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8. NOTES ON THE FOOD HABITS OF NILGIRI TAHR

In the course of a study on the behaviour and ecology of Nilgiri tahr (*Hemitragus hylocrius*), anecdotal records were kept on tahr food habits as determined by direct observation. The study was carried out in Eravikulam National Park, Kerala, August 1979-September 1981 (Rice 1984).

Forbs exceeded grasses in number of species eaten by Nilgiri tahr (Table 1), but grasses were taken in much greater volume than any of the forbs, shrubs or trees. At Eravikulam, Nilgiri tahr were primarily grazers (Table 1).

Nilgiri tahr showed preferences for particular parts of certain plants. For instance, they ate only or mainly inflorescences of *Hypericum mysorense, Pedicularis perrottetii, Crotalaria fysonii, Carex lindleyana, Anaphalis lawii, Anaphalis bournei,* and *Eriocaulon brownianum.* This habit was particularly noticeable in the case of *Anaphalis lawii* and *Eriocaulon brownianum.* When tahr grasped the flowering heads of these plants, the entire plant (in the first case), or the whole flowering stem (in the second) usually was pulled free. Rather than eating the portion of the plant hanging from their mouths, the tahr chewed through the stems to drop the rest of the plant. On the other hand, tahr took only the tender new leaves of *Gautheria fragrentissima* while avoiding the mature leaves. The mature leaves had a characteristic wintergreen flavour, but were bitter.

Two uncommon plants which seemed to be particularly well liked were *Lactuca hastata* and *Impatiens tomentosa.*

There were some species which the tahr seemed to avoid, or at least were never seen to eat despite their ready availability. Such plants included *Rhododendron arboreum* and the grassland species of *Impatiens.*

There appeared to be pronounced seasonal

TABLE 1

PLANTS RECORDED EATEN BY NILGIRI TAHR IN ERAVIKULAM NATIONAL PARK

Species	Family	Type
Ranunculus reniformis	Ranunculaceae	forb
Polygala sibirica	Polygonaceae	forb
Hypericum mysorense	Hypericaceae	shrub
Eurya japonica	Ternstroemiaceae	shrub/tree
Impatiens tomentosa	Balsaminaceae	forb
Crotalaria fysonii	Fabaceae	forb
Crotalaria scabrella	Fabaceae	forb
Oldenlandia swertioides	Rubiaceae	forb
Anaphalis bournei	Compositae	forb
Anaphalis lawii	Compositae	forb
Eupatorium adenophorum	Compositae	forb
Lactuca hastata	Compositae	forb
Wahlenberia gracilis	Campanulaceae	forb
Lobelia sp.	Campanulaceae	forb
Vaccinium leschenaultii	Vacciniaceae	forb
Gautheria fragrantissima	Eriacaceae	shrub
Pedicularis perrottetii	Scrophulariaceae	forb
Sopubia trifida	Scrophulariaceae	forb
Strobilanthes kunthianus	Acanthaceae	shrub
Polygonum chinense	Polygonaceae	forb
Elaeagnus kologa	Elaeagnaceae	forb
Curculigo orchoides	Hypoxidaceae	forb
Cyanotis sp.	Commelinaceae	forb
Eriocaulon brownianum	Eriocaulaceae	forb
Carex lindleyana	Cyperaceae	sedge
Andropogon polyptichus var. *deccanensis*	Poaceae	grass
Chrysopogon zeylanicus	Poaceae	grass
Tripogon bromoides	Poaceae	grass
Tripogon ananthaswamianus	Poaceae	grass
Ischaemum indicum	Poaceae	grass
Arundinella mesophylla	Poaceae	grass
Agrostis peninsularis	Poaceae	grass
Arundinella fuscata	Poaceae	grass
Andropogon polyptychus var. *olyptichus*	Poaceae	grass
Andropogon lividus	Poaceae	grass
Themeda quadrivalvis	Poaceae	grass
Themeda triandra	Poaceae	grass
Isachne bourneorum	Poaceae	grass

preferences for certain species and/or plant parts. For example, after pre-monsoon burning of the grassland, the tahr eagerly took the fresh regrowth of *Chrysopogon zeylanicus* by grasping the leaf blades and pulling out the whole succulent stem. However, as the blades matured, less was taken. With the post-monsoon drying of the grassland the inflorescences were eaten from time to time, and the *Chrysopogon* growing in the wetter, low lying areas was taken more frequently. The grassland dried even more during the winter (January-February) and this was considered the time of lowest forage quality for Nilgiri tahr. My subjective impression was that the tahr's rate of movement while grazing was much faster, suggesting a lower density of acceptable food items. Normally they occasionally entered small *shola* patches a few metres wide, but during the dry season they penetrated up to 10 m into the larger patches, browsing on trees and shrubs.

Nilgiri tahr feed on a variety of plants. Their selection of food items in terms of species and plant parts probably reflects seasonal changes in nutritional quality and availability. The actual diet of Nilgiri tahr probably varies considerably between localities, as it does for bighorn sheep (Shackleton & Shank, in press). Nilgiri tahr in much drier lowland habitats are primarily browsers (Davidar 1978).

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