The Barheaded Goose in North-Eastern India and Bhutan

Anwaruddin Choudhury

The Barheaded Goose (*Anser indicus*) is a common winter visitor to the wetlands and fields of Assam (Choudhury 1990a). Elsewhere in north-eastern India and adjacent Bhutan, it is uncommon or a passage migrant. A brief account on the status of the species in Assam was published in Choudhury (1990b). It has been estimated that at least 50,000 geese winter in south and south-east Asia (Lu 1992, Bishop 1992).

During the last one and a half decade I had the good fortune to traverse north-eastern India including parts of Bhutan as a part of the general wildlife survey. During such trips I observed *A. indicus* on many occasions. In this paper I summarize the current status of this species as observed in the field.

Assam

Assam is among the most important wintering grounds of this species. It arrives in late October/November and is mostly gone by the beginning of April. It occurs on larger beels (ox-bow lakes and depressions), marshes, large man-made tanks, rivers-especially the Brahmaputra and wet fields. This species has been found to be common in Kaziranga National Park, Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary, Joysagar tank, and in parts of the Brahmaputra river, especially from Kaziranga upstream. It has also been recorded in Dibru-Saikhowa Sanctuary, Boroibam-Bilmukh Bird Sanctuary, Laokhowa Sanctuary, Burhachaporii Sanctuary, Deeper beel Bird Sanctuary, Pabitora Sanctuary, Orang (Rajiv Gandhi) Sanctuary, Manas National Park, Sibsagar tank, and in many other wetlands spread over Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Morigaon and Nagaon districts.

In the Barak Valley districts of Kachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj it has become very rare. It has been recorded from Jabda haor (haor = a wetland complex), Chatla haor, Andhari beel (all in Kachar), Bauwawa beel (Hailakandi), Sonbeel and Ratabeel (both in Karimganj).

In the historic man-made Joysagar tank (area: c. 63 ha) near Sibsagar town in upper Assam, large flocks are often seen in winter. They are also less shy and could be observed for long hours from a short distance (upto about 150 metres). On 21 March 1987 I observed two flocks of about 150 birds each floating in the tank. The largest congregation observed on this tank was 316+ geese on 25 December 1987. The geese remain in the tank during the day spending the night in the chapories (islands, sandspits) of the Brahmaputra river and in Pani Dihing Bird Sanctuary. In another large historic tank, the Sibsagar (area= c. 52 ha), in the main town area, they arrive late (January is usual) and are seen in small flocks often in association with the Greylags *A. anser*.

Kaziranga National Park is by far the most important single protected area for the species in the entire north-east India. A few thousand geese winter in the meadows and wetlands of this park. During any visit to sites such as Sohola beel in Agoratoli Range one could see at least a few hundred of geese in winter. For example, on 5 December 1995, I observed 3 groups totalling 750+ birds (c. 300, c. 300 c. 150). On that date the number of Greylags in the beel was only 50+. During the Mid-winter Asian Waterfowl Census 1987-91, upto a total of 4060 geese were observed in counts in different wetlands of the park each year. (Perennou et al 1994). This could be treated as an underestimate as only those wetlands which were approachable by vehicles were covered leaving out many other inside
the park.

The only other area where 1000+ geese were counted was Pani Dihing Sanctuary where 2598 were counted two times (Perennou et al, 1994). Both Kaziranga and Pani Dihing are listed as potential sites to be recognized as of international importance for this species (Perennou et al ibid). During the Waterfowl Census in Asia between 1987-91, Kaziranga and Pani Dihing emerged as the most important sites among the listed as internationally important. These two sites alone accounted for 51.4% of the geese counted in 8 such sites in 1987-91.

Arunachal Pradesh

In this state Barheads are mostly seen in late October/November and in March/early April when they fly through the river gorges of the Siang, Dibang and also Subansiri during migration. In fact these 3 river gorges are among the major flyways for most of the winter migrants. However, in areas like D’Ering Memorial Sanctuary and in the lower reaches of the Siang, Dibang and the Lohit rivers, the geese are often seen in winter. The species could be termed as common during the passage and rarer rest of the winter.

Manipur

The large freshwater lake, Loktag in Manipur is a known wintering site of Barheaded goose (Higgins 1933). However, during a recent survey in January 1996, I did not see a single bird in the lake. In fact compared to the early part of this century, when ducks and geese used to be shot in thousands (Higgins 1933-34), the numbers have been greatly reduced. In 2 days of the count, which was the first mid-winter census in Loktag, we could find only about 2000 ducks in a wetland of more than 200 sq km. (25% coverage). Loktag is the largest freshwater wetland in the entire north-eastern India.

Bhutan

In Bhutan, the species is mostly a passage migrant. On 12 March 1996, I observed 30+ geese in flight over the Manas river inside the Royal Manas National Park. They were certainly on migration as many birds fly through the Manas river. The sighting was significant as the species was not recorded during many of the other recent surveys (Clements 1992, Inskipp & Inskipp 1993a and 1993b).

Threats

The species is threatened by habitat loss/destru-
References
7. Higgins J. C. 1933-34. The Game Birds and Animals of Manipur State with Notes on their Numbers, Migration and Habit, 6 Parts JBNHS, Vols 36, 37.