

# ME & MY EARTH

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*Brahma Kamal in Hindu mythology, is a magical flower of the Gods that really inspire the Hindu cult; a flower known as white Lotus; it is actually a flowering cacti. Scientific name of this plant is Saussurea obvallata.*

BRAMHA KAMAL





# MADHYA PRADESH VULTURE CENSUS 2019

Jagat JS Flora

In the Madhya Pradesh, Vulture Census 2019 was conducted by the State Forest Department on 12 January. The most important Vulture roosting and nesting site in Jabalpur Forest Division where most of the Vultures were recorded is situated at its north-east end, near village Tamoriya in Katangi Circle of Patan Range, at a site locally called Madiya on Sidhbaba-ki-Pahadi. This site is about 14 Kilometres south-east of another major Vulture site in V. Durgawati Wildlife Sanctuary in Damoh District. Together these two sites are at opposite end of a projection of the plateau whose escarpments in a semicircle form an ideal habitat for vultures. The perennial river Hiran, a tributary of Narmada, runs parallel along this picturesque site.

*Jabalpur Forest Division, this year was assisted in Vulture Census by the NGO, Citizens for Nature (CFN). Seventeen participants from the CFN along with the Forest Department staff and some villagers were divided into three groups and each observed one third part of the total length of the escarpment. They positioned themselves before dawn and with the first light at about six am started counting the sitting Vultures with the aid of binoculars and telephoto cameras.*

villages, the road passes through lush green fields with abundance of birds on either sides. The sheer height of the escarpment with scrub and scraggy trees of dry season at the base and the top, interspersed with the exposed striated rock face is a breathtaking sight.

There is a small patch of forest around the mandir, which seems to have been left standing because of reverence for the spot by the local human inhabitants. At other places, the area between the escarpment and the agricultural fields is covered by bushes and stunted trees, mainly Bhirra (*Chloroxylon swietenia*) and Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*). Surprisingly, along the mud tract, there is a big patch and a pure stand of Chironji (*Buchanania cochinchinensis*) trees which appears to



Map showing the Vulture site at **A** in Jabalpur District & **B** in V. Durgawati Wildlife Sanctuary In Damoh District

Another smaller site in Jabalpur Division is in Barman hills of Shahpura Range.

The escarpment at Tamoriya is about a kilometre long and situated at the southernmost point of Bhandar Plateau of Vindhya Range. This upland plateau is formed of striated sedimentary rocks of varying thickness and reputed to be one of the largest and thickest sedimentary successions in the world. This area is also the western end of the Kaimur Range of Vindhyas which runs east for a distance of about 480 kilometres up to Bihar. The scarps rise 500 to 1000 feet from the base and wind erosion has denuded the rock face to form ledges, recesses and caves serving as safe habitat for Sloth Bears and Vultures. Local villagers also affirm of long unexplored caves inside the plateau at this site. The caves were used as meditation and penance sites by Rishi- Munis in ancient times and hence a number of religious shrines are located in the scarps.

This Vulture site is accessed by way of a mud tract, a stretch of about ten kilometres, starting from the west end of Katangi town, turning north near the crossing of the NH 34 and Hiran River. This dusty road is motorable only in dry season, but culverts at depressions are under construction now. After crossing few narrow, congested cemented paths through the

be a plantation. In this unprotected area, one seems to wonder as to how these fully grown trees are still standing in an otherwise barren and predominantly agricultural landscape. The probable answer is that the nuts of these trees are economically important for the local population and traditionally been an article of barter and also, other less useful species of trees been cut down long ago for fuel wood or short term gains, leaving behind pure stands of Chironji trees.

Jabalpur Forest Division, this year was assisted in Vulture Census by the NGO, Citizens for Nature (CFN). Seventeen participants from the CFN along with the Forest Department staff and some villagers were divided into three groups and each observed one third part of the total length of the escarpment. They positioned themselves before dawn and with the first light at about six am started counting the sitting Vultures with the aid of binoculars and telephoto cameras. The exercise was completed before eight am with fair accuracy as the escarpment faced east and received sufficient light to make the Vultures clearly visible. Most of the Forest Department staff and members of CFN were experienced to correctly identify the different species of Vultures.



Vulture site at Timoriya, Katangi, Jabalpur Division

The total count of Vultures at this site was 78. There were 71 Indian Vultures (*Gyps indicus*), including three juveniles, 1 White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), 1 Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) and 5 Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*). Ten nests of Indian Vultures were also observed and one pair was seen mating. At the Shahpura site six Vultures were seen. Thus the total count of Vultures in Jabalpur Forest Division was 84 which is an increase by 22 numbers. An increase of 26 percent seems encouraging but the actual numbers should also increase.

In the final report for overall Madhya Pradesh, 7906 vultures were recorded from 1275 sites which is an increase of little over 12 percent over last census done in 2016. The highest numbers of Vultures in India are found in MP and its protected areas account for 45 percent of the total population. Four out of seven Tiger Reserves have shown a decline in percentage. In Panna TR, famous for its Vultures, the count has fallen by as much as 30 percent but the surrounding unprotected areas have recorded an impressive increase. More than half of all Vultures are found in unprotected areas, Raisen, Vidisha, Mandsaur and Chhatarpur districts having the most of them.

The population of Vultures in Jabalpur Forest Division is in a constant state of flux as another nesting and roosting site in the adjoining Veeranga Durgawati Wildlife Sanctuary in Damoh district, which is about fourteen kilometres away from this site and part of the same

topography, 125 numbers were counted. Taken together, more than two hundred were recorded in this composite site and the Vultures keep changing their positions along the length of the escarpment. Out of the total nine species of Vultures found in India, except for Bearded, rest are seen in Madhya Pradesh. The winter migratory Vultures i.e. Himalayan Vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*), Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) have been recorded in the Damoh district and so there is a strong possibility of seeing them in Jabalpur also. Vulture census has to be undertaken multiple times and at multiple locations throughout the year to get true and comprehensive picture.

There are other factors also that should be taken into consideration for conducting a Vulture census. As the Vultures fly immense distances in quest for food and sometimes feed throughout the night, they may not return to the same roosting sites. After fully gorging themselves, they are sometimes unable to get airborne and have to spend the night on the ground and wait for the next morning to fly again. Census sites should also include their frequent feeding grounds like the vicinity of slaughter houses, municipal waste dumps and outskirts of cities and villages where carcasses of dead animals are dumped.



A visit to a carcass dumping ground, 53 kilometres from Jabalpur and about five kilometres before Tendukheda, in Damoh district and about twenty kilometres north-west from Tamoriya nesting site, in the last week of February presented a spectacular sight. This site is on the





plateau and at a sufficient height to disperse the stench from the decaying carcasses away from the population of Jabalpur city sprawled on the plains below. Early in the cold and misty morning, at 6.30 am, by a conservative estimate, about 250 vultures were seen resting on the ground and trees around freshly devoured cattle carcasses. This group of Vultures comprised of adults and juveniles of resident Indian, White-rumped, Egyptian, Red-headed and the migratory Himalayan and griffon Vultures. It was only after 9 am, when they had warmed themselves in the sun, got airborne, circling in thermals in groups and moved out in the NW direction. A few Jackals and Grey Wolves were also seen running away from the carcasses with mouthful of carrion. It could not be ascertained whether this site was covered in the Vulture census.

As per the 2016 survey in MP, Indian Vulture (*Gyps indicus*) constituted around 47 percent and the White-rumped (*Gyps bengalensis*) around 22 percent of the total population. While the former prefer cliff faces and hill forts, the latter mostly nests on large trees like Peepal, Banyan, Mango, Sheesham or similar big trees growing near villages, sometimes in colonies. Egyptian Vultures apart from nesting on cliffs may also choose old tall buildings, crumbling walls of old forts and tall trees. A thorough survey and mapping of all possible sites by the field staff of the Forest Department, inside and outside Protected Areas is required before counting them. In this massive census

exercise collective effort along with public participation is indispensable. This would be valuable in their conservation and to know where to focus the efforts.

The Forest Department staff is imparted only very basic training for the census. They can identify the common three species i.e. Indian, White-rumped and the Egyptian Vultures. In the nesting sites it is very difficult to differentiate between the juveniles of these species. The problem is aggravated when the two migratory Griffons and Cinereous are also present in the group along with juveniles. As the Vultures have to be viewed from a considerable distance, lack of proper viewing equipment like Spotting Scope results in misidentification. Mr Dilsher Khan, member MP Wildlife Board, imparted training to 1200 staff of the Forest Department before the census. He was present with his team in Orchha in Tikamgarh District where they found many new Vulture sites and 23 nests on old forts of the area.

Under the IUCN Red list of threatened species, the three species i.e. White-rumped, Indian and Red-headed Vultures found at Tamoriya, have been classified under Critically Endangered, CR, species (when they are facing very high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future). The Egyptian Vulture is classified as Endangered, EN (when they are not CR but still face the danger of extinction in near future). Under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, Schedule I, White-rumped and Indian







Vultures have been given highest protection. Birdlife International and Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Mumbai have listed eleven Vulture sites in Madhya Pradesh under "Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas in India- Priority sites for Conservation". All these sites are situated in protected areas and near large reservoirs. In Jabalpur Vultures are found in only one major location. Efforts are required to include the Vulture site at Tamoriya in Jabalpur Division after clubbing it with the adjoining site at V. Durgawati Wildlife Sanctuary in Damoh Division in the Important Bird Areas (IBA) of MP. It is a well proven fact that well managed protected areas prevent extinctions. Government should act to protect these sites by notifications.

There were about 40 million Gyps Vultures till the early 1990's, but the last two decades has seen more than 99 percent decline in population. According to Dr. Vibhu Prakash from BNHS, Diclofenac has come down to be present in less than 3 percent of the carcasses from 10 percent in 2006 when the drug was banned. Mass reduction in the number of Vultures in India should have been a wakeup call but concerted action on national scale it is still required to turn things around. Equally important is the conservation of their habitats as more than half of these endangered species live in unprotected areas and threats to them are increasing more than ever before. It is shocking to know that these sites lack any formal protection. Protecting these sites is crucial to bringing Vultures back from the brink of extinction.

To reclaim even one percent Vultures lost during the last two decades, would mean lakhs of Vultures to be born every year. More than establishing Vulture Conservation and Breeding Centres, which are only four in India at present, their habitats and nesting sites need to be secured. There is no danger to cliffs and escarpments as they are inaccessible and safe, the concern is the disappearance of tall trees used for nesting outside Protected Areas. Declaration of Vulture Safe Zones (VSZ) is a welcome step but the problem is in the implementation of measures of replacing Diclofenac with vulture safe drug Meloxicam even in 50 kilometres radius of

VSZ sites. The importance of such sites is not only for the numbers they retain in natural habitats, but also as save heavens for release of captive bred birds.

Another important aspect is the regular supply of diclofenac free carcasses near the vulture sites. Cattle shelters can be established near such sites where the owners can leave their old cattle at the end of their working lives where they can spend their last time grazing peacefully on community lands of villages, instead of being sold to the butchers for meat. A veterinarian can insure their welfare and check for drug presence. After the cattle die a natural death, their drug free carcass can be fed to vultures. The skin and bones can be sold to pay herders and to purchase more old animals.

The report of this census should document and highlight the urgent need for protection of lesser, remote but important vulture habitats. Protecting such sites is our last



chance, if we lose them, we will also lose the Critically Endangered Vulture species. With increasing human population, the threats too are increasing in the same proportion. We urgently need that our government put in place strong measures to protect these irreplaceable habitats.

End

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