

TAL CHHAPAR : BLACKBUCK SANCTUARY AND RAPTORS PARADISE

Dr Renu Kohli,

Government Bangur College, Pali.

ABSTRACT

Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated near Chhapar town of Churu district of Rajasthan. Churu is located in the Thar Desert and part of the famous Shekhawati region. Tal Chhapar was given the status of a sanctuary on May 11, 1966..Today the sanctuary is heaven for blackbucks and is home to several species of birds including massive numbers of raptors.



Blackbuck lekking

Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated near Chhapar town of Churu district of Northwestern Rajasthan, and is part of the famous Shekhawati region. Tal Chhapar was a shooting reserve of the Maharaja of Bikaner. No one except the Maharaja and his guests were allowed to shoot blackbuck, demoiselle cranes and bar-headed geese. The present area of the Sanctuary is 719 ha. It is situated on the border of the Great Indian Thar Desert. It was established as a "Reserved area" in 1962 and was given the status of a sanctuary in 1966. There is no perennial river in or the surrounding area of the sanctuary. The water quality of the reserve is brackish saline.

The blackbucks are also known as the Indian antelopes (*antelope cervicapra*), belonging to family Bovidae, known for their long and curved horns. Blackbucks are the main residents of the sanctuary,

with numbers ranging around 3500-4000 as of latest estimates. Native to the Indian subcontinent, blackbuck occur in Pakistan (small introduced population in Lal Suhanra National Park), Nepal, and the northwestern and southern regions of India, but are now extinct in Bangladesh. It comes under the category of 'Near Threatened' in the International Union for Conservation and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List and is listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, which prohibits the hunting of blackbuck.

The Sanctuary has tall stumps and sticks erected all around and they serve as perches for various birds. It lies on the way of many migratory birds. The most spectacular migration seen here is that of harriers. Montagu's (*Circus pygargus*) and Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) are more common, while Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*) and Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) are found in smaller numbers. Common Kestrel can be seen very commonly. During August-September, due to rains Tal Chhapar becomes a green heaven, a large number of migratory Eurasian rollers (*Coracias garrulus*) pass through the area, foraging on grasshoppers that thrive on the green grass. After spending about two months, the Eurasian roller goes to southern Africa to spend the winter. Indian Roller (*Coracias bengalensis*) can be found throughout the year.



Indian Roller

FAUNAL DIVERSITY IN TAL CHAPPAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

As many as 310 species of birds recorded in the area which includes Eastern Imperial Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Tawny Eagles, Sparrow Hawks, Crested Larks, Demoiselle Cranes, Little Green Bee-Eaters, Skylarks, Green Bee-eaters. The forest is also known for the flock of Demoiselle Cranes, roaming around and feeding on the roots of the Mothiya grass (*Cyperus rotundus*). The word "Mothiya" comes from the word "Moti" or from the Hindi word for pearl. The shape of the seed of this grass is like very fine round shaped pearls, this majestic migratory bird that flies in from far off countries as Siberia, Magnolia, central Asia and starts to migrate in the month of September. Mothiya is also food for blackbucks and birds which dig it from the earth with their storks. Some desert adapted plants like *Prosopis cineraria*, *Acacia leucophloea*, *A. nilotica*, *Salvadora aoleodes*, *Salvadora persica*, *Capparis decidua*, *Opuntia* sp., *Tephrosia purpuria*, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Ziziphus mauritiana* (ber), *Prosopis juliflora* (vilayati babul), *Azadirachta indica* (neem), *Ficus religiosa* (peepal) are very common and dominant vegetation found in and around Talchhappar area. The brackish soil of the sanctuary also supports salt-loving small bushes and grasses.

Tal Chhappar is also famous for Spiny-tailed Lizards. Spiny-tailed lizards are cold-blooded reptiles and need to warm up their blood using the heat of Sun out of their holes. These lizards start their hibernation by the start of November. To survive the hibernation period, they feed like crazy. These

Lizards are vegetarians but the need for soaking up the sun and preparing for winters leaves them defenseless from the predators in the sky. Eagles, Buzzards, and Falcons all are hunters of them..

Almost all the dry grassland birds of northwest India are seen in Tal Chhappar (Great Indian Bustard). The best time to visit for raptors is towards the end of September, when their favorite prey, the Spiny-tailed lizards abound in the grasslands. The resident raptors of Tal Chhappar are Laggar Falcon, red-necked Falcon, Tawny eagle, Short-toed snake eagle, Black-winged kite, Spotted owl, Indian eagle owl, and Egyptian vulture.

The winter migrant raptors of Tal Chhappar include Steppe eagle, Imperial eagle, Greater spotted eagle, Common kestrels, Pallid harrier, Long-legged buzzard, Cinereous vulture, Griffon Vulture and Eurasian sparrowhawk, Short-eared owl and Indian scops owl.

The passage and local migrant raptors of Tal Chhappar are White-eyed buzzard, Lesser kestrels, Marsh harrier, Booted eagle, Bonelli eagle, Indian spotted eagle. Apart from the rich avifauna, Tal Chhappar also hosts several other fauna that can be encountered easily including huge nos. of Blackbucks, Chinkara, Neelgai, Desert Jerbils, Desert Fox and Desert Cat, Indian Fox, Hedgehogs, Mongoose, Spiny-tailed Lizard.

One of nature's spectacular behaviors worth seeing is their mating system known as lekking. Lekking is a unique and immensely interesting behavior exhibited by male blackbucks. During the blackbuck breeding season, called rutting, blackbucks establish territories. Every year at a particular place in the grassland, males in their prime gather and start marking their territories. Each male's territory has within it one or more saucer-shaped dung piles, where he defecates and urinates multiple times and sits and rubs his secretions on small blades of grass in the vicinity. This is done to signal to other males and interested females. The male also guards his territory from other intruding males. This aggregation of male territories is known as a 'lek' and the behavior is known as 'lekking'. Each

male holds an area ranging from 20 to 100 meters in diameter, with the smallest territories at the center. Since they are cramped so close together, settling border disputes is a challenge.

Another area on the outskirts of Tal chapter is, Gaushala, a community grazing area. Ghausala has short coarse grass, large trees.



Laggar Falcon

Indian spotted creeper bird, with its melodious whistle, can be observed at the Kejri trees as it comes on them in search of insects which it finds in the bark of the tree and since it has a marbled black and white plumage it is difficult to spot while it forages on the trunk of dark, fissured trees from its curved long beak. Some other highlights from the area included Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and Stoliczka's bushchat.

Animal carcass dumping yard nearby is known for raptors including vultures, Egyptian Griffon and Cinereous Vultures can be seen feeding on the rotting flesh. Along with all the vultures, a number of other raptors present in the area are dozens of Steppe Eagles, Shikra, Tawny eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagles, and Laggar Falcons.

THREATS

Increase in human population around the sanctuary, and unplanned and rampant construction activities.

Hyper-aridity, grazing pressure, the invasive weed *Prosopis juliflora*, and salt mines in the vicinity.



White eyed Buzzard

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