

# RAJASTHAN'S TAL CHHAPAR SANCTUARY GETS PROTECTION FROM PLAN TO REDUCE ITS SIZE

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A blackbuck and a raptor, steppe eagle, observing each other at Tal Chhapar sanctuary in Churu district of Rajasthan. Photo: Special Arrangement

The famous Tal Chhapar blackbuck sanctuary in Rajasthan's Churu district has received a protective cover against a proposed move of the State government to reduce the size of its eco-sensitive zone. The World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) has also taken up a major project for the conservation of raptors in the sanctuary, spread in an area measuring 7.19 sq. km.

The Rajasthan High Court has intervened through a *suo motu* public interest litigation to protect the sanctuary, taking cognisance of reports that its area was going to be reduced to three sq. km. under pressure from mine owners and stone crusher operators. The court recently ordered a "complete prohibition" on any action to reduce the wildlife sanctuary's area.

A raptor, black-winged kite, looking for a prey at Tal Chhapar sanctuary in Churu district of Rajasthan. Photo: Special Arrangement

The sanctuary is host to about 4,000 blackbucks and other wild animals, over 40 species of raptors and more than 300 species of resident and migratory birds. The raptors, which include predators and scavengers, are on top of the food chain and control the populations of small mammals, birds and reptiles as well as insects.

A Division Bench at the High Court's principal seat in Jodhpur noted that some exotic species of animals seemed to have been destroyed or relocated to other areas suitable for their survival, following an increase in human population around the sanctuary, and unplanned and rampant construction activities. The court directed the authorities concerned to complete the formalities for declaration of the eco-sensitive zone surrounding Tal Chhapar at the earliest.

The sanctuary earlier had a large population of desert foxes and similar burrowing animals, while the large colonies of the only herbivorous lizard, the spiny-tailed lizard, exist as the prey base for raptors. The issues confronting the sanctuary include hyper-aridity, grazing pressure, the invasive weed *Prosopis juliflora*, and salt mines in the vicinity. The sanctuary's area is

insufficient for its large blackbuck population.

Tal Chhapar sanctuary is host to about 4,000 blackbucks and other wild animals, over 40 species of raptors and more than 300 species of resident and migratory birds. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The court struck down an order of September 30 renotifying a 2.7-km-long road, forming part of the Nokha-Sikar highway, passing through the sanctuary, and ordered its denotification keeping in view the presence of an alternative road existing adjacent to the protected forest area.

Tal Chhapar's Range Forest Officer Umesh Bagotia told *The Hindu* that the grassland for blackbucks was being continuously developed in the sanctuary and attempts were being made for the expansion of a prey base for the raptors. "Some of the rare species of birds of prey have been sighted here. Migratory birds arrive here for their winter sojourn, while several others make a stopover during their migration to southern States," Mr. Bagotia said.

As Tal Chhapar attracts a large number of raptor species for their habitation, the WWF has started monitoring them to understand their status and distribution in the sanctuary. WWF-India's manager (Raptor Conservation Programme) Rinkita Gurav said that recording the numbers of birds of prey and their population trends, behaviour and feeding habits would give an insight on how they were thriving or declining.

"Their presence in the specific habitats makes it vital to monitor them. We will record their interaction with other animals as well. WWF-India will provide insights after understanding them and if any threats are observed, it will be shared with the Rajasthan Government's Forest Department," Ms. Gurav said.

The forest authorities are also examining a proposal to develop the Jaswantgarh forest block in Nagaur district, situated at a short distance from Tal Chhapar, for the shifting of the excess population of blackbucks facing shortage of territory and grazing resources. The High Court has suggested the creation of a corridor for free movement of animals through an underpass across the railway line passing between the two areas.

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