

STUDY LINKS INCREASING PEAFOWL POPULATION TO DROP IN NATURAL PREDATORS, RISING TEMPERATURES

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Peafowls found at the residential area in Tamil Nadu's Erode. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

Growing incidents of peafowl deaths in farms across Tamil Nadu, mostly due to poisoning, have raised the need for a detailed population study of the birds.

The Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), regarded as the national bird, is listed under Schedule-I of the Wildlife Protection Amendment Act, 2022, with the highest degree of protection.

Preliminary observations from an ongoing research at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology (SACON) in Coimbatore suggest that the population of peafowls has increased exponentially across Tamil Nadu in the last five to 10 years. The questionnaire survey sought to address the possible reasons for the population rise and whether conflict has increased. S. Babu, senior scientist at SACON, says while the results are still being analysed, a few hypotheses have emerged.

One of the reasons for the proliferation of peafowls is due to a drop in the numbers of predators such as jackals as a result of reducing thickets. Another could be due to the rising temperatures due to climate change and subsequent increase in dry areas, which are preferred by the bird, Mr. Babu says. The high clutch size of peafowls with about five to six eggs also add to the numbers.

"When we were in school, peafowls were hard to spot. If one had a peacock feather, he was considered a *crorepati*. You could see them only in Sathyamangalam or Viralimalai," says C. Nallasami, secretary of Farmers Forum of India. These days, however, peafowls have become as common as crows, he says, adding that mongoose, jackals, and wild cats have reduced.

Increased conflict has only been reported in some districts, not all. "It's a serious problem in the Western districts. In Cauvery delta regions there is an issue [peafowl conflict] but it's not serious," H. N. Kumara, principal scientist at SACON, says. The survey indicates peafowls prefer paddy, tomato, and chilli fields, he adds.

From field observations, V. Kirubanandhini, a researcher, says with concrete compound walls

replacing biofences, ground-dwelling carnivores tend to reduce in the area, giving more space to birds such as peafowls. According to Mr. Babu, the SACON survey also shows that awareness about the legal protection peafowls enjoy has increased among farmers and *narikuravars*, who are known to collect and sell peacock feathers, peahen eggs, and oil. At present, farmers use loud sounds from beating plates or drums to prevent the birds from entering fields or chase them away.

While the major deterrent for 'hunting' peafowls is the stringent law, more awareness on using sound to protect crops must be given, says Chief Wildlife Warden Srinivas Reddy.

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