



## **VULTURE RECOVERY PROGRAMME**

### **VULTURE CONSERVATION BREEDING CENTRE, PINJORE**

#### **REPORT TO THE NATIONAL BIRD OF PREY TRUST**

**September 2007**

The 2006/2007 breeding season proved to be a significant period for the Vulture Recovery Programme with the first 2 hatchings. In January 2007, 2 eggs of white-backed vultures hatched in one of the colony aviaries at the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Pinjore, after the first full season without any major disturbances to the colonies. Unfortunately neither chick survived, however they have given the staff confidence that breeding is possible and there is no reason to suggest successful rearing of chicks will not be achieved in the future. Two other eggs were laid but these proved to be infertile.

With the digital CCTV system in place in each of the colony aviaries and with good observations made through the season, a number of minor changes have been made to the aviaries to make them easier to manage during the breeding season. Jemima Parry-Jones will visit the centre in September to review the husbandry planned for the next breeding season in time to implement any recommendations made during the visit before the beginning of the season. It is very obvious that the colony aviaries are going to be extremely important in the success of the programme but the key to this will be the management of the birds in those facilities.



The second breeding centre, in Rajabhatkhawa, Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, became fully operational this year and recently a third centre in Assam was approved and construction work is now underway. Over 170 vultures of all three species are now held in the centres, including the only known population of slender-billed vultures in

captivity. Despite successful captures of wild vultures this year it is becoming obvious that the continuing decline in all species is presenting an increasing challenge to the capture teams to actually locate vultures.

Once again ZSL staff attended the kite festival in Ahmedabad in Gujarat and helped out at the Animal Help Foundation rescue centres. The ZSL Chief Veterinary Officer, Andrew Routh, noted the tremendous improvements that had been made at the centres both in their ability to work on the injured birds and with the equipment available. Again a significant number of vultures were rescued and saved from possible death during the week of the festival and 10 of the 21 vultures treated have already arrived at the centre in Pinjore. These adult wild vultures will play an important role at the breeding centres as many of the other captures are of fledgling birds. This trip also provided a tremendous opportunity for one of the bird staff from ZSL Whipsnade Zoo to work with Andrew and the centre staff and contribute to the programme. Andrew's wife, also a vet, joined them.



Earlier this year the annual census programme was undertaken across the normal transects used each time. The final reports from this work are awaited but it seems that the declines continue, as was anticipated, however, it remains to be seen if there is a lessening in the availability and the use of diclofenac in India. The programme has anticipated that the presence of diclofenac could continue in the field for at least 10 years but it is hoped that an earlier replacement of this drug would be possible.

The local staff have done a tremendous job considering that they have not had any experience in vulture breeding previously and are learning as they go with expert advice available when needed. They not only manage the vultures in the centre but they also capture wild vultures, undertake surveys of wild vultures and undertake an advocacy programme across the country. This year proved to be even more challenging as 2 of the 3 vets left the programme and have not yet been replaced.

In December 2006 Pinjore hosted a workshop to discuss the best husbandry practices for the vulture programme with experts in raptor care attending alongside representatives from states and facilities in India. This proved to be a very successful meeting in the revision of the husbandry manual and presented a great forum for staff to discuss some of the challenges they face. It also generated considerable interest in some of the senior staff from states in India planning to develop their own breeding centres.



In August 2007 the Pinjore centre faced yet another challenge when torrential rain in Northern India caused a flash flood to hit the area putting the centre under over 1 metre of water. The staff proved their commitment once again and everyone battled long and hard to minimise the risk to the vultures even when their own property faced the same problems. Assisted by staff from the Forest Department and other locals no vulture was injured at that time and at the tie of writing the centre has reverted to normal operations. Flood protections will be developed before next monsoon season.



The programme in Nepal has developed well during 2007 despite the political problems faced by the country. Although the planned breeding centre has not been constructed a focus on supporting the few wild colonies is proving to be an interesting initiative. In the regions near the known breeding colonies in the Terai area of Nepal an active programme of removal of diclofenac and its replacement with meloxicam is underway. Bird Conservation Nepal is undertaking this work funded by ZSL and RSPB. One colony is also being provided with the chance to feed on cattle known to be free of diclofenac. The effects of this are being monitored closely as this may provide model for future initiatives. The huge distances covered by vultures outside the breeding season means this is not guaranteed to provide a totally safe future for those vultures but it may well prove to be effective whilst the vultures are breeding.

Unfortunately the attendance of staff from India at the incubator training workshop in the US this autumn will not happen due to a number of factors. It is hoped that this will be picked up in the future as artificial incubation is still considered to be an important tool for the programme in the long term. It is expected that the new incubators will be acquired and training undertaken locally initially. The group is currently looking at the provision of

expertise to the programme in India at the key times of the vulture life cycle so having someone in Pinjore during the breeding season would be important.

Despite the progress being made with the programme in India and Nepal there is a long way to go. The centres are proving to be more costly to run than initially anticipated, the removal of diclofenac from the system in India is not happening as quickly as had been hoped even with the tremendous support from the Central Government and the problems faced with the acquisition of vultures from the wild may eventually limit the final numbers in the centres. Funding is proving to be a limiting factor but new initiatives involving the Central Zoo Authority and some of the zoos in India may prove to be key in expanding the programme.

The Vulture Recovery Programme in India continues through the tremendous support and commitment of ZSL, RSPB, BNHS and the National Bird of Prey Trust.

**Nick Lindsay**  
**September 2007**