



A rehabilitated vulture being released in Dinajpur

PHOTOS: SAKIB AHMED

A rest-stop for vultures

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How conservationists are nursing nature's scavengers back to health in the forests of the north

The forest does not intimidate much, in fact, at times it could feel like an extension of Enid Blyton's mystical and whimsical children's book series *The Enchanted Wood*. This particular forest was enchanting and very much accessible. It was a forest with open canopies, that allowed the light to stream in and termites to build six-foot-tall mounds. It also had a dirt-road, carved by the many travellers and villagers who walk through the forest on a regular basis.

On an unusually cold winter morning, I happened to walk through this not-so-intimidating forest in Dinajpur, only to find myself chancing upon something strange, something so bizarre, it was as though I were walking through a movie set, somewhat out of the imagination of James Cameron. What I did see was this: The towering Sal trees in the Singra National Park, first seem dense, drooping onto each other, lending to the illusion of a deep, dark wood when you walk through it. But soon it thins out, giving way to a bridge over a meandering river, following which there is a clearing in the forest. There, standing somewhat ominously, somewhat looking unsure of itself, is a wooden structure. It is a larger than life bird's nest. And inside the structure are vultures—Himalayan Griffon Vultures to be precise. They are here to rest, rehabilitate and hopefully if the process goes well, to be released back into the wild. The Singra National Park conveniently falls on the migration route of Himalayan Griffon Vultures.

Classified as 'Near Threatened', the species is at a risk of declining rapidly if the use of veterinary painkilling drug Diclofenac in livestock is not reduced. Fortunately for the species, an all-out effort has been underway for nearly a decade now to eradicate the use of toxic veterinary painkillers in livestock. Any vulture which feeds on carcass that was treated with diclofenac or ketoprofen eventually ends up dying of renal failure—one of the main reasons behind the rapid decline of vultures in South Asia. The continued effort has managed to slow down this decline of the vulture population in South-east Asia. But more on that later.

For now, let me go back to the strange life-sized bird's nest in the middle of the forest. In a world that is deeply anthropo-

centric, it is hard to imagine, that humans who have essentially caused all of this damage to the wildlife are now acting as custodians of biodiversity itself. The vultures which were housed inside this enclosure were mainly injured Himalayan Griffon Vulture juveniles, which were migrating from the Himalayas. Their range extends from Western China to Central Asia to Afghanistan to China, Tibet and parts of Mongolia. In Bangladesh, the bird was first recorded in 2001 and is now considered a rare winter visitor but is mainly limited to the northern parts of the country. While the vultures housed here appear to be larger than any average sized bird, these particular ones are at their smallest. This is because most of the Himalayan Griffon Vultures that end up exhausting and injuring themselves during their migration route are juveniles who are taking the perilous journey for the first time in their lives.

Now, had it been a few decades earlier, not much thought would have been expended on the matter. In fact, it would make sense to let nature take its course. But scientific journals, cinema, popular



A yellow wing-tagged Himalayan Griffon Vulture inside the rescue centre.

literature and media, all have been screaming one thing relentlessly—we are in the eye of the great storm of extinction.

And without intervention and trying to save every last individual of a species, we will simply continue to spell out doom.

The exhausted birds, after their long journey, are often weak or injured and end up getting caught by villagers. Media reports over the last couple of years have shown a similar trend. From 2014 to 2016, a total of 40 sick or injured Griffons were rescued from the northern districts, according to a conservation report published in *Birding Asia*.

The vultures that were rescued between 2014 to 2016 were moved to Bangabandhu Safari Park and would be rehabilitated under the custody of the Bangladesh Forest Department. But this soon proved to be an expensive process, which prompted the authorities to establish the Vulture Rescue Centre in the Singra National Park in 2016.

Since then, this clearing in the forest

has become a sort of laboratory in the wild. Here, scientists collect samples from vultures, ring or satellite tag them, and eventually release them into the wild. The injured birds are seen perched on a branch in one corner, brooding and basking in the soft winter light, waiting for recovery. And to be able to soar out into the open sky.

It is strange to watch the vultures being fed by conservationists; it is a moment where I am found looking right into the eye of a dystopian future.

The vultures are given their regular meals of a kilogramme of chicken each, every two days. Watching them eat is an intimidating sight. The scavengers prod at the flesh, talons digging in, they pry out slivers of meat, spraying their feathers with droplets of blood.

Release programmes are arranged regularly, when birds are deemed ready to travel and go back to the wild.

It is a sight to behold, as the doors of the crate carrying a now healthy Griffon is opened. The vulture walks out, first timidly, as thousands of people look on, then in quick, nimble steps before spreading its wings and soaring off into the azure blue sky.

These rescue centres have become a necessity now because of the realities on the field. When the forest was in better condition and the threat of human-wildlife conflict was at a bare minimum, an exhausted or injured bird, could stop over here, replenish and then start their migration again.

But now threats have piled up and counting even one loss can spell disaster, making it necessary to continue these efforts, says Raquibul Amin, country representative of International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Saving the vultures of Bangladesh and eventually this entire region is absolutely imperative. Because lose them, and a largescale biological disaster is just waiting to happen. Vultures have a high stomach pH. This means their stomach fluids are acidic and can neutralise anthrax, rabies and botulism among other pathogens. If we lose them, then with them we will lose nature's biggest cleaners resulting in the spread of many diseases.

The government is planning to upscale rescue centres around the country. Since there are many forest department establishments, already in existence, we have plans to scale them up and establish more rescue centres, says the additional secretary of the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change and Chair of the National Vulture Recovery Committee Dr Md Billal.

I have written about this magnificent bird time and again. It is hard to tell, what draws a person so much to these otherwise seemingly grotesque creatures, but there is a strange enchantment to these birds. They are the ones who soar up above the sky when a death occurs somewhere. They are the ones who come when everyone else is gone, to bid their last farewell. The vultures, often make me romanticise too, thinking of a time when they were abundant, when we did not push them towards their extinction and now are having to nurse them back to their previous glory.

As the day's activity comes to an end, I am only left hoping that all of these conservation efforts do bring some change.