

NOTES ON THE DISTRIBUTION AND ECOLOGY OF SOME HIMALAYAN PHEASANTS

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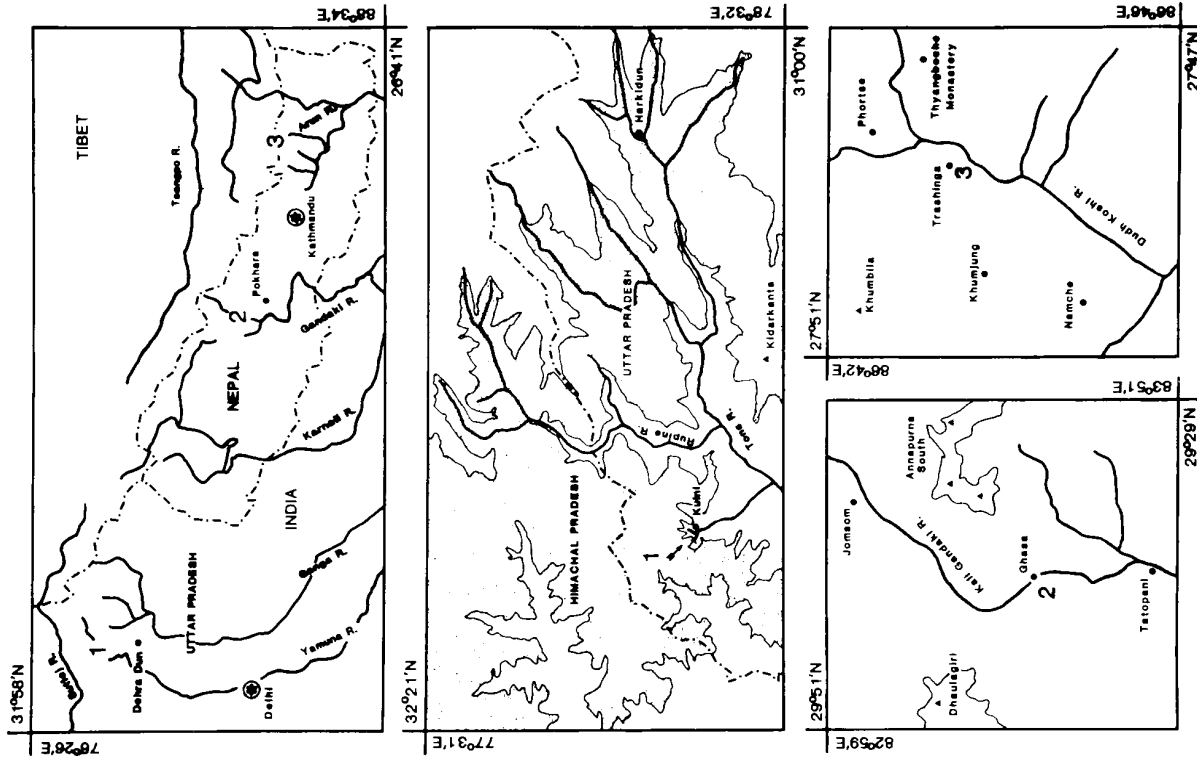
The Himalayan ranges are inhabited by a great diversity of gallinaceous birds, including 13 species of pheasants, 10 partridges, and at least 3 living quails. The Mountain Quail (*Ophrysia superciliosa*) is probably extinct (Ali and Ripley 1980). In many areas guilds of as many as 10 sympatric species have been noted. Salim Ali (1981) has stated, "On many counts the family Phasianidae may be regarded as the most distinctive bird family of the Himalaya."

Although the Indian and Nepalese Himalayas provide excellent opportunities to observe and study a variety of gallinaceous birds, glaring deficiencies exist in our knowledge of their distribution and status. Only recently have researchers begun to investigate the ecology and habitat requirements of Himalayan galliformes. The purpose of this paper is to document my observations of three species of Himalayan pheasants at the limits of their known distributions. Two of the species are endangered, while the third is quite common.

From September 1982 through April 1983 I observed gallinaceous birds at a number of locations in the western and central Himalayas, including the Stok area of Ladakh, the Garhwal Himalayas, the Kali Gandaki Canyon, the Mount Everest Region, and the Sandakphu area of Darjeeling District. I visited locations where the status of certain pheasant species was in question, where pheasants were especially observable, or where several species lived sympatrically.

Nepal Kalij Pheasant (*Lophura l. leucomelana*)

On 18 and 19 December 1982 I observed a group of 4 Kalij in potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) fields at Trashinga, Khumbu District, Nepal (27°49'N, 86°45'E), at an elevation of 3450 m (Figure 1). On both days the Kalij were observed in close proximity to, or feeding among, Himalayan Monal Pheasants (*Lophophorus impeyanus*). Both species fed on small potato tubers left in the fields after harvest. The Kalij, unlike Monal which fed in open fields, kept within a few meters of the protective cover of shrubby hedge rows at the rims of terraced fields. On 19 December, 4 Kalij - two females, an adult male and a



Maps showing locations which are mentioned in this article.

first-year male - spent the afternoon loafing and feeding under a stand of blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*). In addition to Kalij and Monal, I observed Blood Pheasants (*Ithaginis cruentus*), Tibetan Snowcocks (*Tetraoallus tibetanus aquilonifer*), and Snow Partridges (*Lerwa lerwa*) within 2 km of Trashinga. Other observers (A. Chandola, K. and J. Howman, pers. comm.) have also seen various combinations of these species foraging side-by-side in this area.

My sighting at 3450 m is apparently the highest elevation at which Nepal Kalij have been reported, though inaccurate maps of the past have led some observers to erroneously report sightings at higher elevations. Biswas (1978), for example, reported Kalij Pheasants at about 3750 m near Namche, Khumbu District. However, his description of the location - "a harvested field on a ledge about 50m below Namche Bazar" - puts the sighting at about 3350m on a current map (e.g., Ebster 1967). Though my observation is only 100m higher in elevation, it is also about 6km farther up the Dudh Kosi Canyon. Ali and Ripley (1980) noted Biswas' observation as an elevation record for the species, but reported it as approximately 3660m, an elevation which has also been superseded by new maps (S.D. Ripley, pers. comm.). In the past, Nepal Kalij have only been reported from the Khumbu District in spring (Biswas 1978), but these winter observations suggest the species may be a year-round resident.

Cheer Pheasant (*Catreus wallichii*)

At 05.30 on 9 November 1982 I heard a flock of approximately six Cheer Pheasants on the west bank of the Kali Gandaki River at about 3050m, 2.5km southwest of Ghasa (29°35'N, 83°33'E) (Figure 1). The birds had apparently spent the night in an isolated clump of pines approximately 50m below my camp. The slope was quite steep and mostly grass covered, with occasional rock outcrops and clumps of pines. The birds made their way past my tent and farther uphill, calling periodically. Low light and rain prevented me from actually observing them. I tried to intercept the birds at a higher elevation but could not find them after a thorough search of the area. Cheer Pheasants are notoriously difficult to observe or flush (Ali and Ripley 1980, Hume and Marshall 1878), but their vocalizations are distinctive. On the same day, C. McCarty (pers. comm.) observed a small group of Cheer Pheasants on this slope, approximately 2km north.

On preceding days I observed Kalij Pheasants (*L. leucomelana*), Himalayan Monals, Chukar Partridges (*Alectoris c. chukar*), and Koklass Pheasants (*Pucrasia macrolopha*) on the east-facing slope above Ghasa, but I did not find them in mixed feeding associations. A local businessman who employs herders on nearby pastures informed me that Satyr Tragopans (*Tragopan satyra*) are also found close to Ghasa, and that Blood Pheasants, Snow Partridges, and Snowcocks (*Tetraoallus sp.*) are found at higher



Tibetan Snowcocks at wintering area near Khumjung, Khumbu District, Nepal. Photo by James Bland.



Himalayan Monal digging for potatoes near Khumjung, Khumbu District, Nepal. Photo by James Bland.

elevations (K. Gouchan, pers. comm.). The occurrence of so many galliform species around Ghasa - possibly the greatest number of sympatric galliformes in the central Himalayas - is due, in part, to the altitudinal compression and mixing of forest types in the steep Kali Gandaki Canyon.

The Cheer Pheasant is an endangered species (King 1981). The eastern limit of its range is thought to be the Kali Gandaki River, though there are unconfirmed sightings from the Annapurna Range just east of the Kali Gandaki River. The easternmost accounts are from Muri (23°31'N, 83°21'E), about 27km west of the Kali Gandaki (Lelliott 1981). The Kali Gandaki Canyon, with a depth exceeding 5km near Ghasa, is an important line of biogeographical demarcation (Fleming 1971, Stainton 1972). Though the distributions of galliforms are not fully understood in this region, three species apparently reach their distributional limits here. Blood Pheasants are found primarily east of the canyon (Fleming *et al.* 1979), Cheer primarily to the west, and two subspecies of Kalij Pheasants (*L. l. leucomelana* and *L. l. hamiltonii*) intergrade here (Ali and Ripley 1980).

Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*)

On 30 March 1983 I observed a female Western Tragopan in the Tons River drainage, 2.5km southwest of Kulni rest house (31°5'N, 77°59'E) and about 17.5km west of Kidarkanta Peak (31°1'N, 78°10'E), Uttarkashi District, Uttar Pradesh, India (Figure 1). The site was at about 2550m elevation in a bowl-shaped catchment that drains through a narrow gorge just west of Kulni rest house (1950m), the 50 degree, northeast-facing slope had a 30m tall canopy with a cover density of approximately 40%. Predominant canopy species included spruce (*Picea smithiana*), fir (*Abies pindrow*) and deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), and the moderately dense understory consisted of ringal bamboo (*Arundinaria falcata*) and spindly, dormant hardwoods. Bamboo leaves dominated the litter layer, and the receding snowline was only 50m uphill. Thickly understoried stands such as this appeared to be restricted to the upper limits of the catchment, and the bamboo component was restricted to moist east and north-facing slopes.

I had come within about 30m of the bird - a dark gray pheasant with a square tail - when it appeared from behind a rotten log. It ran about 25m, sounding the characteristic "wuck-wuck-wuck" alarm of the species. After hesitating briefly, it flew up through the canopy and then down the steep valley, skimming over the forest on set wings.

The Western Tragopan is also an endangered species (King 1981) and is the rarest of western Himalayan pheasants (Gaston *et al.* 1981). Originally, the species probably ranged from the Indus River (73°E) to as far east as the Bhillingana River (78°45'E), along an altitudinal belt from 2300 to 3800m



Nepal Kalij feeding near the safety of hedgerows, Khumjung, Khumbu District, Nepal.
Photo by James Bland.



One Blood Pheasant from a flock of ca. 60 observed near Sandakphu, Darjeeling District, India.
Photo by James Bland.

(Gaston *et al.* 1983, Hume and Marshall 1878). It has not been observed in Uttar Pradesh for more than 20 years (Gaston *et al.* 1981), the easternmost recent sighting having been at Choor Dhar, Himachal Pradesh (30°55'N, 77°29'E), approximately 30km west-southwest of Kulni (A.J. Gaston, pers. comm.). My observation was probably at the lower elevational limit of local tragopan habitat. Pheasant surveys should be conducted farther up the headwaters of the Tons: larger fragments of habitat, in the Rupine and Supine drainages for example, may harbor a remnant population of Western Tragopans.

Koklass Pheasants (*P. m. macrolopha*) and Common Hill Partridges (*Arborophila t. torquola*) were plentiful around Kulni. While walking along a rocky ridge I heard as many as 50 Koklass Pheasants crow from all directions in response to a thunderbolt. Himalayan Monals were encountered occasionally, generally near rocky outcrops or cliffs.

In summary, three Himalayan pheasant species were observed at the limits of their known distributions. The Western Tragopan, the rarest of Himalayan pheasants, was observed in Uttar Pradesh for the first time in approximately 20 years. The Cheer Pheasant, the most patchily distributed of Himalayan pheasants, was observed on an east-facing bank of the Kali Gandaki River. The Kalij Pheasant, the most common and widely distributed of Himalayan pheasants, was observed at a higher elevation than previously reported.

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