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International Journal of Life Sciences
ISSN No. 2091-0525

DOI-dx.doi.org/10.3126/ijls.v8i1.8084

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Research Article

Total and abrupt elimination of a population of Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) on Delhi - Agra highway in India

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**ABSTRACT**

The present work is to highlight the threats being faced by the Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* (Linnaeus, 1758) in its original area including Mathura district. An isolated population of Egyptian Vultures was seen in 2007-08 spread over an area of 20-30 Kilometers home range. Actually, scores of Egyptian vultures were seen airborne gyrating in the skies at low height on the outskirts of Mathura city towards Delhi. Astonishingly, in 2008, another group of 40-50 Egyptian Vultures was seen feeding on 2-3 carcasses of Cattle on left hand side of Agra-Delhi National highway in September, 2008 towards Delhi. However, a visit in April, 2011 revealed a fatal fact, as all these birds of this population were certainly eclipsed in a short span of 3-4 years. Neither the airborne group nor the "Kosi-Kalan" village road side group was traceable. So much so, not a single bird could be sighted. In conclusion, it is boldly inferred over here that Egyptian Vultures are already in the brink of near extinctions as of in 2013, only one bird was traced on Mathura-Agra Highway.

**INTRODUCTION**

Birds are extremely sensitive to negative changes in their surroundings and fall prey to the axe of extinction. Birds like Haast’s Eagle Harpagornis moorei Haast, 1872, Dodo Raphus cucullatus (Linnaeus,1758), Elephant Bird *Aepyornis maximus* Hilaire, 1851, St Helena Bulwer’s Petrel *Bulweria bifax* Olson, 1975, Upland Moa *Megalapteryx didinus* (Owen,1883), Réunion Flightless Ibis *Threskiornis solitaries* (Selys, 1848) have become extinct in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth centuries due to one or the other inordinate and fatal cause. Birds have also become extinct in the recent past due to over excessive hunting by man for food pleasure or fashion. The birds that were extinct in the 20th century include King Island Emu *Dromaius ater* (Vielliot,1817), Pink-headed Duck, *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* (Latham,1790), Labrador Duck *Camptorhynchus labradorius* Gmelin, 1789, Great Auks *Pinguinus impennis* (Linnaeus, 1758). Birds that are facing very adverse, known and unknown, threats confront the danger of being extinct sooner than latter.

However, the present studies deal with Egyptian vultures in Faridabad, Palwal and Mathura districts near Delhi border with Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh. The aim and objective of the present research work is to highlight the threats being confronted by Egyptian vultures in its original area including Mathura District in Uttar Pradesh. Egyptian Vultures, although being vultures, are much different from traditional vultures like White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* both in size and external appearance. Egyptian Vultures are of the size of a full grown male Jungle Fowl *Gallus gallus* less the crown and color. The birds are distinctly yellow brown on head and around and snow-white on the entire plumage. If a White-backed Vulture is a little bold vis-à-vis human beings, Egyptian Vultures is fearful is of human beings. While sitting nearby fresh human excreta against the backdrop of green grass and black clouds in rainy season, its white plumage and yellow brown head gives it an attractive attention to a human eye. Egyptian Vultures are very docile, delicate, sensitive and secretive birds having a liking for isolated environs on the outskirts of human inhabitation. These are scavengers on human excreta and related substrates and rarely feed on carcasses of dead animals (Donazar et al. 2002). In the 1960s, Egyptian Vultures were quite prevalent, although not in groups. Today, these attractive vultures have been totally wiped out and rarely seen in areas down south of Delhi environs.

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Doi: dx.doi.org/10.3126/ijls.v8i1.8084
It is pertinent to mention that, there are nine species of vultures in India viz. Oriental White-backed Vulture Gyps bengalensis (Gmelin, 1788), Slender billed Vulture Gyps tenuirostris Hodgson, 1844, Long billed Vulture Gyps indicus (Scopoli, 1786), Egyptian Vulture Neophron percnopterus (Linnaeus,1758), Red Headed Vulture Sarcogyps calvus (Scopoli,1786), Indian Griffon Vulture Gyps fulvus (Hablizl,1783), Himalayan Griffin Gyps himalayensis (Hume , 1869), Cinereous Vulture Aegypius monachus (Linnaeus,1766) and Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier Gypaetus barbatus (Linnaeus,1758) (Ali & Ripley, 1987). The fact of the matter is that birds like vultures are already, sort of extinction in their larger parts of prevalence in the last 20 -25 years only in northern India. Such birds, specially vultures are demonstrated this negative, worrisome, unfortunate phenomenon in the worse way. The extinction and threats etc. in context of Long-billed Vulture, White-backed Vultures is a much published issue. However, the case of Egyptian Vultures has remained out of public gaze and media inspection and comments. The present case highlights a case of total and abrupt elimination of a restricted population of Egyptian vultures on Delhi-Agra highway in India. The case actually refers to a spot on Uttar Pradesh and Haryana border in Mathura and Palwal districts nearby Kosi-Kalan town. Earlier workers who have worked on Egyptian Vultures in northern India include, amongst others, Kushwaha and Kanaujia (2011); Chhangani et al. (2002); Chhangani (2004, 2005, 2009); Chhangani and Mohnot (2001, 2004) and Prakash (1999). At the same time, workers elsewhere in the world, who have studied Egyptian Vultures include Biddulph (1937), Ceballos et al. (1990); Cuthbert et al. (2006); Donazar and Olga (1989, 1989, 2008); Donazar et al. (1994); Donazar (2002); Donazar et al. (2002); Galushin (2001); Laura (2005); Laura et al. (2009), Ripolles et al.(2010).

Egyptian Vulture is different from other species by way of its appearance, sensitivity and even by the habit of scavenging on fresh human faecal matter. However, the sudden, rapid and almost momentary disappearance of Egyptian Vulture as highlighted in the present paper seems related with its transformation of scavenging on carcasses rather than on human faecal matter thus remotely and directly related with Diclofenac medicine used in veterinary parlors to contain inflammation of tissue in cattle (Kushwaha and Kanaujia, 2011). It is pertinent to mention that no workers have reported a case of abrupt disappearance /death of a robust population of this unique bird in Haryana and hence the present paper.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The present research paper refers to a isolated population of Egyptian Vultures Neophron percnopterus (Linnaeus, 1758) observed near “Kosi-Kalan” town in Mathura district very near to Haryana Border between Mathura and Palwal District. Egyptian Vultures are a long lived species which are qualified as “endangered” bird species due to their extremely rapid population declines in India (Birdlife International, 2013). It is pertinent to mention that this isolated and restricted population of Egyptian Vultures was resident on Agra-Delhi highway between Kosi-Kalan in Uttar Pradesh and Mathura city in a span of over 15-20 Kms. In the year, 2007, Egyptian Vultures were seen in substantial numbers in sky borne conditions but certainly at considerable low height always. This scene refers to trips made to Agra city in 2007, 2008 and 2009 in summer, autumn and spring season respectively. During 1960s, Egyptian Vultures in singles in a semi desolate mood in ground borne position scavenging on human excreta were observed in Faridabad rural areas and on Faridabad-Palwal-Kosi-Kalan-Mathura-Agra, all in a row on Agra-Delhi highway, better known as National Highway No.2. These observations, therefore, address a contiguous area of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh spread over on a 80-120 Kms. Egyptian Vultures in Faridabad area which were frequently spotted in rural areas, became extinct by the 1970s completely and that is why the first author got delighted to see by chance a robust population of Egyptian vultures in 2007, on Agra-Delhi highway. These birds were in quite good shape in this very sub-population in 2007 through 2008, 2009. In 2009, this sub population was seen aggregated in a group of 40-50 birds while traveling from Agra-to Delhi by road. Kushwaha and Kanaujia (2011) reported large flocks of the Egyptian vulture along with Eurasian griffon, and Cinereous vulture spotted feeding on carrion from Jorbeer, Rajasthan, India. Further, Donazar et al. (2002) reported 109 individuals of Egyptian Vulture roosted together in November 2000 from Canary Islands.
region where it exploit carcasses of small and medium sized animals (Donazar et al. 2002). In the present studies Egyptian Vultures were seen scavenging on carcasses on National Highway No.2 between Kosi-Kalan and Mathura. The above crucial observations provide two important clues: One that the Egyptian Vultures compared to 1960s have started scavenging on dead cattle’s compared to its habit of scavenging on human excreta during 1960s. Two, the death of this sub-population observed in April 2011 was the culmination of abrupt and total extinction—within two years w.e.f. 2009-2011 due to perhaps Diclofenac contents in dead cattle flesh, a proximal possibility. Kushwaha and Kanaujia (2011) reported that vultures are being poisoned by Diclofenac residues, a widely used medicine for both humans and livestock of the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory group of drugs.
Egyptian vulture populations have been declining in several countries as consequences of poisoning, human disturbance or the reduction in food availability (Liberatori and Penteriani 2001; Cuthbert et al., 2006 and Carrete et al., 2007). Hernandez and Margalida (2009) recorded 211 poisoning incidents of Egyptian vultures over the period 1990-2007 to address the impact of poison related mortality in the Spain. Now, there are no Egyptian vultures available on National highway no.2 (Agra-Delhi highway going to Mumbai). Amita Sarkar et al. (2013) recorded only 9 Egyptian Vultures from Mainpuri (Uttar Pradesh) in India and reported that Egyptian vulture is a rarely seen bird species because they are at the stage of extinction and come under the category of endangered species. The extinction of this robust sub population of Egyptian vultures has come in place in a silent, abrupt and rapid manner due to cattle flesh contaminated with Diclofenac-a medicine administrated to diseased cattle to get rid of tissue inflammation (Kushwaha and Kanaujia, 2011). The population of Egyptian Vultures decrease sharply in the Western Palearctic region and almost extinct in the mediterranean regions (Donazar et al. 2002). It is one sad story of decimation of Egyptian vultures sub population. Many such other stories are being scripted elsewhere not only in context of beautiful birds like the one precisely detailed herein but also in reference of several others including House Sparrow Passer domesticus (Linnaeus, 1758), Asian Koel Eudynamys scolopaceus (Linnaeus, 1758), Red-vented Bulbul Pycnonotus cafer (Linnaeus, 1766), and Doves. Soon extremely robust and massive populations of House Crow Corvus splendens Vieillot, 1817 and Black Kite Milvus migrans Boddart, 1783 will become victims in the midst of multi fold causes and continued depletion in breeding potential owing to decimation of nesting sites in shape of trees specific to these two cases for nest lodging. The steady declines of Egyptian Vultures are due to various anthropogenic factors such as poisoning, habitat destruction and decrease in food availability (Donazar, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Egyptian vultures are silently on their way to total and abrupt depletion even in its last left over habitats in Mathura and Agra districts of Uttar Pradesh. It is already extinct in nearby Palwal and Faridabad districts in Haryana. Most appropriate and emergency measures are called for to prevent their total elimination by promoting breeding in vivo of the remaining Egyptian Vultures. It will be appropriate to constitute a “Board of Ornithologists” to look into this sad scenario. “High Status” ornithologists should be kept at bay as these will further compound the problem by putting forth a report reverberating with statistical data, graphs, histograms pie diagrams, much away from reality and ground zero position. On the other hand, practical solutions will be emanating from the small stature ornithologists very near to reality and ground zero situation. Let us call spade a spade and shun mathematics from biodiversity related issues of high concerns requiring immediate and at once rehabilitative corrective and remedial measures by direct, simple and honest observations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The senior author is specially thankful to Prof. J. S. Yadav for bringing an age old heavy weight Camera from Russia in 1986 which has proved rather very effective despite its old age. The senior author is emotionally attached with Prof. J. S. Yadav who brought the camera without any advance request.

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