

## **Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary: An Overview**

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India is blessed with rich faunal and floral diversity. Birds are insignia of royalty in India's natural wealth. They are omnipresent and add colour to our environment. India's avifauna is diverse with unique birds supporting an impressive diversity of 1235 species representing 14% of the world's total of around 9000 species.

Accounting to the bird paradises in India the Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary is one among them and is a lesser-known sanctuary. Nelapattu, a small village based heronry in south Andhra Pradesh is an attractive centre for thousands of waterbirds, and a symbol of harmonious coexistence of humans and birds. Realising the importance of conserving the rich bio-diversity of avifauna, the Nelapattu heronry was declared as "Nelapattu Birds Sanctuary" in 1976 for the purpose of protecting, propagating and developing of wildlife. It is located in Doravarisatram mandal of Sullurpet taluk in Nellore district and is about 105 km from Chennai city on the Kolkatta National Highway. The sanctuary is about 458.92 ha, comprising Kalluru Reserve Forest of 288.15 ha, Nelapattu tank of 82.56 ha and unreserved forest areas of 88.22 ha. The sanctuary receives an annual rainfall of about 1000 mm. The temperature ranges from 27° c to 35° c. In peak summer, the mercury rises up to 45° c.

Locals say the Nelapattu Bird preserve is about four decades old. Birds are important guests and the villagers cheerfully accept those noisy, smelly guests giving them total protection for as long as they stay. They believe that the birds are symbols of good luck and that their yearly arrival ensures timely gathering of clouds (rain) and good harvests. The traditional protection of birds and the eco friendly nature of these villagers is eleemosynary having a strong material basis in the form of 'Guano'. Every year, the villagers get tones of free manure, which enrich their field. A great volume of guano is dissolved in the tank water and the villagers use this water for irrigating their crops. This shows the symbiotic relationship between the humans and birds making this village heronry significant for conservation. The attitude of the local in protecting this heronry is definitely a psychological feel of satisfaction that the villagers enjoy.

Nelapattu receives water only during the monsoon. The villagers cultivate their land with this water and its is only drinking water source for the livestock in and around the Nelapattu village during summer. The birds leave the sanctuary during April/May because of insufficient water. Hence, some measures should be taken to store adequate water in the tank throughout the year to conserve this important heronry.

Nine species of birds in hundreds were breeding at Nelapattu. The Spot-billed Pelican is the flagship species in this sanctuary. More than 500 of this species breed in this site and is considered one of the Asia's largest Pelicanry. The Important Bird Area Programme of Bombay Natural History Society a designate partner of BirdLife International identified this site as an 'Important Bird Area'. Other birds seen here are the Asian Open-billed Stork, Oriental White Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Little Cormorant, Indian Shag, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Little Egret, Median Egret, Large Egret, Cattle Egret and waterfowls such as Common Teal, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveller, Gadwall, Garganey, Spot-billed Duck, Little Grebe, Common Coot, Indian Moorhen, several waders and rarely Greater Flamingos are also seen. Among these, Asian Open-billed Stork is the first to arrive at Nelapattu followed by the Oriental White Ibis and the Spot-billed Pelican.

In Nelapattu, the birds nest on the *Barringtonia acutangula* trees. However, these birds start breeding and nesting during October, they start arriving during September and check the area for feasibility of breeding, nesting in relation to availability of food source, adequate water, nesting site, and disturbance in the area. It settles during October, and stays for about six months up to April.

This sanctuary will be one of the ideal places for eco-education to the students and public. Hence, training programs should be conducted for the field staff of Forest Departments and locals to create conservation awareness. Identification of birds for regular periods, to form a checklist of birds visiting the sanctuary is also needed. The birds of this sanctuary are feeding in the crop fields of the surrounding villages, rivers and nearby Pulicat Lake returning to the sanctuary for nesting and shelter. It is important to protect these birds when they move outside Nelapattu from the danger of poaching pressures. Conservation awareness camps in the surrounding villages, motivating students, youth's, and public to support the conservation efforts to bring people for birds could rectify the poaching pressures. By providing basic facilities for protection, propagation and conservation of avifauna at Nelapattu, this lesser known sanctuary will definitely be a model for eco-education and conservation.

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