Two records of Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* in central Uzbekistan.

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Abstract

We report two observations of Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* from central Uzbekistan. The first of these observations was a juvenile bird seen on March 17th 2015 over semi-desert steppe habitat in the southern Kyzylkum desert, central Navoi province. The second observation was an adult bird seen on September 24th 2017 in the Aktau ridge of the Nuratau mountain range, far-western Samarkand province, at an altitude of 1400 m. Both these observations were made in areas where Himalayan Vulture is not indicated to occur by existing range maps. While it is uncertain whether our observations indicate the presence of a permanent population of Himalayan Vulture in the mountains of central Uzbekistan, or whether the individuals we recorded represent birds which have widely dispersed from their breeding grounds, we nevertheless highlight that this near-threatened species occurs more extensively within Uzbekistan than previously reported.

Introduction

Himalayan Vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*), also known as Himalayan Griffon, is a large vulture inhabiting mountain chains and adjacent lowlands in the Himalayas, southern and central China, and central Asia (Clark *et al*. 2017). Global populations are thought to be at risk due to exposure to diclofenac and other vulture-toxic drugs, a loss of nesting sites, and a reduction in food sources; as such the species is considered to be globally Near Threatened (IUCN 2017).

In Uzbekistan, the species is known to occur in the Tien Shan and Gissar ranges which occupy the eastern border areas of the country, to as far west as the Zerafshan range, approximately 25 km to the south of Samarkand city (Mitropolsky *et al*. 1987, Azimov *et al*. 2009, Ayé *et al*. 2012, Clark *et al*. 2017, IUCN 2017). It is not currently indicated as occurring elsewhere in the country, although other mountain ranges do occur further to the west and north-west; most notably the Nuratau range of central Uzbekistan. These mountains are split into three parallel ridges - the southern Karatau ridge, the central Aktau ridge, and the northern Nuratau ridge, and run along a 160 km north-west axis from the vicinity of Jizzakh city to the south-eastern fringes of the Kyzylkum desert, reaching a maximum elevation of 1993 m (Martin *et al*. 2014). Further rocky mountainous habitats in central Uzbekistan also occur in the isolated Tamditau range, which lies in the southern Kyzylkum desert and reaches a maximum elevation of 974 m (BirdLife International 2017a). Some ornithological research has been previously completed in these ranges, including surveys for vultures

(Korshunova 2006, Martin *et al*. 2014), although none of these previous studies reported the presence of Himalayan Vulture.

Ornithological records from an extensive south-central Uzbekistan study area have been collated annually between 2010-2017 by ecologists conducting surveys for the Emirates Centre for the Conservation of the Houbara (see Martin *et al*. 2014, Martin *et al*. 2018). These surveys have yielded two records of Himalayan Vulture to date, for which we provide details here.

The first record was an observation of a juvenile bird observed at approximately 17h50 by CM in Navoi province on March 17th 2015. The sighting was made from the A379 Navoi-Zarafshan highway at approximately N 41°01'57.4", E 64°37'29.0". This location has an altitude of approximately 140 m and corresponds to the southern extremities of the Kyzylkum desert; the bird was seen flying over the extensive sand dune fields and semi-arid steppes which predominate here. The nearest mountain habitats to this location are the Karatau ridge of the Nuratau range, 100km to the south-east, and Tamditau mountains 60 km to the north.

The second observation was of an adult bird observed at 15h10 by SD on September 24th 2017. This individual was seen flying over the mountain village of Lyangar in the central Aktau ridge of the Nuratau range in far-western Samarkand Province, at approximately N 40°23'46.6", E 65°58'57.1". This sighting was made at an altitude of approximately 1550 m, with the surrounding habitats being comprised of the rocky mountain slopes that predominate in the Nuratau range. A photo of this observation has been archived on with the Internet Bird Collection (hbw.com/ibc/1414622), the identity of which has been independently verified by Bill Clark at the Global Raptor Information Network.

The status of the first observation in likelihood corresponds to a dispersing bird. The observation locality is quite distant from any known breeding sites (e.g. the Zerafshan range, 260 km to the south-east, or the Tien Shan or Gissar ranges further afield). However, these would not be unexpected sources of origin given that long-distance dispersals have been frequently observed in juveniles of this species (Li & Kasorndorkbua 2008, Praveen *et al*. 2014). The status of the adult bird observed in the Nuratau range remains uncertain. This could also have been a dispersing bird originating from known breeding sites further to the south-east or east. However, it could also be that the Nuratau mountain ridges support an as-yet unreported breeding population of Himalayan Vulture that was overlooked by previous surveys here (Korshunova 2006) or that colonized the area after these previous surveys were completed. This possibility is reinforced by the fact that these mountains achieve a fairly high elevation, are spatially extensive, have relatively high connectivity with the Zerafshan range (which in turn is part of the mountain chain complexes of the Pamirs, Tien Shan, and Himalayas, which together constitute the species' core range), and are already known to support breeding populations of four other vulture species – Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*, Cinerous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* and Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (Korshunova 2006, Ayé *et al*. 2012, BirdLife International 2017b-c, IUCN 2017). However, this is not something that can be determined from our isolated records, and further fieldwork in these mountain ranges is required to determine whether this is the case.

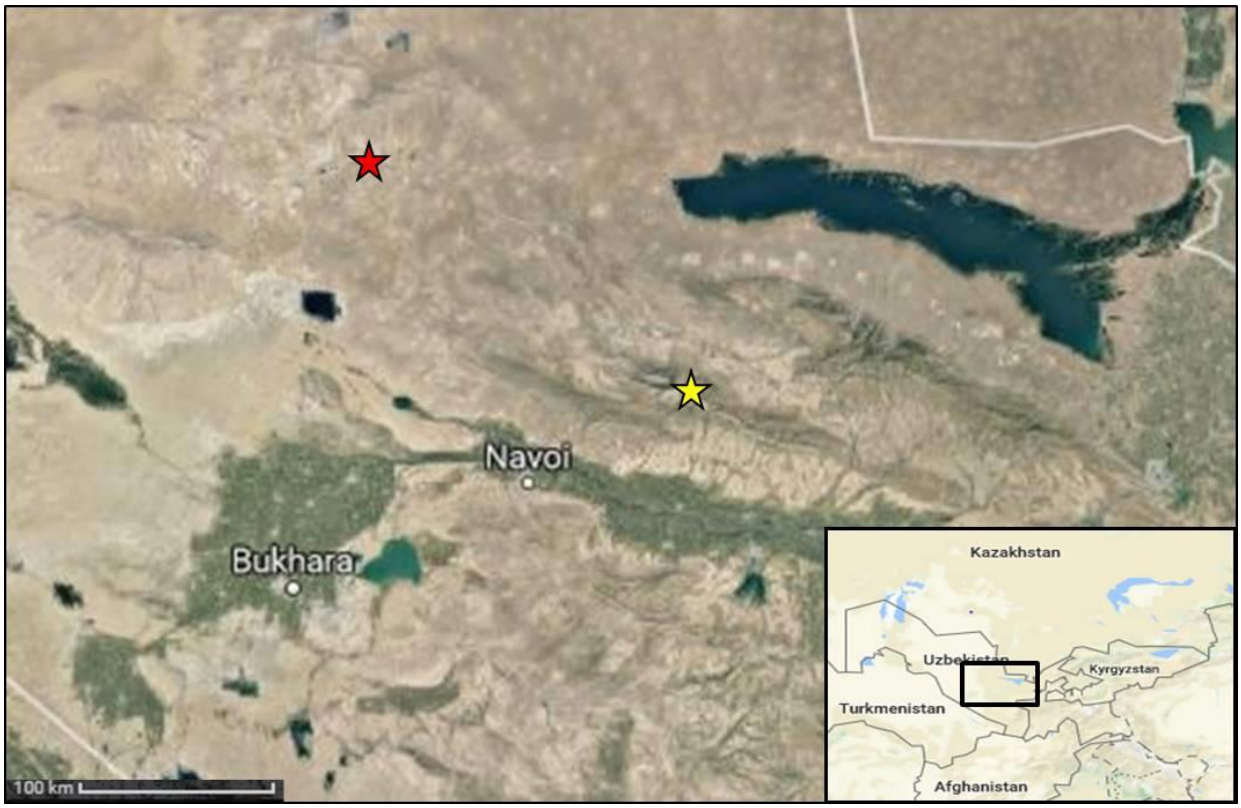

Figure 1: Location of our two Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* observations within central Uzbekistan. The red star indicates the location of the individual seen on March 17th 2015. The yellow star indicates the location of the individual seen on September 24th 2017.

Either way, our observations represent what we believe to be the first observations of Himalayan Vulture in both the Nuratau ranges and the Kyzylkum desert, the species not having been reported as occurring at all in central Uzbekistan by any of our consulted sources (Mitropolsky *et al*. 1987, Korshunova 2006, Azimov *et al*. 2009, Ayé *et al*. 2012, Martin *et al*. 2014, Martin *et al*. 2018, BirdLife International 2017a-c, Clark *et al*. 2017, IUCN 2017). These observations therefore provide valuable data regarding this Near Threatened species' distribution within its poorly-known Central Asian range. However, further information is necessary to clarify the status of Himalayan Vulture within central Uzbekistan; we therefore advocate further exploration of the mountain habitats of the Nuratau and Tamditau ranges.

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