



## 2023 Summary Report and Open Day 2024



## Major Milestones

Reflecting on 2023, two huge milestones stand out from the SAVE region, but there were important updates and progress from all range countries. The headlines were surely the Indian Government's gazetted bans of two toxic veterinary NSAIDs – aceclofenac and ketoprofen, and in Nepal the final releases of captive White-rumped Vultures into the only formally declared Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ), and thereby the closure of Nepal's conservation breeding programme.

Publication of three pivotal papers were also notable: 1) the [nimesulide toxicity testing](#) on vultures by IVRI and BNHS; 2) the [stabilised population trends](#) of wild vultures across India based on repeated road transects; and 3) completion of [a study of the diet of Gyps vultures in India](#) based upon food species identification from faecal DNA.

## Country Updates for 2023

In **Pakistan**, pharmacy surveys in NW Pakistan found no veterinary diclofenac, however, human preparations of diclofenac (less than 3 ml) were present at 25% of visited pharmacies. There is growing engagement by the authorities, and hopes that the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan will regulate other toxic drugs in the near future. The monitoring trends for wild populations however are mixed, with White-rumped Vulture still declining. Provisional Vulture Safe Zone awareness and community work was focused on Nagar Parkar area and there was increased capacity within the WWF Pakistan vulture conservation team with the addition of a new Research and Conservation Officer.



*Awareness session with students at Changa Manga Centre in Punjab, Pakistan*

In **Nepal**, annual road transect surveys again showed further significant increases in vulture populations. A [paper published](#) in early 2024 for 99 satellite-tagged wild and released birds continues to show high survival rates of wild birds, and provides valuable information on mortality causes. With no NSAID-related or poison bait deaths detected for the monitored birds, the genuinely safe habitat in Nepal's Vulture Safe Zone continues to be confirmed. The last ten captive White-rumped Vultures in Nepal were released in March 2023, thereby

terminating Nepal's successful vulture breeding programme. The captive breeding programme was considered to be no longer needed because wild populations continue to increase significantly. In 2022/23, 626 vulture nests of six species were monitored (most (569) of which were White-rumped Vulture) with a 71% success rate overall. Twelve of the tagged captive-origin vultures attempted breeding in the wild, seven of which successfully fledged chicks. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and Department of Forests and Soil Conservation, under the Ministry of Forests and Environment, published an updated five-year Vulture Conservation Action Plan for 2023-2027. Government agencies agreed to take steps to formalise bans of all vulture-toxic NSAIDs at a National Vulture Recovery Committee meeting in November, and we await any documented outcome. Tagging work extended to ten wild White-rumped Vultures in Suklaphanta National Park in SW Nepal as part of a new VSZ initiative there, and for the first time in South Asia, 10 Slender-billed Vultures were also satellite tagged and are being monitored.



***Vulture tagging at Suklaphanta National Park, South West Nepal***

In **India** the over-riding positive development was the Government's veterinary aceclofenac & ketoprofen bans which were gazetted in August 2023. Vulture Safe Zone work around the country expanded to include a new initiative in Tamil Nadu, but undercover pharmacy survey results in several states showed that toxic veterinary drugs remain widely available with particular concern around nimesulide which is becoming increasingly common in several areas. The Indian Vulture Conservation Breeding Centres collectively fledged 66 vultures raising numbers to over 800 individuals of the three resident *Gyps* species held in captivity. This included the first successful double-clutching at the Bhopal centre, an Indian Vulture. One of the reintroduced White-rumped Vultures from the West Bengal programme bred successfully in the wild raising the chick this year. Ten White-rumped and ten Indian Vultures were transferred from the Haryana centre to Maharashtra where there are plans for translocations following release guidelines being developed by the Indian Government. The availability of toxic NSAIDs has complicated plans for proposed releases, and there is no tagging of wild vultures in potential release areas to ascertain their safety. Meanwhile, IVRI



and BNHS completed and published the safety-trials paper further demonstrating nimesulide's toxicity to vultures. Coordinated vulture surveys for three South Indian states were carried out for the small populations in the region, and significantly, the trends from the more extensive road-transects surveys (covering mainly North and central India) were [published](#) (in early 2024) indicating that population trends have stabilised at the new low levels, but with no significant increases. Citizen science information from eBird and State of India's Birds was also published but indicates ongoing further population declines across the country. A study of the diet of Gyps vultures in India, led by the National Centre for Biological Sciences (Bangalore), [was published](#). It shows that carrion from domesticated cattle and buffaloes remains the principal food source for vultures in most of India, even for birds spending some of their time in protected areas. Only in southern India was carrion from wild ungulates (principally deer) significant. These results show that, if toxic NSAIDs continue to be used on cattle in India, vultures are likely to be exposed to them.



*Captive White-rumped Vulture with chick in Rani VCBC, Assam, India*

For **Bangladesh** where ketoprofen was banned nationally in 2021, undercover pharmacy surveys showed that its use has already reduced significantly by 2023, and the second safe drug, tolfenamic acid is already increasing in its place. However, there are signs that flunixin, which has been found to be toxic to wild vultures in Spain, is also increasing in the market. The first White-rumped Vulture was tagged, but after demonstrating transboundary movements into Tripura, India, it was found dead in an otherwise undetected poison baits incident within Bangladesh. The area where this occurred was subsequently the focus of Forest Department and other stakeholders including veterinarian awareness efforts in September. A vulture population survey was conducted across Bangladesh, resulting in a revised White-rumped Vulture population estimate of 248 individuals. During the 2022-2023 nesting season, a total of 18 nests were observed, of which 13 were successful (72%). In the 2023-2024 winter period, 22 Himalayan Griffons were rehabilitated for release, having been picked up weak, and three of them were satellite tagged on release.



*International Vulture Awareness Day 2023 in Moulvibazar, North-East Bangladesh*

Despite national security concerns, **Myanmar** SAVE partners held township-level meetings in October 2023 in order to work towards the establishment of Myanmar's first 100km radius provisional Vulture Safe Zone, centred on Tong San Kha village - a key vulture food supply source near Indawgyi Lake, Kachin State. Meetings involved Government agencies Indawgyi Wildlife Sanctuary and Veterinary Department plus Myanmar Vulture Working Group members and closely aligned Inn Chit Thu Association (for youth community ecotourism etc.) in Mohnyin. Acknowledging that diclofenac has been confirmed as widely available to veterinary practitioners, initiatives have begun with regional government Forest and Veterinary agencies to reduce diclofenac use through promoting meloxicam in targeted vulture strongholds. Pharmacy training to community-based Animal Health Workers around Indawgyi, supported by the Deputy Director of Livestock Breeding Veterinary Department and Myanmar's Veterinary Association, took place in October 2023 in Mohnyin area of Kachin State. Over 200 bottles of injectable meloxicam have been supplied to veterinary services between the three key vulture states since 2021. Hai Hpark Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association at Nam Sang (South Shan State) and Khalaung Taung Nature Conservation at Namhsan (North Shan State) have led periodic vulture restaurant activities, supported by IUCN-CEPF and NABU BirdLife. These resulted in population counts, with minimum figures for White-rumped, Slender-billed and Red-headed Vultures of 120 altogether. There was also new [confirmation of](#) White-rumped Vulture breeding in the Shan highlands. More funding is needed to scale up activities.



*Slender-billed Vulture, Myanmar*

The **Cambodia** Government formally recognised the Cambodia Vulture Working Group (CVWG) in July 2023, with the Chair being taken on by H.E Kim Nong, DG, General Dept of Administration for Nature Conservation and Protection (Ministry of the Environment). The CVWG also expanded to include Rising Phoenix. Coordinated feeding site surveys showed vulture population stability (132 vultures) following earlier declines up to 2018. Nesting platforms were trialled with 21 now in place in Siem Pang. One Slender-billed Vulture pair already use them. Satellite-tagging was extended to all three species (6 White-rumped Vultures, 2 Slender-billed Vultures, 3 Red-headed Vultures were tagged, in addition to the 2 White-rumped Vultures tagged in 2020). These helped with nest locating, which found 30 nests in total. This work was [published early 2024](#). Twelve of the White-rumped Vulture nests located were found at the recently rediscovered colony location in **Laos**.



*Rising Phoenix team tagging a Red-headed Vulture in Siem Pang Wildlife Sanctuary, Northern Cambodia.*

### **SAVE Open Day Presentations**

Apart from the country updates which summarised most of the points mentioned above, the SAVE Open Day presentations also featured several other updates including summarising the mid-term review of the Convention on Migratory Species Vulture Multi-species Action Plan, which highlights that progress so far across Europe, Africa and Asia has been slightly less than hoped for in the plan written in 2017, and in Asia, especially for the top priority action of regulating NSAIDs. The full review which draws on and links closely with the SAVE Blueprint can be [accessed via CMS](#), and a [regional summary is now available](#).



Other presentations during the Open Day questioned whether drug regulation is working for vulture conservation in the region (and more widely), and there was a very clear example presented from Israel of how satellite tracking and prompt followup monitoring revealed otherwise undetected NSAID poisoning by flunixin and diclofenac. We heard how the diclofenac ban has been effective so far in Iran, where Egyptian vulture work is also a focus. We also heard from Nepal about Egyptian Vulture monitoring there, and how trial artificial nest platforms in Cambodia might be effective. Whether feral dogs compete with vultures at carcass dumps in Rajasthan was explored experimentally and a study of vulture diet composition using DNA analysis of faecal material revealed that domestic ungulates are the predominant food of resident Gyps vultures even within protected areas in India. Additionally, we heard about the various methods available for surveying vultures, and their relative merits.

All SAVE Open Day presentations are available to view on website resources page [here](#).

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