

Mangrove boat ride



GOA'S 'WILD' SIDE

WHILE GOA MAY BE KNOWN FOR ITS BEACHES, IT ALSO HAS A VIBRANT WILDLIFE THAT IS WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BINDU GOPAL RAO



Common sandpiper

One of the first things that I always notice about Goa is its abundant greenery, lush mangroves and vibrant water bodies. All of this also means that the state has a varied flora and fauna that gives it one more reason to be the holiday destination of choice.

Start your wild exploration at one of the best known sanctuaries of Goa — the Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary located in the hills of central Goa, 35 km from Margao. Although tiny at a mere eight square kilometres, this deciduous forest has sparse vegetation that makes it easier to spot wild animals and is located in the Western Ghats. Home to wild animals like the sloth bear, elephant, deer, gaur, bison, porcupine and leopard, there is also a vibrant bird life here like the Oriental dwarf kingfisher, yellow bulbul and brown fish owl. The Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary in Mollem is the largest wildlife area spread across 240 square kilometres that is home to animals like the spotted deer and gaur. This is where you can see the

magnificent Dudhsagar Falls that falls from a height of 603 m and is a sight to behold. Also check out the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary in Canacona where you can see the Malabar crested eagle, spotted hyenas, Indian pangolin and more from the many watch towers that dot the sanctuary. The Mandovi-Zuari Wildlife Sanctuary in Dauna Paula has about 20 different species of mangroves and attracts fish, snakes, jackals and crocodiles.

Did you know that Goa has a whopping 430 plus species of birds? Well if that took you by surprise, it is true and this is also why the state government has started an annual bird festival that takes you to the various birding hotspots in the state. A place that you must visit however is the Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary in Chorao. Set amidst dense mangroves this place is home to several species like herons, painted storks, ospreys, blue-winged teals and pintails. The best way to explore the sights of Chorao Island is to hop on to a boat and cruise through the tributaries that will bring you at close quarters to the birds. This is also the place to spot the smooth-coated otter, a species that is currently listed as vulnerable.

The Wild Otters Research, a conservation research centre, is based here to research on the animal, its behavior and rehabilitation needs as well. You can also spot snipes and cormorants near the freshwater Carambolim Lake located close by from here. It is ideal to visit the sanctuary in the early hours of the morning, when bird sightings usually happen.

There is a lot of walking that is to be done to reach your boat for the cruise so be mindful of the same. Also as there are limited boats available it is ideal to book in advance to avoid disappointment. With its unique combination of tropical forests and marine flora Goa is a delight for its wildlife – do not miss it on your next visit.