

# Where have all the squirrels gone?



An orange-bellied Himalayan squirrel leaps between trees in Rangamati's Kaptai National Park. Found across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and China, this arboreal rodent is herbivorous and known for its agility. Its dark or reddish-brown fur contrasts with its striking orange belly, making it one of the region's most colourful squirrels. Usually solitary except in breeding season, its numbers are dwindling due to deforestation. The IUCN lists the species as "Near Threatened."

PHOTO: NOBEL CHAKMA



**Squirrels are sensitive indicators of ecosystem health. If they're declining, it signals that something has gone wrong at the very foundation.**

AFRINA MOMOTAJ

Once, the rooftops, orchards, and gardens of Bangladesh stirred with the restless energy of squirrels. They darted through mango and jackfruit trees, their striped bodies flickering like quicksilver among the leaves. Children watched in delight as they leapt from branch to branch, while elders placed offerings of rice in clay pots for their tiny guests.

The Indian palm squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*), with its three pale stripes and plume-like tail, was more than just a familiar sight. It was a gardener of the wild—scattering seeds, carrying pollen, and sounding alarm calls that rippled through the village fauna. Yet, slowly and silently, these bright-eyed creatures are slipping away. Their absence is not loud or sudden, but like the fading of a season, it unsettles the balance of nature itself.

"Squirrels are sensitive indicators of ecosystem health. If they're declining, it signals that something has gone wrong at the very foundation," laments



Indian Palm Squirrel.

PHOTO: MUHAMMAD MAHDI KARIM/ WIKIMEDIA

Dr Tareque Hasan, Wildlife Ecologist at Dhaka University.

Why are the squirrels disappearing?

#### 1. Choking on pollution

Pesticides sprayed on crops and gardens do more than kill pests—they poison food chains. Squirrels, who nibble on

fruits, seeds, and even bark, often ingest these toxins directly or accumulate them over time. Meanwhile, air pollution from vehicles and brick kilns has been linked to respiratory stress in small mammals.

#### 2. Loss of trees, loss of homes

Squirrels nest in tree hollows, dense foliage, and even thatched roofs. But with urbanisation and deforestation speeding up across Bangladesh, their habitats are disappearing. Fruit trees are cut down to make room for concrete. Old trees are replaced with fast-growing, non-native species that lack suitable nesting spaces. The few remaining trees are often isolated, pruned, or sprayed with chemicals, making them inhospitable to wildlife.

#### 3. Noise and human disturbance

Construction noise, fireworks, loudspeakers, and unregulated tourism in natural spaces all take a toll. Squirrels are skittish by nature—when stress becomes chronic, their reproductive rates drop, and young fail to survive. Even something as innocent

as a curious child chasing a squirrel up a tree can disrupt its feeding or nesting cycle if repeated often enough.

#### 4. Predation and road accidents

With shrinking green spaces, squirrels are forced to forage on the ground, putting them in the path of feral cats, dogs, and speeding vehicles. Roadkill incidents involving squirrels are quietly increasing across urban fringes.

#### What can we do—before it's too late?

##### Individuals

- Plant native trees like jackfruit, mango, banyan, and coconut, species that squirrels prefer.
- Avoid harmful chemicals in your garden. Use natural pesticides or permaculture methods.
- Leave food: Rice grains, fruit peels, or nuts can help squirrels thrive in safe spots.
- Teach children to observe—not chase or catch—wildlife.

##### Communities & policymakers

- Create urban green corridors with squirrel-friendly trees.

- Include small mammal conservation in biodiversity and forestry policies.
- Install eco-bridges or canopy ropes over roads in squirrel-dense zones.
- Launch public awareness campaigns using schools and media.

#### A future without squirrels?

Can you imagine a forest without rustling leaves? A morning without tiny feet scampering across your roof? A tree without a nest tucked inside its arms?

The squirrel is not just a symbol of nature—it is a thread in its fabric. If we let that thread break, we risk unraveling the entire tapestry.

So, the next time you see a squirrel, take a moment. Watch it. Protect it. Celebrate it.

Because if we don't, one day our children may ask, "Where have all the squirrels gone?"

**Afrina Momotaj** is a Climate Smart Agriculturist and Animal Rescuer. She can be contacted at momotaj@ gmail.com

## How Dhaka's rickshaw pullers bear a hidden health toll

YSTIAQUE AHMED

**Poisoned air**  
At dawn, when Dhaka is just beginning to stir, thousands of rickshaw pullers set off on their daily grind. Their cycle rickshaws ferry millions across the capital each day, keeping the city moving. Yet these human engines of Dhaka's transportation system endure a punishing existence: inhaling toxic air, labouring under searing heat, and driving their bodies to exhaustion. Behind their contribution to urban life lies a silent health crisis that goes largely unseen, unheard, and unaddressed.

#### From rural roots to urban struggle

Most rickshaw pullers are rural migrants, drawn to Dhaka by poverty, displacement, or the hope of a better life. With little education or training, rickshaw pulling becomes one of the few options for survival. According to Ariful Islam Nadim, General Secretary of the Rickshaw, Van, Easy Bike Labourer Union, the city is home to nearly one million



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS / THE DAILY STAR

even the bare minimum security. Out of desperation, they return to the streets, and the cycle of suffering continues.

Unable to cope with relentless physical strain, many turn to tobacco, alcohol, or other stimulants—short-term escapes from long-term misery.

#### Poverty and Malnutrition

Malnutrition and poverty form a vicious trap. Rickshaw pullers often subsist on rice with vegetables or curry, with eggs a couple of times a week and meat perhaps once.

Take the story of 75-year-old Md Shiraj, who has been pulling rickshaws for 35 years around Motijheel. Earning Tk 500–600 a day, he eats twice daily and suffers from untreated abdominal disease. Yet, he continues to pedal, compelled by duty to provide for his family.

Surveys confirm that their dietary habits remain dominated by rice, with little nutritional diversity. Spending long hours on the streets, many fall back on cheap junk food, further compromising their health. Excluded from formal healthcare, they often rely on pharmacies, while preventable diseases—

the Rickshaw, Van, Easy Bike Labourer Union recalls, "Before July of last year, our members were under constant attack, lawsuits, and extortion by political leaders. These problems are returning, and we are powerless to resist. The government must bring these workers under regulation."

#### Searching for solutions

Despite the bleakness, there are glimmers of hope.

The Labour Reform Commission, meanwhile, is pushing to extend labour protections to the informal sector, while union leaders continue to demand formal recognition. "Without legal coverage, rickshaw pullers will remain trapped in exploitation," stresses Nasim.

Dr Kamruzzaman suggests creating dedicated lanes for non-motorised vehicles to reduce occupational hazards. He stresses the need for licensing, training, and health support systems. "Policies are meaningless without implementation," he warns.

Dr Rashid recalls a low-cost nutritional innovation developed during her tenure at the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research: a powdered vegetable mix designed for labourers like rickshaw pullers and garment workers. Though the project stalled, she urges the food industry to revisit such ideas to improve workers' diets.

#### An invisible crisis

Rickshaw pullers embody resilience. They power Dhaka's daily life, yet remain invisible in its policy landscape. Their labour builds the city's mobility, but their bodies and health are left to crumble.

Dhaka's air poisons their lungs. Heat batters their strength. Poverty robs their nutrition. And the state denies them protection.

If Bangladesh is serious about inclusive development, it cannot afford to overlook this silent health emergency. Recognising rickshaw pullers as workers, extending legal coverage, ensuring access to healthcare, and investing in nutrition are not acts of charity—they are matters of justice.

Ystiaque Ahmed works at The Daily Star.



auto-rickshaw and 60,000–80,000 paddle rickshaw pullers.

Their battle is not only against Dhaka's chaotic traffic but also against broken bodies, empty stomachs, and a system that refuses to acknowledge them.

Only 38 percent manage to drink more than three litres of water daily, and access to clean water remains a privilege rather than a right.

Dr Rashid adds: As they age, they cannot work the same hours, so the family loses

Even their unions face repression. Nadim of

Ystiaque Ahmed works at The Daily Star.