

# Creating Vulture Safe Zones in West Bengal

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The second Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) of BNHS was established at Rajabhatkhawa, West Bengal, in 2006 in collaboration with the West Bengal Forest Department. The objective of the Centre was to release 100 pairs each of the three resident species of Gyps vultures – White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*, and Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris* – within 10 years of beginning vulture reintroductions into the wild. This aimed to contribute to the national



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Reintroduced White-rumped Vulture with wing-tag no. P6 feeding at Fulbari Carcass Dump

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Vulture Release and Reintroduction Zone in West Bengal extends to areas in Bhutan, Bangladesh, Assam, and Meghalaya

plan of releasing 600 pairs of each of the three species into the wild.

The Centre stands on a five-acre piece of land (protected by electric fencing as this is elephant country) of the West Bengal Forest Department in Rajabhatkhawa village, just outside Buxa Tiger Reserve and National Park. By 2019, the Centre had successfully bred over 70 nestlings of the three Gyps species. It currently houses 146 vultures (93 White-rumped, 35 Indian, and 18 Slender-billed). With the prevalence of diclofenac in cattle carcasses coming down in the landscape over the years due to the various programmes undertaken by the BNHS and government bodies, it is now time to initiate the planned reintroduction of vultures into the wild.

## Vulture Reintroduction Zone

The vulture release and reintroduction zone for West Bengal is spread over an area of

30,000 sq. km (as is the case for all the vulture safe zones in India). An area of 100 km radius, centred around Rajabhatkhawa, West Bengal, was considered as the Vulture Release and Reintroduction Zone for the state. This zone encompasses the bordering areas of Bhutan in the north and Bangladesh in the south. Apart from the areas in West Bengal, it covers two other Indian states – the eastern part of Assam and parts of Meghalaya (see map). As vultures are known to travel over 100 km in a day in search of food, it is imperative to ensure that the area in a radius of 100 km is safe for vultures. It must contain enough food and safe habitat,

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**It is imperative that an area in a radius of 100 km must contain enough food and a safe habitat for the released birds**

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White-rumped Vultures feeding at Fulbari Carcass Dump

so the released bird does not face such survival problems in the release and reintroduction zone. Hence, the following measures are being carried out in the designated area prior to and after releasing captive-bred vultures into the designated area.

**a. Presence of a stable free-ranging vulture population:**

It is important to have a wild population of free-ranging Gyps vultures in the reintroduction zone, so that the captive-bred birds when released would join them, and increase their chances of survival in the wild. A stable or increasing population of free-ranging vultures also indicates the safety of the area. Hence, the wild population of vultures in the area is also being estimated by the VCBC team.

**b. Monitoring food and habitat availability:**

Food is a basic survival need, so ensuring food availability is an important component in conserving vulture populations. Gyps vultures are obligate scavengers, and feed largely on the soft tissues and visceral organs of large

domestic and wild ungulates. Hence, food availability in the release and reintroduction zone is being regularly monitored by the VCBC team. Another crucial aspect is habitat availability, so it is important to get an idea of the presence of good vulture habitat in the release areas.

**c. Monitoring threats from diclofenac and other such drugs:**

Studies have shown that most of the vultures in India died due to diclofenac contamination in their principal food, i.e. cattle carcasses. The drug has been banned for veterinary use since 2006, but human-use formulations are still being illegally used to treat livestock. Not only diclofenac, but other drugs like nimesulide, aceclofenac, and ketoprofen have now proven to be toxic to vultures. Hence, the staff keeps a close watch on the use of these vulture toxic drugs in the reintroduction zone.

Other than these measures undertaken in the vulture reintroduction zone, the following programmes and activities were carried out:

**Assessing other threats:** It was important to identify other threats to vultures, like poisoning of cattle carcasses by villagers to kill rogue predators, which result in vultures becoming unintended victims. Such threats are being monitored by the VCBC team.

**Conducting awareness programmes among stakeholders and local people:** The Vulture Conservation Breeding Programme in West Bengal was not advertised much for the first 10 to 12 years since establishing the Centre, as it was an “off-display” facility, where general visitors could not be allowed. Instead, we made a dedicated team comprising biologists, veterinarians, and local assistants, who could visit places within the release zone and create awareness about vulture conservation among stakeholders (cattle owners, para-vets, gram panchayat members, chemists and druggists, forest guards, school and college students). Without the active participation of all the stakeholders, it would be next to impossible to make this programme successful. Awareness programmes, public meetings, rallies, street corner meetings, and various other gatherings were frequently organized to sensitize people in the release zone areas.

**Support from government and other bodies:** To seek support from different organizations and government agencies to make all these programmes successful, we approached several governmental and non-governmental agencies. We sought and received help in conducting awareness programmes from the Animal Resource Development Department, West Bengal; Himalayan Nature and Adventure Foundation, Siliguri; Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha; and Bengal Chemists and Druggists Association, Alipurduar.

**Removing misconceptions about vultures:** Unfortunately, there are several misconceptions about vultures in our country, and most people do not regard them as friendly creatures. As a result,

removing such misconceptions was difficult, especially in rural areas. To convince them of the importance of vultures and the impacts of the loss of vulture populations on society, constant work was required. By referencing Jatayu, the vulture who fought Ravana in the epic Ramayana, we were able to touch a cultural chord in the minds of our audience and woo them towards vulture conservation. After much perseverance, we persuaded the majority of the audience that vultures are crucial to human society and that they significantly contribute to maintaining a clean and healthy environment by halting the spread of pathogens.



Public meeting on vulture conservation at Siliguri



Meeting on vulture conservation with Animal Resource Development Department



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Captive-bred White-rumped Vulture fitted with PTT and wing-tag

#### Release of vultures into the wild

In December 2019, six rescued Himalayan Griffon were released from the pre-release aviary at 22nd mile in Buxa Tiger Reserve by Shri Rajib Banerjee, Hon'ble Forest Minister, Govt of West Bengal. All the released birds were fitted with orange patagial (wing) tags, and two were fitted with satellite transmitters (PTT, Platform Terminal Transmitter) of Geo Trak make to monitor their movements in the wild. State and national media covered this event. The message of the vulture release programme, as well as the prohibition of the use of the drug diclofenac in treating cattle, was disseminated through print and visual media, and through documentary movies, posters, booklets, and other forms of communication. The general public was asked to notify the Forest Department of any vulture sightings.

Within three months of release, one of the Himalayan Griffons was spotted at Fulbari

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**It is heartening that no  
drug-related vulture deaths have  
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Carcass Dump near Siliguri, which was around 100 km from the release site. One of the reintroduced Himalayan Griffon, which had a PTT, was seen in Phipso Wildlife Sanctuary of Bhutan within six months of release. We observed their behaviour in the wild for a year and were happy to observe that these birds could fly and soar and find their own food and water and none of them died because of NSAIDs poisoning. The experiment was successful and we were ready to release the captive-bred Critically Endangered White-rumped Vultures!

#### Results of releasing captive-bred White-rumped Vultures and Griffons

Ten Critically Endangered White-rumped Vultures and several rescued Griffon Vultures were released in the first few months of 2021, and some of the results are as follows:

- It has been more than 18 months since the release and no mortality has been recorded. The vultures' movements were monitored from the day they were released. All of them flew and soared regularly, frequently over Buxa Tiger Reserve and in adjoining areas of West Bengal and Assam. They would travel over 2–5 km, but would come to the



A vulture awareness rally in Jalpaiguri

- pre-release aviary on every feeding day at the VCBC, where food was provisioned for them.
- Two White-rumped moved to neighbouring areas in the state of Assam in August 2021 and March 2022, and have joined a flock of free-ranging White-rumped that nest and roost near Dhubri and Guwahati. The other eight birds remained close to the pre-release aviary till January 30, 2022.
- On January 31, 2022, one White-rumped (P6) flew and crossed the international border and moved to Bhutan from Malbazar in West Bengal. On February 1, 2022, the bird came back to India and was sighted in Baikunthapur Wildlife Division of West Bengal. For the next seven days, it moved north and reached Ringking Pong Forest near Kalimpong, West Bengal. On February 9, 2022, the bird reached Fulbari carcass dump near Siliguri. For the next few days, the bird moved and fed at the carcass dump with other wild birds. On February 12, 2022, it moved to Teesta River near Sevok, and on the 13th, it came back near the release aviary. In 14 days, when the bird was away from the release aviary, it covered around 360 km.

- Except for one bird, all the rescued migratory Himalayan Griffons that were released in the first two months of 2021 possibly migrated back to their haunts, as they were not sighted in summer.

## Reflections

We have been monitoring the released vultures for the last 18 months, and there has been no mortality so far. It is encouraging that no drug-related deaths have been reported so far, as this shows that the environment is relatively safe for vultures. However, there is no scope for complacency, as vulture-toxic drugs have not disappeared totally and unless sustained efforts are made, the use of these drugs could increase. Hence, active participation of all the stakeholders and policy makers in vulture conservation is extremely necessary to make the release programme successful. Let us hope to see increasing numbers of vultures soaring safely in the open sky above Rajabhatkhawa and its surrounds in the near future. ■

