

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* in Pong Dam, Himachal Pradesh, India



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95. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* in flight at Pong Dam, Himachal Pradesh.

Dhadwal, D. S., 2013. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* in Pong Dam, Himachal Pradesh, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (4): 95.

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Manuscript received on 11 February 2013.

Situated on the Beas River, Pong Dam Lake Sanctuary in Himachal Pradesh (31°58'N, 75°56'E) is the largest man-made wetland in northern India. The entire catchment area is 12,562 km². Within this, suitable habitat for migratory birds extends over 306 km², making Pong possibly the first significant stopover after a trans-Himalaya journey. It was designated a Ramsar Site in 2002 and extends into Kangra, Mandi, and Kullu districts.

Having spent ten years at Pong Dam Lake Sanctuary as Forest Range Officer from June 2003 to February 2012, I received tremendous opportunity to observe at close quarters the bio-diversity of the lake and understand various concerns surrounding its conservation. Following a promotion in February 2012, I spent a brief stint as the Deputy Director at the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh. Keeping in view the importance of Pong, I soon found myself transferred as Assistant Conservator of Forests at Dharamshala in June 2012 by the Government.

From the headquarters at Dharamshala, unable to visit Pong as frequently as earlier when I was posted in the area, I kept seeking all possible excuses to drop by. Because the vastness of Pong makes it impossible to cover it in totality, I frequented only important fragile areas on the look out for vagrant species or passage migrants. These important locations are Nagrota Surian, Dehar Khad, Sansarpur Terrace, Dehra Gopipur, and Guglara. On 29 January 2013, I found the perfect excuse to go there, as I was deputed to carry out a 'pre-census preparedness' survey at the sanctuary. Leaving early from Dharamshala, I found myself at Sansarpur Terrace swamps by 0800 hrs.

I spent the forenoon in these swamps and then decided to visit Dehar Khad via Guglara. Boarding a motorboat at 1430 hrs I set out for these areas that I knew well over the years, but with excitement still alive. Flocks of ducks, geese, and Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* were seen on the way.

I always make it a point to visit where Dehar Khad meets the main lake, as the area never fails to attract Common Shelducks *Tadorna tadorna* and Pied Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* along with other common waterfowl. I focused my binoculars on a patch of white moving in a distance to ascertain roughly 32 shelducks and 35 avocets. I was happy to still find them a year later at the same location.

I was about to ask the boatman Dilbag Singh and Deputy Ranger Joginder Singh to steer us towards Nagrota Surian for the evening when I spotted snowy white patches from a distance through my binoculars. I ask Dilbag to take the boat little closer to the mudflats to inspect the unusual movements. I was surprised to see two big birds sitting deep inside where it was impossible to get closer. I took a few photographs [95, 96] as evidence and signalled to the boatman to switch off the motor so as not to disturb the pair. We spent some time watching the birds and moved onwards.

I was thrilled at the unexpected sighting, but was yet to ascertain the identity of the species despite having been a birder for several years. I kept wondering on our way back if they were domestic ducks or crossbreeds of some species. I was also hoping it would be a new species, the 418th record for the lake. My field guide was not with me during the boat ride, but the moment we reached the forest guesthouse at Nagrota in the evening, I immediately reached for the guide. It turned out to be the Whooper Swan and a definite new sighting at the Ramsar Site.

While busy discussing with my fellow colleagues and staff that night, telephone calls began flooding in from birder friends who had come across photos I uploaded of the swans on the Oriental Bird Group and Delhi Bird Group (Delhibirdpix 2013) upon my return from the site. I was told that I was the first photographer to capture this rare species. Surfing the Internet reading up on the reports, I was thrilled about being able to spot the species in my dreamland of Pong.

The last known record of this elusive species, shot on the Beas River was by Aitken (1900). From January the same year, a record was also left by Gen. Osborne (Osborn 1909) at Talwara, near Pong. Notes by Hume (1878) have recorded the bird as well.

References

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- Osborn, W., 1909. The Whooper Swan - a correction. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 19 (1): 262-263.

Photos: D. S. Dhadwal



96. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* pair photographed at Pong Dam, Himachal Pradesh.