

KAMBALAKONDA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY IN VISAKHAPATNAM ABUZZ WITH NEW FEATURES

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Spotted deer at Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary, which is abuzz with new features with the AP Forest Department initiating a series of measures to develop the place and support and document the flora and fauna of the region | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

Sounds of noisy crickets of the forest fade off while the chirrup of birds tune in at the same time at dawn. As a group of trekkers steps into the Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary located in the heart of Visakhapatnam, they are greeted by a herd of spotted deer staring right at them — super vigilant, ears pointed right up. The musical trill of a rufous treepie echoes through the trees. Guided by scientists and birdwatchers, the trekkers walk towards the trekking trail maintained well with boards mentioning distance and altitude at every 500 metres distance. Natural stairs with stone packing and wooden sticks are built along the sloppy zones as they carefully make their way through the trail. A little ahead, kayaks slash through the waters breaking the morning silence. Spread over an area of 71 square kilometres, Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary is abuzz with new features and a lot more is coming up with the AP Forest Department initiating a series of measures to develop the place and document the flora and fauna of the region. Bordered by Simhachalam hill range on the West and Gambheeram reservoir on the North-east, the sanctuary is a tropical deciduous forest with a canopy of tree cover of mixed composition along with scrubland and meadows. The sanctuary holds a good number of faunal diversity including aves, reptiles and mammals.

A view of the waterbody at Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary, which is abuzz with new features with the AP Forest Department initiating a series of measures to develop the place and support and document the flora and fauna of the region. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

A part of the sanctuary (559 acres) is open for community-based eco-tourism park, central nursery, Animal Rescue Centre and Technology Dissemination Centre (TDC). Soon, wildlife safari, additional trek routes and forest trail paths will be open for visitors of the sanctuary. “We have recently received funding from Indian Oil Corporation Limited under Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER) for establishment of the Eastern Ghats Biodiversity Centre at Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary,” says District Forest Officer Anant Shankar. The Department will develop an Eastern Ghats Biodiversity Centre comprising an orchidarium, a medicinal plants garden, a herbal garden, and a Nature interpretation centre.

Visitors taking selfies at newly constructed wooden selfie points at Kambalakonda Wildlife

Sanctuary, which is abuzz with new features with the AP Forest Department initiating a series of measures to develop the place and support and document the flora and fauna of the region. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

At present, the sanctuary has an adventure zone with some new additions that include rappelling, slacklining, and other activities. Recently, a research and monitoring centre was opened where the data of all the flora and fauna of the wildlife sanctuary and peripheral reserve forests is being maintained. "We are currently also maintaining the water quality data and preserving specimens of some animal species like the Indian clouded gecko. Visakhapatnam is the species type locality (the place in which a specimen was found) of the clouded gecko, which makes the species significant to this region. We want to highlight such species," says Yagnapathy Adari, project scientist of Kambalakonda. At the monitoring centre, eggs of the checkered keelback snake, which were rescued from an apartment complex in the vicinity some days ago, are also being incubated.

Eggs of checkered keelback snake being incubated at the research and monitoring centre at Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary, which is abuzz with new features with the AP Forest Department initiating a series of measures to develop the place and support and document the flora and fauna of the region. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

During the pandemic, extensive surveys were conducted to document and prepare a preliminary checklist of herpetofauna from Simhachalam Hills and Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary in Visakhapatnam district. Various sampling methods were followed to record herpetofauna diversity. As part of the survey done by Yagnapathy with the permission of the AP Forest Department, a total of 58 species belonging to three orders were recorded. "But the overall herpetofauna diversity of the study area may not have been completely documented. Road kills and unseen hunting practices have caused a significant level of risk to the existing diversity of herpetofauna," says Yagnapathy. Kambalakonda is home to more than 120 species of birds. Most common sightings include bulbuls, barbets, cuckoos, flycatchers, hornbills and leafbirds, starlings among others. The perennial streams provide habitat for species like white-breasted waterhen, common moorhen, herons, lapwings, and teals. Here, one can also spot species with significant threat levels like the painted stork and pale-capped pigeon.

As part of the development plans of the sanctuary, the AP Forest Department is working with wildlife illustrator Richa Kedia to map the entire area and display the maps along the sanctuary. "The digital maps captures the essence of the entire zone of the sanctuary with the waterbody and trekking routes as well as the adjacent East Ghats Biodiversity Centre. I am currently working on the brochure maps which will be more detailed and also highlight the various plant species in a story format with cultural references so that people can connect to it better," says Richa.

The Technology Dissemination Centre (TDC) and central nursery are adjacent to the eco-tourism park. The TDC has a research wing where seeds from plus trees (tree with high vigour) are used in various experimental plantations and also through clonal plantations. The place consists of a central nursery where typical forest tree species are raised. The central nursery has a capacity to raise more than 50,000 seedlings. In the year 2018, the AP Forest Department started collecting seeds from all the reserved forests from Visakhapatnam and neighboring districts and successfully collected seeds from over 120 species. "The seeds were stored, treated, and raised. A total of 84 species could be successfully raised as seedlings and saplings here," says Yagnapathy. The aim of the central nursery is to raise various species representing the floral diversity in the entire Eastern Ghats. The seed collected from their respective plantation sites during the respective seeding period and planted on raised nursery beds inside the nursery area. Here a hi-tech mist chamber and an orchidarium is coming up shortly. "The

entire area will be developed into a knowledge centre that will be open to the public.” adds Yagnapathy. This will include the centre that will hold live models of ecosystems characteristic of the Eastern Ghats including native flora and fauna, the rivers and tribal communities. Next to the TDC is the Vanmitra or Social Forestry Nursery. “The main role of the social forestry nursery is to raise agroforestry species to encourage farmers and agricultural practitioners to raise forest trees along with their crops since its beneficial in protecting the undercrop from sunlight, wind and forms of erosion and raise avenue plants and fruit yielding plant species. The stock material raised at the Social Forestry Nursery is prepared from the plus tree seeds. The Social Forestry nursery also has a vermicompost unit, made using elephant and bison dung acquired from the zoological park,” says Anant.

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