



THE SOUTH ASIA VULTURE RECOVERY PROGRAMME

REPORT TO THE NATIONAL BIRD OF PREY TRUST

AUGUST 2008

Introduction

Following the first breeding successes in 2007, this year has already proved to be significant with the programme in all three countries making tremendous progress.

The aim of this report is to give a brief overview of the programme in India and Nepal since the 2007 report, in particular noting the contribution made by the National Bird of Prey Trust to the programme in India through a number of donations made in recent years. The vulture programme in Pakistan is developing well with 11 Oriental white-backed vultures in a centre near Lahore. This is supported by the Hawk Conservancy Trust and WWF Pakistan. I met those involved in the programme in Pakistan during a visit to Lahore earlier this year although I did not see the centre itself.

India

The two successful hatchings of Oriental white-backed vultures (OWBV) in 2007 in the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Pinjore, have been surpassed in 2008 with 2 further hatchings with these chicks fledging and reaching full independence in their natal colony.

In addition to this mile-stone, more OWBV formed pairs, built nests or exhibited breeding behaviour with several eggs being laid during the breeding season. This season also saw the first eggs laid by long-billed (LBV) and slender-billed vultures (SBV) which are probably world firsts.

The third centre was fully commissioned in Assam despite considerable political difficulties in the state. Currently there are 83 OWBVs, 71 LBVs and 32 SBVs in the three centres.



Photo: Vibhu Prakash

A significant part of the success of the breeding is considered to be due to the colony aviaries. NBPT contributions have supported the construction of these aviaries presenting the opportunity to monitor the behaviour of vultures maintained in the larger

colonies. The results will be crucial in planning future facilities in India, Nepal and Pakistan.

Some minor improvements have been made to the design of the colony aviaries which enables the staff to manage the vultures with less disturbance to the vultures, by providing an access door in the centre of the aviary rather than at the ends (see photo below).



Photo: Nick Lindsay

It seems that Oriental white-backed vultures may prefer to use simple nesting frames with rope forming the platform on which they can build their nests (on tree in photo below) whereas the long-billed vultures seem to prefer the concrete shelves (on end walls of aviary). This matches their wild nesting behaviour of trees and rock faces respectively.



Photo: Jemima Parry-Jones

The first formal Technical Advisory Committee meeting was held in June in India with Dr Andrew Routh, Chief Veterinary Officer for ZSL, attending with Jemima Parry-Jones, RSPB and BNHS staff and other local stakeholders and experts. During the meeting husbandry of the vultures was reviewed and recommendations made for the future management of the centres. The overall conclusion was that things are progressing well but there is a need to continue to monitor and evaluate the programme and assess the skills needed to manage the centres and to develop the work further.

The meeting gave the opportunity for Andrew Routh and Jemima Parry-Jones to assist in the annual capture and health checks of all the vultures in the Pinjore centre and share their experience with the staff. Training and capacity building continues to be a crucial element of the programme as staff are replaced and additional staff join the programme.



Photo: Andrew Routh

The new incubators purchased in 2007 with NBPT funding have not yet been put into service but with more eggs being laid it is likely that these will prove to be crucial to the programme in the coming seasons. Staff training in their use is still to be completed.

Avian influenza has been a topic of discussion this year as outbreaks were reported in India, including in West Bengal relatively close to one of the vulture centres. Andrew Routh is working with the India authorities, manufacturers of a vaccine and BNHS to develop a protocol to manage the vultures in case of a local outbreak in wild birds.

Nepal

In early 2008 the Ministry of Soils and Forests in Nepal officially recognised the vulture programme and gave approval for the programme to develop further including the construction of a vulture breeding centre. Three agencies, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) have signed an MoU for the programme. DNPWC allocated land for the centre and construction of the first two holding aviaries was completed in March using funds from ZSL. Fourteen Oriental white-backed vultures were taken from the wild at that time by RSPB staff and settled in to the aviaries. These

were all fledgling birds taken from nests. The vultures are under the care of NTNC and thus the veterinary officer from Central Zoo in Kathmandu who has already taken part in several vulture programme training activities. Three new keeping staff are being trained by a senior keeper from Central Zoo. They will also visit Pinjore this year to develop further skills in the care of vulture colonies.



Photo: Nick Lindsay

A National Action Plan has been produced and approved and will be published later in 2008. This document has identified all the actions required to ensure the long term survival of the Oriental white-backed vulture and the slender-billed vulture present in Nepal. Any future plans will be determined from the action plan.

WAZA Branding

The South Asia Vulture Recovery Programme has been adopted by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums as one of its branded projects. Details of the programme in all three countries are now on the WAZA web-site which includes all the partners and supporting organisations, such as NBPT. The link to the WAZA site and vulture programme page is:

<http://www.waza.org/conservation/projects/projects.php?id=135>

Acknowledgments

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Nick Lindsay
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