

The first-ever study on Malayan Giant Squirrel

December 5, 2020

In news

Recently, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) conducted a first-of-its-kind study on Malayan Giant Squirrel

What does the study say?

- A first-of-its-kind study conducted by the ZSI under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change projected that the number of Malay Giant Squirrels (*Ratufa bicolor*) in India could decrease by 90% by 2050 and that if urgent action is not taken, the species could be extinct in the country for decades to come.
- According to ZSI, Destruction of its habitat could restrict the squirrel to only southern Sikkim and North Bengal by 2050
- As per the study, only 43.38 percent of the squirrel's original habitat in India is now favorable to it, by 2050, the favorable zone could shrink to 2.94 percent of the area the species was meant to inhabit.
- The ZSI study says the health of the species is critical because it indicates the health of the forests it inhabits.
- **India is home to three giant squirrel species**; the other two are Indian Giant Squirrel and Grizzled Giant Squirrel found in peninsular India.
- If the government does not come up with a conservation management plan for the Malayan Giant Squirrel quickly, we may lose the species altogether in India, says the study

Reasons for the decline of the species

As per ZSI study, the Malayan Giant 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.

About Malayan Giant Squirrel

- It is a large tree squirrel in the genus *Ratufa bicolor* native to the Indomalayan zoogeography.
- It is one of the world's largest squirrel species that has a dark upper body, pale under parts, and a long, bushy tail, is currently found in parts of West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland
- Unlike the nocturnal flying squirrels, giant squirrels are diurnal, but arboreal (tree-dwelling) and herbivorous like the flying squirrels.
- 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.
- It is also distributed through Southern China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, the Malayan Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java
- In India, some 20% of the population of the species is found at elevations between 1,500 m and 2,700 m; the rest live in the plains and up to 1,500 m.
- Of the roughly 1.84 lakh sq km of the squirrel's range in Asia, about 8.5 per cent (15,635 sq km) is in India

Its significance

The population of the species also indicates to us the health of the forest, of the vegetation and plants in the forest on which the species feeds, as well as that of the other symbiotic species that inhabit the region

Status of its conservation

- The species is listed as Near Threatened on IUCN's 2016 list
- It is protected under India's Wildlife Protection Act 1972
- It comes under Appendix II of CITES