

GOLDEN JACKALS - ENVIRONMENT

NEWS: A large-scale citizen science study reveals that Golden Jackals in Kerala predominantly inhabit open and human-dominated landscapes, not forests.

- **Title of Study:** *The Uncelebrated Wanderers: Unravelling the Mysteries of Kerala's Golden Jackals*.
- Conducted by **Aranyakam Nature Foundation**.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Population and Habitat Preferences

- **Population Estimate:** Kerala is estimated to host between **20,000 and 30,000 Golden Jackals**, suggesting a healthy but dispersed population.
- **Preferred Habitats:** Jackals are commonly found in **coconut groves, paddy fields, rubber plantations**, and **rural to urban settlements**, indicating their adaptability to human-modified landscapes.
- **Low Forest Association:** Only **2% of jackal sightings** occurred in protected forest areas, showing a strong preference for **non-forest, open habitats**.
- **Altitude Range:** Jackals mostly inhabit **lowlands below 200 meters elevation**, where human settlements and agricultural fields are concentrated.

Golden Jackals in Kerala Prefer Human Landscapes Over Forests, Reveals Landmark Study



A major citizen science project estimates 20,000–30,000 Golden Jackals in Kerala, mostly living in rural and peri-urban habitats rather than protected forests

Geographical Distribution in Kerala

- **Urban District Prevalence:** High frequency of sightings reported from **Kannur, Kozhikode, Thrissur, Ernakulam, and Thiruvananthapuram**, all of which are **densely populated urban or semi-urban regions**.
- **Limited Presence in Specific Zones:**
 - Sparse or no significant population in the **Western Ghats, Alappuzha coast, and Attappady**, possibly due to unsuitable terrain or **interspecies competition**.
 - Occasional sightings from **Munnar and Eravikulam**, suggesting **adaptive capacity** even at higher altitudes, though not typical.

Public Perception and Ecological Role

- **General Attitude:** Approximately **74.7% of respondents** do not perceive jackals as a nuisance, indicating **positive or neutral public sentiment**.
- **Ecosystem Services:** Jackals are valued for **controlling pests** like rodents and wild boars, contributing to **agricultural protection and ecosystem balance**.

Emerging Challenges and Concerns

- **Human–Wildlife Conflict:**
 - **Poultry predation incidents** and **occasional rabies cases** have been reported, leading to **conflict in certain rural areas**.
- **Dependence on Waste:**
 - In several **coastal and urban fringes**, jackals are increasingly feeding on **organic waste**, which could lead to:
 - **Public health concerns** (e.g., disease transmission)
 - **Ecological risks** due to behavioural changes
- **Hybridisation Risk:**
 - There is a growing threat of **interbreeding with stray dogs**, resulting in **genetic dilution** of the native jackal population, raising conservation concerns.

Conservation Recommendations

- **Habitat Recognition:** Urgent need to **shift conservation focus** beyond forest areas to include **open, agricultural, and peri-urban habitats** that support jackal populations.
- **Improved Waste Management:**
 - Develop and enforce better **organic waste disposal systems** to reduce **jackal dependency on anthropogenic food sources**.
- **Community Engagement:** Conduct **awareness campaigns** and **educational outreach** to build **public tolerance** and reduce conflict through better understanding.
- **Scientific Monitoring:**
 - Encourage **ongoing population tracking, genetic studies, and behavioural research** to monitor ecological and evolutionary shifts.

Species Profile: Golden Jackal (*Canis aureus naria*)

- **Taxonomy:** Member of the **Canidae** family, related to wolves and foxes.
- **Physical Traits and Behaviour:**
 - **Medium-sized**, wolf-like build.

- Exhibits **strict monogamy**, typically living in **mated pairs**.
- **Preferred Natural Habitats:** Favors **valleys, riverbanks, lake shores, canals, and seashores**, though now commonly found in **human-dominated areas**.
- **Activity Patterns:**
 - **Nocturnal** in populated zones to avoid human contact.
 - Shows **partial diurnal activity** in undisturbed natural settings.
- **Dietary Habits:**
 - Highly **omnivorous and opportunistic**, consuming **small mammals, birds, fruits, and carrion**.
- **Distribution Range:** Found across **North and East Africa, Southeastern Europe, and South Asia to Myanmar**.
- **Conservation Status:**
 - **IUCN Red List:** *Least Concern* due to wide distribution and adaptability.
 - **CITES:** Listed under **Appendix III**, indicating national protection in some countries.
 - **India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972:** Included in **Schedule I**, providing the **highest level of legal protection**.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/keralas-golden-jackals-find-home-in-human-dominated-landscapes-not-forests-study/article69864259.ece>