



# LAY OF THE LAND

*Reports from near and far*

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## Wild Mumbai

SHRUTI RAVINDRAN

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**EVERY NIGHT** for the past eleven years, Rajesh Sanap and Zeeshan Mirza have spent the postdinner hours combing the woods behind their homes. Like restive sprites, the young men skirt ponds, bash through spiky hedgerows, upturn rocks, shake up leaf litter, and thread through dirt trails hairy with undergrowth. In the course of their nocturnal walkabouts, they've found about a dozen arachnids, including two that are entirely new to science: a rangy, amber-hued scorpion and a compact, ashen tarantula with lean limbs covered in white fur.

A few years ago, they totted up all the living creatures they'd encountered, which they began observing as inquisitive teens and continue to record as full-time conservation biologists: 76 species of birds, 86 moths and butterflies, 13 amphibians, 46 reptiles, and 16 mammals. Not a bad haul for some backwoods. It's positively profligate when you consider just where these backwoods are located: Aarey Milk Colony, as it's called, is in the heart of Mumbai, the most populous city in India. It's a five-square-mile thicket of deciduous forest interspersed with scrubland, cattle sheds, and Bollywood film studios.

Mumbai is crammed with high-rise apartments, crumbling tenements, and informal settlements wedged into the tightest and least hospitable gaps, including mud hills that turn to treacle every monsoon. The idea that a teeming menagerie has endured in this hulking agglomeration-on-a-landing-strip was so *wild* I had to see it for myself.

On a sticky monsoon afternoon, Sanap and Mirza agreed to take me for a walk to one of their favorite haunts. We met outside a café, part of a new shopping complex that included a gym called Big Boss (tagline: "Feel like Boss"). Sanap, a shy young man, was sporting dun-colored hiking gear, while Mirza, the chattier of the two, resembled a lanky giant with whitened skin and blonde hair. We took a wheezy three-wheeler to a crossroads that marks the start of this green area, or what's left of it.

Both Sanap and Mirza grew up in the neighborhood, and since their childhood they've watched commercial outgrowths encroach into Aarey. Sanap remembers a forest barely contained by the walls of the police camp, a forest that tumbled over with civet cats, mongooses, and snakes that he used to photograph as a schoolboy. "Now all that's cleaned up," he said. "It's just concrete." Then came a power station, a hospital, thickets of residential complexes promising "verdant views," a sprawling Bollywood film set, a luxury hotel, and the heaving arterial road that

brought us here. The newest encroacher, the Mumbai Metro, had been fighting to replace several hundred trees with a rail-car shed. "That's why we drew up a list of all the treasure troves of biodiversity that Aarey contains," Mirza explained.

We turned into a small lane, which a sign told us belonged to a VIP guesthouse. The lane wound upward, past soaring teak and silk cotton trees; beneath was a carpet of wild ginger and turmeric shrubs. The rumble of traffic gradually gave way to a symphony of cicadas, the whistling of spotted babblers, and the occasional mewling protest of a peacock. "The original forest was like this," said Mirza. "One intact piece of land. Can you imagine? But they chopped it all off." We walked past a row of bandicoot berry shrubs, above which hovered a pale yellow butterfly, dipping and fluttering like a polite person trying to join an unruly queue. Mirza pointed excitedly at another enormous butterfly, patterned cobalt and black, wafting toward a beech tree. "It's a blue Mormon, our state butterfly!" he said. "My first sighting of the season."

Sanap darted off the path to a muddy slope behind a ditch. He leaned against an exposed tree root, inspecting something. When we approached, he held open a tiny skinlike flap on the tree's bark, which concealed a hole the width of a pencil. Mirza drew in a breath. "He's *amazing* in the field," he said. "Most people would never have been able to spot that." The tiny skin

that Sanap pinched between his fingers was a miracle of soil and vegetation, and it hinged on unseen wisps of silk. “It’s the burrow of a robust trapdoor tarantula, a female,” Mirza told me, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Sometimes she comes and sits with her legs outside.”

“Some of them make a Y-shape burrow with two doors,” Sanap added, “so if you disturb one door, they run toward the other. It’s a very nice strategy.”

There is, however, no effective strategy for spiders or their aficionados to ward off intruders who wish to collect them and sell them online as “the best starter tarantula.” There’s no reliable means of fending

off developers who destroy or expose their burrows, or of denying a state government that wishes resolutely to park a bunch of railcars in the only surviving patch of green in the city. But Mirza hopes that the beauty of the place will somehow spare it from destruction. “If you stumble across a Taj Mahal, you *have* to pass it,” he said earnestly. “You can’t just say, ‘Let’s demolish it and build a mall here.’ It’s a treasure, and it belongs to everyone.”

*Shruti Ravindran is a journalist based in Mumbai. Her writing about science, the environment, and urbanism appears in the Guardian, Aeon, and National Geographic.*

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## Follow Your Feet

ANTONIA MALCHIK

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**ON A CLEAR DAY** last summer, my kids and I stood at a crosswalk while traffic streamed by. It was tourist season in our little Montana town, and the roads were busy; nobody was stopping. A woman in a minivan passed us, intent on the phone propped up on her steering wheel. She is the kind of driver who makes me wish driverless cars were ubiquitous. “Not yet,”

