

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 km² 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 km². 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, lose 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.

Acknowledgement

We are thankful to Shri C.N. Pandey, Director, GEER Foundation, Government of Gujarat, for providing travelling expenses for the survey. We also thank Shri V.B. Raol and Mr. D.P. Jhala for accompanying us in the field work.

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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 carcass of a

donkey. None of the vultures was feeding on the carcass. They were spread out over an area of about 200 m². There were four species present – Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, Indian White-backed Vulture *G. bengalensis*, Cinereous Vulture *Aegyptius 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