CONTENTS

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EDITORIAL

This is my first issue as editor of *Lanioturdus* and by reading the articles you may think I have taken the opportunity to monopolise the issue to publish everything I have done over the past several years. I do admit that my quest for material has spurred me to finalise several papers. But it seems that a stiffy disk with four articles, I sent to the previous editor, Chris Hines, over a year ago, got lost in the post. I have included these although the one on flamingos is dated information.

Good rains have fallen over most of the country and the birds are responding by breeding and the migrants are getting fat on the insects. Everyone should be seeing new birds and hopefully will report on the vagrants, local migrants and oddities.

When Chris met with me, over a beer at Joe's pub, to hand over the editor's job he said the hardest part of this job would be trying to get people to put to paper their observations, adventures and studies. Once again the editor appeals to all the members to please send in your articles so we can get our journal back on a four-times-a-year schedule. I would like to start a section of the *Lanioturdus* for visitors' comments, trip reports, etc. If any members have visitors or bird-watching clients please ask them to send us a short summary of their trip. I am sure that we would like to know what visitors are seeing and how their experience was in Namibia.

continue to ring vultures within the park over the next several years. The scope of our research will probably be expanded in light of the problems with the Indian White-backed vulture *Gyps bengalensis* (see "Indian vultures in trouble" in this issue).

We are conducting a second research project involving Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*. We are investigating adult eagle survival and young eagle dispersion. To do this we need to find Tawny Eagle nests, ring and collect a few of drops of blood from the chicks. Tawny Eagles are territorial and nest in the same area, often in the same tree year after year. We extract DNA from the blood, in collaboration with Prof Dr Michael Wink at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. By comparing the band sharing coefficients within the DNA obtained from eaglets in year 1 to DNA obtained from eaglets in year 2, we can tell if both parents are the same, or if one has changed or if both are new parents. The advantage of using microsatellite pairing DNA and band sharing coefficients is that adult birds do not have to be caught and tagged to determine if one or both are replaced in subsequent years. DNA only needs to be obtained from nestlings. From this data we can then calculate the survival rates of the adults. We are also ringing the chicks with a SAFRING metal ring so if young eagles are found dead, we will be able to determine how far and in what direction they disperse.

We are currently conducting the eagle research within Etosha National Park but would like to expand the project over a wider area to see if there are differences in survival rates. We will be working with colleagues in Zambia who will collect data for us and we would like to find eagle nests in the commercial farming areas south of the park. If any club members or farmers know of nesting pairs of Tawny Eagles please contact us and we will come to ring the birds and collect a blood sample. Tawny Eagle pairs in Namibia begin displaying in the nesting area during April and are easily seen perched near the nest tree. In May the female lays eggs and birds are harder to find at this time. In June the chicks have hatched and then should be large enough for us to ring.

We can be contacted at the following at the address in the header or phone Wilferd at 067–229854 during the day or 067–229812 at night, or Tim Osborne at 067–333408 anytime.

INDIAN VULTURES IN TROUBLE

Vulture Study Group
Electronic newsletter
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Johannesburg, South Africa
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A calamity of epic proportions has affected the vultures of the Indian subcontinent. According to studies of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) there has been a decline of 96% in the Indian White-backed Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) and 97% in Long-billed Vulture (*Gyps indicus*) at Bharatpur between 1985 and 1999. This information was given at the International Seminar on the Vulture Situation in India, 18–20 Sept 2000.

A summary of the meeting highlights *[lowlights are more like it. Ed.]* are given below.

The details are that two of India's commonest *Gyps* vultures have been almost wiped out, almost certainly by a disease. They are now listed as Critical in the Red Data Book. Signs of the suspected disease have been recently seen in Pakistan and Nepal and if the suspected disease can spread to other *Gyps* vultures it may spread through populations in central Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe. The Bombay Natural History Society is working with laboratories in India and a pathologist from the Zoological Society of London to identify the cause and possible actions in India.

Baselines and monitoring are urgently required in other *Gyps* range states to identify the spread of the disease.

Extent of the decline:

a. The problem was highlighted when studies by BNHS (Prakash) showed 96% decline in Indian White-backed Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) and 97% in Long-billed Vulture (*Gyps indicus*) at Bharatpur between 1985 and 1999.

b. In April–June 2000, BNHS repeated surveys (funded by the Ministry of

Environment and Forests and the RSPB) carried out in 1991–93 at 17 protected areas, 3 carcass dumps and along 7236 km of roads across north and central India (Prakash, unpublished BNHS report). These showed a decline of at least 90% in all areas, and some local extinctions. Ninety percent of 1920 people who responded to a BNHS questionnaire considered vultures to have declined in their area.

c. The BNHS survey found adult:first-year ratios for White-backed Vultures just after the breeding season were 9:1, suggesting low nesting success and/or high juvenile mortality.

d. The decline appears to have affected only White-backed and Long-billed Vultures and there is no evidence of a decline in other vulture species. (Of the other six vulture species in India, 2 other *Gyps* species are little known and there is insufficient data to judge population changes, 2 of the non-*Gyps* species are reported to be stable, and for 2 non-*Gyps* there is insufficient information available).

Summary of evidence on the cause of the decline presented at the meeting:

a. No poisons or pesticides were found at lethal levels in the two carcasses examined. Full publication of the results is awaited, and further carcasses need to be tested. There is no evidence of any changes in use of chemicals, or of the introduction of any chemicals in India which could explain the decline.

b. There is no shortage of food: the BNHS survey in 2000 counted 192 livestock carcasses, with vultures on only 5% of them.

c. There are records of poisoning of vultures and other species in India, but no evidence that this has increased, or that it is on a scale that can explain the observed extent or characteristics of the decline. No evidence was presented in support of suggestions that electrocution, drowning in cattle troughs (both significant for small vulture populations in South Africa and Israel), or habitat loss or shooting is a factor in the decline.

d. All of the nine vultures examined from the Bharatpur region had died of an infectious disease, probably a virus. The actual cause of death of all birds appeared to be dehydration caused by enteritis.

e. The vultures that died of infectious disease showed long periods of head-drooping before death. Similar signs were recorded in all of the vulture populations observed by the BNHS survey in 2000.

f. Although healthy vultures have been recorded as head drooping, apparently to shade the bare skin of their heads from hot sun, in such circumstances they face away from the sun and the behaviour is not for extended periods. Sick vultures in India exhibit this behaviour for abnormally prolonged periods. The BNHS survey recorded 17% head drooping in White-back and 11% in Long-billed Vultures.

International Implications

a. Munir Virani from Peregrine Fund presented evidence from Pakistan and Nepal that some vultures there are exhibiting the same head drooping symptom. In Pakistan the proportion of head-drooping birds in the population increases with proximity to the Indian border. In these areas, local people report vultures dying in unusual numbers in the last few years, particularly in the hot season.

b. As the infectious disease appears to be affecting two species of *Gyps*, and only *Gyps*, it is conceivable that it will spread to other *Gyps* species

c. The ranges of species in the genus *Gyps* overlap from India through central Asia and the Middle East to South Africa and western Europe. They are known to travel widely. It is therefore conceivable that a disease that affects all *Gyps* vultures could spread from south Asia throughout the Old World.

[Editors note: In addition to the threat of poison to our vultures we now have the possibility of a disease entering Africa and wiping out the African White-backed Vulture Gyps africanus *and the few remaining Cape Vultures* Gyps coprotheres.*]*