

BLACKBUCK HABITAT FACES THREAT

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Rise in population of feral horses poses a challenge to the Forest department.

Rising population of feral horses in the Point Calimere Wildlife and Bird Sanctuary in Nagapattinam district is posing a threat to natural sustenance of blackbuck antelope species for which the very habitat was created in 1967, wildlife enthusiasts apprehend.

The Forest Department is facing difficulty in relocating at least 200 feral horses - a number arrived at by a conservative estimate of field staff - which had proliferated in and around the sanctuary over the decades after the once-domesticated animals were abandoned by the owners in the surrounding villages.

Maintenance of the horses that was a mode of transport decades back between Vedaranyam and Kodiakarai became a burden for owners after road link was created. The animals that were abandoned have strayed into the over 1,700 hectare sanctuary with vast swathes of grassland.

The strong presence of feral horses has meant less feeding space for the nearly 700 blackbucks and about 800 spotted deer. There are at least 100 jackals that are at the end of food cycle in the sanctuary. The prey-base is a determinant for its population as well.

“If not for the presence of the feral horses, the number of blackbuck antelopes and spotted deer would have been higher,” S. Balachandran, senior scientist, Bombay Natural History Society, said.

“Feral horses are a threat to the population of blackbuck and spotted deer. Capturing and relocating the feral horses will entail big expenditure. Moreover, there is a question of where to relocate them. Sterilising the animals is an option under consideration,” Naga Sathish Gidijala, Wildlife Warden, Nagapattinam, said. The Forest Department has been trying hard to drive the feral horses away from the patches of grassland in the sanctuary towards the shoreline by deploying anti-poaching watchers. The public in the surroundings complain to the Forest Department when the feral horses enter villages in herds, but there is pretty little that could be done officially since they are not wild animals.

The Forest Department is keen on getting rid of the feral horses for another crucial reason. The floral diversity in the sanctuary is under threat due to proliferation of *prosopis juliflora* the seeds of which the feral horses litter in their droppings.

Every year, the department has been spending substantial amounts in clearing overgrowth of *prosopis juliflora*. The fear is that if the spread of the invasive weed becomes widespread, the situation will turn unmanageable.

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