

## ENVIRONMENT

## Western Ghats is home to the Eurasian otter



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### Confirmation comes after 70 years.

You'd imagine that a mammal more than a metre long would be hard to miss. But it has taken more than 70 years to confirm the presence of the elusive Eurasian otter – one of the least-known of India's three otter species – in the Western Ghats. Ironically, researchers found the dead otter after a vehicle ran over it near a fragmented rainforest in Tamil Nadu's Valparai.

Researchers at Valparai's Nature Conservation Foundation came across the otter roadkill two years ago. Based on the dead animal's photographs (especially of its nose and tail), several small carnivore experts concluded it was neither the small-clawed nor the smooth-coated otter (the commonly sighted otter species in south India).

Later, scientists affiliated with the Laboratory for Conservation of Endangered Species at Hyderabad's Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology conducted genetic analyses of its tail tissue to confirm that it was indeed the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*).

The team reported the finding in a bulletin of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group earlier this year.

Though the Eurasian otter has been recorded historically from the Western Ghats (Coorg in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri and Palani hill ranges, according to zoologist R.I. Pocock in 1941), this is the first photographic and genetic confirmation of its presence here. While the species is widespread across Europe, northern Africa and several south Asian countries, it is not as frequently sighted as smooth-coated or small-clawed otters in India.

### **'Surveys a must'**

Similar physical features make it very difficult to identify otter species in the wild, said **wildlife** biologist and small carnivore expert Ajith Kumar. "We still don't know where Eurasian otters occur in India," said Dr. Kumar, who is director of the Wildlife Conservation Society-National Centre for Biological Sciences' post-graduate programme in wildlife biology and conservation at Bengaluru.

"Detailed surveys and studies to ascertain this are the need of the hour," he said. This paucity of information doesn't help, with otters facing multiple threats. Otter roadkills – caused by increasing fragmentation of forests and modification of their original habitats – are becoming increasingly common now, said otter biologist Nisarg Prakash, who was part of the team that published the report.

Though protected by the Wildlife Protection Act (1972), otters are often illegally poached for pelts.