

## KEOLADEO NATIONAL PARK - A WETLAND OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE

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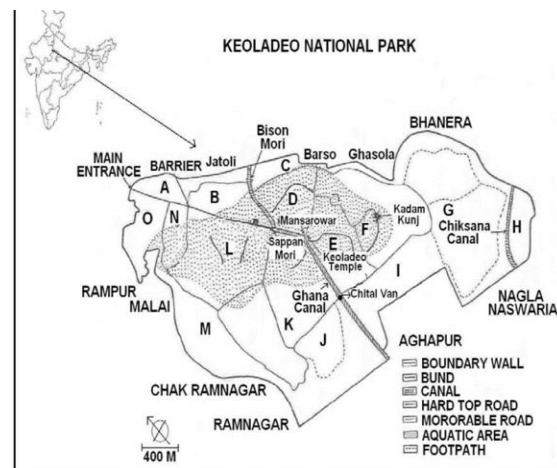


A wetland is an area of land that is either covered by water or saturated with water either through the year or for varying periods of time during the year. Wetlands are transition zones, they are neither totally dry land nor totally underwater; they have characteristics of both.

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to rain forests and coral reefs. Wetlands support both aquatic and terrestrial species. The prolonged presence of water creates conditions that favor the growth of specially adapted plants (hydrophytes) and promote the development of characteristic wetland (hydric) soils. Wetlands perform vivacious functions like water conservation, food supply, cultural value, biodiversity hotspots, pollution abatement etc

One of the most important bird breeding and feeding grounds, Keoladeo National Park (KNP), India's one of the 1<sup>st</sup> two wetlands in the country to be recognised as Ramsay sites along with Chilika Lake (Orissa), lies 170 kms south of New Dehli, at the confluence of the Gambhir and Banga Ganga rivers in Bharatpur district. It originated in as a royal hunting reserve during the 1850s and was a game reserve for Maharajas and the British. In fact, Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India from 1936 to 1943, shot

over thousands of ducks. with his hunting party in a single day! The duck shoot record is mentioned in an inscription on a pillar near the Keoladeo Temple.. Keoladeo, the name derives from an ancient Hindu temple, devoted to Lord Shiva, which stands at the centre of the park. The park is still referred to locally as simply 'Ghana 'meaning dense forest.



*Map -Keoladeo National Park*

### HISTORY OF KEOLADEO NATIONAL PARK

The area was developed into a duck shoot reserves in 1899 by Prince Harbhamji the than Prince of Morvi State in Gujarat during the time he was appointed administrator of Bharatpur. Inspired by the duck shoot reserves that the prince had experience in England he got bunds and dikes constructed (between 1850 and 1899) that increased water holding capacity of the depression. The entire area was flooded put the first time in 1901 with water from Ajan Bund which had been built earlier in 1700 by Suraj Mal Mahal rulers of the state of the Bharatpur .

After Independence, with the consistent efforts of Dr. Salim Ali, the ruler of Bharatpur handed the Ghana reserve to the Government of Rajasthan, which notified it as a Bird Sanctuary on the advice of the National Committee for Bird Preservation, India on March 13, 1956. The shooting though continued till 1965. The rulers retained hunting rights until these were withdrawn in 1972. A masonry wall was constructed around the sanctuary perimeter from 1977 to 1981. In 1982, Keoladeo was declared a national park and then later listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985. The 29 sq.km square park is home to over 370 species of birds besides invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. Keoladeo National Park offers well-defined treks which can be covered on either foot, or cycle or rickshaws. In fact, the park management has trained the rickshaw pullers in bird watching as they make for extremely knowledgeable guides. Chilika Lake (Orissa) and Keoladeo National Park (Rajasthan) were recognized as the first Ramsar Sites of India in 1981.

## RAMSAR CONVENTION

The Convention on Wetlands is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

The Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. Since then, almost 90% of UN member states, from all the world's geographic regions, have acceded to become "Contracting Parties". Currently over 2,400 Ramsar Sites on the territories of 172 Convention Contracting Parties across the world, covering more than 2.5 million square kilometres. The network of Ramsar Sites includes coastal and inland wetlands of all types. The Convention on Wetlands works to reverse wetland loss and degradation worldwide.

India became a party to the Ramsar Convention in 1981



*Painted stork*

The Park is the wintering ground of an enormous congregation of migratory waterfowl and home to resident avifauna. It was only wintering ground for the central population of the rare and highly endangered Siberian Crane (*Grus leucogeranus*) in India, which was last seen there in 2002. While many reasons are given for the species absence in India, a major reason is likely the global decline in its population. Owing to the abundance of the birds, KNP is often referred as 'Birders Paradise'. The grassland system is mostly of savannah type with thickets. The wetland system of the Park is wholly dependent on the monsoon. The total Park is segmented into 15 blocks or compartments, named alphabetically from A to O, separated by earthen dykes or trails.

Its wetland, woodland and grassland are host to enormous congregations of waterfowl in winter.

Wetlands constitute one-third of the KNP of the Park is wholly dependent on the monsoon, and are the lifeline of the park due to their unique biodiversity. A large number of breeding colonies of fish-eating birds occur in the monsoon and autumn months. Apart from the avian variety, several species of microbes, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and mammals are part of this ecosystem.

The grassland habitat is dominated by khus grass (*Vetiveria zizanioides*), a tall coarse grass whose roots contain oil famous for its aroma, interspersed with few other trees and shrubs. The grassland provides an excellent habitat for insects, insectivorous birds (rollers, drongos and flycatchers),

partridges, quails and several species of larks and pipits which inhabit grasslands.

The grassland and woodland of park is also home to a range of mammals and reptiles including pythons and other snakes, deer, sambars, blackbucks, jackals, lizards, and fishing cats—as well as some 50 species of fish and 25 species of butterflies.

Other terrestrial habitats like woodlands are frequented with mammals such as the Jackal, Bengal Fox, Indian Porcupine, Wild Boar, Small Indian Mongoose, Grey Indian Mongoose, Wild Cats, Hyenas and Small Indian Civet etc.

## THREATS TO THE KEOLADEO NATIONAL PARK

There are various factors that threaten the habitat and species of the national park.

1. Shortage of water in the park (source of water, its quantity and quality also affect the park).
2. Invasive vegetation (Prosopis, Paspalum, Eichhornia).
3. Contamination of water with pesticides, fertilizers etc.: The inflow of high levels of pesticides and fertilizers from the adjoining agricultural fields in the park area influences the plant productivity which affects the ecological succession processes. Higher levels of pesticides in the water get bio-magnified through the food chain and adversely affect the birds and other faunal species.
4. Fire: Occurrences of man induced fire affect the breeding of terrestrial birds. Recurring fire in the grassland changes the species composition and leads to habitat loss.

## BEST TIME TO VISIT

Bharatpur Wildlife Sanctuary/ National Park is open throughout the year but the ideal visiting months are from August-November for resident birds and October- February for migratory birds.



*Cobra*

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