

1. Vulture Survey – Environment

First national vulture survey find 70% decline in historic nesting sites. India's first nationwide vulture survey (2023–2025) by WII revealed a 70% decline in historical nesting sites, confirming the fragile recovery of four critically endangered species. The survey found that 54% of the remaining 4,800 breeding adults are now heavily dependent on the safety of Protected Areas for survival.

India's First Vulture Census

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has released India's first-ever nationwide survey on vultures. The survey is officially titled, "Pan-India Assessment and Monitoring of Endangered Species – Vultures".

About the Survey

Significance – This is India's first systematic national assessment focused specifically on the nesting populations of vultures.

Conducted By – The survey was a collaborative effort between the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

Timeframe – The assessment was conducted over a two-year period, from 2023 to 2025.

Coverage – The survey spanned 216 sites across 17 states.

Species Focus – The assessment concentrated on four Critically Endangered (IUCN status) species of Vulture –

1. White-rumped Vulture
2. Indian Vulture
3. Slender-billed Vulture
4. Red-headed Vulture

Key Findings of the Census

Overall Population – The survey successfully recorded approximately 2,500 nests, which provides an estimate of 4,800 breeding adult vultures.

Habitat Decline – The survey revealed a stark 70% decline in historical nesting sites, indicating significant habitat loss or unsuitability over time.

Importance of Protected Areas (PAs) – Nearly 54% of all active nests were found to be located within Protected Areas, underscoring their critical importance for the survival and conservation of these species.

Species-Specific Findings

Indian Vulture – This species accounted for the majority (58%) of all recorded nests. Its nesting sites were primarily concentrated in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

White-rumped Vulture – This tree-nesting species made up 39% of the nests. A significant concentration was found in the Kangra Valley (Himachal Pradesh), which hosted 67% of its nests.

Slender-billed Vulture – This species showed a highly restricted distribution, with nesting found only in **Upper Assam** (totaling 40 individuals at 20 sites).

Red-headed Vulture – This species was observed nesting *only* within the protected areas of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, highlighting its extreme vulnerability outside these safe zones.

About Vultures

Introduction – Vultures are large scavenging raptors (birds of prey) that are vital to ecological health.

Ecological Role – They act as nature's clean-up crew, maintaining ecosystem hygiene and aiding in nutrient cycling. By rapidly consuming carcasses, they prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases such as anthrax and rabies.

Threats to Vultures

Diclofenac Poisoning – The primary threat, caused by vultures feeding on livestock carcasses that were treated with the veterinary drug diclofenac.

Habitat Loss – This includes general deforestation and the specific loss of large, mature trees required by some species for nesting.

Food Scarcity – Modern carcass dumping restrictions and sanitation practices have reduced the

availability of food for vultures.

Secondary Poisoning – Poisoning from consuming carcasses contaminated with pesticides and other toxic chemicals.

Disturbance – Human disturbance in their breeding areas and a general decline in safe, undisturbed habitats.

Vultures of India – Species Overview

Species	Scientific Name	Distribution	IUCN Status	Nesting Habit
White-rumped Vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	Himachal Pradesh, UP, Bihar, MP	Critically Endangered	Tree-nesting
Indian Vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	MP, Rajasthan, Maharashtra	Critically Endangered	Cliff-nesting
Slender-billed Vulture	<i>Gyps tenuirostris</i>	Upper Assam, NE India	Critically Endangered	Tree-nesting
Red-headed Vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	MP, Rajasthan, NE India	Critically Endangered	Solitary, forest nesting
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Across India, especially NW and Gangetic plains	Endangered	Solitary, scattered nests
Himalayan Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>	High-altitude Himalayas	Near Threatened	Cliff-nesting
Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier)	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Western and Central Himalayas	Near Threatened	Cliff-nesting

Steps Taken for Vulture Conservation

Ban on Veterinary Diclofenac (2006) – A crucial step to remove the main poisoning agent from the vultures' food chain.

Establishment of Vulture Safe Zones (VSZs) – Designating specific areas in multiple states that are actively monitored and managed to be safe for vultures (i.e., free of diclofenac).

Creation of Vulture Breeding Centres – Captive breeding programs have been established at Pinjore (Haryana), Rajabhatkhawa (West Bengal), and Rani (Assam) to build a healthy, genetically diverse population for reintroduction.

Carcass Management – The creation of “Vulture Restaurants”—designated sites where drug-free carcasses are provided to ensure a safe and reliable food source.

Legal Protection – Vultures are included under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which affords them the highest level of legal protection in India.

National Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2020–2025) – A comprehensive strategy focusing on monitoring, awareness, and the regulation of other veterinary drugs that may be harmful to vultures.

Conclusion

The 2023–2025 survey exposes both the fragile recovery of India's vultures and their critical dependence on specific, protected habitats. The findings emphasize that future conservation success must rely on a combination of habitat protection, continued drug regulation, and ensuring food security (safe carcasses) to prevent the further collapse of these ecologically vital scavengers.

Source – <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/alarm-bells-first-national-vulture-survey-finds-70-decline-in-historic-nesting-sites/articleshow/125020992.cms>