

# Stigma of disease carriers threatens Nilgiris' only colony of Indian fruit bats

## Residents fear the bats carry zoonotic diseases that are transmissible to humans

ROHAN PREMKUMAR  
UDHAGAMANDALAM

The Nilgiris' only colony of Indian fruit bats, one of the largest bat species in the world, is under threat from local residents who want the trees they roost on to be cut down.

The bats, also known as flying foxes, have been seen in the same area in Coonoor for the last few years. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, residents have been calling on the Forest Department to cut down the trees to get rid of the bats.

### Nipah virus scare

The calls have grown louder since cases of Nipah virus were reported in Kerala, and fears that the bats carry zoonotic diseases that are transmissible to humans.

However, wildlife biologists and conservationists have called for the protection of the colony, by underlining the importance the bats play in the health of local ecosystems.



A colony of Indian fruit bats roost on an Acacia tree in Coonoor.

According to Samson Arockianathan, a wildlife biologist and researcher who has been studying the colony of flying foxes in Coonoor since 2017, there were anywhere between 2,000 and 2,500 individuals which roost in Coonoor.

“The bats have only recently been seen in Coonoor. One of the reasons may be loss of habitat in their home range. The bats only migrate to Coonoor each year during September and stay for the

next four months before heading back to their home ranges, which I suspect is in Coimbatore,” said Mr. Arockianathan.

### Very little risk

The wildlife biologists and other researchers said the bats consumed fruits in forests nearby, and there was very little risk of the animals passing on any virus to humans.

“The bats mind their own business, and play a crucial

role in the health of local ecology as they are seed dispersers of many varieties of fruit-bearing trees. The Forest Department should educate people to treat the animals with the respect and consideration they deserve as there have been instances reported worldwide of people attacking and killing wild bat populations,” said a Nilgiris-based ecologist.

### Complaints

When contacted, Bhosale Sachin Thukkaram, District Forest Officer (Nilgiris division), confirmed that they had received complaints about the bats from the public who fear increased risk of transmission of zoonotic diseases from the animals.

“We are monitoring the issue, and want to study where the bats' home range is and what is driving them to Coonoor each year. Once these factors become clear, we can take a decision on what needs to be done keeping in mind the welfare of the public,” he said.