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Migratory stopover sites of giant honeybees: A plea for conservation

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Populations of the giant honeybee, *Apis dorsata*, face many threats, but paramount among them is habitat loss. The forests of South Asia, the habitat of the giant bee, face the most rapid deforestation occurring anywhere in the world. I recently discovered and reported on a site--an orchard along the Pai River in Thailand--where 16 colonies of migrating giant honeybees were bivouacking in close proximity to one another. The same time the following year >2x as many bivouacs gathered there. Informants assert the site is used annually; apparently the colonies are resting as they move to higher altitudes and flowering plants as the dry season begins. The site affords remarkable opportunities to study bees as they migrate. Although some colonies perch high, observable only with binoculars, others rest within ~1-5 m, easily accessible. E. g., I was able to describe their migratory dances in preparation for departure flights. Also, in 6 weeks the first year I observed >40 swarms of the Indian hive bee, *Apis cerana*, hopscotching through the orchard, eluding predatory hornets. This behavior had not previously been recorded. To make matters even more interesting, a black dwarf honeybee swarm, *Apis andreniformis*, occurred in the same orchard, and I studied interesting facets of its absconding behavior. The orchard is an astounding site for research, but probably not unique in South Asia. Most likely such sites exist wherever bees undertake long seasonal migrations. I describe attributes of the site, e.g. its location along a major river, and other possible navigational cues. I recommend researchers search for congregation sites wherever Asian honeybees migrate. Stopover sites--or hornet-shedding sites--may be essential to these species' life histories. Humans have drastically altered much riparian habitat in South Asia, but doubtless there still exist essential bivouacking sites that warrant conservation.