

Conservation Education and Community Outreach Programs for Conservation of Cheer Pheasant in Barekot Rural Municipality, Mid-Western Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Within the western Himalayan region of Nepal there is a lack of knowledge concerning areas occupied by and population status of, the Vulnerable-listed Cheer Pheasant. This in turn, inhibits implementation of long-term conservation measures. One such area in mid-western Nepal, identified in 2015 as supporting Cheer Pheasants, is the Barekot Rural Municipality (RM), Jajarkot District. This is one of the most remote areas of the country, and boasts richness in biodiversity and untouched natural beauty. Equipping local citizens with knowledge about Cheer Pheasants is imperative to assist in its conservation. The overarching goal of this project is to promote conservation of the species (including its critical habitats) in the Barekot RM via application of several education and public awareness initiatives. From 20 November to 3 December 2018, our team of three conducted conservation education, community outreach and capacity building programs in various schools and villages in Barekot. Through our project activities, we were able to: (a) inspire and encourage 517 students from seven schools in Barekot, (b) raise awareness levels in 394 individuals from seven local communities in Barekot, and (c) engage 35 local livestock herders to act as local stewards to help safeguard habitat and advocate Cheer Pheasant conservation in their communities. Our project represents a small, yet hopefully significant, step in educating and sensitizing local communities to the threats faced by Cheer Pheasants, and encourages simple measures to maintain its scrub-grassland habitat and to reduce hunting pressure. A positive response from the Barekot RM Office and willing participation of the locals in community outreach and capacity building programs, indicated a level of success of the awareness program.

INTRODUCTION

The Cheer Pheasant *Catreus wallichii* is a monotypic galliforme, endemic to the northern Indian subcontinent. It is distributed across the southern foothills of the western Himalayas of NE Pakistan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in India, eastward to western Nepal, within an altitudinal range of 1,200 – 3,000 m (Delacour 1977; Ali and Ripley 1980; cited in Gaston et al. 1981). Due to its rarity, it is one of the nine protected birds of Nepal, under the ‘National Park and Wildlife Protection Act 1973’ (HMG 1973). The distribution of Cheer Pheasant in Nepal is local and patchy. It inhabits precipitous, often craggy, hillsides dissected by wooden ravines with stunted trees, and open scrub with grass cover; it also occupies recently cleared areas with secondary growth (Lelliot 1981). This preference for scrubby grassland may be part-accountable for a decline in Cheer Pheasant numbers as grasslands below about 2,000 m are frequently burnt by local people (primarily herders) both to encourage fresh growth for livestock and to prevent scrub colonization, scrub cover being an important habitat component (Gaston et al. 1981).

Conservation actions in remote western Nepal, where Cheer Pheasants mainly occur, are rare. Despite harboring some of the last untouched natural areas in the Himalayas, local communities (including schools and youth groups) are very rarely involved in nature conservation activities. Some actions, such as, radio-broadcasts concerning safeguarding threatened birds have been carried out in other areas where Cheer Pheasants occur, including Baitadi, Doti and Achham Districts (Poudyal 2012). Similarly, some studies including population monitoring of Cheer Pheasants, have been undertaken in Kaligandaki Valley, Mustang (Acharya 2004; Acharya et al. 2006), Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (Subedi et al. 2005; Singh 2006) and Rara National Park (Buddhathapa 2006; Singh 2009).

Our project targeted the Barekot Rural Municipality (RM) in order to foster awareness regarding conservation and importance of Cheer Pheasants in Jajarkot District as a whole. The initiative specifically addressed the lack of knowledge amongst local people regarding Cheer Pheasants and focused on its status and threats to it. Cheer Pheasants have been reported to be killed (snared/catapulted for food) and ‘domesticated’ (i.e. bought into captivity and kept as a sign of prestige and status among the villagers) in western Nepal (Subedi 2003). It is also probably one of the most illegally traded birds within Nepal for this reason (BCN and DNPWC 2011), although the actual extent of hunting and trafficking has never been investigated. We focused on Barekot RM for a number of reasons. Calls of Cheer were first noted here in 2015 at Aireni Community Forest (CF), by Paudel and Bhusal (2015). Following up, we assessed the conservation status of the pheasant through administering individual household questionnaire surveys in Barekot RM (Budhathoki 2017). We also looked for signs (e.g. nests, feathers, footprints and scratch marks) in potential habitat, and additionally heard (and recorded) calls at a new site, Jante Gauda Bhote Gareli CF. Our study (Budhathoki 2017) indicated that planning and executing immediate conservation actions aimed at changing the local perception (to a positive rather than exploitative one) was required for long-term protection of Cheer Pheasants in this area.

METHODS

The study was conducted in Barekot Rural Municipality (29°2'24" N, 82°19'48" E), Jajarkot District, Karnali Province, western Nepal. The site falls within the proposed Barekot Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA). The selection of schools and communities was based on relevancy and significance to Cheer Pheasant conservation based on preliminary information collected by Budhathoki (2017). Education and awareness paper-based modules about Cheer Pheasants were prepared. Digital presentations were not a viable option due to the remoteness of the study site and lack of electricity facilities. Brochure, poster, and bookmarks (including photographs) were designed to cover various topics including protected birds of Nepal, physical description of Cheer, its conservation status, habitat requirements, behavior, reproduction, threats and conservation importance. The content was in Nepali language for the ease of the local people. A total of 1,000 brochures, 1,000 bookmarks and 100 posters were printed for the education and awareness programs. The call of Cheer was also played for participants to help stimulate interest and enable identification of the species.

The education program was aimed at students of lower secondary to higher secondary level (age group 13-18 years), and also included their teachers. This student level was targeted because we

believe that this age group is both mature enough to understand the concept of wildlife conservation, whilst young enough to be curious and impressionable regarding the program contents. The program involved a child-friendly, non-formal learning approach directed to increase student awareness levels about, and positivity towards, Cheer conservation. We organised classes for school students whereby information about Cheer was delivered orally. We selected the schools and villages surrounding Aireni CF, where calls of Cheer were first recorded (Paudel & Bhusal 2015) and Jante Gauda Bhote Gareli CF, where recorded by Budhathoki (2017). The selection was also made following suggestions of Mr. Govinda Singh, a local bird conservation enthusiast with knowledge of various important birds and their habitats in Jajarkot.

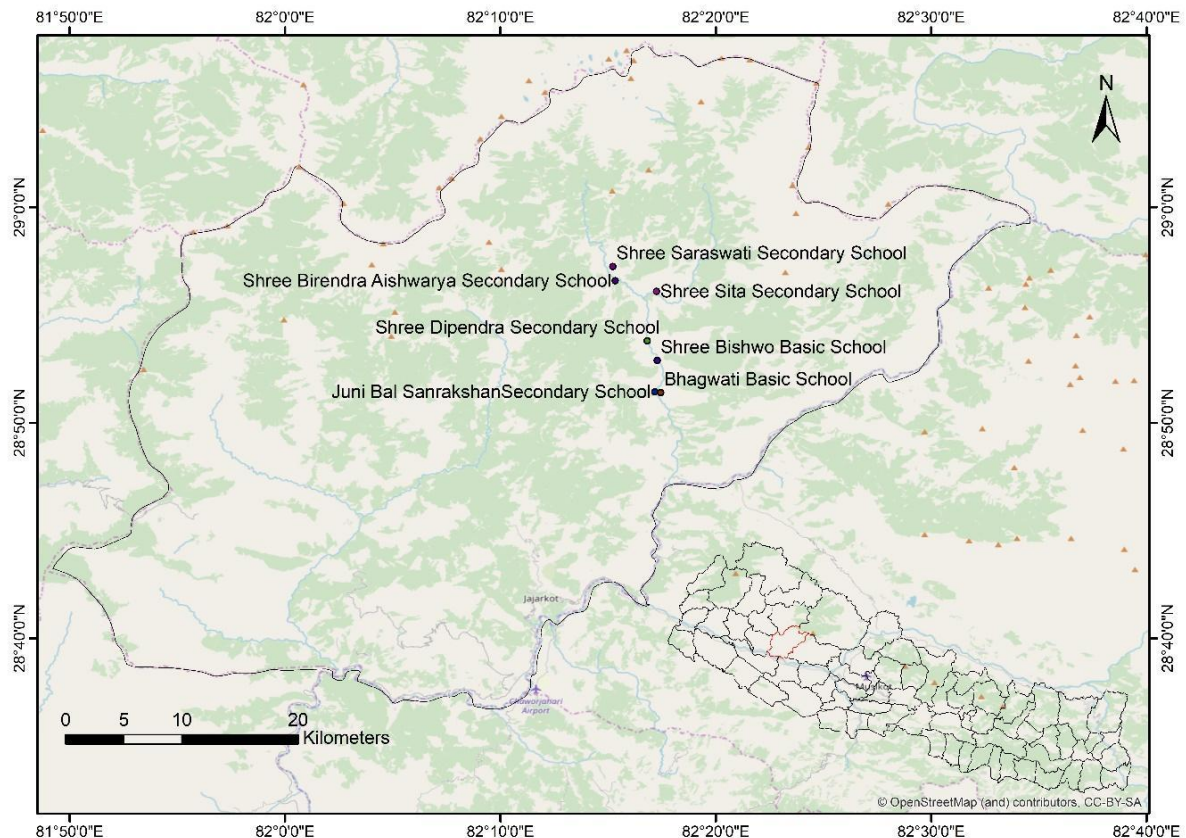


Figure 1. Location of the seven schools involved in the conservation program, Jajarkot District.

Similarly, group discussions (community outreach) were held with other members of the local communities. During the course of these discussions, five livestock herders from each community were asked to become stewards of their respective community forests to help reduce harmful management practices (e.g. grassland burning at times when Cheer were nesting). In most rural settings of Nepal, teenagers are the herders of livestock, travelling across the rough terrains of the ‘jungle’ in order to do so. They have good knowledge of the trails and bird and mammal species found in their areas.

As with the school education program, we used photos and played calls to familiarize participants with Cheer and to avoid confusions with other pheasants. We also informed participants of the laws regarding hunting and collection of the protected birds of Nepal, rewards for informants of poachers/collectors and punishments for those engaged in such illegal activities. The local stewards

were also encouraged to advocate the conservation of Cheer and other important birds found in Barekot RM. Group discussions were also carried out with the local NGOs, police, political leaders and community forest user groups, to enhance co-operation with the local stewards.

RESULTS

A total of 517 students and 54 teachers were engaged in the conservation education program. In each of the schools, we spent about 2 hours delivering classes (including distributing brochures, posters and bookmarks) and discussed the birds and other wildlife present in the nearest jungles.

We encouraged the students to ban the use of slingshots (often used to kill birds), based on ‘altruism and love’ for nature. We obtained a student pledge for banning use of slingshots and to spread conservation knowledge within their family and wider community. Details of the participating schools are presented in Table 1. As the selection of schools was based on their proximity to previously identified Cheer habitats, one school from Nalgad Municipality was also selected as we found this to be the closest secondary school to Aireni CF. The school is located on the west bank of the Nalgad river, while the community and the CF are on the opposite bank. The Nalgad River acts as the boundary between Barekot RM and Nalgad Municipality.

Table 1. The schools where the conservation education programs were conducted, November-December 2018.

Name of School	Address	GPS co-ordinates	Total participants	Male	Female	Grade
Shree Dipendra Secondary School	Barekot-9, Sakla	28° 53.805 N 82° 16.812 E	90	42	48	8-10
Shree Bishwo Basic School	Barekot-8, Sepukhola	28° 52.890 N 82° 17.282 E	47	16	31	6-8
Bhagwati Basic School	Barekot-8, Laikham	28° 51.402 N 82° 17.441 E	40	17	23	6-8
Juni Balsankrakshan Secondary School	Nalgad Municipality-8	28° 51.440 N 82° 17.164 E	152	81	71	8-10
Shree Birendra Aishworya Higher Secondary School	Barekot-2, Limsa	28° 56.590 N 82° 15.332 E	51	17	34	8-12
Shree Saraswati Secondary School	Barekot-5	28° 57.247 N 82° 15.217 E	68	35	33	8-10
Shree Sita Secondary School	Barekot-6, Karkijyula	28° 56.094 N 82° 17.249 E	123	56	67	8-10
TOTALS:			571	264	307	

The community outreach program was held in seven villages of Barekot RM (Table 2). The outreach programs were each of about 2-3 hours long engaging 394 individuals in total. In each of the village, we provided a similar talk program for the local people. After the session, we held discussions on queries of the local people, which mainly dealt with what their roles would be in the conservation of Cheer and the forests in general. A total of 35 people (five from each community) stepped forward to become local stewards of their respective forests. These volunteers were those people (mostly

teenagers) who would frequent the higher elevation jungles while herding livestock. We showed pictures of different Himalayan pheasants that are found in those areas and played calls of Cheer to help them correctly identify the Cheer.

Table 2. Number of participants and communities that participated in the Outreach Program.

Village	Elevation	Total participants	Male	Female
Sakla, Barekot-9	1,453 m	52	23	29
Sepukhola, Barekot-8	1,421 m	48	19	29
Laikham, Barekot-8	1,345 m	53	26	27
Silinge, Barekot-5	1,804 m	52	30	22
Limsa, Barekot-2	1,718 m	78	45	33
Karkijyula, Barekot-6	1,533 m	54	21	33
Koruka, Barekot-5	1,787 m	57	31	26
TOTAL:		394	195	199

Regarding education about bird protection law, the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act, 2029 of Nepal, states prison sentence of 6 to 24 months or fines of Nepalese Rupees (NRs.) 1,000 to 10,000 for hunters/poachers or collectors of protected birds. It also has provision of rewards, for informants of hunters, poachers or collectors, of up to NRs. 25,000. The locals were unaware of these legal provisions and this information acted as an incentive for the stewards to look after their forests, knowing they had legislative backing, should they confront any people engaged in potentially illegal activities.

Meetings were also held with the president of Barekot RM, Mr. Mahendra Bahadur Shahi, where we discussed our education and outreach programs. The response from Barekot RM, Office of the Rural Municipal Executive, was positive and they were happy to receive these kinds of school and wider community education and conservation awareness programs.

DISCUSSION

Environmental education and community outreach programs are important tools in ensuring long-term locally-based conservation of biodiversity (Sekercioglu 2011). Realizing the gap in implementation of such programs in rural settings of Nepal, we carried out a conservation education and community outreach program in Barekot RM of Jajarkot District, Nepal in 2018. The major objective of the program was to change the knowledge, attitude and perception of the people towards Cheer Pheasants, and direct their local knowledge about wildlife and the jungles (habitats) into positive conservation actions, and away from illegal activities such as hunting and collection. The positive response from the Barekot RM Office, and willing participation of the local people (adults and children alike) denoted a level of success of the awareness program as a whole. The actual effectiveness of our education project with regards helping to conserve Cheer Pheasants will only be elucidated if there are follow-up field studies in Barekot. It is also hoped to conduct further conservation education programs in the area.

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