

First photographic record of Grey-headed Fish-Eagle in Debagram Reserved Forest, West Bengal

The Grey-headed Fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* is a medium-sized piscivore raptor characterized by its brownish-grey plumage. Although it is a widespread resident in certain regions of India, its distribution is patchy and the population is relatively small despite its expansive range (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). The species is found in the terai regions of the lower Himalaya, extending to Assam, and in central India touching the parts of southern Madhya Pradesh extending to eastern parts of Maharashtra, and southward from Western Ghats of Maharashtra to the foothills of Kerala (Grimmett et al. 2011; Mehta & Kulkarni 2013).

This eagle prefers lowland forests with large waterbodies, particularly slow-running rivers, lakes, perennial forest streams, marshes, seasonally flooded swamp-forest, mangrove swamps, coastal lagoons, and estuaries (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Nesting occurs in tall trees with open crowns located near waterbodies. Preferred nesting tree species include



Grey-headed Fish-Eagle in Debagram Reserved Forest. © Shuchismita Das

Mangifera indica, *Calophyllum apetalum*, and *Terminalia arjuna* (Balasubramanian & Manikandan 2015).

Adults exhibit a distinctive appearance with a relatively small head, longish neck, powerful grey bill, and a contrasting white belly and tail, marked with a broad black subterminal band. Sexes are alike, with females usually heavier than males. In contrast, juveniles display boldly streaked heads and underparts, diffuse brown tail barring, pale underwings with dark barring on flight feathers, and pronounced

dark trailing edges. The Grey-headed Fish-Eagle is currently enlisted as 'Near Threatened' by the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2024). Although no systematic population assessments have been conducted, the species faces numerous threats, including deforestation and degradation of waterbodies which are their primary hunting grounds, unsustainable fishing practices, pollution of waterways, and loss of riparian vegetation for nesting (Clarke et al. 2023; BirdLife International 2024).

On 8 October 2023, a pair of Grey-headed Fish-Eagles

were observed perching on an exposed snag overlooking a waterbody, inside the Debagram Reserved Forest (23.159 N, 88.653 E), consisting of western Gangetic moist mixed deciduous type of vegetation located in Nadia-Murshidabad forest division in Nadia, West Bengal. This sighting represents the first photographic record of this species in Debagram forest and is significant as this species is considered rare in the Nadia District. While there are many eBird records of this species from the Bibhutibhusan Wildlife Sanctuary, located approximately 12 km away in the adjacent North 24 Parganas District, only one prior observation was recorded in February 2023 in Nadia (Sarkar 2021)

During a subsequent seasonal survey on 24 January 2024, the characteristic squawk call of an individual of this species was heard emanating from a nest situated atop a tall Arjun tree *Terminalia arjuna*. Another individual was also spotted perching near the waterbody. The pair was observed again at the same location on 25 May 2024. The sighting pattern emphasizes the potential of this understudied area for supporting this Near Threatened species which also acts as a key indicator for the health of aquatic ecosystems as their presence reflects clean water and a healthy prey base, making them valuable tools for conservation biologists. Additionally, conservation efforts should focus on protecting the waterbodies and surrounding forests from anthropogenic disturbances. By ensuring the health of this ecosystem, we can not only safeguard the Grey-headed Fish-Eagle but also maintain the ecological balance of the entire Debagram Forest.

References

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