnect fragmented habitats and monitor gene flow and hybridization among populations. Strengthening conservation policies and increasing local awareness are equally important for sustainable protection. Conservation awareness programs and community participation have been encouraged in villages near forest edges, particularly around Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary. Since the species frequently occurs close to human settlements, involving local people is essential, as peaceful coexistence is key to its long-term protection.

Conclusion

The golden langur represents the rich natural heritage of Northeast India and Bhutan. However, its future is uncertain due to ongoing environmental and human-induced challenges. Protecting this

species requires a combination of research, conservation planning, and community involvement. Safeguarding the golden langur ultimately contributes to preserving the broader ecosystem it depends on.

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