

Conservation Bulletin

Conserving the Asian Woollyneck in Nepal: efforts, outcomes and lessons learnt

PRASHANT GHIMIRE^{1*} and NABIN PANDEY¹

¹ Institute of Forestry, Pokhara Campus

*Email for correspondence: prashantghimire66@gmail.com

The Asian Woollyneck *Ciconia episcopus* is one of the least studied, yet vulnerable storks found only in Asia. In Nepal, Asian Woollyneck Stork is downgraded from Vulnerable to Near threatened but national population status is still unknown. It has been recorded from Suklaphanta National Park in far west to Jhapa District in the far east. It shows preference to natural wetland habitats including rivers, flood plains, marshes and artificial habitats such as rice paddy-fields, flooded pastures, and cultivated fields. A research and conservation project was initiated, specifically for the Asian Woollyneck in Nepal from November 2016. Over the last two years, we have visited different parts of the country to explore its status with our intensified efforts in Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts of western lowlands, and Pyuthan, Arghakhanchi and Salyan districts of the mid-hills of Nepal. Both research and conservation initiatives were carried out in the aforementioned districts. Here we present the efforts and their outcomes.

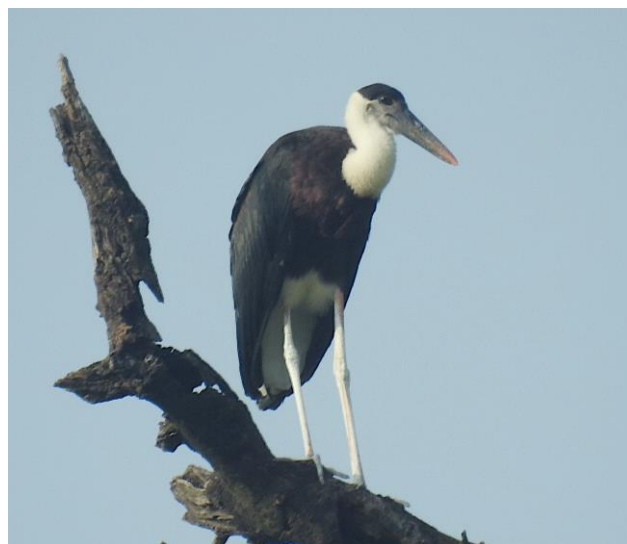


PHOTO 1: Asian Woollyneck roosting on a Sal tree.

Efforts

Research

Seven permanent road transects of variable length (15 km to 34 km) have been established for seasonal monitoring in Rupandehi and Kapilvastu since 2016 (FIG. 1). The transects are being used for regular survey of Asian Woollyneck.

Conservation

Audio-visual tools were used for conservation education campaigns conducted in 50 schools and 20 social groups of project area benefiting 3500 people. Household visits for conservation awareness, bird identification training for students in Lumbini, and bird guiding training for youths, homestay owners and women in Jagadishpur were conducted. Two Community Based Bird Conservation Units (CBBCU) were formed in Jagadishpur and Kudan in collaboration with District Forest Office, Kapilvastu. The objectives of these units are to carry out Asian Woollyneck conservation initiatives in the area.

Oral presentations were made during Rufford Small Grants Nepal Conference 2018, Kathmandu and Bird Watching and Identification Training 2018, Pokhara and Poster presentation during Butwal Trade Fair 2016 and Nepal Owl Festival 2018, Jiri. Posters (n = 1000) and Leaflets (n = 2000) emphasizing the importance of Asian Woollyneck have been published and distributed.

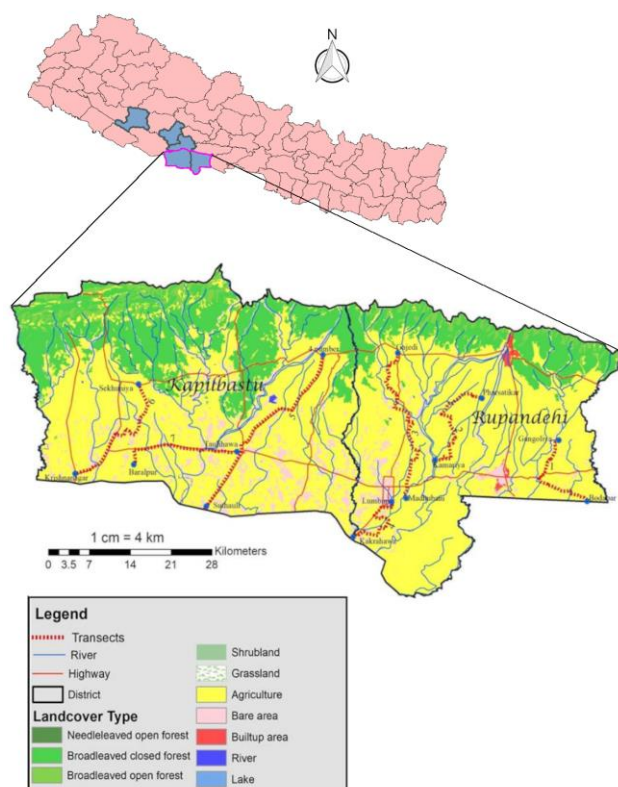


FIG. 1: (Past and Ongoing) Project implementation districts.



PHOTO 2: Presenting project outcomes in Bird identification training at Institute of Forestry, Pokhara.



PHOTO 3: Participants involved in bird watching after Bird identification training at Jagadishpur reservoir.

In Arghakhanchhi, Pyuthan and Salyan Districts, we have initiated a Science and Community Campaign to connect conservation science with the local culture. We aim to educate local communities regarding why and how we are working to save this species by disseminating the results and outputs of scientific papers.

Moreover, Asian Woollyneck Photo Bank campaign has been initiated for national level scientific documentation about the distribution, threats and status of the Asian Woollyneck. This campaign is online bank where individuals deposit photographs of Asian Woollyneck with detailed information of observation such as number of individuals observed, location and date, directly observed threats and short biography of depositors. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been used to update people regarding our works and educate more about the Asian Woollyneck itself.

Outcomes

Research

Total of 38 (11 Kapilvastu and 27 Rupandehi) and 41 (11 from Kapilvastu while 30 from Rupandehi) Asian Woollyneck were observed during winter and summer

2017. In the summer of 2018, we observed a total of 46 (18 from Kapilvastu while 28 from Rupandehi) Asian Woollyneck individuals.

Conservation

CBBCU of Kudan visited about 30 households of surrounding villages to sensitise local people about the issues affecting bird conservation in the area. This resulted in removal of two hunting nets which were placed to hunt farmland birds. Trainees from bird guide training are now involved in awareness activities and tourism promotion in their locality. Despite the positive attitude of locals of Jagadishpur towards bird conservation, their active involvement is lacking.

Facebook and Instagram page has gained 2011 and 255 followers respectively in last 7 months. They have been a complementary tool to raise issues of conservation and receive responses from followers. For example, Facebook post regarding Photo Bank Campaign and Leaflet reached to 13,537 and 5200 people respectively otherwise might not have been reached by our usual conservation efforts. With the help of information published through such media, Photo Bank Campaign has received a total of 51 photo submissions from 19 districts by 25 people till date.

Lessons learnt

Conservation sensitization at the local level can really help to reduce anthropogenic threats to Asian Woollyneck as shown by the incident of hunting nets removal in Kudan. However for sustaining such motivation of local people it is important that proper work which addresses their livelihood gets a priority. Skill based trainings for income generation will be important. Individual and short-term projects with small funding like ours are able to promote message of participatory conservation but cannot sustain community-based operations after the project completion. However we also learnt that consistent visit to the project area and regular meeting with local people also helps keep their motivation up.

Use of social media could be an effective way to disseminate conservation awareness among wider audiences at both national and international level.

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Biosketches

PRASHANT GHIMIRE is a final year student at Institute of Forestry, Pokhara, Nepal. His interest lies in behavioural ecology of storks and their connection with human dimension.

NABIN PANDEY is a third-year student at Institute of Forestry, Pokhara, Nepal and working to conserve Asian Woollyneck in Nepal.