

## BIRDS &amp; PEOPLE

# Jatayu: the vulture restaurants of Nepal

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**Introduction**

On many farms in the Indian subcontinent the veterinary drug diclofenac has been used in recent decades to treat domestic livestock which developed arthritis and could not walk. Even a trace of diclofenac in a bovine carcass can poison many vultures because they usually feed in social groups and range over large distances; consequently when even one such treated animal died it was a threat to a great many vultures. Indeed, between 2000 and 2007, four vulture species declined by over 90% in South Asia, and another by over 99% (Chaudhary *et al.* 2011). The IUCN currently lists four species as Critically Endangered: Indian (formerly Long-billed) *Gyps indicus*, Slender-billed *G. tenuirostris*, White-rumped *G. bengalensis* and Red-headed *Sarcogyps calvus*. Another, the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, is classified as Endangered (BirdLife International 2010, Global Raptor Information Network 2011a, 2011b). Fortunately, several organisations are now working together on a conservation initiative that includes captive breeding and release of vultures into

diclofenac-free zones, scientific field studies of vulture biology and ecology, and ‘restaurants’ where vultures are provided with a reliable source of food that is free from veterinary drugs and agricultural chemicals (Government of Nepal 2009, Bowden 2011).

In the last decade, vulture feeding stations have been set up in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Nepal), South-East Asia (Cambodia) and similar programmes also exist in Africa and Europe (Murn *et al.* 2008, Bird Conservation Nepal 2009, Government of Nepal 2009). In Nepal, through the efforts of Bird Conservation Nepal, the goal is to have the restaurants managed by nearby communities so that any profits stay local. In return, people are happy to bring their old and unproductive livestock to a place that will look after the animals until they die. For Hindu people, cows are sacred animals and the killing of one is punishable by law in Nepal (Subramanian 2011).

In late November 2011, after completing a survey of migrating Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* in the foothills of the Himalayas, we visited several

**Plate 1.** Site of the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.





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**Plate 2.** Vultures (mostly juvenile Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* and White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*, with one Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*) waiting to feed at a carcass at the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.

vulture restaurants in central Nepal. The Sanskrit name for vulture is *jatayu*, while Nepali people call them *giddha* or sometimes *kuchikar*, meaning ‘broom’. Here we discuss three of these vulture restaurants, and provide details on how best to visit them.

### Ghachowk

Our starting point was the city of Pokhara in central Nepal. The Ghachowk vulture restaurant, established during 2010, is located in a river valley in the foothills of the Himalayas about 15 km north-east of Pokhara (Plate 1). The restaurant is about an hour’s taxi ride from the town (\$25 round-trip), and then a 20-minute walk down into the gorge. Along the way vultures can be seen and photographed in flight and perching on nearby low cliffs. At the restaurant, observers sit in a well-constructed hide that holds up to 10 people (suggested donation \$3), approximately 25 m from where the carcasses are placed. Highland species are most common, including up to 50 Himalayan Griffons *G. himalayensis*, White-rumped and Red-headed Vultures (Plates 2 & 3), although a few Slender-billed and one Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* were seen as well. Other birds we saw around the feeding station included Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* (Plate 4), Bonelli’s Eagle

**Plate 3.** Adult Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* at the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.



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**Plate 4.** Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* in flight near the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.



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**Plate 5.** Second/third year White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* at the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.

**Plate 6.** Adult Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* in flight near the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.

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**Plate 7.** Adult Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* in flight in the vicinity of the Ghachowk vulture restaurant, Pokhara, Nepal, November 2011.

*Hieraetus fasciatus* and Red-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*. The vultures perch in the nearby trees for several hours or sit along the nearby river before coming to feed on the carcass. We used 400 mm and 500 mm lenses here, with crop factor cameras, and occasionally a 1.4 × teleconverter. Light was good enough for 1/500th sec exposure at F8 using ISO 400.

The restaurant is operated under the auspices of Bird Conservation Nepal and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Rabi Lal Pokharel

is the coordinator for the local community. He is best contacted via email through Surya Gurung of Pokhara (GurungSurya@yahoo.com) for arrangements to visit this vulture restaurant.

#### **Pithauli, Nawalparasi district**

We then travelled west from Pokhara on the main highway, turning off at the town of Kawasoti in Nawalparasi district just beyond the western edge of Chitwan National Park. Here we visited the Pithauli restaurant on the outskirts of the village

**Plate 8.** Adult Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus* in flight at the Pithauli vulture restaurant, Chitwan National Park buffer zone, Nepal, November 2011.



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**Plate 9.** Juvenile Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus* at the Pithauli vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.



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of Laukani (Subedi 2009). This is the first community-managed vulture feeding station (and vulture information centre) in the world, developed with funds from the United Nations Development Programme/GEF/Small Grants Programme, the International Trust for Nature Conservation and the RSPB. When Pithauli was first established in August 2007, there were fewer than 20 nests of White-rumped Vultures in the area, but this number steadily increased to more than 70 in 2011. From the well-constructed hide we found 500 mm lenses (and longer) to be best for photographing vultures at a carcass. The light was excellent. In the immediate area of the hide, we identified (using Rasmussen *et al.* 2001) and photographed two Indian Vultures (Plates 8 & 9) and had wonderful views of vultures in flight, as well as Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*. Afterwards, on a walk with a guide through the nearby forest and fields of the buffer zone of the national park, we found tracks of the Greater One-horned Rhino *Rhinoceros unicornis* and observed raptors such as Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus calidus*, Shikra *Accipiter badius* and Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* in flight. D. B. Chaudhary is the coordinator at this site, and is best contacted through one of us (TS).

We stayed in the home of a local farmer (\$11 per day including three fine meals and a private room; shared basic bathroom with a cold shower possible).

#### Gaindahwa Lake

The town of Lumbini (the birth place of Buddha) in the *terai* of west-central Nepal, very near the main highway, was the starting point for the visit to our third vulture restaurant, Gaindahwa Lake, approximately 15 km north of the town. At this site we found an abundance of juvenile and sub-adult Himalayan Griffons that had migrated to the lowlands, whilst the adults remained in the highlands to breed (Arshad *et al.* 2009, Kenny *et al.* 2009). Here we also observed one subadult Cinereous Vulture (Plate 11). In certain seasons, a few Slender-billed Vultures can be found here as well. In the large and comfortable wooden hide, we needed 500–800 mm lenses for close-up photos of vultures feeding at a carcass, but we also obtained many good flight shots using hand-held 300–400 mm lenses. In the nearby farmlands and community-managed forest, we saw Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* and White-eyed Buzzard *Buteo teesa*. We chose to stay at the nearby

**Plate 10.** Adult White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* at the Pithauli vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.





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**Plate 11.** Subadult Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* at the Gaindahwa Lake vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.



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**Plate 12.** Four subadult Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* at the Gaindahwa Lake vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.

**Plate 13.** Three subadult Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* and two White-rumped Vultures (juvenile and adult) *Gyps bengalensis* at the Gaindahwa Lake vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.



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**Plate 14.** Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* pair near Gaidahwa Lake vulture restaurant, Nepal, December 2011.

Lumbini Buddha Garden Hotel (\$10 per person; warm shower) because the grounds are maintained for birds. In the fields adjacent to the hotel we watched Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata* and Pied Harriers *Circus melanoleucos*.

There are three other vulture restaurants that we did not visit; two, Lalmatiya and Syalapani, are in Dang District, roughly 125 km west of the restaurant at Gaidahwa Lake, whilst the third, in the far south-west of Nepal, lies within the Samaiji Community Forest in Kailali District. More details about these sites can be found in the Bird Conservation Nepal (2009) brochure, *Jatayu Restaurant*.

### Visiting the restaurants

The admission fee to each of the six vulture restaurants in Nepal is approximately \$3. We recommend contacting and using one of the two guides mentioned in this article since they speak English well and both studied raptor biology in the USA. One (TS) has done research at several of the vulture restaurants in Nepal. Guides have the best knowledge of when a carcass becomes available at a particular restaurant because they are in frequent cell-phone contact with restaurant coordinators. We learned that vultures readily come down to feed if a carcass has not been provided for four days or more. On the other hand, if carcasses have been recently available the vultures might take several hours to descend from roosting trees. Groups of up to six people are ideal since noise and movement while getting into the wooden hides can be easily minimised, hence the vultures will come to the carcass to feed sooner. However,

if the vultures are shy eaters when you visit, it is still possible to get wonderful photos of them perched and in flight.

In the long term we believe the future is beginning to look better for vultures in the Indian subcontinent, but there is still a very long way to go (Bowden 2011). Rural people who once disliked vultures are beginning to appreciate them because they bring money into their villages. In return, we hope that the 'vulture safe zones' that surround the feeding sites are significantly enlarged and vulture nesting colonies are actively protected. With educational outreach from NGOs such as Bird Conservation Nepal and Himalayan Nature, both rural and urban people now realise the health benefits for humans that these birds deliver—a large carcass can be consumed in less than an hour by a flock of hungry vultures. In Nepal, dead animals and refuse are often dumped into rivers, and this practice can quickly spread disease to people living downstream (Baral 2009). Without vultures, other scavengers such as feral rats and dogs quickly increase. These animals are likely to come into contact with humans and spread rabies and other diseases (Prakash *et al.* 2007). For the authors who travelled Nepal as eco-tourists, the vulture restaurants allowed us easily to photograph seven of the nine vulture species of Nepal—including four that are Critically Endangered on the Indian subcontinent, and one, the Indian Vulture, for which this was the first confirmed record from Nepal (a short report will appear in *BirdingASIA* 18). To see vultures flying over us so close—that was magnificent! These birds are huge and graceful in flight, very different from the noisy individuals we watched battling for space at a carcass. We only hope that more birders and photographers avail themselves of this opportunity to make a difference to the lives of people and these birds.

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