

Galliform conservation in Nepal

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Abstract Pheasants are familiar to and valued in Nepal's culture. Between 2004 and 2007, a number of research projects have investigated the globally threatened cheer pheasant and swamp francolin. The long-running World Pheasant Association project at Pipar and Santel has been resurveyed and new studies on francolins and satyr tragopan have taken place. Several species that live in the forests and in farmland need immediate conservation measures to halt their population decline. An assessment of the effect on galliform populations of the Maoists' People's War would be useful. Further surveys on little known Galliformes including Himalayan quail, more education and awareness programmes and more practical conservation projects are urgent to safeguard the future of Nepal's galliform species.

Keywords Conservation, Galliformes, insurgency, Nepal.

Introduction

Galliformes are one of Nepal's best known bird groups. The larger species, particularly the pheasants, are known to every tribe living in Nepal. Each species has a unique name in the tribal languages and pheasants often feature as a brand or logo on various programmes e.g. school names, club names, dance groups, radio programmes, etc. *Danphe* (= Himalayan monal *Lophophorus impejanus*) is Nepal's National Bird and is protected by the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973. In addition, satyr tragopan *Tragopan satyra* and cheer pheasant *Catreus wallichi* are also protected by law. Cheer pheasant is a globally threatened species (Vulnerable) with a distribution restricted to India and Nepal, while satyr tragopan is Near Threatened (BirdLife International, 2004).

A number of postage stamps featuring these pheasants have been issued: *Danphe* - Rupees 1 and 2 in 1959 and Rs. 3.50 in 1979; *Munal* (satyr tragopan) - Rs. 5 in 1969 and cheer pheasant - Rs 0.15 in 1977 (Nepal Philatelic Bureau, 2006). Recently the Government of Nepal has issued a 50 Rs. note depicting *Danphe*. Together, these indicate the high value put on pheasant conservation by the Government of Nepal and its people.

Research and conservation

Two overviews of galliform conservation in Nepal have been presented at previous International Galliformes Symposia (Baral,

2000; 2005). In this paper I will briefly outline progress made on galliform research and conservation since the International Galliformes Symposium held in India in 2004.

A number of new research programmes have taken place under the leadership of a promising new generation of Nepali student conservationists. Three separate projects studied cheer pheasant populations in Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, Annapurna Conservation Area and Rara National Park. These studies were reviewed at the Cheer Conservation Summit in Kathmandu in 2006, organised jointly by the World Pheasant Association (WPA), Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) and British Council, Nepal (Garson & Baral, 2006). A cheer pheasant advocacy document was produced to mark the International Galliformes Symposium in China in 2007 (BCN, 2007).

The important galliform areas at Pipar and Santel (in the Annapurna Conservation Area) were revisited by separate teams in 2005 (Mahato, 2007). Work in the WPA Pheasant Reserve at Pipar included repeating earlier call count and vegetation surveys, as well as a large scale education and awareness programme in the nearby villages (Poudyal et al., 2007; Sharma, 2007).

In Koshi Tappu, a population survey was undertaken on the swamp francolin *Francolinus gularis* (Bhagwan Raj Dahal & Hem Sagar Baral unpublished data). A total of 12 sites were surveyed using call counts. Pilot studies on the status and distribution of grey francolin *F.*

pondicerianus and black francolin *F. francolinus* were conducted in the Lumbini Farmlands Important Bird Area (IBA) (Hem Sagar Baral, Dinesh Giri & Sharad Singh *unpublished data*). A study of satyr tragopan was funded by the Oriental Bird Club (OBC) was conducted in the Mai Valley IBA in 2007 (Naveen Mahato *unpublished data*).

Despite being classified as globally threatened (category: Vulnerable), swamp francolin remain unprotected. BCN has strongly recommended inclusion of swamp francolin by the Government of Nepal on the protected bird list. BCN has also requested the Postal Service of Nepal to issue postal stamps featuring this species to help raise its profile.

The BCN bulletin *Danphe*, has published seven important articles exclusively on Galliformes (Thapa, 2005; Acharya, 2006; 2007; Singh, 2007; Mahato, 2007; Sharma et al., 2007; Garson & Baral, 2007). WPA and BCN have forged a very strong partnership to carry out these projects.

In addition to these *Danphe* publications, WPA News and other international journals and bulletins have also published articles on pheasants and their habitat conservation in Nepal (e.g. McGowan, 2004; Kaul, 2005; McGowan, 2005; Dahal et al., 2007). For example, *Tiger Paper* recently published a paper on a study of vegetation and grazing impacts on pheasant in Pipar (Poudyal et al., 2007) and an assessment of swamp francolin at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve has just been published (Dahal et al., 2009).

Future priorities

During the Maoists' People's War, a general increase in galliform abundance was observed in many areas of the country (Baral, 2005). However, this increase took place not because these birds were given greater protection, but rather because during the Maoists' People's War, many forested areas remained inaccessible because of the fear of armed people and land mines. This resulted in habitat protection, less disturbed forest areas and reduced hunting. Now that Maoists have become part of the mainstream political process, areas that remained inaccessible during the war have started to become disturbed again. Already there is an indication that the increases in abundance of forest Galliformes have started to reverse. A study on the effects of the Maoists' People's War on

galliform populations in Nepal would be useful to give indicators of future priorities for the effective conservation of Galliformes.

Conservation projects that aim to increase galliform abundance are urgently needed to help efforts to stabilize and restore the species. Species of national conservation concern include swamp francolin, cheer pheasant, satyr tragopan, grey francolin, koklass pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*, red junglefowl *Gallus gallus*, Indian peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, Himalayan snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*, and Tibetan snowcock *T. tibetanus*. Most species receive some protection inside protected areas, but grey francolin are heavily dependent on the traditional agricultural landscape. The other two Nepal francolin species, black and swamp have been also noted in similar habitats. The farmland dependent Galliformes require immediate conservation measures.

Satyr tragopan have been used as a target species for the development of birdwatching and trekking tourism in the Himalayas. The impact of trekking tourism on Galliformes is not known and a study should be initiated. Education and awareness programmes to encourage community-based safeguards are important for protection of Galliformes. Feasibility studies of nest box schemes for satyr tragopan and the translocation of swamp francolin to other suitable areas should also be conducted.

For many years access to the western part of Nepal has been severely limited. There has been very little survey or conservation work in the area since the insurgency started. Recent evidence of cheer pheasant from the mid hills of far western Nepal (Budha, 2006) indicates that area in the western Nepal should be given priority on bird surveys.

An expedition should be mounted to look for Critically Endangered Himalayan quail *Ophrysia superciliosa* in the western part of Nepal. The only documented study made for this species in Nepal is by the late Dillon S. Ripley (Ripley, 1953). This expedition followed the Karnali river catchment which is an area too far east of Mussorie and Nainital. Other than this study no attempts have been made to look for this bird in Nepal although Nainital and Mussorie where the species was first collected are only 50 km away. There is more potentially suitable habitat west of this river valley closer to Mussorie and Nainital.

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Biographical sketches

Hem S Baral has a PhD in Ornithology and is the leading ornithologist in Nepal, having been involved in important bird conservation and research activities. As former Head of BirdLife Nepal he has pioneered many innovative conservation projects. Hem currently works as an independent wildlife biologist and expert on nature-based ecotourism.