

Mor

Newsletter of World Pheasant Association - India



Indian Peafowl
Pavo cristatus
National Bird
&
Odisha State Bird



Himalayan Monal
Lophophorus impejanus
Uttarakhand State Bird



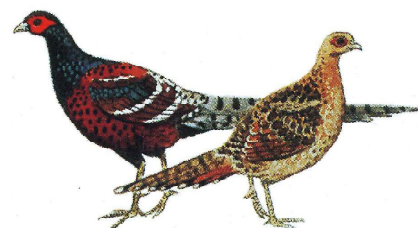
Western Tragopan
Tragopan melanocephalus
Himachal Pradesh State Bird



Blood Pheasant
Ithaginis cruentus
Sikkim State Bird



Blyth's Tragopan
Tragopan blythii
Nagaland State Bird



Hume's Pheasant
Syrmaticus humiae
Manipur and Mizoram
State Bird

***Pheasants as
National & State Birds***

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Editorial

Dear Readers,

This is the third issue of MOR prior to the New Year 2021 and marks the end of the calendar year. Each deals with an issue that is expected to play a role in deciding the outcome.

The Corona virus pandemic has reminded us why the green spaces, even parks and gardens are important for ordinary people. Whilst it is necessary to pay attention to social distancing recommendations, the time spent outside in parks and forests is critical for maintaining our mental and physical health. So, to observe a 'green hour' daily will not only help ourselves but also can help restore our wildlife and environment.

In this issue we share the success stories of pheasants released in the wild in Himachal Pradesh. This state is always ahead in conserving rare pheasants. Now Western Tragopan will be released at Daranghati Wildlife Sanctuary whereas eight Cheer pheasants released earlier near Shimla are doing well in nature. A detailed account of our National Bird, Peafowl has been incorporated in this issue, focussing mainly the threats it faces. Already a nation wide campaign has been initiated by WPA-India.

With each passing year, our endeavour is to achieve more and that the readers find this newsletter interesting and enjoyable. We seek your critical feedback to enable us to improve further. Enjoy your year end holidays and wishing you a very happy New Year 2021.

Dr. M. Shah Hussain, Hon. General Secretary

India's Prime Minister with India's National Bird



National Bird of India, Indian Peafowl: In Danger?

Several studies claim that Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) faces severe threats. These include hunting for meat, feathers, medicinal purposes and poisoning by farmers to protect their crops. In 1972, it was added to Schedule I of Indian wildlife protection act and also to Appendix-1 of CITES. However, population estimates by several environmental groups and WWF claim that it has decreased by around 50% since the time of independence.

Indian Peafowl is one of the largest members of the family Phasianidae. In 1963, it was declared as the national bird of India as it had a wide distribution. Moreover, it also has a strong connection with the history and culture of India where it is associated with various gods. It is the “vahana” or vehicle of Lord Murga in southern India (Fig 1) and Lord Krishna used to keep peacock feathers on his forehead (Fig 2). During ancient times in India this species held an important status. In fifth century AD when Gupta dynasty ruled India, Indian Peafowl was considered as a crucial object for art and architecture. Moreover, several coins were issued with its illustration (Fig 3). Even Tughlaks took up peafowl feather design for the state emblem and headgear of the soldiers. Islamic religious buildings depict various drawings of peafowl (Fig 4). In Christianity it was considered as the symbol of “resurrection”.

The Peacock is also known as a “bird with thousand eyes” because of its beautiful train of colorful tail feathers (Fig 5). This special train consists of 100 to 150 greenish blue tail coverts. Usually birds get their colours of feather from the selective pigments, but this is not the case with this species. The colour is obtained from the optical phenomenon and the microstructure of the feather. Each feather has several ornamental ocellus or eyespots which is distinctive for this bird (Fig 6). However, the females have dull brown plumage lacking these attractive eyespots. These precious feathers are used to attract females during breeding season. But recently scientists have found that they produce an infrared sound from these feathers which is inaudible to humans. They think it can fulfill two purposes, either maintaining their territory or attracting females.

Indian Peafowl can be found extensively in the Indian sub-continent. Its distribution ranges from Jammu and Kashmir to east Assam, south Mizoram and the Indian Peninsula. However, Rajasthan, Mathura, and Chitrakoot are some of the regions recorded with highest numbers. They also been introduced in USA, Europe, Hawaii islands, West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Andaman Islands. Ornithologists suggest that they number more than 100,000.

They prefer moist, dry deciduous and semiarid biomes in which they form leks during the breeding season where a lot of males display their feathers in open areas to attract females. Dust bathing is done to remove bacteria and external parasites from their feathers (Fig 7). Usually they are found in a flock commonly known as Muster. One of the vital decision includes selection of roosting sites. because



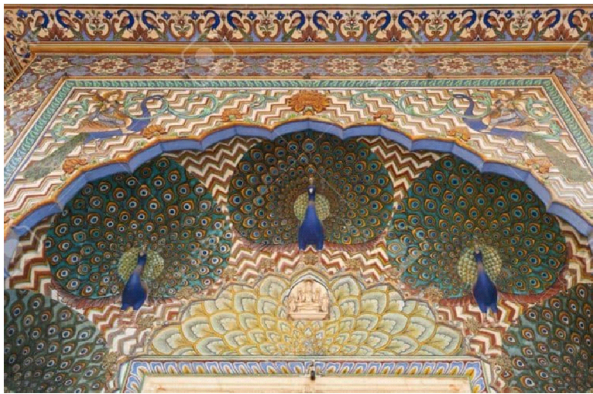
(Fig 1)



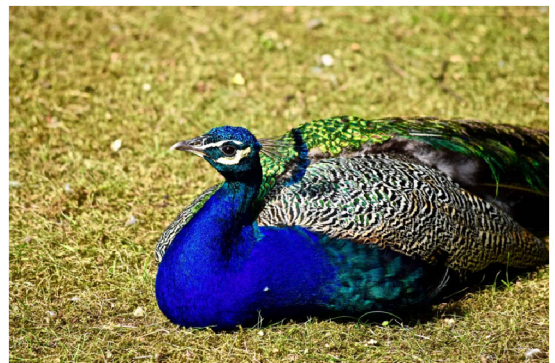
(Fig 2)



(Fig 3)



(Fig 4)



(Fig 6)



(Fig 5)



(Fig 7)

it acts as the platform for sharing information and even provide protection from main predators. Generally, they make an attention call whenever they sense danger. Common places for roosting include tall buildings or trees.

Their decline in many regions in India has attracted attention. They face many threats:

1. They are killed in huge numbers for their alluring and elegant feathers. There are trade centres in many regions of India selling these plumes illegally. A recent study by TRAFFIC in 2008 confirmed Agra as centre for trade. Three of the communities Harries, Kanjars and Khatkis were involved selling a total of 20 million feathers annually. Having domestic, decorative and religious values the demand of these plumes has become high. Due to this illegal poaching and trapping, the species has completely vanished from some parts of Pakistan.
2. To resolve this issue, a rule of using only shed feathers was amended. But for making the job easy and fast, poachers still prefer to kill the bird for collecting the tail coverts. To complete this task, they usually pick mass poisoning due to these bird's territorial nature. Even hunting them is quite simple as they roost at the same site every day.
3. Some poachers are very specific for their choices. So, they wish for plumes without any blood. To accomplish this work they grab the bird, break their legs then harvest their feathers.
4. They are even hunted for meat. Recently, a divisional forest officer of Andhra Pradesh, India confiscated some cooked meat, bird residue (intestine) plus a wooden block used for cutting meat. To identify the species being cooked, a set of universal primers were used. Through this they confirmed that following species has been killed illegally which is regarded as wildlife crime.
5. Another threat is human interference and habitat destruction. Recently, a survey of the Indian peafowl population in Sigur Plateau, Tamil Nadu, India revealed that the population is decreasing rapidly. Local people shared that habitat alteration and invading human habitation are the main reasons behind their decline.
6. Due to a decrease in their natural habitat they tend to live alongside humans. This increases the chance for an encounter with predators such as domestic dogs.
7. Peafowl are considered as one of the serious pests of crops. To protect their crops, farmers sometimes opt to do intentional poisoning.
8. Since only male peafowl are targeted for the feathers, it can lead to problem of skewed sex ratio of its population.

The government of India and several institutes are working in protecting this bird. Some of the actions include:

1. The Ministry of Environment and Forests has kept a proposal of banning illegal trade of peacock feathers. The increased poaching and killing of the bird is mainly due to high demand for the plumes. Therefore, Ministry has decided to amend sections 43(3)(a) and 44 of the Wildlife Protection Act.
2. Another issue is unknown estimation of population size. As a solution certain proposals are kept forward under the nation-wide campaign Save the National Bird, World Pheasant Association -India (WPA- India). This includes a survey to know the current status of the species. Moreover, on 19 June 2006, the board authorized a periodic monitoring, survey for population size and proper protection measures.
3. Lately, the Wildlife Institute of India organized a questionnaire survey on population status of Indian peafowl.
4. Central government in 2013 banned the usage of feathers in handicrafts and jewellery.
5. Recently, the government has amended the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The following act describes the trade of body parts of peafowl equivalent to punishment for killing other non-endangered species. The person breaking the rule will be jailed for up to two years.
6. A study by Wildlife Institute of India confirmed the way to distinguish between shed and plucked feathers. By this means the illegal trade can be caught red handed.
7. Very few sanctuaries in India are involved in conservation and breeding of peacocks. One of them is Bankapur sanctuary also known as “Peacock Paradise” in Karnataka is exclusively indulged in this process.

Though there are steps taken for keeping the common bird common but still there is a need to take more actions.

1. Using scientific methods like line transect, call counts and roost counts to have an estimate of the population.
2. To identify high risk areas and potential sites to take immediate actions.
3. Mapping the species for its habitat and distribution status.
4. Have a detailed account of trade with the source and people involved.
5. Making volunteer groups to Educate local people on species behavior and habitat.

Birds are one of the most important parts of the environment. Once the Biologist and Godfather of Biodiversity, Thomas Lovejoy said that “If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the Environmental Problems in the world.”

Source: by Prachi Dadhich, BIOME ECOLOGY DECEMBER 20, 2018.

Himachal: 8 Out Of 18 rare Cheer Pheasants born from Captive Breeding survive In wild

Himachal Pradesh runs an exclusive captive breeding centre for Cheer pheasants near Chail in an effort to reintroduce the highly threatened ground dwelling Himalayan bird into its natural habitat.

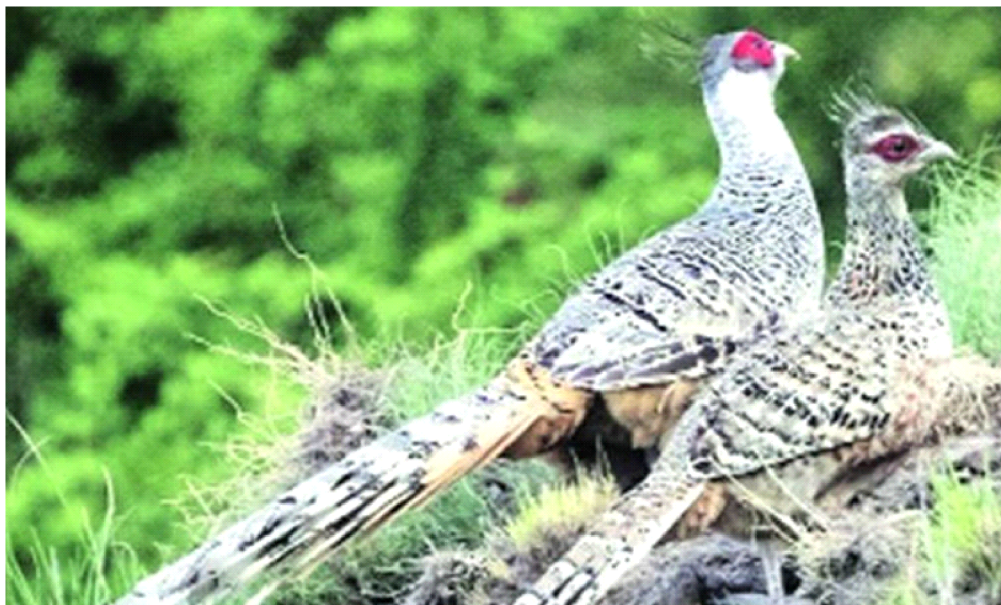


Photo Credits: The Indian Express

Eight Cheer pheasants which were released into a forest following their captive breeding have survived in the wild. Himachal Pradesh runs an exclusive captive breeding centre for Cheer pheasants near Chail, to reintroduce the highly threatened, ground dwelling Himalayan bird into its natural habitat. A threatened species, they are found in the Himalayas, occurring in India, Nepal and Pakistan.

'Cheer' refers to the bird's occurrence near Chir Pine forests and Pheasants are mostly ground dwelling birds. Males and females of this species look very similar except that male birds have a relatively long tail and crest.

Three families of pheasants from the facility were introduced into soft release pens at a site between Seri and Undala villages of Dharbhog Panchayat in Shimla rural tehsil in October 2019. Soft release pens are enclosed wild spaces which act as a precursor to an actual release into the wild. Of the 18 birds originally released, 12 are chicks and 6 adults and belonged to three different families. Of the total, 13 birds survived the soft release and were subsequently introduced into the forest. For tracking and monitoring, the adults have been fitted with identification rings and very high frequency (VHF) collars. Till date, eight of those pheasants, including three adults, have survived, according to the Wildlife Wing of the State Forest Department.

“The surviving birds are healthy and have adapted well to their new surroundings. In fact, a couple laid eggs this breeding season (April to June),” Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden Dr Savita told the media.

The released population will be closely monitored for nearly a year till the birds establish in the new habitat. Meanwhile, coming October, the officials are planning to release four more families of the bird. “This is first of its kind experiment, and if the pheasants survive for a year and get intermingled with the naturally occurring population, this would be first successful reintroduction of the bird into the wild,” the IUCN said.

Himachal Pradesh is one area where a majority of the remaining wild populations still survive. According to IUCN, 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. The State Forest Department has taken a number of measures to save the species, including the establishment of protected areas and carrying out captive breeding.

“These sites are important Cheer Pheasant areas in the state where the number has depleted over the years and this project will help in the recovery of wild populations. This is a unique initiative and will bring the reintroduction site on the world map of wildlife conservation,” it added. The breeding centre at Khadiyun near Chail, located in a wildlife sanctuary, currently has 75 birds being raised in seven enclosures, which were bred according to standards of breeding as suggested by agencies like IUCN and recognised by the Central Zoo Authority. The birds that were released were selected based on their genetic constitution for reintroduction protocol, as approved by Galliformes Expert Group of the IUCN.

“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,” the IUCN said.

In February last year, the selection procedure for pairing and breeding of these birds was put in place. The birds were paired and allowed to breed based on the stud-book records and genetic analysis. To ensure maximum success, intensive management of these birds was practised. “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,” the IUCN said.

“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 birds 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,” it added.

The birds are daily fed 150 grams of fruits and vegetables, 150 grams of grains, soybeans, and mineral mixture. According to an official, Pheasants can live for more than 10 years in captivity, and one bird lived for around 16 years.

Meanwhile, the release site was also thoroughly inspected for predators, grazing pressure, human presence, etc. According to a wildlife official, one reason the birds were released in Seri area was

because the area deity is believed to be against the hunting of wildlife. “The major threats to Cheer Pheasant are hunting, forest fires, grazing and fodder collection. Forest fires pose a major threat as these mostly occur during the breeding season. Grazing and fodder collection result in the reduction of disturbance-free habitat that the Cheer Pheasants prefer,” the IUCN said.

“However, in recent years, hunting here has drastically declined due to growing awareness regarding the importance of the bird and its vulnerability,” the official said. Locally called chaidh, the cheer Pheasants dwell in grassland habitat combined with short trees and shrubs in elevations between 1,500-3,000 metres. Currently, their global population has dipped to less than 2,700 birds, due to human disturbances and other factors.

“Globally, due to these unregulated activities, the population of Cheer Pheasants 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 ” said IUCN. The breeding centre at Khadiyun has been operational since around 1990. While it was previously used for breeding the Red Jungle Fowl and the Kalij Pheasant, it was dedicated exclusively to the Cheer Pheasant, around ten years ago.



Photo credit: Dr. John Corder

Source: The Logical Indian Crew, Himachal Pradesh 30 July 2020.

Himachal: Vulnerable Western Tragopans Soft Released Into Forest In First Effort To Reintroduce Species Into Wild

A brightly plumed bird endemic to northwest Himalaya, Western tragopan or Jujurana has an estimated global population of less than 3,500 individuals.



Image Credits: Jansatta

In a first effort globally to reintroduce the vulnerable western tragopans into the wild, six captive-bred birds have been soft released into a forest in Himachal Pradesh. A brightly plumed bird endemic to northwest Himalaya, Western Tragopan or Jujurana has an estimated global population of less than 3,500 individuals. Six of these vulnerable pheasant species, which is also the State Bird of Himachal, was raised in a pheasantry at Sarahan and was soft released into the nearby Daranghati Wildlife Sanctuary, reported The Indian Express.

In a soft release, which is a precursor to full release, the birds are shifted to the site of release and placed in temporary enclosures or soft pens. The process helps the birds to adapt to the area's climate and environment.

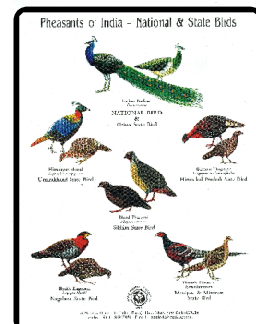
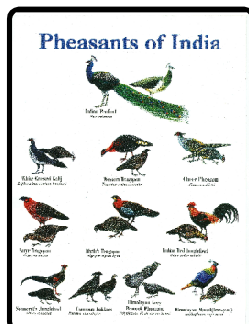
While the elevation of the breeding centre at Sarahan is around 2,300 metres, the birds have been soft-released into a site in the sanctuary around 3,200 metres above the sea level. In the next few days, the six birds - two pairs and two chicks - are expected to be let out of the pens. Otherwise, they will be released during the upcoming wildlife week during which the state forest department will hold an official event to mark the release. In order to help a researcher monitor the birds' location, movement and other parameters once they are out on their own in the wild, the birds are tagged with very high frequency (VHF) radio devices. Of the seven different species of pheasants in the state, Western Tragopan is the most elusive one, wildlife officials said. Across the world, Sarahan pheasantry, or the Western Tragopan Conservation Breeding Centre, located at Sarahan in Shimla district is the only centre where the conservation breeding of the pheasant is being carried out, the wildlife wing of the state forest department said. The Western tragopan is among the five species of birds from Himachal which were listed under species of high conservation concern by a report - 'State of India's Birds 2020' - released early this year.

Source: The Logical Indian Crew, Himachal Pradesh 25 September 2020.

Resource Material - available on request

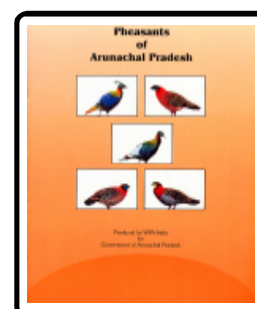
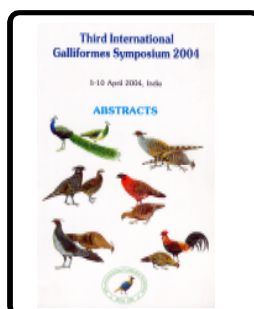
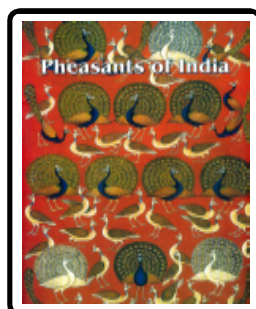
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