

# PELICANS NEST ON PALM TREES AT KOONTHANKULAM BIRD SANCTUARY IN TIRUNELVELI

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February 15, 2023 04:18 pm | Updated 05:56 pm IST

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Pelicans have occupied 17 palm trees in Koonthankulam | Photo Credit: Sasikumar Samikan

The pelicans have arrived at Koonthankulam. They usually find a cosy spot on shrubs near the lake to build their nests for the breeding season. But this time, they have chosen to nest atop palm trees in the region. "This is the first time they are doing so in my 55 years of observing and documenting birds in Tirunelveli," says 68-year-old S Balpandi, a resident bird expert. Balpandi is from Koonthankulam, that was declared a bird sanctuary in 1994, and spends most of his days at the wetlands of Tirunelveli.

"Spot-billed pelicans arrived late last year expecting the lake to fill up with rains in December," points out Balpandi. "But we have not had good rains in our region and hence our wetlands are not full." As a result, the pelicans flew away, and stopped one kilometre from the nearby Arumaneri wetland to nest on tall palm trees.

Each tree has three to four nests that the birds have fashioned out of twigs on spread out tender palm leaves | Photo Credit: Sasikumar Samikan

"Pelicans usually live in groups and have occupied 17 palm trees," Balpandi says, adding: "Each tree has three to four nests that the birds have fashioned out of twigs on spread-out, tender palm leaves." The nests have around three eggs each. This adds up to 10 to 15 birds on each tree, making them quite crowded.

"People from our village petitioned the District Collector to help, and with support from the District Forest Officer, water was released into Koonthankulam for two days from the Manimuthar dam in the district," Balpandi explains. This eased the situation a little, and Balpandi reports cormorants, darters, black-headed and glossy ibises nesting at Koonthankulam. "It will do our birds good if more water is released," he adds.

But the pelicans continue to nest on palm trees. Armed with his notebook and field glasses, Balpandi travels to see them almost every other day on his two-wheeler.

According to S Balachandran, who is in charge of Bombay Natural History Society's Bird Migration Study Centre at Point Calimere, this behaviour is being observed for the first time in Tamil Nadu. "However, pelicans are adaptable, and can even nest on man-made stands," he

adds.

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