Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* nesting in Mahuva, Bhavnagar district, Gujarat, India

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Introduction

Populations of the *Gyps* vultures in South Asian countries have been declining precipitously during the recent past. The once abundant Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Long-billed Vulture *G. indicus* and Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris*, now face extinction. The major cause for their decline is the veterinary drug, Diclofenac, which is the most widely used veterinary pain killer in South Asia.

Mahuva town (21°05'N 71°45'E), in Bhavnagar district, Gujarat, holds a sizeable population of *c.* 150 White-backed Vultures and is famous for its coconut *Cocos nucifera* plantation.

Methods

A rapid survey for nests of vultures was carried out from 12–27.iii.2005, during three visits to the coconut plantations in Mahuva. This aimed to collect baseline data on nesting of vultures in Bhavnagar district, to provide information to the forest department for the management, protection and conservation of the species and, to evaluate disturbance factors to nesting birds. The end of winter, October–March, is the nesting season of *Gyps* vultures in Saurashtra (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955). By observing the movements of vultures through binoculars, from the outskirts of the town, we identified an area of *c.* 4 km^2 of coconut plantation where the vultures roost. This area was thoroughly surveyed, by scrutinizing the canopy of every coconut tree, through binoculars, to detect the presence / absence of nests. The observations were made from the ground to prevent disturbance. The activity of adult birds on the nests was recorded. The approximate height of each nesting tree was estimated. Names and addresses of farmers were registered for the exact location of nesting trees.

Results and discussion

150 White-backed Vultures were counted during the survey. All these vultures roosted and some nested on the coconut trees. We recorded 25 active nests of White-backed Vultures in an area of 4 km^2. All the nesting trees were located in private plantations of local farmers. The nesting trees were marked by colour bands for the identification of exact location of the nesting tree. Each tree held just one nest, with a sole exception holding two. The average height of the nesting trees was 16.78 m. Chicks were observed at just two nests. To minimize disturbance, nests were not visited closer, hence the clutch size was not observed. At least one adult was observed at a nest, probably incubating the egg or newly hatched chick.

If the number of nests recorded (25) was compared with the number of adult birds seen (150), it would be difficult to conclude whether the population was thriving or falling! This would require a more detailed study, perhaps for a couple of years, to find out the real status of the vultures at Mahuva.

Despite its rarity, owners of the coconut groves are becoming increasingly intolerant towards the vultures. According to them, trees utilized by vultures, loose their productivity as vultures damage its leaves and flowers, thus disturbing the fruiting process. A healthy coconut tree yields 1,500–2,000 coconuts annually, which amounts to an income of about Rs 500–600. We observed 85 damaged trees (including 24 used for nesting) belonging to 15 farmers. To prevent such damage, farmers use air-rifles, fire-crackers, etc., to prevent vultures from alighting on their coconut trees. This has resulted in the birds being vary and frightened of human approach, taking off no sooner a roosting or nesting tree was approached.

Conclusion

To protect vultures in Mahuva, it is imperative that local farmers be made aware about their status in India as well as in South Asia. Involvement of communities is a basic requirement for the conservation of any species, particularly in privately owned areas, and outside protected areas. To protect vultures, the state should consider fiscal reimbursements to farmers to mitigate the crop loss.

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A vulture congregation in Pokhara, Nepal

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(See photo on back cover)

On 9.xii.2004 while birding in some fallow fields on the outskirts of Pokhara (Nepal), with a small group from England, we encountered a large mixed species flock of vultures (> 60 birds). We stopped and approached slowly and managed to get in close enough to see an almost totally consumed carcase of a donkey. None of the vultures was feeding on the carcase. They were spread out over an area of about 200 m^2. There were four species present – Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, Indian White-backed Vulture *G. bengalensis*, Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* and what I at first glance identified as Eurasian Griffon *G. fulvus*. Later, going over photographs with Hem Baral in Kathmandu, we identified them properly as juvenile Himalayan Griffon *G. himalayensis*. Interestingly there was not a single adult plumage Himalayan Griffon present, although we saw a fair number in flight, both before and after, this sighting. The following morning we saw about 20

vultures in a kapok tree, not far from this spot, amongst which were three adult Himalayan Griffons, a couple of Slender-billed Vultures and the remaining (as I realised later but not then) juvenile Himalayan Griffons.

Of the 60+ birds about 40 were juvenile Himalayan Griffons, most of which were in two large groups with a few individuals scattered about. There were about ten Slender-billed Vultures and a dozen Indian White-backed Vultures. Some of these were among the Himalayan Griffons, some were on their own and the largest group (of non-Himalayan Griffons) was a mix of Slender-billed Vultures and Indian White-backed Vultures, of which two were juveniles. There were also four Cinereous Vultures (two juveniles); huge and hulking even in comparison with the Himalayan Griffons. Above us circled at least two dozen large raptors silhouetted against the mid-afternoon sky and so, not easy to identify. However, most of them were *Aquila* eagles – with at least a few Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and possible Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga*. However there were no eagles on the ground.

A few interesting aspects of this congregation emerge. The large numbers of *Gyps* vultures seen, given the fact that we know that 'Diclofenac' is available and used on cattle in Nepal (Baral et al. 2005). Could it be that in the hills Diclofenac is not as extensively used as in the plains? Could it also be that Himalayan Griffons are less susceptible to Diclofenac than other *Gyps* species? The second point relates to identification. I now realise that the great majority of my 'Eurasian Griffon' sightings have actually been juvenile Himalayan Griffons—especially in the plains. I'm probably not alone in mis-identifying this species on a regular basis. Given how wide-ranging a juvenile Himalayan Griffon is during winter, this is something that birders across northern India need to be careful about. (A quick aid in separating the two species is that the upper parts of immature Himalayan Griffons are very streaky in appearance while Eurasian Griffons have a uniform appearance including immature plumages as well. Illustrations in most of the guide books show the Himalayan Griffon immature to be greyer than Eurasians but this seems misleading to me.) The other thing that struck me was the very low ratio of adult plumage birds in relation to immature plumage Himalayan Griffons.

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A record of the Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* from West Bengal, India

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The Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* has a historical distribution in India in the states of West Bengal, Sikkim and the north-eastern states except Tripura (Ali & Ripley 2001). Most of the recent sightings of this species from India have been from Arunachal Pradesh (Choudhury 2003, Birand & Pawar 2004). Grimmett et al. (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) mentioned that this bird occurred in West Bengal, and Islam & Rahmani (2004) recorded its occurrence in three protected areas (PAs) in West Bengal. These are Buxa Tiger Reserve, Neora Valley National Park and Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary. The report of this species from Buxa is based on a sighting from Buxa Tiger Reserve in 1992 (Allen et al. 1997) whereas records from other areas are based on assumptions or unauthenticated records. The first definitive sighting with photographic evidence of this species within 12,722 ha Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (26°51'34"N 88°24'45"E), Darjeeling district, West Bengal, was made by the authors on 23.x.2005 near Latpanchor village, within the Latpanchor beat of the sanctuary. Two adult males and an adult female were sighted. It is therefore, distributed in seven PAs of India namely, Namdapha and Manas National Parks and five sanctuaries – Buxa, Mahananda, Eagle's Nest, Kamlang and Sessa. This is also the current western-most distribution record for this species, the former being in Buxa; about 60 km on the eastern side of the current site (Fig. 1). The habitat wherein the birds were sighted was tropical semi-evergreen forest. Given the resident status of this species, there might be a thriving population of this species within Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary. Further research is required to assess the current status of this species in this region. Habitat destruction is not an immediate threat for this species in this area, however, threat from poaching cannot be ruled out. Indigenous people were known to hunt this bird for the pot and hunting outside the PAs in recent times cannot be ruled out. Trapping or hunting this bird attracts a penalty of Rs 25,000/- (US$ 550) and imprisonment for a minimum of three years, extendable up to seven years, as it is a Schedule I species of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972. Therefore, in addition to carrying out a thorough survey for this species in northern West Bengal, an awareness generation activity among local people should be undertaken.

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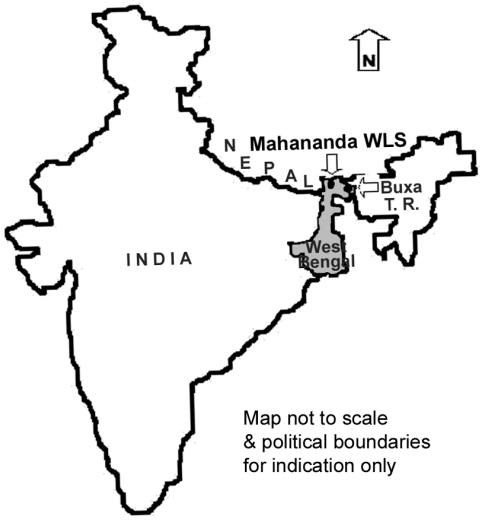

Figure 1 – Recent sighting areas of Rufous-necked Hornbill from West Bengal, India.