

## The Night I Met the Wild – A Forest Experience I'll Never Forget

The night I met the wild didn't begin with a plan. It began with a spark an unexpected, unshakable feeling that I was about to witness something that would stay with me for the rest of my life. I was just a high school student back then, full of curiosity, and had joined a wildlife walk held near the thick, mysterious forests of Kelinja. Nestled deep in the Western Ghats, not too far from my hometown of Vitla, the forest promised adventure. What I didn't expect was that it would also teach me humility, silence, and connection. The walk itself was simple. No fancy tents, no luxury lodges. Just a handful of walking towards the forest, surrounded by towering trees that whispered secrets with every gust of wind. We spent the days going on guided nature walks, learning about the ecology of the Western Ghats, and spotting wildlife in its natural habitat. I remember seeing a hornbill soar across the sky and laughing as langurs chased each other across tree branches. Once, I caught a glimpse of a civet cat slinking through the undergrowth its eyes glowing like twin torches in the shade. But it was the night safari that had my heart racing the most. Something about the idea of walking through the forest in complete darkness felt electric. It was like the jungle kept its real stories hidden under a blanket of stars. At 8:30 PM sharp, we set off with two experienced forest guides leading the way. We were told to walk silently, avoid sudden movements, and use our torches sparingly. The night had swallowed the sky, and the moonlight became our only natural guide. Each step made the dry leaves crunch underfoot. The chirping of crickets filled the air, interrupted occasionally by the haunting call of a nightjar or the sudden hoot of an owl. There was no room for loud thoughts or loud voices only an alert mind, open eyes, and a fast-beating heart. We walked slowly, scanning the darkness, wondering what could be hiding behind every bush or tree. Then, about twenty minutes into the walk, something made us all stop. Two glowing orbs stared at us from a distance. The guide raised his hand and whispered, "It's a leopard." I froze. A real leopard. Not in a zoo, not on a screen, but right there in the wild calmly perched on a rock, half-concealed by the shadows. It didn't growl or move. It just sat there, watching us with eyes that seemed ancient and wise. In that moment, I felt something shift inside me. There was no fear just awe. The kind of awe that makes you forget everything else. The leopard stretched its back, like a house cat waking from a nap, and then slipped away silently into the trees. We didn't follow it. We stood still, respecting its space, grateful that it had allowed us even that brief encounter. I walked to the edge of the clearing. The moon was still high. The trees swayed gently. I sat on a rock, thinking about what I had just experienced. And then came the second moment the one that sealed the night in my memory forever. From the shadows, I heard soft footsteps. I turned my head slowly. A sambar deer, elegant and unhurried, was making its way across the clearing. It didn't notice me at first, but when it did, it paused. We looked at each other two beings sharing the same space, the same stillness. I didn't move. Neither did it. That moment of mutual recognition felt deeper than any conversation. It was like we were saying, I see you, and I trust you. Eventually, the deer continued on its path, and I remained on that rock, unable to move, unwilling to break the silence. That night, I learned something that no textbook could ever teach me: the forest speaks to those who listen. It doesn't use words, but sounds, sights, and moments that speak directly to your soul. I realized that wildlife is not just about the thrill of spotting rare animals it's about understanding that these creatures live their lives far away from our noise, trusting in silence and rhythm. They are not intruding on us. We are the ones walking into their world. When I returned home, I didn't immediately tell everyone what I had seen. Some stories need time. They grow inside you like roots, shaping how you think, how you see the world. Slowly,

I started sharing it not to impress anyone, but to make them feel what I had felt. I told my friends about the leopard not chasing, not threatening, but quietly watching us. I spoke about the deer that didn't run. I told them how the forest at night isn't scary it's sacred. After that night, I began reading more about nocturnal wildlife. I learned that the night is when many creatures truly come alive. Bats fly from tree to tree, pollinating flowers while most of us sleep. Owls patrol the skies with pinpoint precision. Glow-worms light up the darkness in a silent celebration of life. The forest doesn't sleep it shifts gears. But I also learned something painful. Many of these animals are in danger. Leopards, especially, often fall victim to speeding vehicles when they try to cross roads that slice through their habitat. Some are killed when they enter human settlements, not out of aggression, but confusion and desperation. They lose their space because we keep taking it.

That realization made me feel responsible. Not guilty, but aware. I began attending local wildlife talks and following conservationists online. I shared facts and stories during school presentations. During my nature photography sessions, I became more mindful no flash, no loud noise, no unnecessary footsteps. I wanted to document, not disturb. I even started sharing my experiences and thoughts. I wrote about that night in Kelinja about the leopard and the deer, about how the wild isn't something we should conquer, but something we should protect. To my surprise, students from other towns wrote back saying they had never thought about nature that way. Some of them said they wanted to visit a forest, not for photos, but to understand. That's when I knew my story mattered. What I wish more people knew is that wildlife isn't always about drama. You won't always hear a roar or see a chase. Sometimes, it's just a pair of eyes in the dark. A rustle in the grass. A moment of trust. And those are the moments that change you. Every person, especially young people should experience the forest at night at least once. Not to prove bravery, but to learn humility. The forest teaches you how to be quiet, how to wait, how to watch. It shows you that not everything valuable needs to be loud. Some of the most meaningful connections are made in silence. The night I met the wild, I didn't just see animals. I saw a way of life that we are dangerously close to losing. A world where balance still exists, but barely. A world that doesn't need saving it just needs us to stop destroying. That memory lives with me even now. Whenever life gets noisy, I close my eyes and return to that clearing the moonlight, the rustling trees, the glowing eyes. It reminds me why I care. Why I speak up. Why I believe that telling these stories matters. Because the wild doesn't have a voice but I do. And so do you.

So if you ever get a chance, take it. Walk into the forest. At night. Without fear. With respect. Let yourself be small in front of something so big. And when the night shares its secrets with you, carry them gently. Tell others. Not to show off, but to keep the stories alive.