

Mathikettan Shola National Park, Location, Flora, Fauna, Significance

July 4, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Mathikettan Shola National Park is one of the smallest yet ecologically significant national parks in the Western Ghats. Despite covering only 12.82 sq. km, it plays a crucial role in conserving the unique shola-grassland ecosystem, protecting endemic biodiversity, and maintaining an important elephant corridor in the southern Western Ghats.

About Mathikettan Shola National Park

Mathikettan Shola National Park is **located near Poopara village in Udumbanchola Taluk of Idukki district, Kerala.**

- It was **notified as a National Park on 21 November 2003** to conserve the fragile shola forest ecosystem and its rich biodiversity.
- The park **covers an area of 12.82 sq. km**, making it one of the smallest national parks in Kerala.
- It forms **part of the Cardamom Hill Reserve**, which **lies within the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Western Ghats**

- The park is strategically located between **Eravikulam National Park** and **Pampadum Shola National Park**, strengthening ecological connectivity across the region.
- A centrally notified **Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ)** extending from 0 to 1 km surrounds the park to minimise human disturbance.

Mathikettan Shola National Park Historical Background

The area of Mathikettan Shola National Park was first **declared a Reserve Forest in 1897** by the erstwhile Travancore Government. In the past, parts of the forest were leased for cardamom cultivation, and a few of these old plantations still exist today.

Recognising the ecological importance of its unique shola ecosystem and its role as a vital elephant habitat, the area was **declared a National Park in 2003**. The name **“Mathikettan”** comes from a Tamil expression meaning **“mind confuser,”** based on local folklore that the dense, winding forests often caused people entering them to lose their way.

Mathikettan Shola National Park Geography

The park represents the classic montane landscape of the southern Western Ghats

- The park lies at an altitude ranging from 1,200 metres to 1,984 metres above sea level.
- **Kattumala**, situated along the eastern boundary adjoining Tamil Nadu, is the **highest peak in the park**.
- The landscape consists of rolling hills, valleys, undulating high-altitude terrain, and plateaus, characteristic of the southern Western Ghats.
- It contains a mosaic of **shola forests, shola grasslands, moist deciduous forests and semi-evergreen forests**.
- Three important streams – **Uchilikuthi Puzha, Mathikettan Puzha and Njandar**, originate from the park and ultimately drain into the **Panniyar River**.
- The park lies close to the Kerala–Tamil Nadu border and is accessible through the Munnar–Kumily Highway.

Mathikettan Shola National Park Flora

The park supports a highly diverse and endemic vegetation typical of high-altitude Western Ghats forests.

- Dense shola evergreen forests occupy valley regions, while grasslands dominate hilltops.
- Evergreen, semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests together create a rich mosaic of habitats.
- The forests contain numerous rare medicinal plants, orchids and endemic flowering species.
- The vegetation acts as an important watershed, helping regulate stream flow throughout the year.

Mathikettan Shola National Park Faunal Diversity

Mathikettan Shola National Park supports several threatened, endemic and endangered wildlife species, making it an important biodiversity hotspot of the Western Ghats.

Mammals: Important mammals include the Asian Elephant, Gaur (Indian Bison), Sambar Deer, Barking Deer, Wild Boar, Leopard, Jungle Cat, **Indian Giant Squirrel**, Nilgiri Langur and Bonnet Macaque.

- It is also home to rare species such as the Nilgiri Marten, Dhole (Indian Wild Dog), **Nilgiri Tahr**, and occasionally Tiger, highlighting its high conservation value.

Birds: The park is recognised as an important birdwatching destination because of its rich diversity of endemic Western Ghats birds.

- Prominent species include the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Black-and-Orange Flycatcher, White-bellied Blue Robin, Nilgiri Flycatcher, Malabar Whistling Thrush, Grey-headed Bulbul, and several species of Laughing Thrushes.
- The forests also support numerous endemic hornbills, sunbirds and woodpeckers.

Reptiles and Amphibians: The cool and moist climate provides ideal conditions for reptiles and amphibians.

- The park shelters pit vipers, shieldtail snakes, cobras, pythons, rat snakes, skinks, forest lizards and turtles.
- It is also known for its **endemic frogs**, many of which are found only in the Western Ghats.

Butterflies and Insects: The rich floral diversity supports a large variety of pollinators.

- Common butterflies include the Southern Birdwing, Blue Mormon, Common Jezebel and Crimson Rose.
- The forests also support numerous endemic moths and pollinating insects, which are essential for maintaining ecosystem health.

Mathikettan Shola National Park Ecological Significance

The park performs several important ecological functions beyond conserving biodiversity.

- It serves as a **critical elephant corridor**, connecting forests of Kerala and Tamil Nadu and facilitating seasonal wildlife movement.
- It strengthens **habitat connectivity** between Eravikulam National Park and Pampadum Shola National Park, ensuring landscape-level conservation.
- The park **protects the fragile shola-grassland ecosystem**, one of the world's most unique mountain ecosystems.
- It acts as an **important watershed**, safeguarding the catchment of streams that feed the Panniyar River.
- The forests store significant amounts of carbon and contribute to climate regulation.
- The park **conserves several endemic and threatened species** found only in the Western Ghats biodiversity hotspot.

Major Challenges

Despite its ecological importance, the park faces several conservation challenges.

- Habitat fragmentation caused by private landholdings, roads and settlements restricts elephant movement.
- Human-wildlife conflict has increased due to shrinking wildlife corridors.
- Legacy cardamom plantations inside parts of the protected area affect habitat quality.
- The park's small size makes it dependent on connectivity with surrounding forests.

- Climate change threatens the sensitive shola-grassland ecosystem.
- Tourism and increasing developmental activities around the park may create additional ecological pressure if not properly regulated.

Government Initiatives

Several conservation measures have been undertaken to protect the park.

- Declaration of the area as a National Park strengthened legal protection.
- Notification of an Eco-Sensitive Zone helps regulate developmental activities around the park.
- Elephant corridor conservation is being integrated into broader landscape-level management.
- Wildlife monitoring and habitat restoration are being undertaken by the Kerala Forest Department.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/mathikettan-shola-national-park/>

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