
Final Report (2011-12)

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Status of Western Tragopan in Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar Zone of Jhelum Valley

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Cover Photos:

A view of survey plot (WT10) in Pir-Chinasi area, Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir, Pakistan, where Tragopan was confirmed.

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Status of Western Tragopan in Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar Zone of Jhelum Valley

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AJ&K: Azad Jammu & Kashmir

HNCF: Himalayan Nature Conservation Foundation

PAs: Protected Areas

PCPH: Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar

A newly shot Tragopan

View of PCPH

Monal Pheasant’s head used as decoration in one home in the study area

Summer houses in the PCPH
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study area, Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar (PCPH) zone (34.22°-460N, 73.48°-72°E) is a part of the Western Himalayan landscape in Azad Kashmir, Pakistan; situated on both sides along a mountain ridge in the northeast of Muzaffarabad (capital town of AJ&K). The study area is very rich in biodiversity ranging from threatened mammal species (Asiatic Black Bear Ursus thibetanus, Common Leoprad Panthera pardus) to Pheasants (Cheer Catreus wallichii and Western Tragopan Tragopan melanocephalus). No systematic surveys have been conducted in the PCPH until now and the current report contains the first ever complete information about Tragopan presence/absence in this area. Out of 11 surveys plots Tragopans were confirmed at 2 plots based on dawn and dusk call count monitoring which shows that the species is still present despite high anthropogenic pressure, although at very low numbers and very fragmented locations. The major threats recorded are utilization of natural resources in an unsustainable way, hunting, firewood and timber wood collection. As the area has no protected area status no wildlife protection staff is working there, having less control over hunting in this difficult mountain landscape.

For the conservation of this threatened species and the vulnerable habitat it can be found, I highly recommend to give the area some protected status. This however will only work if the local communities are in favour of such a development and therefore an awareness project is needed which will help to conserve the rich biodiversity of the area along with Threatened Pheasant species like Western Tragopan and the Cheer Pheasant which occurs in the same area but at lower altitudes.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am really thankful to Mr. James Goodhart and the Oriental Birds Club for granting me the donation of GBP1500 for this project which enabled me to conduct surveys of this important species in this far-flung area of the world after a long period of almost three decades. I am really thankful to Mr. Francis Buner for his continued guidance throughout the project period. Thanks are also due to Officials and field staff of the Wildlife department of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, for all the support they provided during the field work. I am also thankful to Usman Akram and Hassan Ali (WWF-P) for their help in developing the GIS-based distribution map.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

This is the continuation of our efforts to assess the current distribution and abundance of the Western Tragopan in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K). Since 2008 we conducted surveys in Machiara National Park, Salkhala Game Reserve and now Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar (PCPH) zone of AJ&K, Pakistan, an initiative that was started by Mirza (1978) and Islam (1982).

1.2. Aims and Objectives

- To conduct surveys for presence/absence data of Western Tragopans in Pir-Chinasi/ Pir-Hasimar zone of Azad Kashmir.
- To ascertain the impact of hunting on Pheasants, especially Western Tragopan in Study area.
- To build capacity of Wildlife Department staff to conduct pheasants surveys.
1.3. Study area

Study area, Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar (PCPH) zone (34.22°-46°N, 73.48°-72°E) lies within the Western Himalayan landscape in Azad Kashmir, Pakistan; situated on both sides of a mountain ridge northeast of Muzaffarabad (capital town of AJ&K). The mountain peaks of the hill range have altitudes above 2,500 m.a.s.l., some even above 3,000 m.a.s.l., with a general east-west orientation, having north facing and south facing slopes. The lower reaches of the south facing slopes are heavily dotted with human settlements, connected with the capital city by all-weather roads/jeep tracks. The hills fall within the moderate rainfall zone (Dar, 2006; Fig.1).

1.4. Species (Western Tragopan Pheasant).

The Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*) is classified as Vulnerable (Birdlife International 2003). Gaston *et al.* (1983) stated that two main blocks of habitat are currently occupied in Kashmir: (1) the Neelum valley in Pakistan and (2) the Kishtwar National Park in the Chenab valley, India. Mirza *et al.* (1978) called the species "still common" in some "pockets" within the Pakistani part of Kashmir. In Pakistan Tragopans are associated with mixed coniferous forest with particular use of forests with dense undergrowth (Gaston *et al.* 1983a,b; Islam and Crawford 1987), from as low as 1350 m in winter, to 3600 m in summer.
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2. Methodology

2.1. Call count survey

Eleven survey plots (WT1 –WT11, Fig. 1-2) were established, one survey plot per side valley following Awan & Buner (2010) and Buner & Lewis (2006). Each plot was established in potentially suitable habitat and altitudinal range of the Western Tragopan (Fig.2.) Survey plot selection was based on information collected from literature reviews, locals and wildlife field staff.

Call counts (Gaston 1980) were conducted at all eleven survey sites to obtain presence/absence data as well as basic estimates for abundance. 20-min dawn and dusk call counts were conducted between mid and end of May 2012 to estimate abundance, which started after the first Tragopan was heard calling. Where no Tragopan was heard, the surveys lasted 60min.

2.2. Hunting survey

A questionnaire survey has been conducted to gather information on hunting pressure on different pheasant species especially Western Tragopan in PCPH landscape.

The Questionnaire was designed to gather information about the hunters (age, education, employment, etc), pheasant species (population increase/decrease, purpose of hunting etc.), hunting seasons (months, seasons, weather condition, days etc.) and conservation education and awareness (importance of birds, threats to pheasants, reaction on decline of pheasant population). Three questionnaires per village were filled to gather information about hunting pressure.
3. Results

3.1. Call count survey

Out of 11 survey plots only at two survey plots (WT9 & WT10) Tragopan was confirmed, whereas no calls were detected among the rest of the survey plots, even no other evidence were found to support the presence of the species from the area. The locality Nagan (WT9-WT10) is the area where the Tragopan is confirmed through calls and also supported by other information collected during the hunting survey.

Table 1. Presence/absence and abundance of Tragopan in study area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Code</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Elevation (m)</th>
<th>No. of calling males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PWT1</td>
<td>Khizar</td>
<td>11-May</td>
<td>2868</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT2</td>
<td>Keran</td>
<td>12-May</td>
<td>2903</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT3</td>
<td>Pir-Hasimar</td>
<td>13-May</td>
<td>2819</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT4</td>
<td>Beensian</td>
<td>14-May</td>
<td>2867</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT5</td>
<td>Perthan</td>
<td>15-May</td>
<td>2991</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT6</td>
<td>Bukar Thali</td>
<td>16-May</td>
<td>2953</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT7</td>
<td>Nagan 1</td>
<td>17-May</td>
<td>2945</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT8</td>
<td>Nagan 2</td>
<td>18-May</td>
<td>2920</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT9</td>
<td>Nagan 3</td>
<td>19-May</td>
<td>2909</td>
<td>2 Dawn, 1 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT10</td>
<td>Nagan 4</td>
<td>20-May</td>
<td>2950</td>
<td>1 Dawn, 1 Dusk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWT11</td>
<td>Jodar Gali</td>
<td>21-May</td>
<td>2910</td>
<td>0 Dawn, 0 Dusk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surveys revealed that a very diminutive population of Western Tragopan is surviving in PCPH area. Presence of Tragopan has been confirmed from only two survey plots (PWT9-10) and two calls were recorded at dawn and one at dusk at the survey plot WT9 whereas one call at dawn and dusk each was recorded at WT10.
Figure 2. Call count locations.

3.2. Hunting survey

Pheasant hunting survey recorded that hunters between 20-40 years are involved in hunting through traps (80%) and 20% use only guns for shooting purpose. Local farmers (100%) are involved in hunting using traps which are relatively easy to set during the winter moths with heavy snowfall in this mountainous area. Hunting is 99% for fun and food whereas 1% is only for income if they hunt a Tragopan or Monal. Hunting is 98% done between September and April both with traps and guns whereas 2% is done in other months also. Special weather conditions are, cloudy weathers and first snowfall has been recorded as mostly used for shooting and is suitable for all the pheasant’s shooting. Traditional Traps are 100% illegal and have no permits whereas only 5% hunters hold shooting permits which are also not allowed for threatened species. These permits are only to shoots Kali and Koklass whereas Tragopan, Cheer and Monal are shot without any legal permit.
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**Figure 3.** Dynamics of hunting in PCPH
4. Threats

4.1 Human and Livestock Pressure

Communities from the surrounding villages migrate to their alpine pastures together with their livestock between April and September and move upwards through the forest area, creating disturbance for the wildlife. During their stay they daily go to the forest to collect wild vegetables, firewood, grass for the cattle. While doing so they do not only create disturbance but also damage the fine undergrowth which is important for pheasants as shelter. Along with locals there are nomads using the same route for their summer migration from southern to northern part of Azad Kashmir. They have a lot of sheep and goats with them during this migration which scan the whole area for food putting pressure on wildlife to search for a safe refuge.

Figure 4. A local Boy selling the medicinal plants after collecting it from nearby forest

Figure 5. Herds of nomads crossing the area towards northern Kashmir.
4.2 Hunting

Hunting is one of the major threats to the pheasants of the study area as the area has no legal protection status and no permanent wildlife protection staff is available in the area to control hunting.

Hunting is done using different techniques but traditional pit fall traps have been found to be the most common. According to the locals, Tragopan numbers have decreased over the past decades and they believe unsustainable harvest is the main cause. Hunters dig a deep pit (1ft x 2.5ft x 1.5ft) in the ground and put a lid (1ft x 2.5ft) on top. The lid of the trap is covered with humus to provide camouflage. The lids are tightened with some ropes from the upper side and when a bird walks over it, it will fall into the trap and lids move back to their original position as the ropes pull them back upwards. The poachers visit these traps every week to collect birds (Awan 2009). A total of 23 pit fall traps of almost same sizes were uncovered during the survey in the study area (Fig.7). These traps were mostly installed under Yew Taxus wallichiana and Spruce Picea smithiana which have braches bent forward down to earth providing protection to birds while they are looking for food and shelter especially during snowfall. Newly captured pheasants can be collected alive, otherwise while they try to escape striking their wings against traps woods and get injured and die till their collection from the trap. Raja Nazir Ahamd (hunter), said that he released 2 Koklas from such traps in 2011 from the study area whereas Wildlife staffs reported to destroyed 12 traps during 2009 and 7 in 2011 from only around Pir-Chinasi area.
5. Outcomes

1- This is the first ever comprehensive survey of Western Tragopan in the study area which established 11 survey plots for future monitoring of the species in PCPH. Out of 11 survey plots, the species could be confirmed only at two plots. All these plots could be used for the future monitoring of this threatened species in PCPH zone of AJK.

2- Serious threats have been identified which needed to be addressed for the conservation of the target species and its habitat.

3- Traditional traps were found used by the local communities to capture pheasants for food or for some income generation purpose. These traps with modifications can be used for catching pheasants for future scientific research work. This will be good as catching Tragopan has always been a difficult task and to date only one individual has been caught for scientific field research.

4- Five wildlife staff was trained together with one university student for future monitoring and research of the species in PCPH and in other part of AJK as well.

5- Based on all the information collected, recommendations have been made to the concerned authorities for the conservation of Western Tragopan in PCPH.

Figure 7. Location of traps found in the study area
6-Conservation Recommendations.

This survey report has highlighted that the remaining population of Western Tragopan in Pir-Chinasi/Pir-Hasimar is under high pressure from different anthropogenic activities. This area is an important site for Galliformes in Kashmir as it hosts the more common species such as Monal, Koklass, Kalij and Chukar Partridge together with the two threatened species Western Tragopan and Cheer Pheasant. However, human population increase demands more and more natural resource utilization resulting in the increased pressure for the Galliformes habitat. This negative development is in fact increasing more and more rapidly as the area is located near Kashmir’s capital which is attractive for the human to live in. To conserve the remaining population of the threatened species of Pheasants, it is important to put the area under some protected areas (PAs) category and launch a conservation awareness programme for the local community. Similarly strong Galliformes conservation awareness programmes could be launched to educate the community regarding the importance of the mountain forest ecosystem and the dramatic and long-lasting consequences it will have to the local livelihoods should these forests be lost owing to short-sighted overexploitation.

Enterprise development could be used as alternate livelihood to minimize the pressure on the natural resources of the area. This could be helpful if engaging the women of the area in some income generating activities, so that they may spent much of their time in their business for income generation rather than going to forest for 4-5 months which is, in fact, less productive and also increasing pressure on the natural resources.

Others (Additional Progress)

Discovery of more traditional trap used for capturing pheasant from PCPH and utilization of these traps with little modification can be used for some future research work. This will be done after a detail discussion with Dr Francis.
7. References


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Figure 8. Human settlements near Pir-Hasimar area

Figure 9. Commercial Logging in the study area