

NEWS AND NOTES FROM ELECTRONIC SOURCES

Tibetan Blue Bear

Natural History of South Asia - General discussion and research <nathistoryindia@lists.Princeton.EDU

Did you ever hear of the Tibetan Blue Bear ? There was a flurry of information in response to this question on the Natural History of South Asia Network last week. Dr Colin Groves of the Australian National University, a renowned taxonomist, provided the last word.

This Blue Bear is generally listed as a subspecies of the widespread Brown Bear, *Ursus arctos* (which includes all Eurasian brown bears plus the Grizzlies and Big Brown Bears of N.America). It will be listed in books as *Ursus arctos pruinosus*, but in my opinion is a distinct species (*Ursus pruinosus*). There are some in Chinese zoos: small-appearing, squat, very shaggy, dark blue-grey, nearly black, with a white mark on the chest. The range is the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau, mainly Sichuan; they may venture along the southern flank of the Himalayas as far as about Bhutan. Heuvelmans reports that a skin of one was identified by a Tibetan, or maybe a Sherpa, as a yeti.

The western Himalayas, and probably western Tibet, and the Pamir and Tianshan, have a different bear, the Red Bear, *Ursus arctos isabellinus*, which is large, slenderly built (like a real brown bear), red-brown. In Beijing Zoo the two are housed together in a big rocky pit, and they are dramatically different.

Vulture Alert

Note circulated by Asad R. Rahmani, Director, Bombay Natural History Society Hornbill House, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai, who wants information

Eight species of vultures are reported from the Indian subcontinent, out of which the following four species were quite common on the Indian plains: White-backed, Long-billed, Indian Griffon and Egyptian, particularly in north, north-west and central India. Only the King Vulture is considered uncommon. The Himalayan Griffon and Lammergeier are montane species found in the Himalayas. The last species, Cinereous Vulture, is widely distributed in central Asia but in India it is mainly a winter visitor to the north and north-west (as far as Dhulia district in Maharashtra). Vultures are generally less abundant in the south Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

There has been a decrease in vulture numbers in several Asian countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, due to direct persecution and a decline in their natural prey. In these countries there is no taboo against eating cows and buffaloes so few carcasses are left. In India, however, the situation is different and we have millions of cows and buffaloes. So there is no dearth of carcasses. Vultures therefore receive an uninterrupted supply of food throughout the year.

In recent years we have received alarming reports that vultures are declining rapidly all over their former strongholds in northern India. There have been many news items in local newspapers that carcasses are being left uneaten because of the scarcity of vultures. Carcasses which used to be consumed within minutes now rot for days and in many areas only the village dogs are left to scavenge on them. It is difficult to quantify the overall decline in vulture numbers

because no baseline data on an all-India basis are available. However, some idea of the population crash can be made from the studies of Dr Vibhu Prakash, Principal Scientist of the Bombay Natural History Society. In the mid 1980s, whilst carrying out Ph.D research on the birds of prey in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, he counted around 350 nests of White-backed Vultures inside the Park. However in 1997 he saw only 25 nests - more than 90% decline in ten years, and this year (1998) only 11 nest could be counted inside the Park.

We can only speculate as to the rate of decline in other areas. We also do not know the decline in the populations of Griffon, Long-billed and Egyptian Vultures because no studies have been conducted on their nesting sites or in their foraging areas.

Without proper studies it is difficult to determine the main reason(s) for the decline in vulture numbers. Habitat destruction or hunting, the usual reasons for major population crashes, can both be ruled out in this case. Large trees, used for nesting by White-backed Vultures (Long-billed and Egyptian vultures normally nest on cliff ledges), are still plentiful in the countryside. Vulture are also not hunted as few people eat them as they are considered unclean. With a huge number of unproductive livestock, food is not in short supply.

We do not know the reasons for the population crash of Whitebacked Vultures ? We suspect that new pesticides could be responsible for them. But which pesticide(s) ? There are some reports of vultures dying after eating cattle carcasses but these are unverified reports. Perhaps, they are experiencing nesting failures because of egg-shell thinning. These were known to be the causes of the population crashes of the Peregrine Falcon in Europe and North America and the Brown Pelican in North America during the 1960s. Alternatively, it could be some avian disease which is killing the vultures. If this is the case, we will have to wait for the epidemic to subside, leaving a few healthy birds to repopulate the countryside. Another possible reason is that abnormally high populations of vultures have been maintained in India due to the abundant food supply (of cow carcasses). Now, because of liberalization of the Indian economy and other market forces, villagers are keeping fewer cattle, resulting in a decrease in food supplies and the population of vultures is currently stabilizing. It is certainly true that in many areas villagers are shifting to keeping high quality breeds of cattle which are well looked after and do not die and rot in the countryside. However, it is doubtful if this trend is widespread, especially in the so-called cow-belt consisting of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat where the largest numbers of vultures are (were) found. Perhaps there is no single factor for the decline of vultures in India. Until we are able to solve the mystery of vulture deaths, we may not be in a position to devise conservation measures to save these majestic and useful birds.

Asad Rahmani, Director, BNHS requests you to keep a watch on vultures (and other birds) in your area and if you have noticed a decline in their numbers, please let me know the exact area, period of observation, if possible percentage of decline, and any other useful information.

Balochista Black bear facing extinction

Massive destruction of dwarf palm (date palm) groves in the Phub range of Khuzdar district is feared to dissipate the already rare existence of Balochistan's Black Bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus gedrosianus*).

This coupled with the long spells of drought denying sufficient food and water is again forcing the animal to leave the preferred native habitat and move into wilderness. The fact that not more than two pairs of the Balochistan black bear exist in the country has turned experts and wildlife activists to demand urgent scientific measures to contain the extinction of the rare species. Balochistan Black Bear is an isolated breed of one of the two sub species of the black bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*) found in Pakistan.

Unregulated hunting, poaching, snatching of bear cubs for commercial purposes and constant desolation of the particular habitat has already led to its extermination from its otherwise wide distribution area comprising the Safaid Koh mountains, Kachmina valley, Takht-i-Suleiman range, Ziarat, Kaliphat, Western Kalat and Kharan.

Its main stronghold, however, always remained the strip right from Ziarat to the Phub hills south of Khuzdar consisting dry, sub-tropical, semi-evergreen scrub forests. Ironically unfavourable circumstances to the entity of animal in the Ziarat-Khuzdar belt had led many of the experts to believe its total annihilation.

The fear was substantial to a certain extent as locals settled in the area, more particularly around the Phub hills were growingly noticed to erase dwarf palm groves, the only source of sustenance for the Balochistan black bear.

The bear not only feeds on their fruit, which is nothing but dates, but also consumes the thick, starchy and juicy rhizomatous stems of the palm. The locals needed palm as source of fuel besides acquisition of cultivable land.

A survey conducted only recently by the Pakistan Zoological Survey Department ascertained the tangibility of the Balochistan black bear in the area. It, however, at the same time stressed for urgent and pragmatic measures for its survival.

APP news item from KARACHI, 9 November 1998.

Siberian Crane at Keibul Lamjao National Park

Harsh Vardhan has supplied the following information on the arrival of the pair of Siberian cranes at KNP, Bharatpur. It was communicated over the Natural History Network by Dave Ferguson.

"A pair of Siberian cranes was observed first time this winter season at Keoladeo National Park at about 9:30 am (IST) on 11 November 1998 in the E Block. It was presumed that the birds landed in the park the previous night. They are adult birds, However, there is no chick accompanying them. The pair was observed feeding in the same (E) Block for next two days. A Sarus crane pair with two chicks had a territorial dispute with the migrant pair. The resident birds tried to corner them for a while. This led the Sibes to abandon that habitat, take off and settle in K Block. The birds were reported feeding in this Block today (November 18) also." Harsh adds that last year a Sibes pair had landed in this park on 17 November, while the year before last, the arrival date was on 16 November.

Forest Owlet update

From: Pam Rasmussen via the SANHN,
17 Nov 98. After the rediscovery of the Forest Owlet, I put in for an emergency follow-up survey in hopes of determining how critical the situation is for the species. This was funded by the Smithsonian Institution's Biodiversity Programs, and enabled us to start up a survey in collaboration with Bombay Natural History Society. Dr. Rahmani assigned a recent post-doctoral student, Dr. Farah Ishtiaq, to the project, and together we relocated what was presumably the pair we had found in Nov. 1997. We studied that pair for many hours, obtaining interesting behavioral data and tapes of the very distinctive vocalizations, but while I was there we failed to find additional birds. Most discouraging was the very noticeable degradation of the habitat since our November visit, but the birds were still there. After I left the area, Farah continued the survey and has to date located a total of 8 individuals, most or all of them paired up. So what we can say now is that there is a small population, but how localized they are is still conjectural, since no definite reports have yet come from elsewhere, and formal survey work has not yet been conducted outside of the general Shahada/Taloda region. The habitat badly needs protection, but Dr. Rahmani and others are actively pursuing the matter. Farah and I have written a paper on the behavior and vocalizations that we hope to submit soon.
Pam Rasmussen << rasmussen.pamela@nmnh.si.edu >>

Blair declares war on the antelope poachers

British PM Tony Blair has thrown his weight behind a campaign to save the rare Tibetan antelope, whose fur is sold, illegally, to make the world's most expensive shawls.

The Chinese government has declared the Tibetan antelope, or chihu, an endangered species. The Wild Yak anti-poaching squads regularly patrol the vast, arid Qinghai-Tibet plateau where the antelope live, braving appalling conditions and attacks from poachers.

The shahtoosh shawls are known to be sold in London, as well as in France, Italy, Hong Kong and India. One shahtoosh on sale for £11,000 was found in a police raid on a shop in South Audley Street, Mayfair, last year.

Traders claim that the antelope fur is collected by tribesmen from spiny bushes and branches when the animals moult. But the truth, as documented by Western scientists and Chinese anti-poaching police, is that the animals are shot and trapped in their thousands every year. The poachers cut the hair from the throats of the animals. One antelope yields only about 120-150 grammes of fur.

A patrol expedition in August uncovered the corpses of more than 800 female chihu, who had been shot shortly after giving birth to their young. Police tried to feed powdered milk to some of the hundreds of orphans but almost all died of starvation. Chinese authorities estimate that between 2,000 and 4,000 antelope are killed each year. The fur is smuggled to Kashmir and Nepal, often in exchange for tiger bones, which are smuggled into China for use in traditional medicines. Conservationists in India, where the Kashmiri government stoutly defends the trade in shahtoosh, are pinning their hopes on research into hand-refining cashmere goat hair. Experts predict that the antelope face extinction in the next 20 years if the killings do not stop.

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Tiger Bone Festival accused of popularising an illegal activity

While India celebrates the 25th Year of Project Tiger, a national effort to save the magnificent animal, members of the public in Japan will celebrate the use of the endangered tiger in medicine.

On the 22nd of November, Osaka, Japan's second largest city, will host a festival at the shrine of a Japanese medicine god, "celebrating the efficacy of tiger bone medicine". The streets will be decorated with streamers and empty medicine packets. The event, advertised in the "Kansai Time Out" is supported by major Japanese pharmaceutical companies.

"EIA is shocked by the apparent lack of awareness and concern over the future survival of tigers, as reflected by the hosting of this tiger bone festival. Especially in an age where genuine practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine are condemning the use of tiger bone and advocating herbal alternatives. This festival openly supports an illegal international trade" said Debbie Banks, EIA campaigner.

All international trade in tiger has been banned for 12 years yet recent EIA investigations reveal that despite Japan being a Party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1980, tiger parts and medicines claiming to contain tiger parts are still openly sold on the streets of Tokyo. EIA will be presenting the results of these investigations next week in Tokyo, and questioning the government over their failure to eliminate this trade.

EIA Tiger Campaigner, Debbie Banks said "Japan's national legislation fails to ban the trade in products that are not readily recognisable, such as tiger bone and derivatives. This seriously undermines efforts in tiger range states to save tigers and jeopardises the lives of forest guards, who despite being poorly paid and poorly equipped, continue to protect tigers against armed poachers".

Japan has never had tigers and the bones used in medicine come from tigers killed in forests across Asia. Consumer demand in Japan is contributing to an illegal international trade that is decimating the world's remaining tiger populations.

At the turn of the century there were believed to be around 80,000 wild tigers world wide. "We have already witnessed the silent extinction of three sub species of tiger this century and today there may be no more than 5000 tigers left" said Banks.

In India, the Director of Project Tiger believes that there may be less than 3000 tigers left and that they are losing between 250-300 tigers a year. Tigers are threatened by habitat destruction and the decline in their prey base and poaching for this illegal trade pushes them closer to extinction.



NOT ZOO NEWS BUT OF INTEREST TO ANIMAL PEOPLE ANYWAY

Dinosaur eggs continue being openly sold in Dahod district

A dinosaur hatchery in the Jurassic age is being plundered by people for selling them at a price between Rs.2,000/- and Rs.20,000/- in Dahod district (Gujarat State). After the news broke out in newspapers, the police had cracked down on the trade, 'imposing section 144 (Indian Penal Code) in that district. Some traders, suspected by the police were taken into custody. It was reported that some foreigners visited the villages and bought some eggs for huge amount. The local tribes did not like the eggs being taken out for sales. With less staff strength and without official vehicles, the forest department could not make necessary surveillance. The Commissioner (Geology and mining, (H.K. Das) admits that the problem in the Dahod district has not been taken care of as yet. (*The Indian Express, Bombay, 29 Sept 98*).

Special fish being used to clean 'Sarovars'

Two tanks of Kurukshetra (near Delhi) - Brahmasarovar and Sannechit tanks - will be cleansed of their water by the use of grass carp fish. About five lakh pilgrims are expected to take bath in these tanks ('Sarovars') on Aug 22. Unlike on earlier occasions when alum with lime were used, the Kurukshetra Development Board had decided on the introduction of fish for cleansing the water along with weeds and algae. Since the fish was not available locally, 30,000 seeds were rushed from Calcutta and introduced into the tanks in the first week of August this year. (*The Times of India, New Delhi, 15 Aug 98*).

India to attend Antarctic scientific meet

Cambridge-based scientific committee on Antarctic research will meet with biologists from 38 countries at Christ church, New Zealand in Sept 1998. Dr. Ashish Hazra, Deputy Director of the Zoological Survey of India, who had visited the Antarctic as part of the ninth Indian expedition in 1990 will present papers on the life cycle of a variety of invertebrate fauna surviving at sub-zero temperature. This belongs to the family of 'Springtails'. As one peculiar microscopic animal resembles a miniature bear from the icy water of the Priyadarshini lake in Dakshina Gangotri, it has been nick-named 'Water bear'. The magnitude of Indian research is being further reviewed. (*The Hindu, 19 Sept 98; The Indian Express, New Delhi, 19 Sept 98; Rajasthan Patrika, Jaipur, 2 Sept 98*).

Elephantine suit

An elephant appeared as a witness in a court at Kottayam as summoned by a Division bench of the Kerala High Court. It was leased out by its owner to someone for two years. When he came to know about its ill treatment, he filed a suit against the lessee who, in turn, alleged that the owner had tried to sell the elephant to a third person even while the lease was in force. During the pendency of the case, the elephant will have to be in the court premises undergoing discomforts. (*The Times of India, New Delhi, 25 Aug 98*).

Love bites: Mosquitoes love a hot man with aftershave

A review of insect repellents in the annals of internal medicine reveals that the ideal prey of mosquitoes is 'a hot, dark-suited man of generous proportions, wearing an aftershave with a strong artificial floral fragrance and giving out plenty of carbon dioxide and body odours'. The review reveal that the insects use their eyes, noses and thermal sensors to pick out their preferred targets. The female mosquito does the biting, gulping down her own weight in blood every three or four days. (*Times of India, New Delhi, 6 Aug 98*).