THE MAGIC OF DANDELIL

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

By Sharmilla Deo

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 our ride.

Small island
So while scanning through our binoculars, looking at a small island in the middle of the river, a fisherman standing closely 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.

Pied Hornbill seen in Dandelil, PHOTO: ASHISH ROSE

We were a large group and everyone felt 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, live, in front of our very eyes, was a fascinating moment for all. It glided along smoothly sans the hummings that can be expected from it—a dash 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 observed—and gently disappeared into the horizon. 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, 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 Hornbill has a black plumage, with a distinct white belly and a yellow and black cap.

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 cap 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, where 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 flapping of its massive wings, it flew away into the sunset.

Dandelil 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 Dandelil is known for its high mammal diversity which includes the Indian Gaur, Sambar, Chital, Elephant and the elusive Black Panther, only a Giant Squirrel showed itself to us unhindered. 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 staring our necks to get a glimpse of the slender Lorius, an arboreal mammal, but with no luck.

In addition to the astounding biodiversity, Dandelil also has other places of interest like the Synheri 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 Shiv lingam emerges within the caves. A huge pilgrimage is held here around Mahabalikrant.

Our two days in Dandelil 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 river probably bitten by a snake, from sightings of numerous butterflies and moths impossible for us to identify to various observations made from macaques in the forest, we had several joyous moments, and Dandelil once again managed to spin its magic on yet another group of nature lovers.

(The author is a member of Kalavilish)