Wintering Blacknecked Cranes in India

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The Apa Tani valley of Arunachal Pradesh shot to fame in mid-fifties when Col. Betts reported a small flock of Blacknecked Cranes (Grus nigricollis) wintering there (Betts 1955)—the only flock then known wintering outside China. But for the unfortunate cranes, the scene around them was changing faster than what many of their admirers would have liked. Col. Betts wrote again in 1971, “The cranes were comparatively fearless of the 20,000 Apa Tanis who lived and worked in the fields, but even then anyone not in Apa Tani dress could not get within 0.8 km of them. With the appearance of outsiders and soldiers with firearms, aircraft and motor transport, there is a very grave risk that the birds have either been shot or scared away.” (Betts 1971).

What actually happened to the Apa Tani flock is not documented. When Lavkumar Khacher went to the valley in search of the flock in 1978, he could not find a single crane. He was told that the last pair was shot and eaten two years before (Lavkumar 1981). Blacknecked cranes had apparently stopped wintering in India.

Then came the discovery of large numbers wintering in Bhutan (Gole 1989). The occurrence of substantial numbers in Bumdiling at an altitude of 1500 meters and lower than that of Apa Tani valley (1830 meters), rekindled the hopes that valleys in India adjacent to the Bhutan border might still harbour a few pairs of Blacknecked crane. Lavkumar had also expressed the hope that these cranes could be found in valleys where similar habitat conditions prevailed. His probables were the
lowland marshes in Lohit division and the marsh south of Seppa in West Kameng division (Lavkumar ibid).

I got an opportunity to make a diversion to Arunachal Pradesh while looking for the Sarus in Assam. I went to Apa Tani valley in late February 1990. The valley is a wide shallow basin flanked by low hills clothed with dense pine forests. Rice fields occupy almost the whole valley. In one corner is an airfield where small planes land. In late February the rice crop was harvested long back and preparations were on for the spring crop. The whole valley was a picture of bustling activity. Rice fields were full of people and their animals; there were scooters, cars and trucks on the road and Apa Tanis in traditional dress were hard to find. Elections for the legislative assembly were due. Processions and motorcades were moving on the road and loudspeakers were blaring the merits of the contestants.

The wet rice fields looked very promising and tempting. But no decent crane would have landed there with so much human noise and movement surrounding him.

I showed Blacknecked pictures to many Apa Tanis, now in modern dress and riding scooters. But they said that they had never seen such birds in the valley. Finally I found an Apa Tani in traditional dress complete with bow and arrow and his “dah” (a short sword) slung at his waist. When he looked at the picture, he exclaimed, “Kendah!” the local name for the crane. Many years ago they used to visit the valley, he told me. “We never used to kill them”, he added.

It was the entry of the outsiders in the valley that probably sealed the fate of the Blacknecks.

I also visited Tawang which sits high on a mountain. Tawang is a district headquarters with all the hustle and bustle of modern times. But its lower reaches are broad and gently sloping. Naturally villages and terraced cultivation occupied these broad slopes. The ever-smiling Monpas, the local tribe practising Tibetan Buddhism, immediately recognised the picture of Thung Thung Karma, the name given to these cranes in Ladakh, Tibet and Bhutan. “A pair or two sometimes come to our fields” they told me. The broad terraces indeed looked a promising habitat.

But the inhibiting factors operating in the Apa Tani valley were present in Tawang also and probably deterred the Blacknecks. Though the Buddhist culture in the region was a welcome sign. Now I had to find a valley that retained Buddhist culture but was still away from the hurly burly of modern civilization.

It was while returning from Tawang that I happened to look into a quiet valley. A dirt track connected it to the main road. Hardly any vehicles plied over the track. The valley was sparsely populated and the main crop was paddy.

As we started on the dirt track, I showed the picture to a passing Monpa. He recognised the Thung Thung and said that last year two pairs had come to the valley. We approached the village and stopped to enquire at a small hut. A man who was cleaning some fish came out to say that only two days ago he had seen a pair. This was the first positive statement that Blacknecks were indeed present this year.

We went beyond the village and I scanned the sprawling rice fields. Far away I immediately recognised the familiar black and white forms quietly moving in harvested fields. The Blacknecked crane had returned to winter in India!

The place was Sangti valley (Lat. 27°-26” N, Long. 93°-18” E) not far from Dirang, a charming town on the main road to Tawang. We found the cranes on 15th February at 1430 hrs. in bright sunlight with moderate easterly winds at temperature around 15°C. The cranes were searching for food in flooded fields, looking probably for frogs, shrimps and such other animal food. We did not find any fallen grain in those harvested fields. *Najas*, *Cyperus* sp. and *Myriophyllum* were the other plants growing in those fields. I was accompanied by Vice Admiral M P Awati (Retd.) and Prof S D Mahajan from Kolhapur who share with me the (re)discovery of wintering Blacknecks on Indian soil.

References