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In a landscape where conservation attention often follows large mammals, an Old World arboreal spider, its sapphire body too striking to miss, has caught the attention in Andhra Pradesh and triggered a conservation status study.

It's Andhra Pradesh deputy chief minister K Pawan Kalyan's post on X that sent the curiosity levels soaring: "A rare jewel of the Eastern Ghats is finally getting the attention it deserves... This is one of many such stories to come," he stated referring to the state's latest effort to document the Peacock Tarantula.

The AP Forest Department, in collaboration with the Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society, has initiated a conservation status survey of the Peacock Tarantula (*Poecilotheria metallica*) in the Nagarjunasagar Srisaillam Tiger Reserve (NSTR). The exercise seeks to establish baseline information on its population, distribution and habitat, fundamental details that remain uncertain despite the species' recognised conservation status.

Endemic to a narrow stretch of forest in Andhra Pradesh, the tarantula is listed as 'Critically Endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Its dependence on old-growth trees makes it particularly sensitive to changes in forest structure, while its limited range leaves little room for recovery if habitats are disturbed.

For field teams, the immediate task is to locate, record and understand. "This species is restricted to a small patch, and we do not yet have reliable estimates of its numbers. Understanding its population is essential before any meaningful conservation measures can be implemented," said Dr Shanti Priya Pandey, additional principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife). She added that conservation priorities must extend beyond well-known species. "It is not always about the size or visibility of a species, but its ecological role and current status," she added.

The study is being carried out with tech-



nical support from Wingham Wildlife Park in the United Kingdom, which has experience in maintaining captive populations of the species. Officials say the collaboration will help standardise survey methods and strengthen documentation.

Despite its limited public profile, the Peacock Tarantula plays a defined ecological role. As a predator, it feeds on insects such as crickets and grasshoppers, contributing to the regulation of their populations. Its habitat, typically mature trees with suitable crevices, also reflects the health of older forest systems.

This close association with old-growth habitat presents a challenge. The loss of mature trees not only reduces shelter but also affects the broader microhabitats that sustain the tarantula's prey.

Researchers and conservationists point out that studies of such species often extend beyond a single objective. By identifying and protecting specific habitat requirements, conservation measures can benefit a wider range of organisms within the same ecosystem.

Within NSTR, the current survey represents a measured expansion of focus from well-documented flagship species to those that remain under-studied. The findings, experts say, will inform habitat management and future conservation strategies, while adding to the limited body of knowledge on one of the region's most restricted-range species.

An Old World rare blue spider catches conservation attention in Andhra



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- Dr Shanti Priya Pandey, additional PCC (wildlife), AP