

WILDLIFE

IN FINE FEATHER

In an unassuming town deep in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, **Lakshmi Sharath** discovers a birdwatcher's paradise





DEEPAK/EMBAU/FICRR

It was a seamless spread of blue that greeted me. A faint glare from the morning sun covered the small islands that mushroomed in the waters. The hills slowly emerged from the haze, the ridges forming an outline in the distant horizon. I stood at the edge of the road taking in the scene. I was in Ganeshgudi – a quiet, nondescript town lost somewhere amidst the Western Ghats near the banks of the Kali River. It had no tourist tag attached to it; neither was there a wildlife sanctuary nor a hill station to boast of. No beaches or temples either. Its only claim to fame was that it houses the Supa Dam, built over the Kali River in the '70s. The town itself is mostly inhabited by employees of the power station which was commissioned in 1985.

To many a wildlife enthusiast, Ganeshgudi is just another town



DAVE M HUNT PHOTOGRAPHY/DREAMSTIME.COM

(Clockwise from facing page)
The Malabar pied hornbill

Birders photographing birds
at Jungle Lodge and Resorts,
Ganeshgudi

Common kingfishers have
whirring wing beats and high-
pitched vocalisations

FYI

When to go

The best time to visit is during winter which lasts from October to February.

Getting there

Ganeshgudi is approximately 500km from Bangalore. The nearest rail head is Londa, about 30km away. It is a three-hour drive (115km) from the nearest international airport at Dabolim, Goa.

Getting around

You can either bring your own vehicle or hire a taxi at Londa. Most resorts also provide car rental services with pick-ups from the railway station.

Tourist information

www.karnatakaturism.org, www.karnatakaholidays.net

on the way to Dandeli that's home to the Anshi National Park and Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary. But, this biodiversity hotspot is Karnataka's best kept secret as it is home to several endemic species of birds and we were here to meet some of them.

We drove down State Highway 34, a road devoid of vehicles; not a soul in sight. It was only us and the dense vegetation around. The birds had begun singing their odes to the morning sun. A while later, we checked into a rustic guest house with an unusual name, the Old Magazine House that's part of the Jungle Lodges & Resorts (JLR) group. Set within a reserve forest at an altitude of 1,800ft, the property is shaded by a canopy of deciduous trees, so dense that I could only see patches of sky through the leaves. I was told that this was once an ammunition dump used to store dynamite, probably during the construction of the dam, and it added to Ganeshgudi's old-world charm.

Sitting down to a breakfast outdoors, we observed the birds quickly quench their thirst at the bowls of water placed amongst the bushes. Our first visitor was a brilliantly hued blue-capped rock thrush in a dazzling coat of orange, flitting around, not in the least worried about our presence. Its colours did not just attract our attention but

a female thrush as well – the pair seemed to be engaged in an interesting conversation. The thrushes were not the only thirsty lot. We soon saw a line of birds waiting their turn. A lone Tickell's blue flycatcher seemed rather impatient, and quickly vanished into the foliage after a sip or two. It was soon followed by the white-bellied blue flycatcher, an Asian fairy-bluebird sitting on a branch, as well as a verditer flycatcher in its feathered coat. It was indeed a day of flycatchers and they came in various shades of blue.

The names of the birds matched their vibrant hues: the emerald dove, scarlet minivet and ruby-throated bulbul. Every colour stood out against the muddy ochre background. A Malabar whistling thrush came out of

nowhere, trilling away like a happy-go-lucky schoolboy. His shimmering dark-blue coat glistened in the sun as he dipped into the bowl for a little bath. The other birds flew into the woods, giving him some privacy. With a camera in one hand and binoculars in the other, my breakfast remained untouched.

While you can hire the services of one of the lodge guides, it isn't necessary. The winged creatures are all over the place and with a little observation, even a novice birdwatcher is sure to luck out. Just make sure you are equipped with a pair of binoculars and a guidebook on the birds of the region.

We walked around the woody environs craning our necks in



SANDEEPAWADI/FLICR



MCB BAIK HALWA/GETTY IMAGES

(Clockwise from bottom right) An Asian paradise flycatcher feeding its offspring

Old Magazine House, Ganeshgudi

The view of the Kali River from Sunset Point, Ganeshgudi

A male ruby-throated hummingbird



KANMAN ASY / FLICKR

DIVINE CHORUS

The scientific name of the Asian paradise flycatcher is *Terpsiphone paradisi* meaning 'sweet-voice of paradise'



BRIAN LASEBY / DREAMTIME.COM

anticipation of more sightings. The beak of the Indian grey hornbill peeped out from the foliage. I sat for a while and watched the multihued Indian pitta shyly walking around. The bird of the day, however, was the Asian paradise flycatcher, swishing its white tail, doing a bit of a jig, hopping around from one branch to another. It is considered lucky to spot this elusive bird that's usually perched high up in the trees. But here it was, parading before us.

We barely noticed the sun striding across the sky with the dense forest cover above. As evening approached,

we drove around Ganeshgudi. A detour took us through the forest where the Kali flowed, reflecting the greens and yellows of trees. A contemplative boatman there was only too eager to take us around. The silence rung in our ears as we bobbed along. Even the birds had gone quiet. Ganeshgudi's secret had been discovered by them years ago and they had successfully managed to keep this pristine spot away from noisy tourists. A white-throated kingfisher looked keenly for its evening meal while we floated about. The sun finally set and we wandered on into the twilight. **E**

FACT FILE

AT A GLANCE

A part of the Uttara Kannada District of Karnataka, Ganeshgudi is a quiet town on the banks of the Kali River. It is surrounded by dense foliage and rich fauna, and is a lesser-known haven for birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts.



Built across the Kali

River, the Supa Dam is located about 2km from Ganeshgudi and generates power for various parts of the state. Its backwaters offer serene views of the landscape along with plenty of birdwatching opportunities. Head to the Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary (Solad Complex, JN Rd, Dandeli, Karnataka 581325.

+91-82- 8423-3721. Daily 6am-6pm.) for a glimpse of the black panther, sambhar, Malabar flying squirrel and the Malabar pied hornbill. Adjacent to the sanctuary is Anshi National Park which is situated in an endangered part of the Western Ghats and home to a variety of flora and fauna including teak and silver oak trees and

animals like pythons, leopards and the Malabar civet cat. Together they make up the Dandeli-Anshi Tiger Reserve, covering an area of about 875sq km protected under Project Tiger.



Stay in an ethnic bamboo hut or a dormitory at Old Magazine House (Near Supa

Dam, Uttara Kannada District, Ganeshgudi, Karnataka 581325. +91-80-4055-4055. www.junglelodges.com/old-magazine-house. ₹), an erstwhile ammunition dump which has been converted into a wildlife resort. Birding enthusiasts can explore the surrounding woods. The resort also organises white-water rafting trips,

coracle rides and treks. At the Hornbill River Resort (Near Supa Dam, State Highway 34, Joida Taluka, Ganeshgudi, Karnataka 581365. +91-98806-83323. www.hornbillriverresort.com. ₹), you can choose to camp in a tent or stay in a cottage, tree house or rock house, and enjoy adventure sports like white-water rafting.