

## Short Communication

### Reappearance of Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* in Tharparker, Southeast Pakistan

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The characteristic habitat of Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* (Scopoli, 1786: see Dickinson (2003) and Naoroji (2006)) (formerly King Vulture *Torgos calvus*, treated by some as *Aegyptius calvus*, e.g. Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2005), Rasmussen & Anderton (2005)) is well-wooded or forested foothills and plains in regions of adequate rainfall (Roberts 1991). It is a resident and sedentary species of the Subcontinent, but unlike many vulture species it is not gregarious and is highly territorial (Naoroji 2006). Formerly, it was common on the Rawalpindi Plateau (Whistler 1930, Roberts 1991), and Ticehurst (1922) recorded it as fairly common in the better watered parts of Sind, though considered it a scarce resident of the Salt range. In the 1960's, it appeared to be a very rare vagrant, with individuals being occasionally seen around the Tharparker Desert (Holmes 1968). Roberts (1991) reported only three sightings since then, the last in 1980 being in the Nagarparkar area. Its nest had been reported from the Hab valley (Balochistan), near Lahore and the Salt Range (Punjab) before 1950 (Roberts 1991). Since 1980 there has been no authenticated record of this species anywhere in Pakistan, although its distribution map in Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) includes southernmost Sindh and narrow strip from just south of Lahore that

extends almost to Peshawar (which probably represents its former range). In India the Red-headed Vulture population was declining at a rate of 41% per year in 1999 and 44% per year between 2000 and 2003 (Cuthbert *et al.* 2006), and it is considered a Critically Endangered species (Birdlife International 2007).

We recorded two Red-headed Vulture individuals in the Khairpur area, 60 km from the Indian border at 27°09'N, 69°21'E, deep in the Tharparker Desert on 16 January 2002 during a Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis (undulata) macqueenii* survey. We did not find any signs of them breeding – their breeding season is March–April – but the birds seemed to have established a long-lasting pair-bond. Roberts (1991) suggests the pair-bond is permanent. This sighting is the first of this rare species since 1980 in Pakistan. The dominant plant species of the deep Thar Desert are *Calligonum polygonoides*, *Prosopis cineraria*, *Aerva javanica*, *Cymbopogon jwarancusa*, *Haloxylon salicornicum*, *Dipterygium glaucum*, *Salvadora oleoides*, *Ziziphus mauritiana*, *Leptadenia pyrotechnica*, *Acacia nilotica* and *Calotropis procera*. This characteristic plant community has not previously been recorded as a preference of this vulture, which has never before been reported, even as a transient, from such deep desert areas.

It is possible that a shortage of food and increasing urbanisation in the typical habitats of Red-headed Vulture forces the birds to explore new areas. No data are available in Pakistan regarding the influence of food supplies and habitat destruction on the populations of vultures but in the other regions of the world, these factors are important to vultures (See Houston 1974, Newton 1979 and Prakash 1999). In recent years the negative influence of contaminants (*e.g.* diclofenac) on vulture populations, especially on *Gyps* vultures on the subcontinent, has been revealed (Gilbert *et al* 2002, Green *et al* 2004). In light of the poor conservation status of many of the vultures of the region, the sighting we report is of great interest to ornithologists.



**Figure 1.** Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* in Khairpur, the Tharparker Desert.

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