

Mor

Newsletter of World Pheasant Association - India





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Editorial

Dear Readers,

The pheasant world has improved a lot in the preceding years and is continuing. With their habitats getting restored and more sightings in the regions we had not expected, there still shines a light in a dark room. The covid-19 may be a curse for the humans but is in fact a boon for the birds and other animals. With the virus around every corner and the lockdown, there have been no human trespassers in the forests or the parks where these stunning creatures thrive. That gives them the much needed free space they require for their growth and prosperity. This is one of the main reasons there have been more sightings. WPA-India has been involved with many field based conservation projects across the country since the commencement of the organisation. Initially, many of these projects were designed to find out where species occurred and what their conservation status was. As our knowledge of status and ecology increased, we became able to promote realistic action to help ensure that species and their habitats survive.

The present issue of Mor covers some observation of the lesser conspicuous Galliform species; Quails. The degrading ground vegetation is greatest threat to quail's survival. The sighting of King Quail in Mangalore is a good sign of species survival, and reintroduction of Cheer Pheasant in Himachal Pradesh are some of the good indications of efforts being made for long term conservation of Galliform species. Enjoy reading this issue and hope that the policy makers will again think about restoring the damaged ecosystem of earth with great pace if humans wants to continue its race.

Dr. M. Shah Hussain, Hon. General Secretary





The King Family, Baruipur, West Bengal

The arrival of the monsoon was delayed by over a month in 2019 in most parts of southern West Bengal. In middle of July the lush green we used to see on the fields could be seen nowhere. The low-lands were sun baked and the soil almost rock dry. The 'Birding Season' was over for most birders here. But all of a sudden a small place caught the attention of birders for a very unusual bird. The place is a fresh-water wetland spread over about 2.5 sq km area near the township of Baruipur.

This very place is going under heavy construction works and still hosting a good number of small winter migrants every year. Bird watchers gather here mostly for various species like Baillon's Crake, Brown-cheeked Rail, Slaty-breasted Rail, marsh-dwelling Warblers, Ibises and Raptors. Usually, bird watchers will not expect to find a galliform in this water-covered area. Probably due to less rain this year the grasses couldn't grow large. So instead of waist high grass thickets there was mattress of grass only 5-6 inches tall. Most likely this was the reason behind a group of enthusiastic, bird watchers spotting the male King Quail or Blue-breasted Quail *(Excalfactoria chinensis)* on the edge of a road along the marsh. The same group found the family of two adults and three hatchlings later that day near the same spot. This was the second occasion when King Quail was sighted in southern Bengal.

This galliform was first reported in Bengal by Allan Octavian Hume and C. H. T. Martial. After that, Dr. Salim Ali also mentioned about their presence in Bengal. Later in 1960s, one specimen was collected by the ornithologist Bishwamoy Biswas from east Kolkata wetland. But there



were no reports of nestingof King Quail from southern Bengal. This was the first record of King Quail nesting in this region. Though the Common Quail *(Coturnix coturnix)* is more or less a commoner in winter for many parts of southern West Bengal, King quail was really an unexpected guest. And the cherry on the top was the family show they provided to the bird watchers and photographers. For almost a month, bird watchers used to gather near the spot to get a glimpse of the King and his family. The place is about two feet path through grass and this family could only be seen while crossing this path. Interestingly, despite all the noise and movements made by the birders, this little family was very punctual. They used to cross the narrow path twice or thrice in the early morning. Sadly, the particular spot got disturbed by a few over enthusiastic photograpers and birders. But by that time the babies were almost fully grown and hopefully flew safely with their parents.

by: Ayan Banerjee, Life Member, WPA-India.

Rare King Quail sighted near Mangalore International Airport

MANGALURU: Arnold M. Goveas, Roshan Kamath and Vivek Nayak, birders from Mangaluru, have been lucky to identify a king quail, which is almost certainly the first photographic file of the bird from South India. The birders are part of Coastal Karnataka Birders Network.

Arnold instructed Ideal News that since March 28 they have been sighting the king quail nearly each day on a small patch of thorny bush that has dried up at Kenjar near the Mangalore International Airport. Some miscreants have burnt a portion of the patch. The bird seems to be feeding on seed pods. King Quail is a tiny bird, somewhat bigger than a new-born chicken. It is a species of old world quails within the family Phasianidae. It is the smallest species of 'true quail', ranging within the wild from southeastern Asia to Oceania with nine different subspecies. It is very tough to identify. We found the bird after we had been trying to take photos of Crimson munia that still feed at the same seed, after we by accident spotted this bird. The bird appears to spend its time mostly in duvet, amidst thick grass and shrubs, comes out in the morning and evening to feed at the seeds. It was "Roshan who first spotted the bird. We knew it was a unique bird, and before we got a good photograph, it flew away," stated Arnold.

The trio then began a look-out for the bird. They waited patiently and had been lucky that the bird came again, and they have been in a position to identify the bird and add the same on E-bird, an online database for bird observations. The workforce quickly realised that they had been only a few sightings and fewer photographs of the king quail from India. Most of the sightings and photographs have been from Assam.



Arnold stated, "The bird that we have sighted is a male and hence it was easy to identify. The female resembles the average quail. It's a small bird but a phenomenal one. Also known as the Blue-breasted quail, its colours are attractive and unique. What is surprising is that this is a single bird and we suspect the female bird may well be around somewhere, as quails are in most cases found in pairs."

Roshan Kamath, a marine engineer and commented: "This King Quail is indisputably the first sighting of the bird for the region".

Shivashankar M from the Coastal Karnataka Birders Network stated; "Quails are very tough to sight within the field and this quail is even rarer to search out. I'm satisfied that common birders at Mangaluru have find it right here and reported it in our network. Many birders from throughout India have come down to observe this person."



Source: April 11, 2019, Ideal News, Mangalore.



Re-Introduction of Cheer Pheasant in the Wild in Himachal Pradesh



The State Forest Department of Himachal Pradesh has set up an exclusive breeding centre for Cheer Pheasant in Chail, Himachal Pradesh as per the standards of breeding suggested by IUCN and recognised by the Central Zoo Authority. The centre has managed to breed more than 70 birds so far.

Cheer Pheasant is a threatened pheasant found in the Himalaya, occurring in India, Nepal and Pakistan. 'Cheer refers to the birds' occurrence near Chir Pine forests and 'Pheasant' means a member of the game-bird family, which mostly include ground dwelling birds. Males and females of this species look very similar except that male birds have a relatively longer tail and crest.

Cheer Pheasant occurs in grassland habitat combined with short trees and shrubs in elevations between 1500 - 3000m. They breed in steep cliff-like places by making a ground nest during April – June. During the breeding season, a female Cheer lays up to 5 - 10 eggs (sometimes 12) and incubates them in around 28 days. Both male and female take care of chicks until the next breeding season. During this period, they teach chicks survival techniques, such as winter survival, finding food and avoiding predators. In captivity, Cheer Pheasant live for more than 10 years.

Threats: The major threats to Cheer Pheasants are hunting, forest fires, grazing and fodder collection. Forest fires pose a major threat, which mostly occur during the breeding season. Grazing and fodder collection result in reduction of disturbance-free habitat that the Cheer Pheasant prefer. Globally, the population of Cheer Pheasant has reduced to fewer than 2700 birds. As a



result, it is a highly protected species included in Schedule-I of India's Wildlife Protection Act. 1972

Conservation and Re-Introduction: Himachal Pradesh is an area where a majority of the remaining wild populations are surviving. Some important Cheer Pheasant areas in the state include Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary, Chail Wildlife Sanctuary, Bhaila-Chonri area, Seri and isolated areas in Chamba, Rampur and Kullu. Himachal Pradesh Forest Department has taken several measures to save the species, including establishment of Protected Areas and carrying out captive breeding. The Forest Department has set-up an exclusive breeding centre for Cheer Pheasant in Chail, Himachal Pradesh. Following standards of breeding as suggested by agencies like IUCN and recognised by the Central Zoo Authority, the centre has managed to breed more than 70 birds. It is now planned to reintroduce these captive-bred birds. The vision is to re-establish populations of Cheer Pheasant in areas where they previously occurred but have now gone extinct due to various reasons including human disturbances. These sites are important Cheer Pheasant areas in the state this project will help in recovery of wild populations. This is a unique initiative and will bring the reintroduction site on the world map of wildlife conservation.

To start with, a total of three family groups (a total of 18 birds) from a total of 75 birds that have been captively bred in the facility. These birds have been selected based on their genetic constitution for reintroduction protocol as approved by Galliformes Expert Group of IUCN is being followed.

Selection procedure for pairing and breeding of these birds was put into place in February, 2019. Based on the stud-book records and genetic analysis, the birds were paired and allowed to breed. An intensive management of these birds was practiced to ensure maximum success of breeding of the selected lot. A strict veterinary health screening protocol was followed up with regular sample testing to diagnose any kind of infectious processes. Feeding protocol was also spruced up to ensure a healthy constitution and rule out any feed related health issues especially mineral deficiencies. Morbid samples of the birds were collected by the veterinarians and sent to IVRI, Izzatnagar to rule out any prevalent diseases, and none of the bird was found to be harbouring any infectious or contagious pathogens. The quarantine of the birds was accomplished well in time for the final reintroduction into the soft-release facility.

On 3-4th October 2019, the selected family groups were released into the soft-release pens in the selected site at Seri. The birds are now being trained to switch over to natural food. The birds will also be imparted essential predator training for their better survival. The release site has been thoroughly evaluated for the types of predators, grazing pressure, human presence etc. by means of grid camera trappings, evaluation and presence of signs of predators and also evaluation of the pathogens/parasites in the existing avian species. The birds shall be trained to



waive off any kind of human-imprinting and upon exhibition of typical natural behaviour of the free ranging species.

Now the birds have been fitted with identification rings and VHF tags in selected birds. The final release from the soft-pens has been done after a month of keeping them in the soft pens. Thereafter close monitoring of the released population is being carried out which will continue for almost a year till the population of the released birds establishes itself into the new habitat spelling out success of reintroduction exercise.

This is first of its kind experiment and if the pheasant survive for a year and get intermingled with the naturally occurring population, this would be first successful reintroduction of the bird into the wild.

Source: IUCN, 02 February 2020.



A shot of Cheer Pheasant at Chirbatiya (Photo: Yashpal Negi)



Cheer Pheasant at Chirbatiya

The presence of endangered Cheer Pheasant at Chirbatiya in district Rudraprayag has thrilled the Forest Department and bird experts. The remote Chirbatiya, located 40 kms from the district headquarters, recently hosted a bird festival. Earlier the sighting of Cheer Pheasant *(Catreus wallichii)*, also known as Wallich's pheasant, was limited to few locations in Uttarakhand. But, now Chirbatiya has got added in the list.

A bird festival was hosted at Chirbatiya on 25-26 December 2019. Bird watchers and other enthusiasts participated and they were overjoyed by sighting the rare bird. The Cheer Pheasant is described as 'vulnerable' in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Bird guide Yashpal Negi says, "In my two decades long career as bird guide, I have seen Cheer Pheasant thrice and that too in remote locations like Madhmaheshwar, Mukku Math and Talla (near Chopta). This time I was successful in spotting eight Cheer Pheasants at Chirbatiya."

A 2007 study, 'Status, distribution and management of Galliformes in Uttarakhand' by S Chandola and Sameer Sinha (published in Wildlife Institute of India's Galliformes of India) shows small presence of Cheer Pheasant in Uttarakhand. According to the study, the habitat is limited to Lansdowne (Pauri), Nanda Devi Biosphere, Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary, Govind National Park, Tehri and Uttarkashi Forest Divisions. It is estimated the population of this bird declined due to hunting and habitat loss.

Divisional Forest Officer (Rudraprayag) Vaibhav Kumar Singh says, "Heavy sighting of Cheer Pheasant clearly proves that Chirbatiya offers ideal habitat for this bird species. In the two days festival we recorded presence of over one hundred species, but Cheer Pheasant was special.

Big confusion prevails about the long-tailed bird in Chirbatiya and locals used to call it Chukar partridge and some other 'Junglee Murga'. In many places in Garhwal region, the Cheer Pheasant is even called as 'Chaud.' Bird watching is fast becoming popular. The big presence of Cheer Pheasant is likely to attract bird lovers to remote Chirbatiya.

Source: Raju Gusain, Dehradun, January 2, 2020, The Statesman.



Population Dynamics of Black Francolin *(Francolinus francolinus)* from NijmulaValley, Garhwal Himalaya

Abstract: The Black Francolin is one of the common species of the family Phasianidae found in Garhwal Himalaya, where its distribution is confined to the Shivalik plains and associated hills up to 1500 m. above mean sea level. It inhabits scrub jungle near cultivation in extremely arid areas. It is typically found in pairs but coveys of four to eight birds are also known. Adults feed on insects, especially grasshoppers, while the young prefer ants and their larvae. Total of 400 individuals, maximum 56 individuals records in December month and minimum 16 individuals records in month of April. Similarly maximum group size record in (4.6) January and minimum (1.87) in month of April respectively.

Introduction: The knowledge of population dynamics of any animal species is prerequisite for a wildlife manager or game biologist because successful management needs accurate information on population size at particular time of year or season. Population size or density of an organism depends on many factors viz., habitat size, ecology, food, reproductive success etc. Black francolin *(Francolinus francolinus)* (Baker, 1921) known as Black partridge in India, is important group of game birds, belong to the order Galliformes, family- Phasianidae- Black francolin are widely distributed game birds, found in America, Europe and South Africa (Hume and Marshall, 1879, Grimmett et.al., 1998 and Ali and Reply 1983). They inhabit same arid mountainous, thicker growth of tall grasses, through on branches of trees for calling (Roberts, 1991, Del Hoyo et al., 1994). This francolin species has been providing hunting pleasure and dining table delicacy for the rich, source of bush meat for the poor, allurement for its keeper as pet, and helps the farmer in controlling insect pest infestation (Fuller et. al., 2000). In this paper we describe findings of the study carried out on monthly and seasonal variation in population and density of Black francolin for one year in Nijmula valley, Garhwal Himalaya.

Study Area and Methodology: Black Francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*) is common game bird of the Garhwal Himalaya and known as 'Teetar' in the vernacular language. A residential population of this bird was studied at Nijmula valley in Garhwal Himalaya, Uttarakhand. The study site was located on the south facing slope and spread in 5 km² area. The study area comprised mixed temperate forest (*Pinus roxburghii, Cedrus deodara* and *Cupressus* species), scrubs (*Rubus, Berberis, Rhus, Euphorbia* etc.) grass land and bare ground. Adjacent agricultural fields of a small village which are generally used to grow Kharif crops (May to October) and Rabi crops (November to April) also constitute part of the habitat. From September 2016 to August 2017, regular visits for 8-12 days were made every month to record information on sighting and population. Using transect/trail walks method (Javed and Kaul, 2002) data were collected on total number of birds sighted, group size in a month, biotic pressure etc. In the study site, many



trails were laid by local people who daily visit the area for fodder and fuel collection, cattle grazing, etc. Data was analyzed statistically using formulae.

Result: A total of 400 birds were recorded in 153 observations. Chicks were observed in June, July and August. It is typically found in pairs, but family parties or coveys of four to eight or more birds are also known, which break up into pairs during the breeding season. Maximum number of birds (56) was observed in December and a minimum (16) was recorded in month of April. Of the 153 observations made between September 2016 and August 2017, 30(21.1%) were of solitary birds while the majority 47(31.6%) were pairs. They were often seen pecking about along the Nijmula valley between Badrinath highway and Nijmula village road, especially in early morning and late evening.

Discussion: The Black francolin inhabits open ground dotted with dense vegetation of scrub jungle close to cultivation. Mian and Ghani (2007) in a study designed to evaluate effect of increasing protection on biodiversity under desert conditions of study area did not record Black francolin. Ali (1941) reported this species from Dahawalpur (Punjab), without pointing specific area. It appears that Black francolin is an invasive species in India, extending its distribution range with introduction of canal irrigation and subsequent development of thicker vegetation. Present study also suggests common occurrence of Black francolin in suitable habitat of Garhwal Himalaya. Information on population and habitat characteristics reveals that Black francolin is a bird of disturbed habitats present near human habitations and agriculture fields. Anthropogenic activities, e.g., cattle grazing, mowing, forest fire and hunting, were recorded at study site. Young et.al., (1987) reported that regular disturbances are necessary for maintenance of habitats as mowing and fires bring good growth of vegetation and food in the next year. A sighting of Black francolin in a small group (2-8 birds) seems a threat to conservation of this bird in the study area because local old hunters reported sighting of large coveys consisting more than 16-18 birds in the past. Despite the Wildlife Protection Act (1972), hunting is still a common practice around the study area. Egg picking for food during breeding period in May-June is another problem.

Conclusions: The present study reveals that the Black francolin in Garhwal Himalaya varies in relation to time. In spite of these studies, our knowledge about this habitat is little till date. Present investigation is an attempt which could serve as a benchmark for management and further habitat level research.

by: Manish Kukreti Department of Zoology, Govt. P.G. College, Gopeshwar, Chamoli-246401, Uttarakhand, India. (Journal of Global Biosciences ISSN 2320-1355 Volume 6, Number 8, 2017, pp. 5189-5192 Website: www.mutagens.co.in).



Resource Material - available on request

Posters

- Pheasants of India
- Pheasants of Arunachal Pradesh
- Pheasants of Himachal Pradesh
- Pheasants of Uttarakhand
- Pheasants of Assam
- Pheasants of J&K
- Pheasants of Sikkim
- Pheasants of Nagaland
- Pheasants of West Bengal
- National and State Birds
- Save the National Bird
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