

Opportunistic road count of Bearded Vulture in Himachal Pradesh

The Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, also called Lammergeier is well known as a mountain bird species. It is listed as a Near Threatened species by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2021). It is found in northern Africa, Europe, and in the Himalaya in Asia (Botha et al. 2017).

The bird is resident throughout the Himalayan range, being common in western part of the range (Naoroji 2006). Its nest and habitat are well described (Baker 1935) while the bird morphology and its behavior are also well described (Ali & Ripley 1983).

During January 2005, while conducting the *Gyps* vulture survey in Himachal Pradesh, I opportunistically recorded this graceful bird. Himachal Pradesh has 12 districts, but in this survey, the districts Lahaul and Spiti were not covered and Kinnaur was only partially covered because of heavy snowfall. In 10 districts, a total distance of 1,506 km was travelled along the highways in



Bearded Vulture in flight at Chail Wildlife Sanctuary, Himachal Pradesh. © Sachin Ranade.

21 days, sighting 10 Bearded Vultures at six locations in five districts (Table 1). For the state, the northernmost sighting was noted in Banikhet and Chamba districts while the southernmost observations were at Chail Wildlife Sanctuary, Solan District.

In all observations, the Bearded Vultures were seen following or loosely associated with the flock of Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*. At Chail Wildlife Sanctuary, an immature and an adult individual were seen carrying bones collected from a carcass,

dropping them on rocks from a height and feeding on them. At Dharamshala, a breeding pair was seen in the nest that was just next to the nesting colony of Himalayan Vulture. In the rest of the four instances, the birds were seen soaring along the bare hills and mountains.

A study with line transect distance sampling done for the species in Annapurna mountain range in Nepal had recorded an encounter rate of 0.21 vultures/km and density 0.184/km² (Subedi et al. 2018). The authors compared the

Table 1. Sighting records of Bearded Vulture in Himachal Pradesh in January 2005.

	Date	Time (H)	Village	District	Number	Activity	Latitude	Longitude	Altitude (m)
1	02.i.2005	1100	Kathed, Chail	Solan	2	Feeding on Bones	30.9403° N	77.2381° E	1439
2	14.i.2005	1520	Khaniara, Dharamshala	Kangra	2	On nest	32.2139° N	76.3944° E	1764
3	17.i.2005	1436	Bangala, Banikhet	Chamba	1	Soaring	32.5253° N	75.9367° E	1970
4	20.i.2005	1100	Jari	Kullu	1	Soaring	31.9731° N	77.2042° E	1284
5	21.i.2005	1200	Larji, Aut	Kullu	2	Soaring	NI	NI	NI
6	23.i.2005	1100	Rampur	Shimla	2	Soaring	31.4794° N	77.6897° E	898
NI - No Information.									

population density to the Africa and Alps that appeared much low compared to the density in Nepal. The population of Bearded Vulture in Himalayas has breeding season from December to March (Ali & Ripley 1983). Hence, probably one or both the birds from the breeding pairs could be on nest and probably I came across fewer individuals with encounter rate 0.007 individuals per km.

In this survey, on only three occasions, pairs were observed. Interestingly, as an example of citizen science data, the species has been recorded globally 18,059 times—3,189 times from India, out of which 726 sightings in Himachal Pradesh recorded on the eBird (Orta et al. 2020) that underlines Himachal Pradesh's importance in the conservation of this relic species.

In comparison to the *Gyps* vultures, Bearded Vulture is solitary and due to its different food habit, it appears to be safe from the drug diclofenac. The species was locally extinct in Europe and Africa, and is being reintroduced successfully (Brink et al. 2020; Terraube et al.

2022). There is a need to investigate whether any such threat faces the Indian population of the Bearded Vulture.

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