

Hornbills in southern Mizoram: history, beliefs, and recent sightings

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“Chika ... Chika ...,” the tea-stall owner called out with a ‘puri’ (deep fried Indian bread) in her hand, and out of nowhere a hornbill appeared on the counter and noisily took the puri in its beak. I gobbled up the puri I was eating in wide-eyed silence. The tea-stall owner did not divulge much about the hornbill but the staff at the Tourist Lodge at Chaltlang (23°45′14″N, 92°43′30″E), shared later in the day, that the ‘fellow’ had been there for more than a year and was very smart. It was partial to fruits (and fruit vendors) and, according to the locals, did not waste its energies by flying in the city—it travelled atop city-buses! Sharing the pictures with Aparajita Datta the very next day helped erase confusions I had about the species—a female Wreathed Hornbill *Aceros undulatus*. However, it rekindled my curiosity to know more about this stunning species in the part of Mizoram where I used to have my home and field base. Southern Mizoram spans two districts, Saiha (22°29′15″N, 92°59′08″E), and Lawngtlai (22°30′59″N, 92°53′28″E), and is referred to by Choudhury (2006) as having some of the best remaining rainforests in north-eastern India. This contiguous landscape also houses Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary, Blue Mountain (Phawngpui) National Park, Tokalo Wildlife Sanctuary (proposed), and Palak Dil (or lake; 22°12′04″N, 92°53′29″E). I had come across hornbills during my stay in these parts and was keen to know more of the species that I had seen first in Balpakram National Park (Garo Hills, Meghalaya), the noise of whose wings I had excitedly heard while screening Shekar Dattatri’s film, ‘Silent Valley,’ in villages within the Garo Hills Elephant Reserve.

My mishaps with local languages precede my interest in birds and this led to my initiating efforts with compilation of local names of hornbills. Two languages are primarily in use in the landscape—Mizo and Mara (Saiha is also referred to as Maraland). Zonunmawia & Pradhan (2004) enlist flora and fauna of the state and give the Mizo names of four hornbills (in bold): Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*—**Vapual**, Wreathed Hornbill—**Kawlhawk**, Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus tickelli*—**Vangai**, and Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthracoeros albirostris*—**Vahai**. A publication by the state forest department (Anonymous 2006) corroborates this listing. In his seminal work, *The Lakhers*, Parry (1932) says, “Vahia is the name of the small hornbill, and the village took that name as it is a favourite haunt of these birds.” [*Maras were also referred to as Lakhers.*] I gladly recalled my trips to Vahai (or Vahia; 22°13′17″N, 92°56′36″E). I recall my interactions with village council members at Tuipang (23°19′02″N, 93°01′26″E) during September 2008. We had three gatherings during the visit in course of our efforts in conservation education. In each of these we put bird field guides to good use and had them interact with us about the birds in the guide. They pointed to Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* and said they had seen around their village!

Since I moved to Mizoram I have been fortunate to have the

inclination and energy to read more on the region, particularly books by commissioners and missionaries who visited these lands some decades ago. Parry’s (1932) is one of the more amazing books I have come across in terms of addressing details. In his description of tribes, he states,

“The Mihlong clan claim to be descended from the Great Indian Hornbill. No member of this clan may kill a hornbill, as they say that if they ever ate Hornbill’s meat it would be equivalent to eating their father and mother. The Mihlong, however, do not offer any sacrifice to the hornbill.”

While describing beliefs prevalent in the society he goes to painstaking details,

“It is ‘ana’ (prohibited) however to shoot the cock bird of any of the four kinds of hornbill found in the hills during the nesting season which lasts from March to July. When the hen hornbill hatches out her eggs and brings up her young inside a hollow tree, she never moves out until her nestlings can fly, when the cock removes the clay which encloses her in the nest and lets her out. Meanwhile she is entirely dependent on the cock for all her food. For this reason Lakhers believe that if they shoot the cock, Khazangpa (*God*) will be angry and punish them, as the hen and her young will inevitably die; hence it is an *ana* to kill a cock hornbill at this season. Lakhers, however, have no scruple whatever about killing and eating a hen and her young. As soon as a man has marked down a hornbill’s nest, he reserves it for himself by driving a bamboo or wooden stake into the trunk of the tree. This is called *pahaw*. When the young have grown large enough to be worth eating, the finder of the nest robs it and kills and eats the hen and her young. When any one robs a hornbill’s nest, he must place a short piece of bamboo or stick in the nest before he leaves it. This is called *masongpa*. The belief is that when the cock comes home and finds his family gone, he picks up the piece of stick in his beak, carries it off to the King of Hornbills and tells him that his family has been killed with this stick. The King of the Hornbills, seeing that the hen and her brood have not died because the cock had neglected to feed them, gives the widower another wife. Next year the cock brings his new wife to make a nest in the same hollow tree, and thus affords another feed to the man who has reserved the nest. Once a man has reserved a nest it is his forever, and he believes that so long as he puts a piece of stick in the nest after robbing it, he can take the nest every year with impunity, as the hornbill will always find another mate.”

As I write I recall another incident concerning hornbills in Baghmara, South Garo Hills (Meghalaya) (25°07′37″N, 90°23′36″E). We had screened a wildlife film and were in the

middle of post screening interactions when participants shared their views and reactions. An old lady shared a Garo saying which compared lazy women to hornbills, for the latter do not move for months on end while their spouses get food for them!

Other than a handful of surveys, southern Mizoram has remained in the proverbial rain shadow of wildlife research. Going through them did throw some light. Pawar & Birand (2001) in their seminal work on north-east Indian birds (where two of the sites surveyed by them were in south Mizoram) mentioned Oriental Pied Hornbill at Palak Dil and Great Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill, and Oriental Pied Hornbill at Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary. Ghose (1999) did not report any species of hornbills from his survey at Blue Mountain National Park. Choudhury (2006, 2008) wrote of having seen Oriental Pied Hornbill at Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary, Palak Dil, between Laly and Phura (Saiha), and of having heard their calls in Blue Mountain National Park. He came across old casques of Wreathed Hornbills at Sangau and Thaltlang (Lawngtlai) near Blue Mountain National Park. He presumed that the Great Hornbill was once common based on the number of preserved casques he saw in villages but says that the species has now become extremely rare and locally extirpated owing to hunting and habitat loss. We listed the Great Hornbill among the avifauna of Palak and adjoining forests in our contribution to Islam & Rahmani (2008).

In Mizoram I have been fortunate in experiencing some special moments when I came across hornbills. Oriental Pied Hornbills seem to have the least problem with my savouring the sight of their grandeur. First (27 May 2008) I saw this species when returning from Palak Dil to Phura (village nearest to Palak Dil; 22°19'52"N, 93°02'35"E). It was perched on top of a dead tree in the valley to our right and was calling loudly. I was part of the team that surveyed the proposed Tokalo Wildlife Sanctuary and had the opportunity to walk through some amazing forests on the India–Myanmar border. As we began our exercise (12 February 2009) we saw two of them between Phura and Tokalo (22°10'26"N, 92°53'25"E). Strange noises from the vehicle had forced this stop and I was loitering around when both birds fluttered and flew towards the adjacent secondary growth. Prior to the moment I had not seen them from so close and it was one of those occasions where I have been happy with the vehicle not functioning properly. During the survey we walked streams marking the boundary of the sanctuary with posts and set up temporary camps each evening. The ambience in these camps was amazing: banana leaves formed the bed, tea was served in bamboos cut up and used as cups (some images from the survey can be found in: http://mizoram-samrakshan.blogspot.com/2009_03_01_archive.html), and one of us was assigned duty each evening to ensure the shoes of the team got dry enough with the heat. As I woke up lazily in one such camp I was stunned to see (20 February 2009; 22°01'18"N, 92°52'23"E) seven hornbills flying over us, with two leaders, three in the middle and two in the rear. They were snow-white when seen from below, and exhibited amazing grace as they flew. It was surely a dramatic way to wake up and finally I understood the difference in the tail markings (*vis-à-vis* the Great Hornbill); the black band was clearly missing today. I had yet another exciting sighting during my last trip to Palak Dil (24 January 2010). Five of them flew out of the canopy very near to Palak Dil as we entered the gate. The last sighting (31 March 2010; 22°22'58"N, 92°47'53"E) was at our camp in Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary. On 23 December 2009 I was distressed to see one displayed for being sold at the New Saiha market in



Chika, the female Wreathed Hornbill *Aceros undulatus*, in Aizwal, Mizoram. Photos: Nimesh Ved.

Name	Link	List of Important Bird Areas and protected areas	Citation
Balpakram	http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=18283	BirdLife International (2011) Important Bird Areas factsheet: Balpakram Complex. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 05/12/2011	
Ngengpui	http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=18322	BirdLife International (2011) Important Bird Areas factsheet: Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 05/12/2011	
Blue Mountain	http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=18318	BirdLife International (2011) Important Bird Areas factsheet: Blue Mountain (Phawngpui) National Park. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 05/12/2011	
Palak	http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=18323	BirdLife International (2011) Important Bird Areas factsheet: Palak Dil. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 05/12/2011	

Saiha. This was just before Christmas when people were on a buying spree. It looked very sad and even had small shiny stickers on its casque.

I came across the Great Hornbill (19 February 2009; 22°01'21"N, 92°52'08"E) during the above-mentioned survey. I recall talking to myself then, "Gosh, it has such a charisma, it's the tiger of birds!" We saw (31 March 2010) another near the base camp at Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary on an overcast day just before it rained heavily.

I sighted two Wreathed Hornbills (01 December 2010) at the Blue Mountain National Park and this was memorable. We looked down from the peak into the valley that appeared like a green carpet and saw them gracefully moving as if two white patches glided from right to left till they disappeared from our view.

The final sighting was the Brown Hornbill (30 March 2010) just before we reached Bungtlang (22°21'16"N, 92°46'30"E) with colleagues from the Mizoram Forest Department. The hornbill sat on a tree beside the road in the misty evening. The thrill of having seen it silenced me for a while. We were to participate in the tiger census at Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary and the sighting provided a wonderful impetus to the exercise.

The century-old practices presented in this article give a glimpse of the wildlife hunting– conservation scenario at that time plus the knowledge the tribes possessed of the species. The forests of southern Mizoram offer opportunities for conservation of Hornbills and other forest birds and warrant long-term protection efforts. Local teams should be assembled and encouraged to take part in research and surveys of these species. These teams could further help in propagating the need to conserve them by virtue of their membership in youth associations and other social institutions, e.g., family and church.

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Website links

A pet hornbill was shot in Aizawl and culprits arrested: http://articles.timesofindia.india-times.com/2011-02-14/wild-wacky/28546814_1_hornbill-jail-custody-pet.

Aizawl, which has quite a few bloggers, also did talk about the bird ~ <http://mizohican.blogspot.com/2011/02/chp-336-rip-zika.html>.

This is from my blog: <http://mizoram-samrakshan.blogspot.com/2010/09/they-say-she-is-smart.html>.