

# Jatayu



A Newsletter of Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme



A Joint Project of  
Bombay Natural  
History Society



Forest Department  
of Haryana



Forest Department  
of West Bengal



Forest Department  
of Assam



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The BNHS was founded in 1883 for the purpose of exchanging notes and observations on natural history and exhibiting interesting specimens. Today, it is the largest non-governmental organization (NGO) in the subcontinent engaged in the conservation of nature and natural resources, education and research in natural history with members in over 30 countries.

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## Editorial

This was a very eventful year for the Vulture Conservation. The first ever hatching of a White-backed vulture in captivity at the Conservation Breeding Centre at Pinjore was a major milestone in the efforts to save the species from extinction. The doubts about breeding these vultures in captivity in some quarters can now be laid to rest with this hatching of nestling. The environment in which vultures are kept at the centres is as close to natural as possible. In the colony aviaries they forage and live in flocks as they would do in the wild. A few adults at the centre formed pairs at the onset of breeding season, started inspecting the nest sites and began building nest. Many a times, while watching on the CCTV camera monitors, one would forget whether one is watching the nesting pair in the wild or in captivity. Nestlings raised by natural parents are best suited for the reintroduction which is the ultimate aim of the conservation breeding programme. We are quite sure that there will be successful breeding in the years to come and reintroduction programme will become a reality.

The conservation breeding is a long-term programme and it is very important that the State, technical and funding agencies remain fully committed to the programme until the objectives are fulfilled. The Haryana Forest Department and Bombay Natural History Society have been working jointly on the Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme since the year 2001. This association was formalised by entering into a long-term MOU of fifteen years between the two organisations. The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre at Pinjore, has made rapid strides under the dynamic leadership of Ms. Kiran Choudhary, the honourable Minister of forests, Government of Haryana. She was instrumental in getting the memorandum of understanding



signed on 2nd May 2006, for the smooth running of the programme. A governing council which will oversee the functioning of the centre, was formed as was agreed in the MOU, under the chairmanship of the Principal Secretary, Environment & Forests, Government of Haryana. The Chief Wildlife Warden, who is also the leader of the programme, is the Member Secretary. The other members are from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, Wildlife Institute of India, Central Zoo Authority, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, UK, Zoological Society of London, UK and National Birds of Prey Trust, UK. The BNHS is responsible for the execution of the project. This MOU thus ensures total support and commitment from the government and technical and funding agencies which is vital for the success of this important programme.

The Forest Department of West Bengal has been extending all the support for the Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme. The honourable Minister in charge of forests, Mr. Ananta Roy took time off from his busy schedule to inaugurate the second Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in India at Raja Bhat Khawa in West Bengal. Mr. Simon Wilson, the Dy. High Commissioner of U.K. in India based at Kolkata also

graced the occasion. It is very reassuring to see the keen interest of our political leaders in vulture conservation.

The Bombay Natural History Society entered into an MOU with the Assam Forest Department for the establishment of the Conservation Breeding Centre largely for the Slender-billed vulture, which is perhaps the most endangered vulture in the world. An estimated 200 pairs survive in the wild. The dynamic Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam, Mr. M. C. Malakar, IFS, who is also the Project Leader, organised all the permissions in a short span of time for setting up the facility.

The ban on the manufacturing of diclofenac for veterinary use came into effect from August 2006. It is a very welcome step but a comprehensive ban on storing and use of veterinary diclofenac would be more effective. The filtration of human diclofenac into veterinary use is also a serious issue. As yet, there is no ban on the veterinary use of diclofenac but only on its manufacture for such purposes and whether this will be enough to prevent total extinction is not clear.

The conservation breeding centres offer the only real security for survival of the three species of vultures.

- R.D. Jakati

## Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Pinjore, Haryana

Birth of White-backed vulture nestlings

Two nestlings of the White-backed vulture, hatched at the centre on 1st and 5th January 2007, respectively. This was the first ever hatching of White-backed vulture nestlings in captivity anywhere in the world. Both the eggs hatched in the mornings and the parents were seen going around in the nest curiously craning their neck and peeping from different directions wondering what was there in the nest, quite typical of

inexperienced parents. They however, soon realized and began brooding the young one. In one of the nest the female was seen eating the eggshell. Both the parents were very attentive and were seen giving saliva to the nestlings. They would brood continuously and would not leave the nest unattended. The nesting was observed on the CCTV monitors. Unfortunately, neither nestling survived but this was not unexpected for first time parents. We hope to have better success next year.

## Vultures at the centre

In all, 123 vultures are housed at the centre of which 53 are White-backed, 54 Long-billed, 14 Slender-billed and 2 Himalayan Griffons. The majority of the White-backed and Long-billed vultures are housed separately in colony aviaries. Juvenile birds are spread among the smaller aviaries. All the Slender-billed vultures are housed in a colony aviary. Two Himalayan Griffons are housed in display aviaries at the far end of the centre.

## Enhancement of facilities

Construction of the third colony aviary of dimensions 100'x40'x20' was completed and the Slender-billed vultures were shifted into this aviary. There are now three such aviaries in the Pinjore centre.



In the past, food was provided by entering into the aviaries. However, it was noticed that vultures were hardly utilizing the perches and ledges which were near the entrance of the aviary. Two food hatches of dimension 3'x1½' were first made, one each on the 100 ft. walls, in the White-backed aviary. These have proved to be very effective and the same have also been constructed in the other two

colony aviaries.

An additional water tank was constructed towards the plantation side of the centre where the land is slightly higher. The water flows with gravity through the pipes to the aviaries and even reaches the original water tank placed on top of the laboratory building. This makes water management more practical. A waste disposal pit of dimensions 10x10x10' was dug out side the centre, close to the perimeter fence to dispose the left over carcasses and other waste. The bone collector collects the bones from the pit every month.



## Breeding season at the centre

### A. White-backed vultures

#### i. Courtship

Like in the wild, in captivity also, the onset of breeding was noticed



in the White-backed vulture colony aviary, which houses the adult vultures, from the beginning of September 2006. Nine pairs were formed and were observed sitting close together on selected nest ledges. They would bring nesting material and would arrange it on the ledge. They would copulate on the nest ledge or on a perch near by and would defend the nest ledge.

#### ii. Nest building

The birds preferred the nest ledges with jute matting. They



were observed bringing nesting material from October. The nesting material comprised of twigs of various species of trees. All the pairs seemed to prefer the twigs of Pine. The green leaves and grass were brought to line the nest. Both the birds participated equally in nest building and made a big nest of twigs. This year nine pairs of White-backed vultures



were observed building nests.

#### iii. Incubation

The White-backed vulture lays just one egg every year. This year four pairs had eggs. Fairly synchronised laying was observed in the colony. The first egg was laid on the 9<sup>th</sup> November and



subsequently two more eggs were laid on the 10<sup>th</sup> November. The fourth egg was laid on the 28<sup>th</sup> December on the floor of the aviary probably by an unpaired female. Both birds shared equal responsibility in incubation. The average incubation period was 55 days.

### B. Long-billed vultures

Three pairs were observed in the Long-billed vulture colony. One pair built a nest on a concrete ledge but later shifted to a new site on another concrete ledge on the other end of the wall. Eventually, the pair broke up. The male paired up with another female and again built a nest. No egg was however laid. Most of our Long-billed vultures are 2-3 years old and it will be another two years before they will start breeding.

### C. Slender-billed vultures

No pairing of birds was noticed at all as all the Slender-billed vultures at the centre are either juveniles or sub-adults. It will take at least a couple of years before they start breeding at the centre.

## Surgery on vultures

The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre has developed the capability of carrying out major surgeries on vultures to give them a better quality of life and improve their breeding potential. The birds are anaesthetised with the help of isoflurane gas which works very rapidly and recovery is fast which reduces any risks of trauma due to unsteadiness and wing flapping by the bird.

Five birds with severe wing deformity, caused by the kite string injuries in Gujarat, were operated upon between 20<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> January 2007 under the expert guidance of Dr. Andrew Routh from ZSL. The string injury severed the tendons and muscles as a result of which the birds would hold the affected wing open and drag it along. This caused



injury to the blood feathers which soon developed maggots. The wings of five birds were successfully amputated and the birds are now leading a better quality of life at the centre.

## Formation of Governing Council and its first meeting

The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre is a joint project of Bombay Natural History Society and Haryana Government. One of the requirements of the MOU is to have a governing council headed by the Principal Secretary, Environment and Forest, Government of Haryana. The Governing Council was constituted under the chairmanship of Mr. H C Disodia, IAS, Principal Secretary, Forests, Government of Haryana with Dr. R. D. Jakati, IFS, Chief Wildlife Warden, Haryana as the Member Secretary. The Governing Council has an advisory role and will meet twice a year. It has 14 members

which will include representatives of Central Zoo Authority, Wildlife Institute of India, Hissar Veterinary College, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Director, Bombay Natural History Society and international members from Zoological Society of London (ZSL), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and National Birds of Prey Trust (NBPT).

The first meeting of the Council was held in the chamber of Mr. H C Disodia, IAS on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2006. The progress report and the plan of action for the next year were presented by the Chief Wildlife Warden.

## Visitors to the centre

Mr. B.G. Deshmukh, President, BNHS visited the centre in the month of February 2007. He was given a guided tour of the centre by Dr. Vibhu Prakash. He was happy by

Dr. Chris Parish, The Peregrine Fund, USA, inspected the centre on 30<sup>th</sup> November as members of International Technical Advisory Committee.

Mr. Vinod Rishi, Director, Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, Dehradun, and former Additional Director General, Wildlife, MOEF, Government of India, visited the centre on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2006. Dr. R. D. Jakati, Project Leader, took him around



the progress made at the centre.

Mr. H. C. Disodia, IAS, Secretary, Forests, Government of Haryana, visited the centre on 14<sup>th</sup> December accompanied by Dr. R. D. Jakati, Project Leader. Dr. Jakati gave him a guided tour of the centre. Mr. Disodia expressed his satisfaction with the functioning of the centre.

Ms. Jemima Parry-Jones, MBE, National Birds of Prey Trust and



the centre. Mr. Rishi was impressed by the progress made at the centre.

Mr. Mike Yates, the President of Rotary International visited the Vulture Centre on 25<sup>th</sup> September along with his wife. He appreciated the efforts and has promised all possible help in raising funds for the breeding programme.

Dr. Jurgen Blaser, Vice-Director, Head Forest-Environment team of Swiss Foundation for Development and International Cooperation, Switzerland, visited the centre on 14<sup>th</sup> September to understand the Vulture Conservation Breeding Program.

He was a guest of Haryana Forest Department and was accompanied by Mr. Somashekhar, IFS and Mr. Sapra, IFS, Conservator of Forests (Wildlife). He was greatly impressed by the work being carried out.

Mr. Brij Kishor Gupta and Dr. Nirmaljeet Singh from the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) came on an inspection of the centre on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2006. The centre has sought recognition as a Rescue Centre for vultures from CZA under section 38 H of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972. This recognition has since been given.

Mr. Debi Goenka, Honorary Treasurer, BNHS visited the centre on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> August. He was given a guided tour of the centre as well as a presentation on the various activities being carried out at the centre. He was very happy with the progress made at the centre.



## Workshop on Best Practice Review of Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme

A workshop on 'Best Practice review of the Vulture Breeding Programme' was held from 5th to 7th December 2006 with the objective to produce a manual 'Best Practice Guidelines for

NBPT, The Peregrine Fund and IUCN Reintroduction Specialist Group also attended the workshop. BNHS provided all the logistics and support. It was funded by the RSPB and Darwin



Indian Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme'. The participants included officials from Forest Departments of Assam, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Haryana and Maharashtra. Organizations like IVRI, WII were also represented. International experts from the RSPB, ZSL,

Initiative for the survival of species, a UK Government grant. A manual will shortly be produced with the input from various experts and it will form the baseline for running a conservation breeding programme of vultures.

## Workshop for Establishment of ex-situ conservation centres for vultures in Indian zoos

The Wildlife Institute of India organised a three days 'Workshop for Establishment of ex-situ conservation centres for vultures in Indian zoos' at Pinjore from 1-3

Government of India. The zoos are 1. Van Vihar, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh 2. Nehru Zoological Garden, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, 3. The Nandan Kanan Zoo, Orissa, the Junagadh Zoo,



November 2006 in collaboration with the Bombay Natural History Society and the Haryana Forest Department. The Central Zoo Authority, the apex regulatory body of Government of India for keeping animals and birds in captivity, sponsored this workshop. The major objective of the workshop was to develop a project proposal for the proposed conservation breeding centres in the four zoos identified by

Gujarat. The main resource persons were drawn from Haryana Forest Department, Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Pinjore, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun and Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izzat Nagar, UP. Mr. Chris Bowden, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, UK, was the international resource person to give an international perspective of conservation breeding.

## Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between BNHS and Haryana Forest Department

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Haryana Forest Department and the Bombay Natural History Society for long term collaboration in Vulture Conservation Breeding Program on 2nd May 2006. The signing ceremony was held at the Chief Minister's Committee room at Haryana Secretariat, Chandigarh. This demonstrates the importance that Haryana Government accords to the vulture breeding programme. The ceremony was presided over by the dynamic Haryana Forest Minister, Ms. Kiran Choudhury. The MOU was signed by Dr. R.D. Jakati on behalf of Forest

Department and by Dr. A. R. Rahmani on behalf of BNHS in the presence of the Forest Minister, Forest Secretary, Mr. Jain, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Mr. J.P.L. Srivastava, Director, Animal Husbandry and other top forest officers of Haryana. Dr. J.K. Rawat, Addl. PCCF, conducted the meeting. The Minister in her speech highlighted the importance of vultures in the environment and pledged support of Haryana Government to the Vulture Conservation Breeding Program. She thanked RSPB, ZSL and Darwin Initiative for funding the Centre and BNHS for establishing and running the centre in Haryana. Mr. Jain,

Dr. Rahmani, and Mr. Chris Bowden also spoke on the occasion. The film entitled 'The vanishing vultures' by Mr. Mike Pandey was also screened which gave a vivid description of the role played by diclofenac in vulture decline. Signing of the contract will ensure the smooth functioning of the centre and long-term commitment of Haryana Government and BNHS to Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme. The signing ceremony was recorded and was broadcasted on National Television, Doordarshan on the 12 May 2006.

According to the MOU, the Chief Wildlife Warden is the Project Leader and is supported by Project Manager who is the Principal Scientist of Bombay Natural History Society and Deputy Project Manager, who is a forest officer and is appointed by the Forest Department of Haryana.



## Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Raja Bhat Khawa, West Bengal

### Inauguration

The second Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre was inaugurated on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2006 by the West Bengal Minister in charge for

forests, Mr. Ananta Roy. Mr. Simon Wilson, British Deputy High Commissioner, East, was also present for the inauguration. Mr. Roy unveiled the plaque and Mr. Wilson released the newsletter

Jatayu of the project. All the top forest officials including the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden were present on the occasion. Mr. Roy

congratulated the Forest Department of West Bengal and the Bombay Natural History Society for initiating the breeding programme of vultures at Raja Bhat Khawa. Mr. Simon Wilson lauded the efforts of BNHS and West Bengal Forest Department in establishing the breeding programme and emphasised that this programme has put Raja Bhat Khawa on the international map. He also added that the conservationists all over the world are looking at the centre for saving the three endangered species of vultures from extinction. Mr. Ananta Roy and Mr. Simon Wilson inaugurated the colony aviary by releasing a juvenile White-backed vulture each in the aviary.



### Enhancement of facilities

#### a. Colony Aviary



check the progress of nesting. The aviary has double door protection and covered gallery on both the 40ft walls.

Presently, a total of 33 birds are housed in the aviary. There are 17 White-backed vultures, 4 Long-billed vultures and 12 Slender-billed vultures.

A colony aviary of dimensions 100'x40'x20' was constructed at the centre. The design of the aviary is the same as it is at Pinjore. All the nest ledges are netted with coconut rope and bordered by wooden frame. There are water troughs, food hatches and perches at different heights. There are a number of big tree stumps of teak which serve as natural perches. There is a window above each nest ledge to



#### B. Laboratory

The laboratory is established in a building given by the Forest Department, which is about 100 m from the centre. It has two big rooms of dimensions 24x20' and two small rooms of dimensions 10x12'.

The front big room is utilised as sample storage room where a freezer and a refrigerator are installed. Towards the other end of the room, a small interpretation section is developed which explains the vulture story and the

Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme.

The second large room is utilised as a meeting room cum library. The small library has all the books relevant to the programme.

One of the smaller rooms is utilised as haematology room. The room has a microscope, centrifuge and other equipment required for analysing blood samples. One small room is utilised as post mortem room and has all facilities for carrying out post mortems.



## Vultures at the centre

This year 36 nestlings were added to the centre. In all, 50 vultures were housed at the centre by the end of March 2007.

### White-backed vultures

There are 21 White-backed vultures at the centre. Only one is an adult, three are second year birds and the rest are first year birds. Thirteen nestlings were collected from West Bengal and five from Madhya Pradesh, this year.

### Long-billed vultures

There are seventeen Long-billed vultures and all are first year birds. All of them were collected as nestlings from Madhya Pradesh.

### Slender-billed vultures

There are 12 Slender-billed vultures at the centre and all are 2-4 years old. We could not collect any Slender-billed vulture this year.

## Rearing of vulture nestlings

Thirty-six nestlings were collected this year from West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. The nestlings were



distributed between the five holding and one hospital aviaries

which were converted into nursery aviaries. Nest ledges were put all along the edge of the 4 ft wall. The 2 ft wide ledge was made of rolled out bamboos. Nesting material consisting of twigs and green leaves were spread on the ledges. A perch wound with coir rope was put almost a foot above the nesting ledge for the nestling to jump on. The ledge extended into the shaded area also providing shelter from rain. The nestlings of similar age class were kept together throughout the period. A maximum of 4 nestlings were kept in one aviary. The White-backed and Long-billed vultures were kept in separate aviaries. Ledges were strategically placed at the edge of the wall to get drafts of wind through the chain-linked mesh which encouraged the birds to jump, wing flap and exercise.

## Feeding the nestlings

Most of the nestlings collected were between 45-60 days old. The younger nestlings were fed on minced meat with crushed bones in normal saline water, 100-200 gm three times a day. The older nestlings were given 500 gm meat per day with crushed bones. They were given 1500 gm of meat twice a week once they were over 100 days old. The birds were given meat of freshly slaughtered



goat carcasses. The birds will eventually be shifted to colony aviaries once they are 150 days old after giving them a health check.

## Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Assam

The major recommendation of the Vulture Recovery Plan, February 2004, was



to set up at least three conservation breeding facilities in India, immediately and ultimately six across south Asia.

The third centre was established at Rani forest, Assam. The site was approved by Mr. Malakar, IFS, PCCF and Chief Wildlife Warden, Assam and the project advisors

Ms. Jemima Parry-Jones, MBE & Dr. Andrew Routh. The land at the Rani forest was ideally suited for setting up the centre. The centre is situated within Jorasal Reserve Forest under the jurisdiction of Rani Range in East Kamrup Division bordering Meghalaya state. It is about 25 km from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam and 10 km off the Kolkata-Guwahati National Highway. It falls in Kamrup district on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra and is 12 km from Guwahati airport. The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre is established in 5 acres of Assam Forest Department's land.

## Infrastructure

### Bamboo Fence

Three feet high temporary bamboo perimeter fence was erected around an acre of land where the construction of quarantine aviaries and watchman's hut were proposed, to keep the domestic animals away.

constructed for the watchman to reside. This has a coating of varnish on it and is water proof. The roof is of galvanised tin. This is utilised now as watchman's room as well as for storing construction material. At least one watchman stays round the clock at the centre.

### Quarantine Aviary

The centre has two quarantine aviaries of dimensions 15'x12'x14' with capacity to hold at least 8 vultures. These aviaries provide total isolation to birds to recover from stress.

Any bird brought to the centre is first kept in this aviary and their health is monitored for a month. Blood and faecal samples are analysed periodically to make sure they are free of diseases.

### Watchman's cabin

A room of dimensions 20x20x12' with walls of coarse matting (tarja) made from bamboo was



## Vultures at the centre

A total of four vultures are housed at the centre. There are two White-backed vultures and two Slender-billed vultures. All these birds were collected as sick or injured by different organisations and individuals. The staff from the centre went and collected these birds after taking due permissions from the Chief Wildlife Warden, Assam.

## Vulture Workshop, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

A vulture workshop was organised in Ahmedabad in collaboration with Bird Conservation Society of Gujarat (BCSG) and Gujarat Forest Department on 9th December to discuss the vulture nest colony monitoring programme, the use of Diclofenac and effectiveness of the ban of Diclofenac in Gujarat. The workshop was inaugurated by Mr. Pradeep Khanna, PCCF and CWLW and was attended by well known bird watchers of Gujarat including Mr. Luv Kumar Khachar, Mr. Lal Singh Raol, Dr. B M Parasharya, Dr. Bakul Trivedi and Mr. Kartik Shastri. The meeting was also attended by the scientists from Geer Foundation including its Director, Mr. Pandey. Dr. Richard Cuthbert, RSPB and Dr. Vibhu Prakash, BNHS also participated actively in the meeting.

A positive outcome of the meeting was that everybody agreed that diclofenac is a major cause of vulture mortality and it should be totally withdrawn from the system. Everybody was of the strong opinion that diclofenac is still widely used through out the state and efforts should be made to implement the ban effectively.

The injury to birds caused by kite string during uttrayan festival in January was also discussed at length. A very effective presentation was given by Animal Health Foundation. Mr. Pradeep Khanna said that kite flying festival can not be banned as it is a social and religious festival. He however said that all attempts should be made to save the injured birds. Dr. Vibhu Prakash made a very strong appeal to stop the mayhem of the birds by restricting kite flying.

## Monitoring of vulture nesting colonies

The project has been monitoring the breeding success in identified nesting colonies of White-backed vultures and Long-billed vultures since 2001. The colonies are spread all over the existing range of these two species and are monitored by both volunteers and staff of BNHS. There has been very low breeding success in all the nesting colonies except the one in Wynad Wildlife Sanctuary.

Mr. Kartik Shastri is monitoring White-backed vultures and their nesting in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. He is monitoring 45 nests spread over the Ahmedabad city.

Mr. Shanti Lal Varu has been monitoring the entire Kuchch area of Gujarat for vultures. He monitored 12 nests of White-backed vultures and a few nests of Long-billed vultures. He has recorded two nests of White-backed vultures on rooftops of houses in a residential colony.

Mr. C. Sashikumar is monitoring

White-backed vulture nesting colony in Kurichyat Range and Tholpetty Range at the Wynad Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala. He has recorded a total of nine nests of White-backed vultures at these two locations.

Mr. Vishwas Katdare has been monitoring two colonies of White-backed vultures viz Anjarla and Murud, both in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. At the Murud colony, absolutely no nesting was observed this year whereas at Anjarla, 12 nests were recorded.

Mr. B. Raha has been monitoring White-backed as well as Long-billed vulture colonies in Nashik, Maharashtra. This year no nesting of White-backed vultures was recorded. He is monitoring 26 nests of Long-billed vultures at Ajineri Fort, at Nashik.

Mr. S. Saravanan, Research Fellow, BNHS, is monitoring a nesting colony of Long-billed vultures at Bayana, Rajasthan. He has recorded 15 nests this year.

## Seminar cum Workshop on status & conservation of vultures in North Bengal

A seminar was organised by the Bombay Natural History Society and West Bengal Forest Department in collaboration with Himalayan Nature and Adventure Foundation, Siliguri on 8th November 2006. The workshop was attended by about 20 NGO's active in North Bengal and the Animal Resource Development Department. The objectives of the workshop were

to educate the participants on vulture identification and their decline and to get a feedback from them regarding presence of vultures and use of Diclofenac in their areas. The main resource persons were from Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) and West Bengal Forest Department. Dr. Richard Cuthbert, RSPB, UK, was the international resource person.



## Nestling collection

The wild caught nestlings and juveniles taken in to captivity are expected to be more adaptive to



captive conditions and breed more easily than wild-caught adults. The Vulture Recovery Plan released in the year 2004, recommends that 75% of the birds which would form the founder stock of the captive population should be collected as nestlings or juveniles. The best age to collect nestlings of vultures is when they are about 45 days old as by then their thermoregulation is developed and they are able to feed on food placed in front of them on their own. Collection of nestlings and juveniles also makes sure that the age of the bird is known as it is important in a conservation breeding programme.

This year nestling collection commenced from February 2007 and continued until March 2007. Thirteen Long-billed vulture nestlings and 6 White-backed vulture nestlings were collected from Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary at Mansaur, Madhya Pradesh whereas 4 Long-billed vulture nestlings were collected from Ramnagar, 'Gidh Pahadi' near Satna, Madhya Pradesh. Thirteen White-backed nestlings were collected from various places in North Bengal.

All nestlings collected were weighed, ringed and physically examined. The birds were transported by air to the centre at Raja Bhat Khawa, Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal.

## Project Staff

Dr. R. D. Jakati, IFS, Chief Wildlife Warden, is the Project Leader and is supported by his team of Mr. Sada Ram, Wildlife Inspector and Mr. Rakesh Sharma, Forest Guard, at Pinjore.

Mr. S. Saravanan, Senior Research Fellow and Mr. R. Venkitachalam, Research Fellow form the research team at Pinjore, supported by Mr. Niranjana Dalei, Administrative Assistant, Mr. Jai Kishan, Mr. Shagun Chand and Mr. Timman Singh, vulture keepers, Mr. Mahendra Singh and Mr. Rajesh

Kumar, drivers, in Pinjore.

Mr. Ujjawal Bhattacharya, IFS, Chief Conservator of Forests, is the Project Leader assisted by Mr. L G Lepcha, IFS, Field Director, Buxa Tiger Reserve, for the West Bengal centre.

Mr. Sachin Ranade, centre in-charge, Mr. S. Siva Kumar, Senior Research Fellow and Dr. Jeherul Islam, Project Veterinarian form the Research team in Raja Bhat Khawa, West Bengal, supported by Mr. Amar Prasad, driver and M/s.

Monu Lama, Bandhan Urao, Purna Raba and Madan Lakra, vulture keepers/watchman.

Mr. M.C. Malakar, IFS, PCCF and Chief Wildlife Warden is the Project Leader & Dr. Devojit Das is the centre in-charge for the Assam centre.

Dr. Vibhu Prakash, Principal Scientist is the over-all in-charge of the conservation breeding programme and is supported by Ms. Nikita Prakash, Technical Assistant.

## Vulture Carcass Submission Protocol



In order to carry out the necessary investigations to determine the cause of the vulture declines, it is vitally important that freshly-dead vultures are available for detailed post mortem examination and sampling for diagnostic tests. Therefore, biologists are encouraged to inform Dr. Vibhu Prakash of any sick vultures in their area and to collect any freshly dead vultures that may be found. If they are to be useful for examination, the carcasses must be fresh, and kept that way, until the time of examination by storage on ice, as follows.

1. Put the carcass into a strong plastic bag and seal this bag to make it watertight. Press out any air in the bag before sealing it.

2. Repeat step 1 so the vulture is now within two strong, sealed plastic bags.

3. Place the bagged vulture on ice packs\* in a thermo cool box and cover the carcass as much as possible with ice packs\*.

4. Seal the thermo cool box by taping the lid on tightly with strong sticky tape. Tape all the way around the join between the lid and the box.

5. Immediately contact Dr. Vibhu



Prakash (BNHS Pinjore 01733-232924/264426) to arrange for the carcass to be sent by the fastest way possible to the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Pinjore. The cost for sending the carcass will be borne by BNHS. Remember - time is of the essence.

6. Include with the carcass (by

placing in a sealed envelope taped to the outside of the thermo cool box) details of the carcass as follows:

Species of vulture

age of vulture if known

Location where carcass was found

date and time of day carcass was found and collected

any other relevant information e.g. state if vulture was known to have been sick (and for how long) before it died.

To create ice packs, fill plastic bottles with water, replace the lids securely and place into a deep freezer. Please note, if you are monitoring vultures and likely to find carcasses, it is a good idea to have quite a number of ice packs ready-made in a freezer to avoid delays in submitting carcasses for post mortem examination.

PLEASE DO INFORM THE LOCAL WILDLIFE /FOREST DEPARTMENT AFTER COLLECTING THE CARCASS AND OBTAIN PERMISSION. PLEASE INFORM US IN CASE OF DIFFICULTY.

## The Last Word

As the vulture population is very low, it will be good to record all sightings and nesting records of the vultures. We would welcome your inputs in collection of data or information on vultures from your area. As you are all aware that investigations into the cause of the vulture declines are reliant on a supply of freshly-dead vultures for post mortem examination, the next few columns of this newsletter is, therefore, devoted to the protocol for the submission of vulture carcasses for pathological examination. Please do all you can to help us obtain these necessary carcasses. Also, if you observe sick vultures, please inform Dr. Vibhu Prakash directly at the Vulture Project Office. All contributions will be duly acknowledged.

## Donations

The project would like to say a big 'Thank you' to the Body Shop Foundation who very kindly donated 2.4 Lakhs for the construction and running of the colony aviary for Slender-billed vultures. Thank you Body shop for the help in the construction of the aviary of the most endangered species of vulture in the world!

This is also an opportunity to acknowledge the huge and underlying support for the programme given by RSPB through BNHS, who are now taking the main burden of funding, since the major Darwin Initiative Funding finished in June 2006. Without this financial commitment, the programme would be severely jeopardised.

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Further information on Darwin Vulture Project can be obtained from Dr. Vibhu Prakash at the Project Office or Website at: [www.bnhs.org](http://www.bnhs.org)

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