

## A Recent sighting and photographic record of Goliath Heron (*Ardea goliath*) in Sundarban Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

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Goliath heron is one of the world's largest heron species belonging to the order Ciconiiformes and family Ardeidae. This species is distributed in Africa from Southern Egypt to South Africa (Kushlan & Hancock, 2005), Middle East and the Indian subcontinent (Hancock & Elliot, 1978). The habitat of Goliath Heron generally includes lakes, swamps, mangrove wetlands with little cool water and occasionally also river deltas. Generally it is diurnal and a passive hunter, standing motionless about three quarters of the time (Douglas *et al.*, 1980).

They are solitary foragers and are highly territorial, it generally consumes fish and any other small animals such as frogs, prawns, small mammals, snakes, lizards, insects and even carrion (Mock & Mock, 1980). Generally the breeding season corresponds to the start of the monsoon and breeding may not occur every year. They are properly adaptable owing to their nesting site selection and they prefer nesting on islands, lakes and large water bodies. Status of this bird is evaluated as Least Concern (LC) by IUCN Red List, Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 has accorded Schedule IV status and CITES has listed this species under Appendix I.

The sightings of Goliath heron have been very rare and infrequent in the Indian part of Sundarbans (Prater, 1926) and the neighboring mangroves in Orissa. The previous sightings of Goliath heron in Indian Sundarbans were recorded by Jackson (1976) and Banerjee R (1994). In Assam the bird was sighted by Saikia & Bhattacharjee (1990). Madge (1994) sighted it in Mihimukh, Kaziranga National Park, Abdar *et al.* (2004) recorded it at Sangli in Morana district of Maharashtra and



Fig. 1. Goliath Heron at Bhagvan Bharani in Sundarban Tiger Reserve



Fig. 2. Goliath Heron landing on the mud bank

Gopi and Pandav (2007) recorded it in Bhitarkanika, Orissa. A sighting of Goliath Heron was recorded in 2005 in Indian Sundarbans which was confirmed by the forest officials.

As a part of the project on "Monitoring tigers, co-predators, prey and their habitat" a survey was carried out to enumerate signs of prey and predators during February to May 2010 in the

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Indian Sundarbans. On 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010, an adult Goliath heron was sighted in a small creek called Bhagavan Bharani which is situated in National Park West Range of Sundarban Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India. The bird was identified with an aid of Bushnell (12X40) binoculars and the standard field guide of Grimmett, *et al.* (1999). The head of the bird was brown in colour, eyes were yellow, bill and legs were black, throat was chestnut and body was brown (Fig. 1 & 2).

The wading bird was seen on the mud bank during the start of high tide at 12.52 PM. As we were on a mechanized boat the bird flew when we were about 40 meters from it probably due to the sound of the engine of the boat. The bird was observed to fly for about 100 meters and perched again near shore. The vegetation of the site where the bird was sighted composed of *Exoceria agallocha*, *Ceriops decandra*, *Avicenia marina* and *Phoenix paludosa*.

Though Goliath Heron is categorized as Least Concern species in IUCN Red List of Threatened Species their population status is still unknown in the Indian sub continent. This record augments that this bird is vagrant to Sundarbans TR. According to Sundarban's history the previous sighting was reported in 2005 by the forest officials however there is no authentic information about this rare heron. Whilst Sundarban Tiger Reserve is home for several rare and endangered taxons this sighting after a long time reveals that these rare birds still exist in the unique mangrove habitat.

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