

THE MAGIC OF DANDELI

Karnataka's enchanted protected area has over 300 bird species and lazy crocodiles

By Sharmila Deo



Oblivious to the rising temperatures in the month of May, the Kali river

was gushing by at a considerable speed. Although it was not brimming till the banks as it does during the monsoon, at least it looked alive and flowing, unlike many other rivers in parts of the country, where they dry up in summers and expose their beds as vast expanses of pebbles and sand.

We were standing very close to its banks near the Supa Dam at Dandeli.

Dandeli, one of the country's oldest Protected Areas has some of the best patches of semi-evergreen forests and harbours a huge diversity of animal and plant life. It is located in the Western Ghats in Karnataka.

It was around 4 pm, and we were booked to do a coracle ride on the river at that time. But like any self-respecting tourist, I de-

manded from our ferryman a 'guaranteed sighting' of the Malabar Pied Hornbill, and he obligingly told us to indulge in some 'time-pass' and return an hour later for the ride.

Small island

So while scanning through our binoculars, looking at a small island in the middle of the river, a fisherman standing closeby waved to us and started pointing in a certain direction. As I looked I couldn't believe my eyes when they fell on a huge crocodile floating silently near the island.

We were a large group and everyone fell silent and gaped at the reptile in awe. It is one thing to see the crocodiles on various channels on TV, but to see this dinosaur-like creature,



Pied Hornbill spotted in Dandeli. PHOTO: ARSHIYA BOSE

live, in front of our very eyes, was a fascinating moment for all. It glided along smoothly sans the histrionics that can be expected from it—a lash of a scaly tail, the display of sharp, pointed teeth in a huge jaw opened wide, a quick dive at an unfortunate bird who may have decided to perch upon a branch overheard—and gently disappeared into oblivion. Excited by our chance sighting, we headed back to the boarding place for the coracle

ride. We squeezed into the round basket-shaped boat and set off for a ride on the Kali. The view on both sides was beautiful. The river was flanked by mountains covered with thick forests.

Roosting time

As the boatman had promised, we soon started seeing hornbills fly across from one bank of the river to another. It was close to their roosting time,



Thick vegetation along the banks of the River Kali. PHOTO: AUTHOR

and they all were going back to their favourite trees to rest for the night. We saw over twenty hornbills that evening, in the span of one boat ride. The Malabar Pied Hornbills have a black plumage, with a distinct white belly and a yellow and black casque.

We were very lucky to come across another species of the hornbill—the Great Pied Hornbill the very next day. This majestic bird is larger than the Malabar Pied Hornbill, its most prominent feature being the bright, attractive, yellow and black casque on top of its massive bill. We were at a sunset point at a high elevation from where we could see the tops of trees, when one lone Great Pied Hornbill just landed on one of

the trees right in front of us. Its sheer size, its graceful flight, and its bright colours took our breath away. By the time some of us could reach for our cameras, it took off, and with another flap of its massive wings, it flew away into the sunset.

Dandeli has over 300 bird species of which we saw the Malabar Trogon, the Fairy Bluebird, the Changeable Hawk-Eagle, some owls, and different kinds of Green Pigeons amongst many others.

Giant squirrel

Although Dandeli is known for its big mammal diversity which includes the Indian Gaur, Sambar, Chital, Elephant and the elusive Black Panther, only a Giant Squirrel showed itself

to us uninhibitedly. It roamed across the canopy of trees in our campus. Some Macaques ventured into our rooms uninvited, and dashed off with whatever food packets they saw lying around. We spent a good one hour in the dark straining our necks to get a glimpse of the Slender Loris, an arboreal mammal, but with no luck.

In addition to the astounding biodiversity, Dandeli also has other places of interest like the Syntheri Rocks which is a huge monolith in granite along the Kaneri river, a tributary of Kali. Kavala caves have stalagmite formations and a natural structure in the form of a Shivlingam emerges within the caves. A huge pilgrimage is held here around Mahashivaratri.

Our two days in Dandeli were packed with lots of sightseeing, many activities like white water rafting, coracle rides, safari rides within the sanctuary, and forest trails around the government resort that we had opted to stay in.

From spotting many interesting tree species which were new to us to coming across a dead civet probably bitten by a snake, from sightings of numerous butterflies and moths impossible for us to identify to various observations made from machans in the forest, we had several joyous moments, and Dandeli once again managed to spin its magic on yet another group of nature lovers.

(The author is a member of Kalpavriksh.)



Enchanted forest area in Dandeli, Karnataka. PHOTO: AUTHOR