

Vulture population on the rise in tiger reserve

Researchers had 1,602 encounters with vultures — a majority with the white-rumped species

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A recent study of the population of vultures in the Sigur plateau has found that the population of all four resident vulture species have seemingly been on the rise over the past few years.

In a study titled *Population status and seasonal distribution of vultures in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve*, published in the Journal of Science and Technology, authors S. Manigandan, P. Kannan, H. Byju, S. Bharathidasan and B. Ramakrishnan recorded vulture sightings between January and October of 2018, along 61 km of roads through the reserve.

The roads pass through key vulture habitats in Sriyur, Vazhithottam, Masinagudi, Moyar, Theppakadu and Kakkanallah.

The researchers had 1,602 encounters with vultures, with a majority of them being with the critically-endangered white-rumped vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), followed



Rising numbers: Vultures spotted in the buffer zone of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve last year.

by the long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus*), the red-headed vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) and the egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). Though white-rumped vultures were the most frequently recorded, with 1,405 encounters, researchers said there were also encouraging signs that the populations of long-billed vultures, asian king vultures and egyptian vultures using the landscape was increasing.

Mr. Ramakrishnan, assistant professor at the department of zoology and wildlife biology at the Government Arts College in Udhagamandalam and one of the authors of the paper, said it was interesting that data pointed to a clear increase in the number of sightings of vultures between the months of January and May, indicating that vultures were using the tiger reserve as a key nesting habitat.

Of the nine vulture species found in India, the four resident ones, as well as three seasonal migrants are spotted in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve every year

“The study is indicative that there are good nesting sites for vultures here, as well as excellent food availability, which in turn points to a healthy number of carnivores, whose kills the vultures depend on for food,” he said.

Younger vultures

Another encouraging sign that the researchers noticed was the increasing number of juvenile asian king vultures.

It must be noted that researchers are yet to find a single nesting site for the rarely-spotted species on the Sigur plateau, and the records of younger vultures is indicative that the species is breeding and their numbers

increasing.

“Of the nine vulture species found in India, the four resident ones, as well as three seasonal migrants — the Eurasian griffon vulture, the Himalayan griffon and the cinerous vulture — are spotted in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) every year. The fact that these vultures are seen here is a sign of the importance of the landscape as a whole,” said another researcher.

Deputy Director of MTR (buffer zone) L.C.S. Srikanth said the Forest Department was facilitating long-term studies of vultures in the reserve.

“We have noticed new nesting sites, with the growth of *Terminalia arjuna* trees along newly-established check dams, which is also very encouraging. We have also proposed the setting up of a vulture breeding and rehabilitation centre to help in the long-term conservation of the species,” he added.