

NOTES

First record of Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* in Chhep, Preah Vihear, northern Cambodia

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On 30 December 2004, during a vulture trapping expedition* to Chhep district, Preah Vihear province, northern Cambodia, the early afternoon was livened up with the arrival of a most unexpected visitor. Our trap had been baited the previous evening with a young cow, and within two hours of sunrise had attracted a mixed flock of 54 vultures. The birds strung themselves out in the trees above the bait with small groups descending periodically to worry at the carcass before retreating to the safety of the trees.

By midday the temperatures were really rising and the air in our hides sweltering. At 12h50 a large vulture appeared overhead circling down from high to the south. As soon as the bird swooped in to land amongst the local vultures perched above the carcass it was immediately obvious from its awesome size that we were dealing with something quite different. The bird was considerably larger than neighbouring White-rumped *Gyps bengalensis*, Slender-billed *G. tenuirostris* and Red-headed Vultures *Sarcogyps calvus* present, with its body proportioned quite differently. Its head and neck were completely covered in white down with a characteristic dome shape that made its grey-blue bill look

disproportionately small with respect to the rest of its head. The heavy ruff of lanceolate feathers appeared far more suitable for survival in the extreme conditions of the high Himalayas than the midday heat of northern Cambodia! Overall the bird was a dark chocolate brown with characteristic 'pin-stripes' of cream across the underparts and extending to the upperwing coverts. The only exception was its thighs, which were downy white.

The combination of huge size, dark 'pin-stripe' plumage and distinctive profile left no doubt that the bird was a juvenile Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*, a species not recorded in Cambodia before. After barely ten minutes the Himalayan took to the air, soaring off once more to the south only to return 35 minutes later. Clearly it was less enamoured by our carcass than the locals, and after some unnecessarily aggressive attention from a juvenile Slender-billed it took off and did not return.

There was a spate of Himalayan Griffon Vulture sightings reported across southeast Asia during December 2004 and January 2005, with the first record for Myanmar earlier in the month, and another captured in Phangnga province,

southern Thailand also in December. Two further birds reported as adults were recorded in the main shopping area of Singapore where one was subsequently captured and the other made good its escape. Could the timing of these records indicate that the species may be an irregular visitor to the region?

[*The primary reason for vulture capture at the time was to wingtag birds for use in development of a national capture-mark-recapture model. With monthly vulture restaurants operating across the Cambodian (indeed Indochinese) range of Gyps vultures, the intention was to obtain a population estimate through use of wingtags, coloured leg bands and resightings at restaurant sites. However, trapping sufficient numbers of birds has been a challenge, and as yet we do not have enough birds marked for the model to be viable. At the time we were using a remotely operated Q-net propelled by high tension elastic. Initially, this was relatively successful, but birds quickly became trap shy. The vultures in Cambodia are considerably more wary than conspecifics in South Asia, which may relate to relatively more frequent persecution (we are aware of

several birds being killed by villagers in northern, eastern Cambodia and southern Laos). Although we discussed use of cage traps, the construction, maintenance and manpower required would be logistically challenging in the remote areas frequented by the birds. The secondary reason for trapping has been the deployment of satellite transmitters donated to the vulture project by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Four units have been fitted. The transmitters are being used to determine movement characteristics, home range patterns and to locate nest locations. As we abandoned the methods of capturing large numbers of birds required for C-M-R models, we continued trapping individual birds using padded leghold spring traps for the telemetry studies. While handling vultures we also collect samples to determine the health profile of the species in Cambodia. Sera is collected to determine disease exposure, cloacal/choanal swabs are collected for viral isolation, faecals for parasitology etc. We also collect genetic material for use by Jeff Johnson in Michigan.]

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Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*.

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