
CHAPTER FOUR

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY BIRD SPECIES

The bird species studied namely the Pariah kite Milvus migrans, whiteback vulture, Gyps bengalensis and Scavenger Vulture Neophron percnopterus have many relatives in India. They belong to a wide range of habitats and habits. In the kite family there are Brahminy kite, Haliastur indus, Large Indian kite Milvus migrans lineatus (Gray), Black kite Milvus migrans migrans, Red kite Milvus milvus and Blackwinged kite Elanus caeruleus. The Brahminy kite is found near aquatic habitats and is a fish eater where Blackwinged kite a grassland hawk feeding on insects, small reptiles, birds etc.

Pariah kite Milvus migrans govinda (Boddaert) is the commonest kite of all and is a known scavenger. The bird has characteristic dark fulvous brown colour and distinguishable deep forked tail particularly very conspicuous in flight. This is a large bird (61 cm) of the hawk family in which both sexes look alike. The whole body plumage is more or less marked with dark shaft-stripes, and the white feathers are conspicuous the moment the plumage is ruffed or worn. Other characters are hooked beak, flat head, short legs and tail rather long.

The species is common throughout the Indian subcontinent upto the altitude of 2200 meters. It is also found in Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Andaman Islands, Burma and Decassionally in Malaysia. In India is a common bird in plains, around urban localities and human habitations on the countryside, including outlying nomadic herdsmen's encampments. Though it is mainly a resident species of the region, at places it is known to be local migrant. In Kashmir Valley the species is replaced by the large race, Large Indian Kite Milvus migrans lineatus (Whistler, 1986)

Pariah kite is a gregarious bird around towns and villages and a confirmed commensal of man. It is a useful and very efficient scavenger around slaughter-houses, fish markets, refuse dumps, harbours and bazars. It is an expert stunt flier possessing astonishing manoeuvrability on the wing which is very useful to the scavenger in tangle of overhead electric wires and bustling traffic in the crowded cities. Many times it is found sharing a habitat with vultures but it is less soaring on thermals and circling aloft than vultures. It is often noticed in large aggregations or "armadas" commonly seen high up, drifting with the wind on motionless wings at sunset. The species is known for its large communal roosts in selected trees or groves at dusk and it indulges in much wrangling, wing flapping and wheeling in the air before settling down for the night rest on the roost.

Pariah kite is largely omnivorous but prefers garbage and offal and also shares large animal caracases with vultures. Though it largely depends on urban garbage dumps for food supply, when feeding nest-young the parents are serious meanance to poultry. The species has been observed to pick up earthworms on grasslands after showers, winged termites hawked in the air and small lizards, rats, and chicken youngs. Mason and Lefroy (1912) have reported remains of mice, lizard, frog, chicken and kitchen refuse from the kite gut contents.

The voice of the kite is more heard at the commencement of breeding season than other times. It is a shrill, almost musical whistler altered singly or in quick successions 4 to 7

times from perch as well as on wing. The defence or war cry are also similar.

The breeding season in Pariah kite is prolonged, varying with latitude and locality. In Himalayas it is March to May but in penninsular India it is mainly between October to February. Nest is usually a untidy platform of sticks, iron, wire, rags, tow and rubbish of every description placed 7 to 14 meters up in a forking trunk (Ali, 1941).

The tree chosen may be either in the middle of the most crowded bazar or solitary in the fields. Nests on buildings are very rare (Whistler, 1986). Nests are on branches of large trees like neem Melia azedarach, banyan Ficus bengalensis tamarind Tamarindus indica, shisham Dalbergia sissoo, mango Mangifera indica or any other big tree near human habitations. It appears that both sexes participate in nest building, incubation and nest feeding.

There are eight species of vultures known to inhabit different areas in the country from Himalayas to Kanyakumari. They are Black or King Vulture Sacrogyps calvus, Cinereous vulture Aegyptius monachus, Griffon vulture Gyps fulvus, Himalayan griffon vulture Gyps himalayensis, Indian Congbilled vulture Gyps indicus, Egyptian or Scavanger Vulture Neophron percnopterus, Bearded Vulture or Lammergier Gypaetus barbatus and Indian whitebacked vulture Gyps bengalensis. Out of these Indian white backed vulture is the commonest one.

Indian whitebacked vulture G. bengalensis is a large bird of a size of peacock without its train i.e., about 90 cms. Heavy, brownish black with naked scrawny neck and head sunk it

to the shoulders while bird at rest. When perched as well as in flight high up in the air white lower back is diagnostic. In overhead aspect a broad whitish band along underside of wings distinguishes the species from other vulture species. Both the sexes look much alike.

The distribution of the species is much wide and almost uniform from Baluchistan in the west to Manipur in east and Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari in South. Along Himalayas and Nepal it is found at an elevation of 1500 to 2500 meters. Outside the Indian penninsula it is commonly recorded in Yunnan in China, Thailand and Malay Penninsula but not in Sri-Lanka (Ali and Ripley, 1968).

The species is usually seen in small groups, commonly in association with other vultures. The normal sight of the bird is perched hunched up on tree tops on the countryside, on roofs or walls in the vicinity of slaughter houses, municipal refuse dumps and outskirts of villages and habitations. Unless busy feeding on a carcass or refuse dump or fully gorged and grounded, they spend most of day scouting the country side for food, covering immense distance in the quest or they will soar for hours and circle aloft in the sky with no other apparant motive than fun. With excellent eye sight they are quick to discover a carcass even hidden under forest and gather at it almost from nowhere. It is learnt that the low flying birds like crows guide the vultures and other scavanger birds to their feeding sites. Since the hot wind and thermal currents are necessary for the soaring flight of vultures they are late risers. Individuals may frequently be seen fast asleep in

roosts till the sun is well up in the morning.

Vultures are not much vocal and laughter like sound is occasionally produced while fighting over a carcass or roost. The breeding season primarily lying between October and March. Nests are large untidy platforms of sticks and twigs often with green leaves. Height of nest is about 15 to 18 meters above ground near the top of large trees like Peepal, Banyan, Mango, Seheesam or these days cassuria or similar tree in or near village, road side, or near canal bank. Some times scattered colonies of upto 25 or 40 nests in a grove or small patch of forest.

Indian Scavenger Vulture Neophron percnopterus is a smaller vulture of P.kite size (length 61 cm). It has a short neck unlike other vultures and the adults are overall dirty white with necked yellow head, face and foreneck. The beak is also long and yellow. Both the sexes are alike. In overhead aspect white with wedge shaped tail and broad back apex and trailing edge to pointed wings it looks like eagle.

This is a resident species throughout the country and affects drier hills and plains in the neighbourhood of human habitations. Outside the country limits it is found in South Europe, Afganistan, South of Movoeco, Egypt, Iran and Sind.^{h^a}

It is a useful Scavenger, invariably keeping to neighbourhood of human settlements. Its waddling 'goose-stepping' gait is very peculiar. It is a graceful flier but seldom at very great heights. It is not gregarious and usually seen twos and threes but the number increases where prospects of food are promising. They are often found in association with P.kites, crows vultures and similar scavengers at municipal refuse and

carcass dumps. Its food consists of carrion, offal, garbage and human ordure. Occasionally takes frogs, large crickets on grassland and also wing termites emerging from the ground. It breeds during February to March at remote places.