

Cheer Pheasant in certain habitat patches of Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, Uttarakhand.

Cheer Pheasant *Catreus wallichii* is a medium-sized pheasant that belongs to family Phasianidae of order Galliformes. The species is distributed from northern Pakistan through Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh to Uttarakhand and in east to central Nepal (BirdLife International 2021). The species prefers rocky terrain dominated with tall grasses and bushes with scattered trees, majorly at the elevation in between 1,445–3,050 m, however, there have been instances where the species has been recorded at lower elevation as 950 m (Bisht et al. 2005) and even at 583 m (Hushangabadkar & Anwar 2019). The species is largely reported to be quite sedentary, with little or no seasonal altitudinal movements (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991) and apparently wander downwards in winter due to the extreme cold environment at higher altitude (Baker 1930).

Owing to its specific habitat preference and increasing anthropogenic pressure the population of Cheer Pheasant has decreased over time (BirdLife International 2021). The species is declining at a moderately rapid rate due to livestock grazing pressure, and critical habitat loss due to changing land-use patterns and is currently listed as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List. This species appears to be particularly vulnerable to hunting pressure as it has a strong association with human settlements, relying on low-level anthropogenic disturbance to maintain its preferred habitat and the patchy nature of such critical habitats further render the smallest isolated populations vulnerable to extinctions (Gupta & McGowan 2021)

During our regular field visits to certain areas in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) in Chamoli District of Uttarakhand,



A male (left) Cheer Pheasant along with the female (right) recorded in the first visit. © Anand Kumar.



A male Cheer Pheasant observed calling in subsequent visit to the same area. © Anand Kumar.

we spotted Cheer Pheasants in fair number at certain pockets. In mid of the May 2021, 8–10 individuals of the species were observed at an elevation of around 2,420 m at three separate locations (Site 1: 30.5695 N & 79.5548 E; Site 2: 30.5723 N & 79.5509 E and Site 3: 30.5850 N & 79.5503 E) in the landscape. The later year has yielded even better results with more attempts around the same landscape. During the month of May, June, and July 2022, eight visits have resulted in the detection of 2–8 individuals of this species in almost all attempts.

Cheer Pheasant, Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*, and Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha* are some important pheasants reported from this area. However, *C. wallichii* is uncommon and among the most elusive ones. The existing literature mentions the occurrence of this species, largely through indirect evidences near Lata village in Dhauli Ganga Valley, Painya, near Joshimath, Dhauli valley, at the junction with Rishi Ganga, in Chamoli District, and through calls in Chenab valley, and only one photographic record by a local guide recently near Lata village (Table 1).

The current record provides credible information of species' presence in certain localised pockets of NDBR. The site is rich in avifaunal diversity, harbouring several endemic species and lies in the western Himalaya endemic bird area (Stattersfield et al. 1998). Owing to its remoteness and the tough terrain, the area is not easily accessible and is well protected, thus providing a relatively undisturbed natural habitat for the species among other birds and local fauna. Unlike the mentioned preferred habitat for Cheer Pheasants in the existing literature (Ali & Ripley 1983) such as Chir Pine and mixed pine forests dominated with grasses interspersed with rocky zones, the present stretch where the species was recorded has small boulders, grasses as dominating component, shrubs as *Berberis* spp. and a few trees mainly of *Deodar* spp., *Quercus* spp., and dwarf *Rhododendron* spp., which may collectively provide a good habitable condition to fulfil all necessary requirements of the species.

At the first instance a pair of male and female was spotted, while another male was found



The NDBR landscape where the Cheer Pheasant was recorded. © Anand Kumar.

Table 1. Previous instance of Cheer pheasant in Chamoli District of Uttarakhand.

Year	Place	Author	Description
1974	Lata, Dhaul Ganga Valley	Shah 1980	Confirmed the presence of species but not the number of individuals sighted.
1985	Painya, Near Joshimath	Garson et al. 1992	Confirmed the presence of species but not the number of individuals sighted.
–	Near the junction point between Dhaul and Rishi Ganga	Osmaston 1921	Confirmed the presence of species but not the number of individuals sighted.
2005	Chamoli District, Uttarakhand	Bisht et al. 2005	Confirmed the presence of species but not the number of individuals sighted.
Aug 2007	Chenab Valley, Chamoli	Bhattacharya & Sathyakumar 2007	Confirm the presence of species by calls in dawn and dusk and secondary information.
Oct 2011	Around Joshimath, NDBR	Jan et al. 2011	Evidence claimed but numbers not reported.
Mar 2019	Recorded near winter village Lata	Unknown local guide	Photographic record of a pair near Lata village, NDBR.

calling in the vicinity in the same area. In the following visit to the same area, five individuals were observed gliding from the upper area to the downhill while calling. The same could not be photographed as the individuals disappeared down in between the bushes, though the call of three to four individuals were heard prominently for a few minutes.

Though the species has been reported previously from NDBR, this record is notably the most persuasive direct evidence as per our knowledge, till date. Recording Cheer Pheasant on consecutive days in three trails walked in the same area hints towards a stronghold of this rare species along the NDBR landscape. A fair number of individuals observed during

the month of May in each attempt probably reflect that habitat components and quality in terms of dense ground cover, rocky crags, and rough terrain along with tall grasses as a refuge from predator, may be supporting a healthy population of the species in certain mosaics. Further with very low human interference, the landscape may also favour good reproductive output and better chances for their survival. However, these may be premature assumptions for the current data set; these certainly provide compelling evidence to build further studies in the distribution pattern, population size, microhabitat preferences and breeding habitats for Cheer Pheasant in NDBR.

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