

# Volunteer Vet at Uttarayan 2011 – Ahmedabad

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Uttarayan is the annual kite flying festival held 13-15 January in Gujarat. It is one of the spectacular sights of "Vibrant Gujarat" and also spectacularly deadly to birds, and occasionally human beings. The festival involves families that gather on their terraces and fanatically fly kites, the thrill being able to cut a rival kite flyer's kite-string and to keep a score on how many kite strings are cut by a single person in a day.

However, this competitive spirit has been a source of tragedy to birds and the occasional bat, as the thin kite string cut through their tender skin and flesh as the innocently fly into it, and at times even cuts through bone. The string that cuts through bone is "manja" or glass powder coated kite-string which is as efficient in cutting competitive kites as it is cutting through the wings of a large number of birds.

In order to bring down the number of casualties caused during this festival, the Jivdaya Charitable Trust organizes the "Save the Birds Campaign" every year at the local animal shelter or Panjrapol, where veterinarians volunteer to treat these injured birds. This year, I had the privilege of participating in this event alongside veterinarians from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Assam, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Belgium.

The casualties numbered over 1400 on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, largely comprising of Pigeons, Pariah Kites, Common Crows, Cattle Egrets and Ring-necked doves. Other birds included a few Crow pheasants, Barn Owls, Glossy Ibises, Black Ibises, Comb Ducks, Painted Storks, a White-necked Stork, a Pelican, six Oriental White Backed Vultures and two Egyptian Vultures.

Operating theaters were divided into major and minor ones for Kites and Pigeons, and a major operating theater for endangered species of birds. Major operating theaters were managed by Mrs. Usha Nath who made sure every operation procedure ran smoothly. The veterinarians assigned to these theaters were Dr. Melissa Nollet, Dr. Tarun Sutaria, Dr. Prajwalita Sutaria, Dr. A.D. Chaudhary, Dr. Shashi Kiran, Dr. Dishle, Dr. Manjula, and myself. As a junior vet, I was allowed to assist during operating procedures for the larger endangered birds, all of which proved to be most valuable, experience-wise. Major procedures largely involved suturing of the propatagium or wing web so that the bird will still be able to fly, as well as bone-pinning in broken wings and legs. Such operations were always carried out under gas anesthesia that made operating on these birds much safer. All operated birds were then taken into the intensive care unit where they were monitored until they were alert and active, after which they were then transferred to recovery wards at the second shelter where they could be provided with food that suited them better.

All birds and bats were brought to the clinic in various stages of stress often resulting in mortality. All efforts were made to save as many animals as we could.

The experience proved very valuable, in that not only did I get to see how operations could be conducted on a mass scale with limited resources, I was also able to learn techniques that require a lot of practice and hard work. These birds are extremely prone to stress and thus require careful handling. I am most thankful for being able to be a part of this noble cause.



irony!



Kites in the ICU post operation



Bone pinning of wing in a Kite

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List of the patients treated are listed as follows:

- |                                  |                        |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Sarus crane                    | 2 Spotted owlet        |
| 1 Rosy pelican                   | 1 Scops owl            |
| 6 Painted storks                 | 1 Barbet               |
| 1 Woolly/ white necked stork     | 1 Bee eater            |
| 1 Purple moorhen                 | 4 Rose ringed parakeet |
| 1 White Ibis                     | 1 Mouse bat            |
| 2 Godwit                         | 2 Flying foxes         |
| 4 Comb ducks                     | Unk # Kites            |
| 1 Red Wattled Lapwing            | Unk # Pigeons          |
| 4 Peafowl                        | Unk # Crows            |
| 1 Booted eagle                   | Unk # Crow pheasant    |
| 1 Peregrine falcon               | Unk # Mynas            |
| 1 Shikra                         | Unk # Rosy pastors     |
| 6 Oriental white backed vultures | Unk # Egret            |
| 2 Egyptian vulture               | Unk # Black ibises     |
| 4 Barn owl                       | Unk # Glossy ibises    |

This trip proved to be a great eye opener. Not only did I gain much work-wise, and was able to make many useful contacts, but I also learned the pros and cons of tradition and how people are eager to make amends for what tradition does to these birds. I thank everyone at the JCT for having made this a most memorable experience for me. I am also very grateful to Dr. Vibhu Prakash of BNHS who sent me to become a part of something so big and important. Also the vets at the programme allowed me to "hang around" to help during major surgeries and taught me plenty in the process.



**Tending to the injured Pelican**



**Coating of kite strings with glass**



**Egyptian Vulture at recovery**