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The Nilgiri Hills: Where Three States Meet

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The Nilgiri Hills: Where Three States Meet

Three states meet at one hill range. The Nilgiri Hills hold India’s first biosphere reserve. This article covers the peak, the shola forests, the people and the tahr count of 2026.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Doddabetta** Highest peak, about 2,637 m.

02 **1986** India’s first biosphere reserve.

03 **Shola** Forest patches among grassland.

04 **1,364** Tahr counted in Tamil Nadu, 2026.

Where are the Nilgiri Hills?

1 Three States, One Hill

1.1 Where are the Nilgiri Hills?

The Nilgiri Hills lie in the Western Ghats of southern India. They sit where Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka meet. The Nilgiri Natural History Society calls the reserve here a trijunction of three southern states.

Most of the high ground lies in Tamil Nadu. Ooty, the best-known hill town, is in the Nilgiris district.



The Nilgiri Hills seen from Bandipur National Park, Karnataka. Photo: Ashish K Gupta, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0.

1.2 What is the highest peak?

Doddabetta is the highest peak of the Nilgiris. Most books give its height as 2,637m. The Nilgiris district website gives 2,623 m, so exams usually ask only for the name.

The district site says the name roughly means a large mountain in the Badugu language. It lies about 10 km from Ooty.



Topographic map of the Nilgiri Hills, marking Ooty, Doddabetta and Mukurthi Peak. Map: public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Nilgiris at a glance

Feature	Fact
Range	Western Ghats, southern India
States	Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka
Highest peak	Doddabetta, about 2,637 m
Hill town	Ooty

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: The Nilgiri Hills sit where Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka meet. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: nnhs.in; nilgiris.nic.in

Why does 1986 matter?

2 India's First Reserve

2.1 What happened in 1986?

The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was the first biosphere reserve in India. The Nilgiri Natural History Society says it was set up in 1986.

The reserve covers 5,520 sq km. That area is shared by three states, not just one.

2.2 What is a biosphere reserve?

A biosphere reserve protects a large natural area and the people who live in it. It is not a national park with all people removed.

This matters in the Nilgiris. Many communities have lived in these hills for centuries.

- **Year:** 1986.
- **Area:** 5,520 sq km.
- **States:** Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka.

8. **Think it through:** Why does a reserve spread over three states need three governments to work together? See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was set up in 1986. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What are shola and grassland?

3 Shola and Grass

3.1 What is a shola?

A shola is a patch of dense forest in a high-altitude valley. Down To Earth describes shola as tropical montane forest of the Western Ghats. High-altitude grassland separates the patches.

So the hill top looks like a patchwork. Dark forest fills the folds, and open grass covers the slopes.

3.2 Why does it matter?

The shola and the grassland work as one system. Each depends on the other.

An expert committee of the Madras High Court warned that shola vegetation has become relict in Ooty Nilgiris. Relict means only small leftover pieces remain.

3.3 Which animal lives here?

The Nilgiri tahr is a mountain goat-like animal. It is the state animal of Tamil Nadu. It is endemic to the Western Ghats, which means it lives nowhere else.

It lives in the grassland-shola habitat. The tahr is listed as an endangered species.

- **Shola:** forest patch in a valley.
- **Grassland:** open slope around it.
- **Tahr:** grazes on the grass and climbs rocky cliffs.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The Nilgiri tahr is endemic to the Western Ghats. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: downtoearth.org.in; deccanherald.com

Who lives in the Nilgiris?

4 People of the Hills

4.1 Who are the Todas?

The Todas are one of the oldest known communities of the Nilgiris. They live in the highlands of the Nilgiri Mountains in Tamil Nadu. They have always been a very small group.

A Jesuit visitor in 1603 wrote that they numbered about a thousand. The 1871 census counted 693.

4.2 How do they live?

Buffalo are at the centre of Toda life. The Todas keep herds of mountain water buffalo and make dairy vessels. They also build dairy temples.

Their traditional homes are barrel-vaulted houses. A 1988 survey of 214 houses found only 13 in the old style.

4.3 Who are the Badagas?

The Badagas are the largest community in the Nilgiri Hills. They number about 145,000 in 1991. Most Badagas are still small-scale farmers.

Many other tribal groups share the hills with them. The Kotas and Kurumbas are two examples.

Todas and Badagas

Group	Known for
Todas	Buffalo herding, dairy temples, barrel-vaulted houses
Badagas	Largest community, mostly small farmers

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: The Badagas are the largest community in the Nilgiri Hills. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: everyculture.com

Why did the tahr decline?

5 Why the Tahr Declined

5.1 What threatened the grassland?

Invasive trees are the main threat. The wattle is replacing grasslands and shola forests, says the Madras High Court committee.

The same report says plantations of eucalyptus, pine and cypress have virtually wiped out grasslands and sholas in places.

5.2 How big is the problem?

The committee visited Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in August 2019. It found around 60 per cent of the core and buffer area, or 690 sq km, under invasion.

That is a very large share of one protected landscape.

5.3 Why does this hurt the tahr?

The tahr needs open grass to feed. When trees take over the slopes, the grass disappears.

The animal loses its feeding ground and its herds split into small, cut-off groups.

- **Wattle:** replaces grass and shola.
- **Eucalyptus, pine, cypress:** plantations that cover grassland.
- **Result:** less food for the tahr.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Invasive wattle and eucalyptus help grassland and shola to grow. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Is a reserve label enough?

6 Label Is Not Enough

6.1 Did the reserve label stop the decline?

No. The area has been a biosphere reserve since 1986. Yet the committee found invasion across a huge part of it.

A legal label draws a boundary. It does not remove trees or restore grass.

6.2 What does help?

Active work helps. Officials credit Project Nilgiri Tahr, launched in October 2023, for the recovery. The Tamil Nadu government runs the project.

Regular surveys also matter. Without counts, nobody can tell whether the work is paying off.

9. **Think it through:** Why count the tahr every year? See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: A biosphere reserve label alone stops habitat loss. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What did the 2026 survey find?

7 The 2026 Count

7.1 What did the 2026 survey find?

Tamil Nadu counted 1,364 Nilgiri tahr in 2026. That is a 4.68 per cent increase over last year. ETV Bharat reports 1,303 in 2025 and 1,031 in 2024.

The count has risen by over 32 per cent since 2024.

Tamil Nadu tahr counts

Year	Tahr counted
2024	1,031
2025	1,303
2026	1,364

7.2 Where do the tahr live?

The Anamalai Hills hold 44.87 per cent of the Tamil Nadu population. The Nilgiris landscape holds 29.25 per cent.

So the Nilgiris are the second most important home of the tahr in the state.

7.3 How was the survey done?

Surveyors used an Android app called Varudai. It was used for the first time. It sent field data back in real time.

Better data means better decisions on where to work next.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: The Anamalai Hills hold more of Tamil Nadu's tahr than the Nilgiris landscape. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

Sources: etvbharat.com

What do exams ask about the Nilgiris?

8 Exam Corner

8.1 What has been asked before?

Two past questions are worth a look. One asks where sholas occur. The other matches peaks to hills.

Asked before

PYQ 1 · NDA & NA (I) 2025, Q95

Temperate forests of South India, known as 'Sholas' are found in which of the following hills? 1. Anaimalai; 2. Nilgiris; 3. Palani. Select the answer using the code given below.

(a) 1 only

(b) 1 and 2 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

mcqquestion.com/nda-na/nda-na-1-2025-general-ability-full-question-paper/#q95

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8.2 How do I avoid the usual mistakes?

Do not mix up Doddabetta with Anaimudi. Anaimudi is the higher peak and lies in the Annamalai Hills.

Remember the state, the peak and the year. Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka; Doddabetta; 1986.

Remember this

- **Place:** where Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka meet.
- **Peak:** Doddabetta, about 2,637 m.
- **Reserve:** first in India, 1986, 5,520 sq km.
- **Threat:** wattle and eucalyptus replace grassland.
- **2026:** 1,364 tahr counted in Tamil Nadu.

Explain it back: Why did the tahr decline even inside a reserve?

Practice MCQs

1. The Nilgiri Hills sit at the tri-junction of which three states?

A. Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka

B. Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka

C. Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

D. Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka

See answer ↓

2. What is the name of the Nilgiri Hills' highest peak?

A. Mahendragiri

B. Doddabetta

C. Agasthyamalai

D. Anamudi

See answer ↓

3. In 1986, the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve became which of these?

A. India's largest national park

B. India's first UNESCO World Heritage Site

C. India's first biosphere reserve

D. India's first Ramsar wetland site

See answer ↓

4. Which endangered species is endemic to the Nilgiris' grassland-shola habitats?

A. Indian bison

B. Lion-tailed macaque

C. Nilgiri tahr

D. Malabar giant squirrel

See answer ↓

5. In which state are the Nilgiri Hills, known for fine high-altitude tea around Coonoor and Ooty?

A. Kerala

B. Karnataka

C. Andhra Pradesh

D. Tamil Nadu

See answer ↓

6. In which one of the following highlands of India can you find temperate forests called 'Sholas'?

A. Himalayas

B. Vindhyas

C. Satpuras

D. Nilgiris

See answer ↓

7. Nagarhole became part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in 1986. What made this reserve significant?

A. It was the world's largest biosphere reserve at the time

B. It was India's first biosphere reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme

C. It was the first Indian reserve open to international researchers

D. It was the first reserve to ban all tourism

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.**
   The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve covers parts of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. NCERT places the Nilgiri hills in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.
   ↑ Q1
2. **B.**
   Doddabetta, at 2,637 metres, is the highest peak of the Nilgiri Hills.
   ↑ Q2
3. **C.**
   The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, declared in 1986, was India's first biosphere reserve.
   ↑ Q3
4. **C.**
   The Nilgiri tahr, an endangered species, is endemic to the Nilgiris' grassland-shola ecosystem.
   ↑ Q4
5. **D.**
   The Nilgiri Hills, home to Coonoor and Ooty's tea estates, lie in Tamil Nadu.
   ↑ Q5
6. **D.**
   Sholas are stunted, evergreen montane forests found in sheltered valleys of the Nilgiri hills in the Western Ghats.
   ↑ Q6
7. **B.**
   The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was India's first biosphere reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme.
   ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The Nilgiri Natural History Society places the reserve at the trijunction of three southern states. ↑ 1
2. **True.** The Nilgiri Natural History Society says it was the first designated biosphere reserve of India, established in 1986. ↑ 2

3. **True.** It is endemic to the Western Ghats and is an endangered species. ↑ 3
4. **True.** The source says the Badagas are the largest community in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu. ↑ 4
5. **False.** The committee says wattle replaces grassland and shola, and plantations have virtually wiped them out. ↑ 5
6. **False.** The reserve has existed since 1986, yet the committee found large areas under invasive species. ↑ 6
7. **True.** ETV Bharat gives Anamalai 44.87 per cent and the Nilgiris landscape 29.25 per cent. ↑ 7
8. **Think it through.** Animals and fires do not stop at state borders. A tahr herd or a forest fire can cross from one state to the next. ↑ 8
9. **Think it through.** A count shows if herds grow or shrink. Officials can then change the plan before the loss becomes serious. ↑ 9

Previous year answers

1. **(d) 1, 2 and 3** Shola forests, stunted evergreen patches sheltered in high-altitude valleys, occur across all three ranges: Anaimalai, Nilgiris, and Palani. · IndGeo0051 — The Palakkad Gap

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