

COUNTRY FIRST

Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*: first record for Nepal

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Historically the Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus* was recognised as having two subspecies *G. i. indicus* and *G. i. tenuirostris* until Rasmussen *et al.* (2001) showed there were many morphological differences between *indicus* and *tenuirostris*; Johnson *et al.* (2006) provided molecular data to confirm their work that the 'Long-billed' Vulture is two distinct species.

On the morning of 1 December 2011, we visited a vulture feeding station at Pithauli village (27.667°N 84.283°E), in the buffer zone of Chitwan National Park, in the terai region of south-central Nepal, approximately 185 km south-west of Kathmandu (DeCandido *et al.* 2012). Perched in trees above a carcass provided for the vultures in the area were two individuals we did not recognise. We were able to photograph them as they flew and they were later positively identified as a juvenile and adult Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus* (Plates 1 & 2). The images clearly show many of the morphological differences described by Rasmussen

et al. (2001) that distinguish Indian Vulture *G. indicus* from the similar Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris*. These features include: (a) primary 4 is not much longer than primary 3 in both birds; (b) tips of toes (talons) fall short of the tail-tip; (c) the flanks of both Indian Vultures lack the distinctive white cottony patches of Slender-billed Vultures; (d) the trailing edge of the wing in both individuals is straight and not pinched-in at the body. The juvenile Indian Vulture (Plate 1) is distinguished from the adult (Plate 2) by the following: (a) the juvenile's neck is almost completely covered in white, cottony down while the adult retains only a small amount of cottony down; (b) the juvenile has pointed secondaries and more angular primaries, while the adult has rounded secondaries and less angular primaries.

The images were sent to the Nepal Rare Bird Committee and the RSPB vulture recovery team; both groups confirmed our identification. This is the first confirmed record of Indian Vulture in

Plate 1. Juvenile Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*, Pithauli Vulture Restaurant near Chitwan National Park, Nepal, 1 December 2011.



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Plate 2. Adult Indian Vulture, Pithauli Vulture Restaurant near Chitwan National Park, Nepal, 1 December 2011.



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Nepal—it has not previously been reported there (Chaudhary *et al.* 2012). Only *tenuirostris* was believed to occur in Nepal; its range extends from (in the west) Ambala, Haryana, across the Gangetic Plain along the base of the Himalayas of India and southern Nepal to the Assam valley, southward to the Ganges delta. It was also formerly found as far to the east and south as Vietnam and Malaysia but has disappeared from most of South-East Asia. The Indian Vulture's range (poorly documented due to long-term widespread confusion with other *Gyps* species) was considered to be south of the Slender-billed Vulture: extreme south-east Pakistan and hills on peninsular India south of the Gangetic Plain, east to Raipur in Madhya Pradesh and south to the Nilgiris (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Formerly both species were common in their respective ranges, but since the mid-1990s there has been a catastrophic decline (over 97%) in numbers in South Asian *Gyps* vulture populations. Researchers have conclusively shown that the non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac is the cause of this collapse (Bowden 2009, 2011).

The vulture feeding station at Pithauli near the border with India attracts a number of vultures from the region. The two Indian Vultures we saw had probably observed the behaviour of other vultures coming here to feed. *Gyps* species are known to range long distances, so the appearance of the species in Nepal is not unexpected. With up to nine sites in Nepal, in addition to those established in India and Pakistan, where carcasses are provided for vultures (Gilbert *et al.* 2007), ornithologists and photographers should look out for vultures of unusual appearance that may be representatives of unexpected species, taking advantage of reliable food sources.

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