

(III)

RARE SIGHTING OF NEAR THREATENED GREY-HEADED FISH-EAGLE *ICHTHYOPHAGA ICHTHYAETUS*
(HORSFIELD, 1821) FROM TIKRI RESERVE FOREST OF EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

In Indian mythology raptors always have a special position as 'Garuda' usually the "Vahanum" of the God Vishnu. The genus of Asiatic-Oriental fishing eagles, *Ichthyophaga*, contains only two species: the grey-headed fishing eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* and the lesser fishing eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis*. However, historical and even recent records are difficult to interpret, in South-East Asia at least, due to identification difficulties between this species and lesser fish-eagle *I. humilis*.

This is a striking bird and an impressive hunter, with a relatively small head, longish neck and a powerful, grey beak. The plumage is brownish-grey on the upper parts and white below. It has relatively short legs, a rounded tail, sandy-yellow eyes, and long, black talons. True to its name, the grey-headed fish eagle feeds primarily on fish, but it will also take other prey, including reptiles, depending on local availability. To hunt for its fish prey, this eagle will usually perch on bare branches overlooking a body of water, before executing a short flight to snatch its prey once observed near or at the surface. The stronghold of this species has been reported as northeast India and Nepal.

The Grey-headed fish-eagle *Ichthyophagus ichthyaetus* is a globally near threatened species (Birdlife International, 2015). It occurs in India (widespread and locally frequent in the north-east, scarce and local in the peninsula, Nepal (now rare and local, mainly below 250 m), Sri Lanka (rare in the dry lowlands), Bangladesh (widely distributed but uncommon and local), Myanmar (rare to scarce resident), Philippines (formerly quite common in the north and east, now rare and apparently declining), Thailand (formerly a widespread resident, now absent from north and centre, rare and local in the south), Laos (now rare), Vietnam (scarce in south, disappearing from north), Cambodia (scarce and declining), Malaysia (previously common, now uncommon and sparse), east Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the greater Sundas and Sulawesi, Indonesia (Widely distributed but uncommon in Sumatra and Borneo, and now very rare in Java (Birdlife International, 2015). Although widely distributed, the species is local and declining in most parts of its range through loss of forested wetlands. Virtually nothing is known of their specific ecological requirements in any part of their range exhibiting range contraction and apparent population decline, for unknown reasons, although potential threats



Fig.1 : *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* [Grey-headed fish-eagle].

are thought to include deforestation, wetland shrinkage, pesticides and anthropogenic disturbance.

During course of field exploration in August 2014 to Parvati Aranga Wildlife Sanctuary and adjoining Tikri forest area, Gonda in eastern Uttar Pradesh, a reserve forest area situated at 26° 57' 12" to at 26° 57' 18" N latitude and 82° 10' 27.07" to 82° 10' 27.09" E longitude and at altitude of 83 m. msl. This forest is typical dry deciduous forest of Gangetic plain with typical tree representative of *Shorea robusta*, *Tectona grandis*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Barringtonia acutangula* etc. with water reservoir near the forest edges. Raptors are found all over the world and in all types of habitats, which are considered as the indicator of the health of the forest. Incidentally, a rare sight of nearly threatened Grey-headed fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* (Fig. 1)

The conservation of this species is very essential because of their top position in the food chain essential for ecological balance. Significant causes of this raptor population decline include loss of habitat by degradation, fragmentation and the associated decrease in quantity and quality of hunting areas, nesting sites and food supplies. There is also need to check the pesticides usage nearby areas, which may result in the biomagnification resulting in decline population of the species. Some special programmes should be started to conduct illustrative research on birds, particularly on

globally threatened species. Captive breeding program may also help in conservation of this nearly threatened species. There is also need of regular survey and documentation to divulge significant areas and usual monitoring of various sites throughout its distributional range. There is an urgent demand to protect this noble

Asiatic bird by conserving wetlands (lakes, ponds, river and coastal) and its diversity. Organize awareness programmes via debate or poster involving local inhabitants about the significance of this important raptor species and persuade them for better care of wetland habitats.

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