

On the vagrancy of the Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* to southern India

Praveen J., P. O. Nameer, Dipu Karuthedathu, Chaitra Ramaiah, Binu Balakrishnan, K. Mrutyumjaya Rao, Sachin Shurpali, Rajesh Puttaswamaiah, Igor Tavcar

Praveen, J., Nameer, P.O., Karuthedathu, D., Ramaiah, C., Balakrishnan, B., Rao, K. M., Shurpali, S., Puttaswamaiah, R., & Tavcar, I., 2014. On the vagrancy of the Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* to southern India. *Indian BIRDS* 9 (1): 19–22

Praveen J., B303, Shriram Spurthi, ITPL Main Road, Brookfields, Bengaluru, 560037, Karnataka, India. Email: paintedstork@gmail.com [PJ] [Corresponding author.]

P. O. Nameer, Centre for Wildlife Studies, College of Forestry, Kerala Agricultural University, KAU (PO) Thrissur 680656, Kerala, India. Email: nameerpo@email.com [PON]

Dipu Karuthedathu, #301, Jaya Emerald, Maruthinagar, Bengaluru 560075, Karnataka, India. Email: dipu_k@yahoo.com [DK]

Chaitra Ramaiah, 109, 8th Main Road, 4th Stage, 4th Block, Basaveshwaranagar, Bengaluru 560079, Karnataka, India. Email: chaitra.mr@gmail.com [CR]

Binu Balakrishnan, G 205, Alpine Eco, Marathalli, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Email: binubal@yahoo.com [BB]

K Mrutyumjaya Rao, Flat 404, Kamalakshi Residency, Behind Benda complex, Sarpavaram Junction, Kakinada 533005, East Godavari district, India. Email: mrutyumjaya@hotmail.com [KMR]

Sachin Shurpali, 203, Prakruthi Paradise, Kempamma Devi Road, New Thippasandra, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Email: shurpali@gmail.com [SS]

Rajesh Puttaswamaiah, #48/192, G.Floor, 6th Cross, Kirloskar Colony I Stage, Basaveshwaranagar, Bengaluru -560079, Karnataka, India. Email: rajesh.bp@hotmail.com [RP]

Igor Tavcar MD, Gruenwlderstrasse 197A, 81545 Munich, Germany. Email: igortavcar@hotmail.com [IT]

Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* is considered a resident of the mountains of Central Asia, the Himalayas from northern Pakistan till Bhutan, southern and eastern Tibet, and China. Post breeding, the adults remain for most of the year in the breeding grounds while juveniles wander, in winter, into the plains of South-, and Southeast- Asia (Naoroji 2006; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Though there have been instances of vagrancy in north-east and north-west India, its extent is not well-documented (Naoroji 2006); it did not, definitely, include southern India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Though the resident *Gyps* vultures are considered 'Critically Endangered,' this species is listed under 'Least Concern' as it has a wide range and its population size and population declines are well above the relevant threshold levels (BirdLife International 2013).

This note describes a series of sightings of juvenile Himalayan Vultures from four sites, in three different parts, of southern India, all within a short span of one month; two of the birds being exhausted individuals recovered by local people. Sightings are described below, chronologically.

Akamala, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur district, Kerala (10°40'N, 76°16'E)

An exhausted individual *Gyps* vulture was recovered on 24 January 2013 by local residents and handed over to Kerala Forest Department. Initial pictures were obtained by PON and later the bird was transferred to the rescue unit of Kerala Agricultural University [20]. The bird was doing well, and took the meat that was provided, showing signs of recovery. An attempt was made to release it [21, 22] on 28 January 2013, but it refused to fly. Hence, it was taken into the care of the wildlife rescue centre, Kerala State Forest Department, Kodanad (Ernakulum district), and then to Zoological Gardens, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, where it still lives.

Based on photographs, the bird appeared to be a first year



20. In captivity, Kerala.



21. An attempted release in Kerala.

Photo: Abith Binoy



22. An attempted release in Kerala.

juvenile Himalayan Vulture. The base colour of its body and wings was overall dark brown, lacking contrast between the coverts and flight feathers, thus eliminating Indian- *G. indicus* and Griffon- *G. fulvus* Vultures. Its legs were pale (fleshy/pinkish) compared to the grey of a Griffon Vulture. There was no rufous tinge on the upper and under wing coverts; the patagial bar was indistinct, while the white central bar was also not obvious. Upper wing coverts were well streaked (versus unmarked/lightly marked in Griffon), and some greater coverts showed pale tips. Its ventral side was uniformly dark showing prominent pale streaks that are distinctive for a Himalayan Vulture (Alström 1997).

The photographs were circulated to raptor experts, including Rishad Naoroji, and Vibhu Prakash, who concurred with the identification

Ramadevarabetta Vulture Sanctuary, Bangalore, Karnataka (12°45'N, 77°18'E)

While on a birding trip to check the Indian Vultures of Ramadevarabetta Vulture Sanctuary on 10 February 2013, PJ, DK, SS & IT saw one larger vulture sitting on the ledge [23] along with the Indian Vultures at 0710 hrs. Incidentally, CR & RP were also present at the same place, independently, documenting the vultures [24]. The birds took wing at 0900 hrs after being disturbed by some village boys, and SS shot several photographs of them in flight [25, 26]. Back from the field, the teams touched base over Facebook and compared the pictures to conclude identifications. The plumage details of the bird from Kerala were fresh in our minds and hence there was little difficulty in concluding this as a juvenile Himalayan Vulture—this time in direct comparison with adult Indian Vultures both while sitting and in flight. The overall dark vulture was noticeably bigger than the adjacent Indian Vultures and showed prominent pale streaking on the coverts and pale legs. The base colour of its upper-wing was dark brown without much contrast between the coverts and flight feathers—visible both, while sitting, and in flight. The dark under side with prominent pale streaks and indistinct patagial bar were also evident in the flight pictures. Identification was also confirmed from photographs by Vibhu Prakash. Apparently, the vulture has not been seen since then despite a few birdwatchers

Photo: Sachin Shurpali



23. Perched on a ledge, Ramadevarabetta.

Photo: Chaitra/Rajesh



24. Perched on a ledge, Ramadevarabetta.

Photo: Sachin Shurpali



25. In flight, Ramadevarabetta.

Photo: Sachin Shurpali



26. With adult Indian Vulture (lower), Ramadevarabetta.

having visited the spot (Anush Shetty *pers. comm.*, Vignesh Menon *pers. comm.*, both February 2013).

Hesserghatta Grasslands, Bangalore, Karnataka (13°09' N, 77°29'E)

While discussing the Ramadevarabetta sighting with BB, that same evening, he informed PJ that he too had photographed a *Gyps* vulture, on the same day, at Hesserghatta, which is c. 40 km north-west of Ramadevarabetta. His time of sighting, which was 11 minutes after the birds took off from Ramadevarabetta, makes it unlikely that it is the same bird. However, the two photographs indicate an overall dark bird with prominent pale streaks on the dark ventral side. The white central bar and indistinct patagial bar were also visible in the photograph [27] and one of the photographs also included a Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* for size comparison [28]. Hesserghatta is regularly frequented by several bird photographers for the last five years, most of them focussing on raptors, but this is the first time that a

Photo: Binu Balakrishnan



27. In flight, Hesserghatta.



Photo: Binu Balakrishnan

28. With Western Marsh Harrier, Hesserghatta.

Gyps vulture has been reported from there, despite the breeding colony of Indian Vultures being just 40 km away. Nobody else has reported any *Gyps* vultures since then from Hesserghatta.

Gorasa, Kakinada, East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh (17°04'N, 82°16'E)

Resident villagers captured an exhausted vulture on 12 February 2013 at Gorasa village. Several photographs of this bird were taken on the same night by KMR at the Kakinada DFO's office, and by Dr. Selvam the next day [29, 30]. The bird was dark overall, with a distinctly streaked mantle and upper wing coverts, and with no tinge of rufous; it had pale legs. The plumage was distinctively of a juvenile Himalayan Vulture, and was quite similar to that of the other birds recorded above.

The vulture was later sent to Visakhapatnam Zoo, where it died on the fourth day. According to the FRO Kakinada, a post-mortem revealed that it had an internal injury in its throat, and was unable to feed. It is suspected that villagers had pelted it with stones prior to capturing it.



29. In captivity, Andhra Pradesh.



30. In captivity, Andhra Pradesh.

Photos: Dr. Selvam

Discussion

When the sightings were reported, it appeared that these were the first sightings of Himalayan Vulture from southern India. However, we found a photograph taken in March 2010 at Masinagudi, Tamil Nadu, and labelled "Indian Vulture," that preceded our observations (Vasanthan 2010). More pictures of this bird were obtained and examined by PJ & DK. This bird also showed various features of a juvenile Himalayan Vulture's plumage, and hence was re-identified as that. In a separate discussion, Vibhu Prakash indicated to CR that he has observed juveniles of this species in Rollappadu, Andhra Pradesh, apart from Gujarat and Maharashtra (Vibhu Prakash *pers. comm.*). In other words, it appears that each of the southern states of Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2010; Sashikumar *et al.* 2011), Karnataka (Praveen 2010), Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (Pittie 2010) has a species addition to the state checklists as depicted in the maps (Fig. 12).

Vultures do not breed in the first three years of their lifespan, hence juveniles do not stick to their breeding grounds, wandering considerably, and there is evidence of this in other vulture species like Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* (Duriez *et al.* 2011), and Griffon Vultures *G. fulvus* (Meyburg *et al.* 2004). Juveniles of Himalayan Vulture are known to wander extensively in Southeast Asia also with sightings from the plains of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Peninsular Malaysia, and even from Singapore and Indonesia (Ding Li & Kasornkorkbua 2008). However, they consider this as a recent change as the species is considered fairly distinct in Southeast Asia. While this is debatable, this is definitely not the case with India as there are three other *Gyps* species to be considered, and given the diverse responses our photographs evoked among birders is ample proof that it might have been overlooked in the past. However, it is quite inexplicable as to why four such birds suddenly appeared in different parts of southern India. Incidentally, the first record of a Himalayan Vulture from the United Arab Emirates was a juvenile, recorded in October 2012 (Mike Prince *pers. comm.*, both February 2013).

Reasons that have been considered for such long-distance dispersals are a decline of food supply in their regular breeding range in the Himalayas coupled with the lack of foraging and navigational experience in the immature birds, making a case for long distance vagrancy (Ding Li & Kasornkorkbua 2008). This also brings in an additional conservation concern that though Himalayan Vulture was not considered declining like other *Gyps* due to the threat from the drug, Diclofenac, the risk of juveniles getting infected while feeding on carcasses in peninsular India is very high. Most juveniles succumb to the difficult conditions that arise from inexperience in foraging of food, and from getting separated from their base populations, which are potential threats to their long-term survival.



Fig 12 Himalayan Vulture records from South India.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Rishad Naoraji, Vibhu Prakash, C. Sashikumar, Mike Prince, Ramit Singal, Vinay Das, Saurabh Sawant, and Vishnu Das for discussions on identification, and Sreekumar H., and L. Shyamal for providing information on the vagrancy pattern of these birds. P. J. Vasanthan kindly provided us more photographs of the vulture from Masinagudi. Thanks are also due to Abith Binoy and Dr. Selvam for sharing the photographs they took of vultures in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh respectively. Our thanks to Vibhu Prakash for reviewing an earlier draft of this note, and also for providing the details of taking care of captive vultures. This is reproduced in the box item and shall hopefully be of good use for others who come across exhausted vultures.

References

- Alström, P., 1997. Field identification of Asian *Gyps* vultures. *Oriental Bird Club Bulletin*. 25: 32–49
- BirdLife International. 2013. Website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=3377>. [Accessed on 21 April 2013.]
- Ding Li, Y., & Kasornkorkbua, C., 2008. The status of the Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis* in South-East Asia. *Forktail*. 24: 57–62
- Duriez, O., Eliotout, B., & Sarrazin, F., 2011. Age identification of Eurasian Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* in the field. *Ringling & Migration* 26(1):24-30
- Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C., & Inskipp, T., 2011. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 2nd ed. Pp. 1–528. London: Oxford University Press & Christopher Helm
- Meyburg, B., Gallardo, M., Meyburg, C., Dimitrova, E., 2004. Migrations and sojourn in Africa of Egyptian vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) tracked by satellite. *Journal of Ornithology*. 145(4):273-280
- Naoraji, R., 2006. *Birds of prey of the Indian Subcontinent*. Om Books International, New Delhi
- Pittie, A., 2012. A Checklist of Birds of Andhra Pradesh www.bsap.in Accessed on 21 April 2013
- Praveen, J., 2010. Annotated Checklist of Birds of Kanataka- Version 3.4. Message:18332. bngbirds@yahoo.com. Accessed on 21 April 2013
- Rasmussen, P. C., & Anderton, J. C., 2012. *Birds of South Asia: the Ripley guide*. 2 vols. 2nd ed. Pp. 1–378, 1–683. Washington D.C., Michigan & Barcelona: Smithsonian Institution, Michigan State University & Lynx Edicions.
- Sashikumar, C., Praveen J., Palot, M. J., Nameer, P. O., 2010. A checklist of birds of Kerala. *Malabar Trogon*. 7(3): 2–13 (2009)
- Sashikumar, C., Praveen J., Palot, M. J., Nameer, P. O., 2011. *Birds of Kerala: status and distribution*. DC Books, Kottayam, Kerala.
- Vasanthan, P. J., 2010. <http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/long-billed-vulture-gyps-indicus/bird-flight-below>. [Accessed on 21 April 2013.]

Taking Care of Exhausted Vultures

The juveniles of many large raptors wander a lot and are not good at finding food. Once exhausted they are unable to fly. It is good that such birds are rescued. Birds will be able to fly after they get food and water and a little care for a few days. It will take about fifteen days for such birds to recover fully. Birds should be given about 500 gm of goat meat with bones daily. Ideally half of it should be chopped meat and other half should be a piece of leg with muscles and bones as birds will pull meat from the leg and will be good for their neck and legs. Avoid giving beef or buffalo meat because of the problem of the contamination of the drug *diclofenac*. The drug has been found extremely toxic to *Gyps* vultures. Poultry meat should be strictly avoided because of disease issues. The bird should be kept in a cage not less than 10'x10'x10' and it should be in the open. At least a fourth of the cage should be shaded with a non-conducting material. The floor should be of soil only. There should be a stump and probably two perches. The perches should have rough surface or coconut rope should be wound around it. One could be at a height of about 5'. There should be a water trough and should be always filled up. The juvenile birds tend to get friendly with humans and that should be avoided otherwise there will be a problem in releasing them. The left over bones could be removed twice a week but water should be changed every alternate days.

– Vibhu Prakash, *Bombay Natural History Society*