



Malayan Giant Squirrel

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Why in News

Recently, the **Zoological Survey of India** (ZSI), in a first-of-its-kind study, has projected that numbers of the **Malayan Giant Squirrel** could **decline by 90% in India by 2050**, and it could be extinct by then if urgent steps are not taken.

- Headquartered at **Kolkata**, ZSI is a subordinate organisation of the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change**, established in **1916**.
- It is a **national centre for faunistic survey and exploration of the resources** leading to the advancement of knowledge on the exceptionally rich **faunal diversity** of the country.



Key Points

- **Scientific Name:** *Ratufa bicolor*.

- **Features:**

- It is one of the **world's largest squirrel species** that has a dark upper body, pale under parts, and a long, bushy tail.
- Unlike the **nocturnal flying squirrels**, giant squirrels are **diurnal** (active during the day), but **arboreal** (tree-dwelling) and **herbivorous** like the flying squirrels.

India is home to **three giant squirrel species** and the other two are **Indian Giant Squirrel** and **Grizzled Giant Squirrel** which are found in peninsular India.

- **Habitat:**

- It is found mostly in **evergreen and semi-evergreen forests**, from plains to hills at elevations of 50 m to 1,500 m above sea level.
- **Globally** it is distributed through Southern China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, the Malayan Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java.
- **In India**, is found in the **forests of Northeast** and is currently found in parts of West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.
Of the roughly 1.84 lakh sq km of the squirrel's range in Asia, about **8.5% is in India**.

- **Significance:**

It is considered to be a **forest health indicator species**.

An **indicator species provides information on the overall condition of the ecosystem** and of other species in that ecosystem.

They reflect the quality and changes in environmental conditions as well as aspects of community composition.

- **Threats:**

- According to the study, the squirrel and its habitat are under threat from **deforestation, fragmentation of forests, crop cultivation and over-harvesting of food, illegal trade** in wildlife, and **hunting** for consumption.
Slash-and-burn jhum cultivation in many areas of the Northeast contribute to destruction of its habitat.
- **Destruction of its habitat** could restrict the squirrel to only southern Sikkim and North Bengal by 2050.
 - Only 43.38% of the squirrel's original habitat in India is now favourable to it and by 2050, the favourable zone **could shrink to 2.94% of the area** the species was meant to inhabit.
 - The population of the squirrel in India **declined by 30%** over the last two decades.

- **Conservation Status:**

- **IUCN Red List**: Near Threatened.
- **CITES**: Appendix II.
- **Wildlife Protection Act, 1972**: Schedule I.

Source: IE