

Sighting of the White-bellied Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) in Andhra University Campus, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.

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The White-Bellied Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) is a handsome raptor belonging to the family Accipitridae. It has a wide distribution range on the sea coast of India from about Bombay, South to the East coast. It feeds mainly on sea snakes and fishes. It occupies the same localities for several years of succession and nests high up in casuarina trees (*Casuarinas equisetifolia*) near the sea shore (Ali, 1996). It is protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.

Since the beginning of the South-West monsoon showers in June, 2003 a pair of White-bellied Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) was frequently sighted in the morning and evening hours (between 7-8 am and 5-7 pm) on Red sander woods (*Pterocarpus santalum*) in Andhra University Campus, Visakhapatnam. The Eagles were recognized from the descriptive features (Grewal, 1995) ashy brown above; pure white from head to under parts; wedge-shaped tail; in over-head flight under wings and terminal tail bar contrasting with black feathers.

The University Campus is located at a distance of 6 km from the Visakhapatnam Railway station bordering the Bay of Bengal in the southeast (seashore is within reachable distance of 2 km from the University campus) and a fringe of hills in the northwest. The campus has lush green vegetation of semi evergreen trees; deciduous scrub; perennial shrubs and creepers have created a very good habitat and source of attraction for many birds of diversified food habits (scavengers, predators, insectivores, frugivores and omnivores) of resident and local migrant categories.

Earlier studies (Ali, 1945; Raju, 1985) on the avifauna of this region have shown that the White-bellied Sea Eagle was commonly seen and nested on this coastline of Visakhapatnam. Even in the early 1990's the first author frequently sighted the species during the surveys conducted for the Olive Ridley Sea Turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) nesting habitats and status of nests along the beaches of Visakhapatnam. However, subsequent enquiries with the local fishermen of this region revealed that the species has been rarely seen on this coastline in recent years (2000s). Most of the coastal villages are familiar with this Eagle called 'Ala (*Samudrapu*) Gadda' in the local language.

The main reason for its rare appearance in this coastline was the gradual disappearance of the coastal strand vegetation and massive logging of Casuarina (*Casuarinas equisetifolia*) plantations of 20 to 30 years in a continuous 18km shoreline stretch between Indira Gandhi Zoological Park (IGZP) and Indian Naval Service (INS Kalinga) by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department. Due to lack of suitable perching and nesting sites, the eagles have chosen the University Campus which is located adjacent to the seacoast at an elevation of 60 m as an alternative suitable habitat for conveniently scanning the Bay waters to scoop the marine fauna. Moreover conspecific attraction

[presence of Black kites (*Milvus migrans*) in the campus] also might have an affect on the selection of University Campus for these eagles as evident from the observations by way of sharing the Red Sander Woods (*Pterocarpus santalum*) for perching and flying together in the sky - considered to be a rare sighting.

Further studies on its status and habitat ecology may provide useful information for the conservation of this magnificent Eagle in this coastal region of Visakhapatnam.

References

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