

Status of Indian Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* in India

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Species Introduction

The genus *Ictinaetus* is represented by one species *Ictinaetus malayensis* spread in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaya, and Indies to Celebes and Moluccas (Brown & Amadon 1968). However, there occur two races; *Ictinaetus malayensis perniger* (India east to East Assam) which is larger in size than *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis* (Burma, Malaya, Continental Asia east to Fokien, and East Indies).

A large lightly built eagle with long wings and long squarish tail. Fly keeping wings in dihedral like harriers. Bill small with edge of upper mandible almost straight. The feet and cere bright yellow. The claws are relatively straight compared to the strongly recurved claws of other raptors. Tarsi closely packed with feathers as Lesser Spotted Eagle. The outer toe very short unlike other eagles. The feet seem to be adapted for nest robbing. Adults blackish whereas, immatures appear reminiscent of the young of kite *Haliastur* as they possess buff head and mottled plumage.

Research History

The first ever voluminous study on status, distribution, breeding and food of the Indian Black Eagle was made by Ali and Ripley (1983) in the Indian subcontinent. They surveyed the entire subcontinent. Before that there have been stray observations on it (Daly 1899, Buchanan 1899, Burgess 1937, Prater 1940, Dharmakumarsinhji 1965, Rao 1968, Saini 1973, Dharmakumarsinhji 1985, Borges 1986).

According to Ali and Ripley (1983) the Indian Black Eagle was found as widely but patchily distributed eagle.

A systematic survey covering almost entire country was carried out to get information on the status and distribution of raptors during 1990-1993 (Samant *et al.* 1995). The IBE was recorded as common resident raptor occurring widely in the country.

Thiollay (1996) surveyed raptor populations from 1975-95, mostly in Nepal, Northern & Southern India and Andamans, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Borneo, Sumatra, Java, Laos and Vietnam. He found the eagle as a wide altitudinal range species. He did not mention the eagle as any risk. However, forest fragmentation may be affecting the Indian Black Eagle severely. In Cochinchina (23500 km²), a single 280-km² patch of semi evergreen forest remains within the 350 km² NamCat Tien National Park. The Indian Black Eagle, formerly recorded, has not been found there during his recent intensive surveys. The

Western Ghats, diversity hotspot, in India is the another example of rapid forest fragmentation. In the 1600 km long Western Ghats of Peninsular India, only 20,000 km² of humid evergreen forest remain, but the largest undisturbed continuous fragment is the 90 km² Silent Valley National Park (Daniels 1996).

Anwaruddin Chaudhury (2000), a keen bird lover has surveyed Assam (Northeast India) in great depth since 1980 describes the Black Indian Eagle as an uncommon resident but locally common at places such as Barail Range. According to him the eagle is found in forested foothills and hills but more frequently seen the latter area.

Distribution and status of IBE in India

According to Ali and Ripley (1983) the eagle was widely but patchily distributed in evergreen and moist deciduous forest biotope, foothills and up to about 2700 meters altitudes in the Himalayas and about 2000 m in the peninsular hills. From W.Pakistan (Murree, Rawalpindi dist.), through Himachal Pradesh and Nepal to E.Assam, E.Pakistan(?), W.Bengal, Orissa, E.Ghats in Andhra Pradesh and Madras (including Shevaroy Hills), Madhya Pradesh (Hoshangabad and Bastar dists.). Ceylon and the W.Ghats strip from Kanyakumari northward at least to Goa and N.Mysore (Including the Nilgiri and Palni Hills). Well documented sight records from Gujarat (Jambughoda) and from within a 50 km radius of Bombay city.

The recent survey made by the Bombay Natural History Society covered 34 protected areas, adjacent forest and highways in the country and provided a baseline data about raptors in India (Samant *et al.* 1995). The survey covered all the ten biogeographic zones of the country (Rogers and Panwar 1988). They are Trans Himalayan, Himalayan, Gangetic Plains, Semidesert, Desert, Deccan, Western Ghats, North East India, Coast and Island. Among all the raptors recorded in the country the widest niche breadth was recorded in the Black Eagle. During the survey the bird was seen in 7 biogeographical zones. It was not recorded from Trans-Himalayan, Desert and Island biogeographical zones.

Of all the biogeographical zones the maximum sightings were made in the Western Ghats followed by Himalayas, North-East India, Deccan and Gangetic Plains.

In Himalayan Biogeographical Zone they were sighted in good numbers in Great Himalayan National Park, Buxa Tiger Reserve and Singhalia National Park. In Gangetic Plains Biogeographical Zone they were sighted more in Corbett National Park. From Semidesert Biogeographic Zone only an individual bird was sighted from Ranthombore National Park (Rajasthan). In Deccan Biogeographical Zone the maximum sightings were recorded from Simlipal National Park (Orissa) and a single bird was sighted in Bannerghatta National Park (Karnataka). Western Ghats were recorded as the stronghold of

the Black Indian Eagle from where maximum sightings were recorded of all the zones. Of all sightings in Western Ghats 70% were from the Silent Valley National Park (Kerala). In North East India Biogeographic Zone the North Cacharhills showed the highest number of eagles followed by Kaziranga and Nokrek National Park. From Coast Biogeographical Zone an individual was seen in Bhagwan Mahavir National Park in Goa.

Its highest abundance was recorded in Silent Valley National Park (8.22 km/raptor) in Western Ghats followed by Great Himalayan National Park (15km/raptor) in Himalayan Biogeographical Zone.

The Black Indian Eagle showed preference to wet evergreen, semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests. Sightings were also made in dry deciduous habitats in the drier zones like Deccan and Semi-Desert. They were sighted in these zones, which are not their preferred habitats. The tropical evergreen biotope is largely confined to North Eastern India, Western Ghats and Andaman and Nicobar islands. The eagle is not an obligate evergreen forest species and utilizes modified forest as well.

Food records

Not much information is available on diet of the eagle in the country, as no one has studied its food and feeding habits in detail. According to Ali and Ripley (1983) the food of Indian Black Eagle includes large insects, lizards, rodents, birds sometimes reportedly kills junglefowl and pheasants. But chiefly bird's eggs and nestlings.

Seen taking chicken from the poultry farms at Mahabaleshwar in Maharashtra (Personal communication). There is record of their feeding attempt on Indian Giant Squirrel (Borges 1986).

Nestling field mice, bats and cave Swiftlets (*Collocalia* spp.) have been recorded as food items elsewhere of the country (Roberts 1991)

Potential threat

1) Felling of large trees on which they build nests and 2) Forest fragmentation.

Suggestion

Intensive survey in all the biogeographical zones is the prime most need, which can help accumulate knowledge on its population and distribution and specific ecological requirements. Study should be carried out for at least three consecutive years.

Recent sightings on IBE in India

Dr.G.Maheswaran- Corbett National Park, Uttar Pradesh (1995), Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu (1993)
Ashok Verma- Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal (Dec. 1998)
S.Siva and Jeejo Vargheese- Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal (1998-99)
Dr.Dharmendra Khandal- Mahabaleshwar, Maharashtra (1999)
Isaac Kehimkar- Mahabaleshwar, Maharashtra (1998)
Vijay Cavale and his friend- 300 m out of Bangalore city, Karnataka (2000)
Jeejo Vargheese-Thattekad Bird Sanctuary (1999)
Girish Jathar- Radha Nagri Wildlife Sanctuary, Kala Dang, Patyacha Dang, Panhala Fort (1996-2001), Maharashtra
Girish Jathar-Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka (1997)

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