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'Uttara Kannada Foothills Haven for Bees in Monsoon'

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BANGALORE: With the monsoon at hand, the state is abuzz with sowing activities while many anxiously wait for the smells of the first rain. However, the season is a challenging time for honey bees due to the absence of flowering in vegetation, both wild and cultivated.

At a time when flowers are hard to come by, ephemeral herbs that carpet the low-lying hills of the Western Ghats in Uttara Kannada are a blessing for pollinating agents. These rare herbs flower prolifically during the monsoon and the colourful blooms carpet the coastal laterite hills and plateaus of the district, forming a haven for insects.

The Buzz

Scientists at the Indian Institute of Science studied herbs and flower patches in Bhatkal, Hosapattana, Mugali, Ramangindi, Jalavalli, Kadale, Ramthirtha, Chippikagalu, Belekeri, Moodangi, Nagoor and Brahmur. They also studied the insects that sat on freshly opened flowers for nectar.

They found 58 taxa of insects visited the flowers in the 12 study areas. Bees, especially honey bees (Apidae family), were abundant in all stations. In another study, about 50 species of insects were listed as floral visitors.

The Busy Bees

In their paper, the scientists note that animal pollination benefits 87 of 124 leading food crops cultivated worldwide. Insects are the main pollinators of an estimated 70 per cent of flowering plants, with honey bees leading the pack.

The study stresses the need to protect bees from excessive use of pesticides, habitat shrinkage and food scarcity.

"These rocky regions with activities like mining, quarrying and acacia plantations, deserve better conservation efforts," the paper states.

Of the Monsoon

The study also focuses on the rare herbs that populate areas of Western Ghats earlier considered to be infertile.

Rotala malabarica, a critically endangered herb according to the India Biodiversity Portal and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, grows on these hills. Bladderworts and the mass-flowering Balsam species also dot the hills.

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