Status of Barheaded Goose and Cranes in Assam

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Synopsis

Four species of cranes occur in Assam, all of which are seen occasionally. Recent reports of sighting show small numbers. For one species, the Hooded crane, the only record pertains to the year 1899. The Barheaded goose on the other hand, is a fairly common winter visitor. During winter a large number of migratory waterfowl are captured with the help of nets, which practice is dangerous for the rare birds.

Introduction

The recent data on cranes and Barheaded geese presented in this paper have been collected by me during field trips to the wetlands and other areas in different parts of Assam till the winter of 1988-89. An SLR still camera with a telephoto zoom lens of 75-250 mm, a pair of 20x binocular and a 10x telescope were used during observations.

Barheaded Goose (Anser indicus)

A common winter visitor, it affects large man-made tanks, beels and rivers, notably the Brahmaputra. Detailed observation on the species has been made by me in Sibsagar district of upper Assam. First sighted by me on 21 March, 1987 on Joysagar, man-made historic tank (water area c. 63 hectares) located on the southern fringe of the Sibsagar Town. A total number of about 300 geese were there in two groups of about 150 each.
Succeeding winter's first birds seen again on the Joysagar Tank (22 December, 1987). The largest congregation observed was of 316+ birds on the Joysagar Tank (25 December, 1987). The Barheaded goose are a common sight in Joysagar almost throughout the winter. They remain in the tank for the day spending the night in the chaporis (islands-sandspits) of the Brahmaputra and in Pani-Dihing wetlands. In another large tank, the Sibsagar (area c. 52 hect.) in the main town area, they arrive late (first seen on January, 1988). They haunt this tank mostly in small flocks, sometimes in association with the Greylags (Anser anser).

More observations on the Barheaded goose in Sibsagar district were made on the chaporis (islands) of the Brahmaputra and in Pani-Dihing. Affecting man-made tanks in large groups is quite interesting, as the species is known to haunt chiefly large jheels and rivers (Ali & Rupley, 1983).

The Barheaded goose is also common in the beels and fields of Kaziranga National Park. A flock of 100+ was observed near Borbeel (south-west of Bimoli) on 29 January 1988. On the same day many were seen near Sohola beel, also inside the national park. Sometimes in November-December 1986 I saw one goose in Hajo (Kamrup district) which was captured from a beel of Barpeta district. The Barheaded goose has also been reported from Orang Wildlife Sanctuary and the Bauwwa beel area (Hailakandi district). Locally it is called Boga rajhans (Bengali in Cachar) and Sada rajhans (Bengali in Cachar area).

**Common Crane (Grus grus)**

A very rare visitor. Sightings are also very few, mostly as occasional stragglers. The only sighting recorded by me was in the Sibsagar district (Choudhury, 1988). The earlier stray records in Assam were from Lakhimpur and Cachar (Ali & Ripley, 1983), which are apparently very old ones.

I located the cranes on 2 February, 1988, in the Doboli chaporoi. off Disangmukh while surveying the area for birds. Doboli chaporoi is a large sandy tract/islet in the Brahmaputra River. I saw nine cranes at 9:45 a.m. They were walking and feeding on the ground amidst jhau (Tamarix dioica) shrubs. A few immatures were also there. At 10:35 a.m. they took off from the spot when I could count the whole group exactly, there were 15 cranes altogether. On 7 February, 1988 I again surveyed the locality but did not see any crane.

**Hooded Crane (Grus monacha)**

Recorded as winter vagrant only. The only definite record in the whole of India is a young bird shot by Baker in North Cachar in December, 1899. Other sightings in Assam, also by Baker were recorded on the Subansiri River, Lakhimpur (Ali & Ripley, 1983). During my surveys, which were of course not exhaustive, I did not come across a single Hooded crane. From Lakhimpur area as well as Majuli island (Jorhat district) I received a large number of reports of sightings of cranes during winter (Bikul Goswami, pers. comm.), but authentic specific identifications were not available. Near the Borbeel (south-west of Bimoli) in the Kaziranga National Park I once saw some silhouetted crane-like birds (29 January, 1988).

**Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)**

Recorded as a resident bird (Ali & Ripley, 1983). But till today I could not locate a single bird anywhere in Assam. I also visited Manipur (April, 1988) and surveyed the western edge of the Loktak Lake and also the marshes of the Keibul Lamjao National Park, but no trace of any Sarus crane. In the Handbook (Ali & Ripley, 1983) nothing specific has been mentioned about its status. Surviving population, if there be any, must be very low.

**Demoiselle Crane (Anthropoides virgo)**

Smallest of the cranes found within our limits, the Demoiselle crane is an occasional winter visitor to Assam. During my detailed survey of wetlands of Sibsagar district in the winter of 1987-88 not a single bird sighted. In Kaziranga, Pabitara, Laokhowa, Burha-Chapori and in the wetlands of Kamrup district I did not see any Demoiselle crane.

The only observation made by me was in the Orang Wildlife Sanctuary, Darrang district. It was on 22 January, 1989 while surveying the Satismoloo beel on elephant-back that some grey-coloured birds suddenly sprung from behind the tall elephant-grasses (time, 9:30 a.m.). Recognising them to be cranes I immediately stopped the elephant and started observing the birds keenly. A total number of four birds seen soaring overhead. On closer observation with a 20 X binocular I could make out the following characteristics: size, smaller than lesser adjutants (Leptoptilos javanicus) which were also soaring alongside; body colour from below, light grey; and a deep grey or blackish patch extending from neck to breast. The only crane with which the Demoiselle is likely to be
confused in the field is the Common crane. But in this case the birds were much smaller, and the black extending up to breast (restricted to neck in case of Grus grus) put me in no doubt about their identity. I also photographed two of them in flight (colour transparency).

**Conservation & Discussion**

All the four species of cranes recorded in Assam are among the very rare birds of the state. While the migratory species were always scarce, even in the latter part of the last century, the Sarus has perhaps vanished due to loss of (breeding) habitat. The wetlands comprising the beels and haors are being reclaimed for agricultural purpose. Fishing, boating and grazing in and around the wetlands have also increased considerably over the years because of rapid growth of population. The chaur and chaporis of the Brahmaputra are also gradually being settled by temporary fishermen and graziers besides the larger ones which are already under permanent occupation. All the four species of cranes need conservation attention.

Still fairly common during winter, the Barheaded geese face major threat from mass netting by the locals, because netting takes a much higher toll than shooting. There are also cases of poisoning. It is only in the protected areas like the Kaziranga National Park, Manas Tiger Reserve, Orang Wildlife Sanctuary, Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Pabitra Wildlife Sanctuary, Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary and Burha-Chapori Wildlife Sanctuary (proposed) that the wintering birds are safe. What is most important now is to expand the network of protected areas. On a priority basis the Pani-Dihing wetlands of Sibsagar along with the adjacent chaporis and the Phokolai-Dorou beels should be declared a wildlife sanctuary (c. 60 km²). The proposed extension of Kaziranga National Park which is to cover the whole stretch of the Brahmaputra and its chaporis should also materialize early.

In the historical tanks of Joysagar and Sibsagar the Barheaded geese as well as the other birds are not disturbed. Both the tanks are regarded as sacred by the locals.

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