Join Valli on her very first trip to the lush, verdant Nilgiri Hills with her classmates, where she ends up being the lucky one. She spots elephants, the Nilgiri Marten, sambar deer, gaur and... Read the comic book to find out!
ABOUT WWF

WWF India is committed to creating and demonstrating practical solutions that help conserve India’s ecosystems and rich biodiversity. Since 1969, WWF India has been working towards finding science-based and sustainable solutions to address challenges at the interface of development and conservation. Today, with over 70 offices across 20 states, WWF India’s work spans across thematic areas including the conservation of key wildlife species and their habitats, management of rivers, wetlands and their ecosystems, climate change adaptation, driving sustainable solutions for business and agriculture, empowering local communities as stewards of conservation, combatting illegal wildlife trade and inspiring children and youth to take positive action for the environment through education and awareness programmes.

WWF-India’s Environment Education

Environment Education has been of the core part of the WWF India’s conservation efforts. It follows a three-pronged approach to build environmental awareness and knowledge, develop requisite capacity and skills, and enable action for conservation. The programmes continuously inform and empower the children, youth and citizens of India to act and create impact for a sustainable planet.

WWF India’s Environment education division has 5 flagship initiatives that reach out to diverse urban and rural audiences and aim to create a generation of critical thinkers, problem solvers and environmentally conscious individuals.

- Ek Prithvi – Build conservation leadership through education
- People for Planet – A platform for youth and citizens to volunteer for nature
- Wild Wisdom Quiz - India’s only International wildlife quiz.
- Nature Connect- An experiential learning programme to reconnect with nature
- One Planet Academy - A Digital Resource Centre for environment education.

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Dear Reader,

All through my growing years, right here in Tamil Nadu, even before I was introduced to chess by my mother, I have always been fascinated by wildlife. And so when I heard that the elusive Nilgiri Tahr was declared as the State Animal, I was sure that this magnificent, proud inhabitant of the Montane Grasslands of the Nilgiri Hills would receive all the attention and care it rightfully deserves from the State and all its admirers around our country and the world, too.

Now WWF India, which has completed 50 years of dedicated service in India, have brought out this wonderful comic book on the elusive Nilgiri Tahr that you hold in your hands, in Tamil and in English! I am sure that just like you and other young readers of this book, my son will enjoy reading about Valli’s Nilgiri Adventures, too!

I hope you get a chance to spot the Nilgiri Tahr someday, like I am hoping to, too!

Happy reading!

Viswanathan Anand
Chess Grandmaster and Ambassador, Environment Education, WWF India
It’s the day that the children of Vidya Niketan School have long waited for—the day of the annual school trip to the beautiful Nilgiri Hills. This would be their first visit to a national park, too—Mukurthi National Park. But what they are most excited about is the prospect of spotting a beautiful, rare animal that Akila Akka had spoken to their class about—Tamil Nadu’s state animal, the Nilgiri Tahr…

Please leave your bags there and then go find a seat in the bus…
So much luggage for just two days, Valli?

You said it becomes cold at night in the Nilgiris, Ma’am… So, I got two mufflers, three pairs of socks, and four sweaters… And since we’re going trekking, I got two caps, a ball of string, two spoons, a mug, a pair of binoculars, a water-bottle, two pairs of shoes in case one pair gets wet in the rain or in a stream… Akila Akka said…

We’re going there for two days and not two years, Valli!

How I wish it were two years! We could go trekking with Akila Akka every weekend, try and spot tigers and leopards, sloth bears and elephants, even tahrs maybe…
Good to see that you’re well-prepared, Venky!

I don’t want to miss anything during our journey, Ma’am. Akila Akka had told us to keep our binoculars handy throughout the journey, too.

Do as Rukmini Ma’am and Revathi Ma’am say, Srilatha! Don’t pluck flowers or pick up leaves in the forest… Don’t forget to carry your sketchbook for the trek… Don’t litter… Don’t go anywhere without Valli or Venky…

Hurry up now, children! Get into the bus. We have to reach Ooty by lunchtime!

Queen of Hill Stations, here we come! Mukurthi National Park, here we come!
When Akila Akka was telling us about a leopard chasing a Nilgiri tahr in Mukurthi National Park, I felt so sorry for the tahr.

Yes! I was so relieved when she said that the sure-footed Tahr got away by climbing very quickly on to the very steep cliff. The Nilgiri tahr has to watch out for wild dogs, jackals and tigers too, she said.

I hope the children see a few wild animals. This is their first long trip and I don't want them to be disappointed.

Appa told me that the forests in and around Mukurthi National Park are like sponges—they soak up the rain during the South-west and North-east monsoons and retain them.

Akila Akka said it rains very heavily there.

They are also called Cloud Forests, by the way.

Children, the Mukurthi National Park, where we will be going tomorrow, is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India’s very first International Biosphere Reserve. It was declared a National Park in 1990 to protect Nilgiri tahrs.

Remember what Akila told you about the unusual grass-covered hills? They are known as Montane Grasslands. Montane means ‘high altitude’. Montane grasslands and shrublands is a biome.
Just imagine—the National Park was created mainly to protect the Nilgiri tahr. As our State Animal, it needs to be protected, isn’t it? I forgot to ask Akila Akka why the Nilgiri tahr was chosen as our State Animal. I’ll ask her tomorrow.

It is banned in our colony too, Ma’am.

At this time tomorrow, we will be at Mukurthi National Park! I thought I would just remind you all—single-use plastics are banned in the Nilgiri District. The administration is very strict about this.

It is banned in our colony too, Ma’am.

You know what? My aunty saw a huge Bengal tiger and three Indian Gaurs on a trek near Mukurthi National Park last month.

I have never ever seen a tiger. Gaurs…? WOW!

Yes, there are! When I went to Ooty last year, I saw four Indian Gaurs right in the middle of a tea plantation, as our van passed by! Their horns are huge! They are also called bison by the people who live in the Nilgiris.
Can you see the Nilgiri Hills in the distance?
Does anyone remember why these hills are called the Nilgiri Hills?

Blue mountains, Ma’am! Some people say that the Nilgiri Hills got their name from the purplish-blue flowers of the kurinji shrubs that blossom only once in twelve years!

I like the name kurinji better.

Can you see the Nilgiri Hills in the distance?
Does anyone remember why these hills are called the Nilgiri Hills?

Stro-bi-lan-thes kunthiana, Venky. And, some varieties bloom much earlier, too.

Oh no! I left my mother’s binoculars at home on the dining table!

No problem. You can use mine.

Children! From now on, be very alert. We are entering wildlife country! You could spot elephants, langurs, a Bengal tiger or a Nilgiri Marten maybe or even a Nilgiri tahr at any turn or hairpin bend!

Bengal Tiger!
Nilgiri Tahr!
Nilgiri Marten!
Be alert, everyone! Keep your eyes out; we might spot some animals!

Such a thick forest! It looks like a painting!

It does! And wild animals love thick forests.

How would we spot any wild animal in such a thick forest?
Shhh!!! Have a good look at the first one’s lovely pair of tusks!

They move so silently! Aren’t they huge?

Of course, they are! The Asian elephants are the largest land animals in all of Asia, after all!

Look at their tattered ears! And their prickly coarse hair!

Shhh!!! Have a good look at the first one’s lovely pair of tusks!
Look, there are so many Nilgiri langurs on that tree, Venky!

1, 2, 3, 4… 10… more than 10!

Ma'am!!!

Go to sleep early, children! I hope you have all packed your clothes, a cap and a water-bottle…

We all HAVE to be inside the bus by 5 a.m. Any student who is not in the bus by then will miss the trip to Mukurthi National Park.

A hurried lunch at the lodge and an afternoon nap meant that the children were in no hurry to sleep that night.

Many, many hairpin bends and winding roads later, the bus reached Udhagamandalam.

20 21
Early next morning, at 5 a.m. sharp, the bus was full of very sleepy children. All, except for one...

Which animals do you wish to see today, Valli?

An Indian Gaur would be nice or a sloth bear...and a Nilgiri tahr, for sure!

The bus leisurely moved through the morning mist, the never-ending green carpets of the tea plantations, sholas with streams flowing through and the grasslands in between...

Children, you know what to look for at the National Park, right? Look out for the horns—Nilgiri Tahr’s horns are different from the deer’s!

...until it stopped outside the Mukurthi National Park.

22 23
Good morning, children! Your trekking guide is ready!

Good morning, Akka!

Come along, children!

How many times have you spotted a Nilgiri Tahr, Akka?

Akka, there are so many wild animals in Tamil Nadu. Why was the Nilgiri Tahr chosen to be the State Animal?

The Nilgiri tahr was declared as the State Animal of Tamil Nadu because this is one of the only two states in which it is found. The other state is Kerala. It also gives us all, the people of the state, something to be proud of, doesn’t it?

I have lived all my life in the Nilgiris but I have spotted the beautiful Nilgiri tahr just thrice! So, you can imagine how good the Nilgiri tahr is at hiding itself!

Children! Fresh pug marks! Looks like a Bengal tiger passed by recently!

Let me try and draw it!

Let me click a picture of it!

Let me look at it more closely!

See that stream? We will stop there when we reach it. It’s beautiful!

After a short walk, they all sat next to the stream for a while…

The sky is definitely bluer here in Mukurthi!
Shola is what each patch of stunted tropical montane forest is called locally. The shola and grasslands together form the shola grasslands' complex—the natural habitat for Nilgiri tahr...
Look!
Look!
A tahr!

Tahr?
Where?

Did I miss it?

I can’t see any animal?
Maybe it was a Sambar deer that you saw… Or a spotted deer.

No. It was a tahr. I saw its horns so clearly—the thick, backward-curving horns. It must have fallen down that steep cliff!

Two years ago? But you trek almost every week, right Akka?

Of course, Valli did really see a tahr! This is their habitat, after all. The last time I saw a tahr was almost two years ago. And Valli saw one on her very first trip to the Nilgiris!

Yes! Female tahrs are lighter in colour than males. And, a patch of lighter coloured hair is acquired with age. Males with that lighter patch on their backs are referred to as saddlebacks. Come along now! Time to go back to where we started. By the way, I have never heard of a Nilgiri tahr falling off those steep cliffs, but you all be careful, especially while going down.

Yes, sometimes I even trek two to three times a week. I love these hills. I have spotted many other animals, but our State Animal is a very rare sight. It is very, very shy and its dark grey to black or dark brown colour helps it blend perfectly with its surroundings.

Best camouflage!
Oh, that’s my neighbour Naveen, with his very knowledgeable grandfather, Kuttan.

Look at that lovely shawl that Naveen’s grandfather is wearing. Must be cozy and warm too.

This large single piece of rectangular cloth is used as a sort of shawl by both Toda men and women. These are called Puthukuli. Right, Naveen?

Right, Akka! My grandmother embroidered this shawl that grandpa is wearing.

So good to see you, Naveen! Children, meet Naveen and his grandpa. Naveen lives in Ooty but his grandfather lives here, just outside the Mukurthi National Park!
The shawl looks super grand, Naveen!

It totally does!

We’re going back to my grandfather’s home up there.

My grandfather spots Nilgiri tahrs so often. They are his favourite animals because he feels that they have so much in common with us, the Todas. He says that the number of Nilgiri tahrs has increased in the last few years. He used to worry a lot more about these agile animals earlier.

Worry? Why?

Because the tahr population had dwindled—their habitat had been taken over little by little by people, for farming, tea cultivation and exotic tree planting. The tahrs and Todas have shared the same spaces across these rolling hills and sholas for so long. Originally, we Todas herded our buffaloes over the very same grasslands that the tahrs graze in, shared the same streams, enjoyed the benefits of the sholas too.

I come here whenever I can. Don’t laugh, but I feel so free here.

Tell them about the unique homes in your munds, Naveen.

The shape of a traditional Toda home is inspired by the rainbow, but there are very few of these homes left. My grandparents still live in one. And, close to the sholas, on the grasslands, is where we Todas lived. A group of a few homes formed a mund. In fact, Ooty was also called Ootacamund.
Look! A Nilgiri Marten!

Have a look at these rhododendron flowers! Just the perfect flowers to sketch...

What a beauty!

Do you think we’ll spot any more Nilgiri tahrs?

You have already spotted one. Now we should spot the tiger that passed this way...

Hurry up, children! Or we will be late for lunch! And we have to go to the tallest peak in the Nilgiris after lunch—Doddabetta.

My grandmother would be waiting for us for lunch! It was lovely meeting you all!
Back to Ooty… and then on the road to Kotagiri to reach Doddabetta Peak, 2,637 metres above sea level. So many hills!

They seem to go on forever!

Wow!

Can we go back tomorrow to the National Park, Ma’am? I don’t want to go shopping.

We will do a little shopping as we had planned. We’ll leave Ooty right after that. Don’t you want to buy the famous Ooty chocolates or tea, or some items with Toda embroidery? I have to buy lots of special sweet, the Ooty Varkey.

Can we do both, Ma’am?

The next day at the curio shop…

Chocolates! Amma will love it!

What fantastic photographs!
I am going to buy at least twenty postcards of the Nilgiri tahr.

I don’t know which purse to buy for Amma. They are all so beautiful!

Me too! I’ll send them to everyone I know—I want them all to know that I saw the special Nilgiri tahr, our State Animal.
The trip is almost over…

No pushing. Careful. Collect your things. Stop jumping up and down, Valli! We know you are waiting to tell everyone your special news!

Don’t leave anything behind. Please check before you leave the bus.

Did you see a Bengal tiger? Or the Indian Gaur? And most importantly, did you spot the Nilgiri tahr?

No, but…

I DID!
The Original Inhabitants of the Nilgiris
1. Nilgiri Hills
2. Siruvani Hills
3. High Ranges and Palani Hills
4. Srivilliputhur, Theni and Tirunelveli Hills
5. Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve and Ashambu Hills

The Nilgiri Tahr

The State Animal of Tamil Nadu, the Nilgiri tahr (Nilgiritragus hylocrius) is an endangered mountain ungulate. It is endemic to the Western Ghats in the state of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In Tamil, the Nilgiri tahr is called ‘varai aadu’—‘varai/wurrai’ meaning precipice or edge of a cliff and ‘aadu’ meaning goat. So, it should not be surprising to know that its closest relatives are sheep. However, until 2005, it was placed with the Himalayan tahr and the Arabian tahr. It is also referred to locally as Ibex. Tahr is a Nepali word.

Nilgiri tahr distribution in Tamil Nadu is along a narrow stretch of 400 km between the Nilgiris in the north and the Kanyakumari Hills in the south. Tahr population is divided into five large conservation blocks. These blocks are:

The first two blocks lie north of the Palghat gap and the rest of the three blocks lie in the south of the Palghat gap. They are found in the grassy meadows near cliffs, at an elevation as low as 300 m – 2600 m. Their food mostly consists of grasses. However, a large variety of plants including shrubs and trees are observed to be eaten by the tahrs. These agile animals quickly scramble up steep rocky cliffs, searching for grass and also to get away from a predator—a tiger, a leopard, etc.

Nilgiri tahr is the only mountain ungulate found in southern India amongst the twelve species that occur in India.

The backward-turning horns of a male are bigger and thicker than that of a female. The tahrs roam in a mix of 10–70 individuals. All male herds are also observed. Occasionally, the herd gets congregated up to 250 individuals. Most of them rest in shaded places of the cliffs or in the grasslands. The horns of the tahr reveal their age. The backward turning horns reflect growth rings, which keep increasing every year. Unfortunately, these mammals have a short lifespan of nine years in wild conditions. However, the average lifespan of this species is only about three to five years because of the high mortalities at younger age. Major threats to the Nilgiri tahr are habitat loss due to rampant deforestation, competition with domestic livestock, hydroelectric projects in Nilgiri tahr habitat, monoculture plantations and the occasional hunting for its meat and skin.

What is an ungulate, you might ask. Well, you might have seen many ungulates without knowing it! Ungulates are large mammals with hooves. So, the ones you might have already seen are horses, cattle, pigs, camels and sheep. The term roughly translates into ‘being hoofed’ or ‘a hoofed animal’. Ungulates are usually herbivorous. The hoof is the tip of a toe, strengthened by a thick keratin covering. Hooves grow continuously.

1. Ungulate

The Nilgiri Tahr

Ungulate

What is an ungulate, you might ask. Well, you might have seen many ungulates without knowing it! Ungulates are large mammals with hooves. So, the ones you might have already seen are horses, cattle, pigs, camels and sheep. The term roughly translates into ‘being hoofed’ or ‘a hoofed animal’. Ungulates are usually herbivorous. The hoof is the tip of a toe, strengthened by a thick keratin covering. Hooves grow continuously.
Mukurthi National Park covers a 78.46 square km area, which was declared as a wildlife sanctuary on 3 August 1982 and upgraded to a National Park on 15 October 1990 in order to protect the Nilgiri tahr. Located in the western corner of the Nilgiris Plateau, west of Ootacamund, the park consists of stunning montane grasslands and shrubs interspersed with sholas (forest groves). It is a terrain like no other. It is also home to the Bengal tiger, leopard, dhole, Indian gaur, sambar, Nilgiri langur, etc. The park is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India’s first International Biosphere Reserve.The Park is connected with Silent Valley National Park in the south, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve on the north, Gudalur and Nilgiris divisions in the west and east respectively. Kollaribetta, Mukurthi and Nilgiri are the highest peaks within the Park.

Tahr Facts

**Horns:** Male – 40 cm; Female – 26 cm  
**Height:** Male – 100 cm; Female – 80 cm  
**Weight:** Male – 100 kg; Female – 50-60 kg  
**Colour:** Male – Dark brown-black; Female – Greyish-brown  
**Facial markings:** White and black  
**Mane:** Black  
**Saddleback:** Adult males with different coloured hair on their backs, like a saddle  
**Legs:** Black-and-white markings
conservation of the Toda buffaloes and other grassland-dependent species like the Nilgiri tahr. The Todas have no crops of any kind, and no occupation except for the breeding of buffaloes and living off the milk. Remove invasive species and revive the native shola forests and grasslands in the Nilgiris, is their plea. The Todas are one of the rare tribal communities who are vegetarian by their habit, which in turn helps in protecting the Nilgiri tahr.

With many Todas moving out of the Nilgiris for jobs, very few munds remain. Each mund has around 4–10 homes, one or two temples and a buffalo pen. For the elderly Todas, the drop in Toda buffalo numbers means a loss of livelihood for sure, but more importantly, it means a loss of their precious cultural practices and rituals.

Between 1840 and 1856, plantations of several non-native tree species were introduced to the area to satisfy that demand. These included wattle, eucalyptus, cypress, Indian long leaf pine and thorny gorse. Eucalyptus became the preferred plantation tree. Removal of non-native trees, grasses and flowers is being carried out gradually and native varieties are being re-introduced. On an optimistic note, slowly, the natural habitat of the Nilgiri Tahr and the Todas will increase. Ensuring that both thrive in the long run. A ‘for the Toda by the Toda approach’ is being carried out by local NGOs and the Tamil Nadu government.

An important and economically viable craft of the Todas is their unique embroidery, which used to be done earlier by Toda women during their free time. An unbleached cotton cloth is embroidered with geometrical designs in the form of flowers, animals and other objects of nature. Incidentally, the artisans do the embroidery without transferring the design on to the fabric surface or referring to any book. Young Toda girls carry on this tradition by observing the works done by the elders of the community. To expand the range of uses, items like cell phone pouches, table runners, cushion covers, stoles, scarves, shawls, purses, waist coats are also made.

The Todas and the Tahrs

The lives of the members of the Toda tribe in the Nilgiris revolve around the sacred buffaloes. The Toda buffaloes are a unique breed of buffaloes that can survive the harsh climatic conditions of Upper Nilgiris, are highly disease-resistant and produce rich milk. The special breed of Asiatic water buffalo herded by the Todas can be ferocious, has crescent-shaped horns and short legs. The Todas are connected to nature very closely. Their chants include their special names for the hills, streams, trees, flowers, etc. of the region. But over the decades their grazing lands have reduced drastically, replaced by plantations. So, they go into the forests where they increasingly fall prey to tigers and other predators. Reviving the grasslands and protecting the sholas is crucial to the
What can you do to spread awareness about the importance of the Nilgiri tahr?

Nilgiri tahr is a mountain ungulate which dwells in the shola grasslands of the Western Ghats, in the current political states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Western Ghats are the largest water catchment areas for most of the small streams to large perennial rivers. The conservation of the Nilgiri tahr not just means conserving this endemic and endangered species but also securing the shola grassland ecosystem which caters to the water needs of the people in the districts around the Ghats of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The habitat provides a home to a large number of amphibians, reptiles, fishes, birds and other mammals. Hence the Nilgiri tahr can be well described as a mountain guardian.

Conservation and WWF

WWF India initiated its conservation work on Nilgiri tahr in 2008. In 2012, an assessment on Nilgiri tahr’s status, threats faced, habitat, and population size was carried out in the Western Ghats. WWF India published a report on the comprehensive study of the Nilgiri tahr population and its habitat in the hills of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in 2015. It was the first time such a comprehensive report was made. WWF India continues to undertake regular surveys in the upper reaches of sholas and grasslands in the Western Ghats. It works in close collaboration with the Kerala and Tamil Nadu Forest Departments.

WWF India’s work to protect and conserve the Nilgiri tahr population includes:

- **Assessment** of Nilgiri tahr to evaluate the population size, to identify the major threats to the species, and understand the ecological requirements of Nilgiri tahr.

- **Working with local communities** to raise awareness among local people and partner NGOs to initiate steps towards conservation of Nilgiri tahr.

- **Health assessment of herds** to evaluate the prevalence of tumours in individuals in Nilgiris and Anamalai. Teams of forest staff and veterinarians have been set up to collect tissue samples for analysis and veterinary diagnosis.

- **Behavioural studies for translocation** of herds to reduce the risk of a catastrophe to the species with a single population, improve genetic heterogeneity of separated populations of the species, and aid in natural recovery of this species.
Acknowledgements

This book, Valli’s Nilgiri Adventures, is dedicated to the elusive State Animal of Tamil Nadu, the Nilgiri Tahr. Developed as part of WWF India’s conservation efforts in the State, this visual treat is about a little girl’s intriguing and inspiring expedition into the Nilgiris.

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