

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SHOLAS

The Story of the Palani Hills Gaurs

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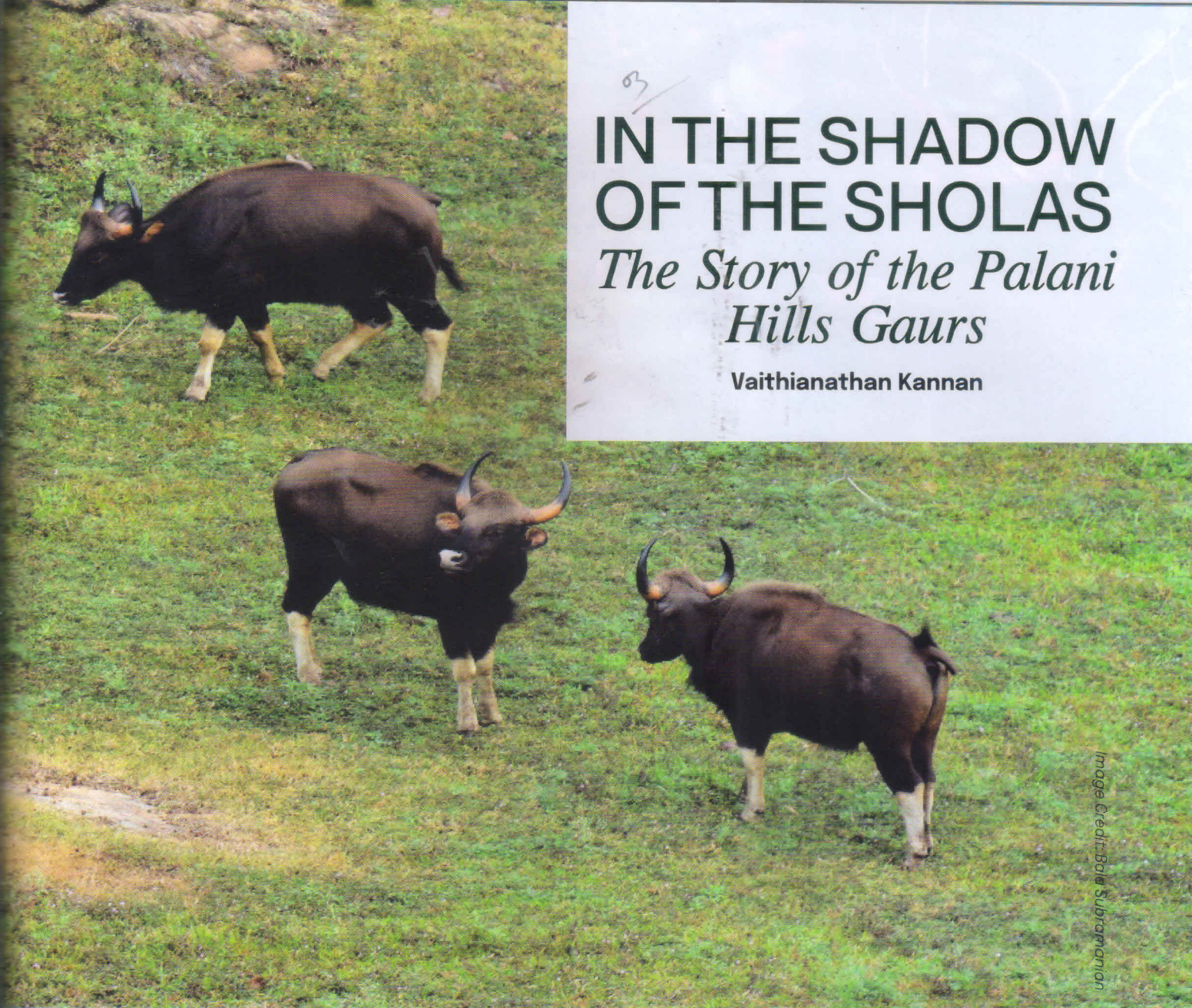


Image Credit: Balu Subramanian

THE Indian Bison or Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) is the largest species of wild cattle found in India and the largest extant bovine. There are about 13,000 to 30,000 gaurs left in the world, with approximately 85% of the population occurring in India. The Gaur has been categorised as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List since 1986. It is also known as “seladang” in Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, the largest living wild cattle species. Historically, gaur were the main prey of large carnivores and played important roles in maintaining the ecosystem by preventing vegetation overgrowth. Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) belongs to the family of wild oxen and is the largest living and the second heaviest among oxen native to South and Southeast Asia. Considered the largest living bovine, the body length of the gaur is usually 250-360 cms, with a height of 170-220 cms. Males may weigh between 1000 and 1500 kg, and females between 700 and 1000 kg. The Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) belongs to the Bovidae family, which includes cloven-hoofed animals such as bison, water buffalo, goats, sheep, and domestic cattle. These predominantly forest-dwelling bovids

are found in evergreen and moist deciduous forests, as well as dry deciduous forests, but up to an elevation of 6,000 ft in the Himalayas. Their diet primarily consists of grasses and herbs, and they are bulk feeders.

In the Western Ghats, the Gaur prefers evergreen forests and moist deciduous forests, but can also survive in dry deciduous forests. It has an average lifespan of around 30 years and is also listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The adult male gaur has a dark brown coat, and turning black as they age; the upper part of the head, from above the eyes to the nape of the neck, is, however, ashy grey, or occasionally dirty white; the muzzle is pale, and the lower part of the legs are pure white or tan. The Western Ghats and their outward flanking hills in southern India constitute one of the most extensive strongholds of extant gaur, especially the Wayanad-Nagarhole-Mudumalai-Bandipur complex. The population in India, Bhutan and Bangladesh is estimated to range between 23,000 and 34,000 individuals.