

# The Silent Scavenger and a Clever Predator

## Vulture: Nature's Scavenger

Vultures are very important to nature. They act as a cleaner by consuming dead animals. However, they are under threat in India. Initiatives are underway by the West Bengal Forest Department with the aim to protect three threatened vulture species. The Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre was set up at Rajabhatkhawa, West Bengal.

Gyps word come from the Greek word Gups, which means “vulture”. their names meaning are as follows:

- Oriental White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, the bengalensis word refers to Bengal, hinting at its geographic range.
- Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus*, the indicus word relates to India, marking where it was described from first.
- Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, the tenuirostris word translates to ‘slender beak’, describing its distinct feature.

This centre also rescues and rehabilitates vultures ensuring their survival and reintroduction into the wild. The pre-release aviary of centre where captive bred vultures from the breeding centre are kept and acclimatized before being released in to the wild. This site is frequently visited by Himalayan Griffon Vultures (primarily resident of Himalaya mountains) and they interact with captive-bred vultures, showing their social behaviour.

### Eat Or eaten?

The Centre provides carcasses of naturally dead animals near the pre-release enclosure, in the feeding site. This method helped to attract wild vultures and supports the released vultures (captive-bred and rescued ones) during their initial days. All carcasses are checked for diseases. While monitoring the vultures at the Centre, an unexpected event

occurred in February 2020, a Himalayan Griffon Vulture was killed by an Indian Leopard *Panthera pardus fusca*. The vulture was feeding on a Sambar Deer carcass near the pre-release feeding ground when the leopard attacked and dragged it away. It was recorded in the camera trap placed in feeding site for monitoring. The drama didn't end there; four years later, in March 2024, two more vulture carcasses were found, likely victims of leopard predation. Adult vultures are usually safe from predators, this was an unusual sight implying the nature doesn't always go as planned.

### Clever Leopard or new predator!

Leopards in Buxa are very much adaptable to living in forests, hills, tea gardens, and even near the human settlement areas. Their diet includes various animals and wild bird including peafowls regularly in different protected parts of India, but predation on vultures is rare and previously unreported. To the observation and best knowledge of the authors of this article, this is the first documented sight of Indian Leopards preying on Himalayan Griffon Vultures in their natural habitat.

### Need more study:

More research is needed to understand leopard diets in vulture habitats. This could reveal whether vultures are becoming a common prey of leopard or this was an unusual occurrence.

### JoTT article summarized:

**Chakraborty, S.S., D. Ray, A. Sen, P.J. Harikrishnan, N.K. Jha & R. Ghosh (2024).** Indian Leopard predation on the sub-adult Himalayan Griffon Vulture (Accipitridae: Accipitriformes). *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 16(11): 26104–26109. <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.9255.16.11.26104-26109>

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