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ACTIVITY PLANNER

Asian vultures disappearing quicker than dodos

By Paul Eccleston
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Three species of Asian vultures are disappearing quicker than the dodo and could become extinct within 10 years.

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One species, the oriental white-backed vulture, has lost 99.9 per cent of its population since 1992, according to the latest survey.

And numbers of long-billed and slender-billed vultures have together fallen by almost 97 per cent in the same period.

Scientists say a captive breeding programme is probably now the last hope for saving the vultures which were once widespread across India, Pakistan and Nepal.

The catastrophic collapse in numbers has been blamed on an anti-inflammatory drug given to livestock which is poisoning vultures which feed on their carcasses. The manufacture of the drug, diclofenac, which causes the birds to suffer kidney failure, was banned in India in 2006 but is still in common use.

A version of diclofenac developed for human use is also being utilised by farmers to treat livestock.

Scientists counted vultures in northern and central India between March and June last year. They surveyed the birds from vehicles along more than 160 sections of road totalling 18,900 kilometres in length. Their study followed four previous counts, the last in 2003.



Long-beaked vulture: Captive breeding programmes may be the only chance of rescuing three species of vulture

Their study, published in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, says the oriental white-backed vulture is now critically imperilled with only one thousandth of the 1992 population remaining.

Numbers of white-backed vultures in India could now be down to 11,000 from tens of millions in the 1980s. Populations of long-billed and slender-billed vultures have dropped to around 45,000 and 1,000 birds respectively.

"All three species could be down to a few hundred birds or less across the whole country and thus functionally extinct in less than a decade. It is imperative that diclofenac is removed completely from use in

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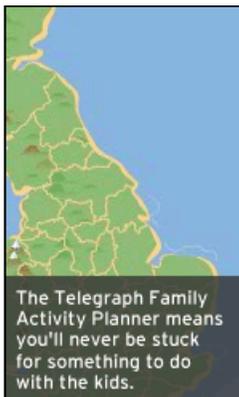
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livestock without any further delay to avoid the extinction of the three vulture species," the report states.

Dr Vibhu Prakash, of the Bombay Natural History Society, who led the study with colleagues from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) said: "Efforts must be redoubled to remove diclofenac from the vultures' food supply and to protect and breed a viable population in captivity."

Co-author Dr Andrew Cunningham, from the Zoological Society of London, said: "These survey results show that imminent extinction looms for at least three species of vulture in India.

"Captive breeding is their last hope, so we are delighted that one of these species, the Oriental white-backed vulture, has successfully been bred this year in one of the captive breeding centres."

Dr Richard Cuthbert, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, who also took part in the study, said: "Time has almost run out to prevent the extinction of vultures in the wild in India. The ban on diclofenac manufacture was a good start but a ban on the sale of diclofenac and other drugs known to cause kidney failures in vultures is vital."

Three captive breeding centres have been built so far in India: in Harayana, northern India, where 120 vultures are housed, in West Bengal, holding 52 vultures, and in Assam, holding 10 vultures. Two additional centres are operational in Nepal and Pakistan. These centres aim to hold viable populations of all three species.



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