

## The sky scan

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**H**ow do we go about helping vultures to recover so that they once again provide the aerial cover they did just a couple of decades ago? Getting the vultures back from the brink of total extinction is not something individuals can do effectively because these birds cannot be given refuge in one's backyard; the collective force of society is needed for such conservation action. Awareness and concern are of course important, but beyond this the individual, howsoever committed, cannot but develop a sense of helplessness. And yet, it is the individual that has to be at the core of all meaningful effort. Towards this end some individuals in Gujarat have made a remarkable effort—even if an organization or the government takes up action—it is they who will always have to remain involved, if for no other reason that to ensure that action is appropriate and has society emotionally involved.

The remaining vulture populations need continuous monitoring. Individuals flying foul of kite strings and sustaining injury need succor. This is taking place in several of the cities, and I know of persons, who have nursed injured eagles and hawks till they are able to fly but, a damaged wing cannot always be set right, and the bird cannot fly well; what happens then? There are all sorts of government regulations prohibiting individuals keeping raptors, including vultures, in captivity. The handicapped bird should be taken to a nearby zoo or handed over to a registered organization. Publicizing such 'receiving' centers would help. I would like to see scientifically managed captive breeding projects developed at such centers.

In Gujarat there are many *panjrapols* sheltering old and unwanted cattle. These are run by charitable organizations with very strong financial backing. It seems possible to involve them in the effort to conserve vultures by attaching a captive breeding facility to each. Actually, any such proposal would be welcomed. I have been approached by the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) to help do just this. I understand funding would not be a problem! Can our Vulture Group follow up? The UK-based Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds (RSPB) and the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) have initiated a similar project in Haryana outside Chandigarh, so we have a model to follow. Even as the formalities are being worked out, it should be possible to start impressing on these *panjrapols* to ensure that no detrimental medications are permitted in their medical units and, that the carcasses of cattle are left out in disposal sites surrounded by high walls to keep out dogs. Also, large trees within their complexes need strict preservation and new trees need to be planted which, in time, would grow large for the remaining birds to alight on and possibly start nesting on. No captive breeding program can be considered complete unless there are possibilities of

the birds being rehabilitated.

The urgency for concerted action is great. Quick and effective steps have to be initiated and there is no room for complacency. The main stumbling block would seem to be well-intentioned conservation laws involving animals on Schedule Lists and vultures are high on these, thanks to the urging of conservationists like myself. It would be a tragedy if nothing were done to loosen the negative grip of conservation regulations, which were set up in response to public concerns.

While there has been some concern expressed about the disappearance of vultures from our skies, surprisingly no great dismay has been articulated for the near total extinction of several eagles and falcons that were a delight to behold during my childhood days. Each winter, the late Dharmakumarsinhji would be a visitor and I still recall the exciting mornings with him as he flew his falcons and hawks after francolin and hare in the wonderfully managed grasslands around Jasdan. During those outings, his falconers, apprehending the arrival of some eagle overhead, threw continual skyward glances. These large raptors were known to wrest prey captured by the falcons! Winter was a grand season for observing several species each of falcons, buzzards, hawks, and harriers. During the cool of the mornings, most of these otherwise great fliers would be perched on telegraph poles or some exposed situation atop a tall tree or a rock outcrop waiting for thermals to start. Only the harriers would be hunting as they went past gliding low over the ground taking advantage of the cool ground breezes. Vultures were seldom given a second glance.

I have been trying to explain why we had not shown concern for the decline of all the fascinating birds that were in such demand for falconry, the sport of kings. I do not recollect there having been a single seminar to highlight the decline of these several, fascinating birds. One of the explanations would be the fact that they never assembled in huge numbers, and a majority of them were winter visitors. Those that did breed with us did so in the cool months when they were largely overlooked among the larger numbers of migrants. It was only the "elite" falconers who did express any concern in passing since in any case, the sport of falconry, like *shikar*, was becoming infra dig in polite society; sportsmen who were the driving force behind conservation action were progressively sidelined. Falconry, the aristocratic sport that had been raised to a high art, quickly disappeared. The great furor resulting from some Arab sheikhs visiting India for falconry was more on account of their targets being bustards. I for one, in all honesty, considered our two resident falcons safe since a Laggar *Falco jugger* pair came regularly every autumn to breed on the Hingol Gadh balcony and India's leading raptor photographer, Rishad Naoroji, had only a few years earlier, two pairs of Red-headed Merlin *F. chicquera* under observation close by. There also was apparently plenty of prey in the form

of pigeons, parakeets and small passerine birds. During the cool months, visiting Peregrines *F. peregrinus* were regularly seen. It was the repeated failure of the Hingol Gadh falcons to turn up that set me wondering whether all indeed was well.

Falcons tend to be traditional in using nests that are invariably wrested from other birds like crows. The Laggars prefer tall, more exposed locations and most of the old trees have gone, and surprisingly, crows that they generally supplant, have themselves been greatly reduced. Breeding successes seem to have become more spaced out with fewer pairs successfully raising young. With a declining population, it is reasonable to surmise that the Hingol Gadh pair is no longer alive and that there has not been any replacement. As for the Red-headed Merlin, it may be surmised that success with raising young has not been sufficient to maintain a healthy population. We need to institute a Raptor Watch as has been done for Sarus *Grus antigone* and vultures.

### Recreating the aerial displays

I must repeat that no captive rearing project can be considered a conservation effort unless the end results have the birds repopulating their former habitats. The initiatives taken by the Vulture Group of the Bird Conservation Society, Gujarat (BCSG) need to evolve a strong working relationship with the various *panjrapols* in Gujarat and the Wildlife Wing of the Gujarat State Forest Department to draw up a strategy that goes well beyond the immediate present. Groves and avenues of banyan, tamarind and such large trees should be planted so that, by the time the beleaguered vulture populations show signs of revival, there are numerous nest sites ready for them to take over. In any case, these gracious trees have been part of our countryside and their loss is felt. I would strongly recommend the development of a blueprint for a massive tree planting drive involving the large, indigenous trees with action commencing June 2007 at the start of the rainy season.

Falcons and possibly several of our resident eagles take over nests of other birds and I am of the firm belief that with the destruction of trees in the countryside, not only were the

traditional nesting sites lost, but also newer locations became less available. For fiercely territorial birds, which breeding raptors are, great pressure, detrimental to successful nesting, must have resulted from the lack of nesting sites. It needs no debate to affirm that with the decline in numbers of small birds and reptiles, the home range of each nesting pair would have expanded. Might not the time it takes to have large trees reach full stature prove too late to rehabilitate the existing pairs of falcons? There have been reports of crows nesting on the electricity grid pylons, suggesting the possibility of placing nest platforms over the entire grid inducing, at least Laggars to take advantage! Here is a conservation effort cutting across various departments of government and involving amateurs.

Can falcons and eagles be bred in captivity? There have been successful projects in Europe and America and there is no reason why we cannot take on similar programmes in India. I see no difficulty in finding funding provided the wildlife laws are rationalized. The question remains, "Who will bell the cat?" Surely there is no harm in initiating a discussion? With this note, I throw the gauntlet to the Chief Wildlife Wardens of Gujarat and other states.

As I was mulling over the problem, I received the first *Newsletter* of the BCSG Vulture Group. Among the several difficulties vultures are facing, the most immediate would seem to be of feeding on carcasses at *panjrapols*. Men flaying the dead animals through the day are followed by packs of stray dogs that over after they have finished with the task prevent the birds from feeding. Flaying should be carried out in sheds and the skinned carcasses disposed off in open enclosures protected by (I repeat) high walls that would keep stray dogs out. The high wall would serve an additional purpose of providing a safe place for the vultures to spend the night on after feeding.

A vigorous vulture rehabilitation program would help in making it easier to start support programmes for the other raptors. The bonus would be more and more shady avenues and groves cutting out the brilliant sunshine, which drenches the land uninterrupted for at least eight month of each year.

## Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1968)—16

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**I**n *Indian Birds* of Nov/Dec 2006 I had commented on some of the articles in the 1968 volume of the *NLBW*. I find that there are two articles in the same volume, one by my daughter Shama and one by myself, referring to the birds of our garden and its immediate surroundings, which are of historical interest. The area referred to covers no more than two square miles, but it was, naturally speaking, a very productive-cum-beautiful area of considerable conservation importance. Every square yard of this land is now covered with high rise buildings and there is no sign of the birds referred to either in the garden or beyond. On the west parallel to Juhu beach was a thick mass of mangroves

a continuation of the chain of this valuable vegetation stretching from the centre of Bombay unbroken for several miles to the North. Some of these mangroves are still in existence, and over them a war is being fought between conservationists and developers. It is strange that the Municipality of Bombay has still not recognised the invaluable role of these unique aquatic plants in saving our coastline from steady erosion and from damage by the occasional fury of the oceans. None of the birds referred to in these two articles are uncommon or threatened, but it is unusual to see such an assembly of both arboreal, desert and water birds so close at hand