

The Reptiles of Kodaikanal

by

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Riding the Thilak bus down the ghat to catch the Pandian Express, it was a luxury to have someone else doing the driving. Driving the jeep I rarely get the chance to see the forest and hills. But now my eyes are drinking in the leaves, flowers and trees as the evening sun lights them with a magic glow.

Looking up the steep rocky slopes just before Tumtum parai, I get a brief but vivid look at a large, almost black monitor lizard. He is getting the last rays of the sun before a chilly night, draped in utterly relaxed repose, watching the traffic whiz by below him.

A reptile in Kodai has to soak in as much sun as possible since reptiles depend on it for their body warmth. Without warmth a reptile cannot be active and cannot digest its food. So the cold of higher altitudes is why there are relatively few reptiles up here.

The most common Kodai snakes are the shield tail snakes which burrow and live under rocks. They are harmless, usually brown in colour and about 25 cm (10 inches) long. There are several species and some have nice yellow or orange markings on the underside.

The ratsnake was not common in Kodai but now, perhaps due to temperatures going up due to deforestation, ratsnakes are seen all over Kodai. They are harmless and very welcome as they are much better at catching rats than cats or anything else.

We found the shedded skin of a cobra at Shenbaganur, but the cobra has never been recorded at Kodai. The most common venomous snake in these hills is the large scaled green pit viper (called banana viper or bamboo pit viper by some people). While its bite is venomous, it is never fatal, and causes swelling and pain for a few days.

The Russells viper is occasionally found in Kodai though it is rare. Its bite is very dangerous but fortunately this snake stays out of the way of humans.

Some years ago there were a few pythons left in wooded parts of the Upper Palnis but they are gone the way of most of the large predators in the hills. There are no doubt still a few pythons left in the lower, rocky hills where there are some thick stands of thorny forest.

Kodaikanal has an endemic lizard called *Salea* which is found only in the Upper reaches of the Palnis, Anamalais and Nilgiris. It is dark green with a prominent ridge on its back and moves very slowly. There is at least one species of house gecko up here but it is not seen often and makes no sound like the one on the Plains. There are also a couple of species of skinks in the high hills and more in the forests lower down. That much more study on the reptiles of the hills has to be done was proven to us when our son Nikhil discovered a new species of snake in Tiger Shola a few years ago, Nikhil's Kukri snake.