

Occurrence of Red-headed Vulture in Segur plateau, Tamil Nadu

The Nilgiri North Forest Division is located at the centre of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, with Mudumalai Tiger Reserve on the western side and Sathyamangalam Wildlife Sanctuary on the eastern side. The Segur plateau and adjoining Moyar valley, which extend over an area of 500 sq. km with open scrub forest, provide an ideal breeding ground for four species of vultures, viz. Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*), White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) and Long-billed Vulture (*Gyps indicus*). This population is insulated from the ill-effects of diclofenac (an anti-inflammatory drug sometimes given to cattle), as these vultures mainly feed on wild carcass rather than cattle carcass¹.

Among threatened birds, vultures especially the *Gyps* species are facing a radical decline in population in the country². Being scavengers, vultures prevent the spread of dangerous diseases such as anthrax and rabies³, which could cause havoc to wild animals, livestock and man. It is noteworthy that without scavengers, who occupy an imperative (last) level of the food chain, the recycling or proper



Figure 1. Red-headed vulture sighted at Segur plateau in the Nilgiri North Forest Division.

disposal of (especially) dead and decaying material is either stopped or delayed.

The Red-headed Vulture is a black turkey-like vulture, with deep-scarlet naked head, neck and legs. In flight, diagnostic features include a white band on the underside of the wing, and white patches on the thigh and base of the neck. Generally it prefers open country and semi-desert biotope, and is present in the subcontinent at ≤ 2000 msl (ref. 4). According to Ali⁴, it is a carrion feeder usually present single/in twos/in threes in vulture gatherings at animal carcasses. This vulture has a false reputation for its boldness, audacity and for monopolizing a carcass until it has had its fill of the choicest titbits. But in reality, it is timid and shy in nature. The Red-headed and White-rumped vultures were common in Kerala during the 1930s; now, not a single bird is sighted in most parts of the state, except in the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (C. K. Vishnudas, pers. commun.)⁵.

On 9 October 2011, we sighted (Figure 1) three pairs of *S. calvus* feeding on Spotted deer (*Axis axis*) carcass that was killed by a tiger. This was at Kookalthorai Hallah beat of the Thengumarahada section in Nilgiri Eastern Slope Range of the Nilgiri North Forest Division in Tamil Nadu. Red-headed vultures are in limited numbers and most vulnerable in India because of their specific habit of feeding on fresh carcasses⁶. The presence of these vultures here could be directly correlated with the successful survival of tigers in this landscape. There is also a good population of large predators like leopards and wild dogs, in addition to tigers.

Along the trek route, we encountered five tiger scats (both fresh and old) and one fresh scrape mark within 1.5 km

from the tiger kill. This indicates the burgeoning population of large predators in this plateau. The Nilgiris Eastern Ghats landscape unit of the World Wide Fund for Nature is also studying the tigers in Segur plateau and Moyar valley, using camera traps. So far, 25 individual tigers have been recorded, which ensures the long-term survival of vultures too. A long-term scientific study and regular monitoring are urgently warranted to understand the population trend of the threatened vulture species in this landscape.

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