

RTD24 Heron Specialist Group: heron conservation

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1 Issues

1.1 Background

Hérons are a worldwide family, the 62 species of which have undergone remarkable changes in distribution and numbers during the past century, both retractions and expansions. Both processes are of conservation concern. Many heron populations occur in human-dominated landscapes and have come to depend on human action for their continued well-being and conservation.

This was the third meeting of the Heron Specialist Group (HSG). At the previous two IOCs, the Group focused on a world wide review of heron conservation, resulting in the published volume, Heron Conservation (Kushlan and Hafner, 2000). More recently, the Group has participated in surveying highly endangered herons in Asia, a major topic for present meeting.

1.2 Improving coordination in Asia and global conservation planning

The HSG is charged by its three parent bodies (IUCN Species Survival Commission, Wetlands International and BirdLife International) with overseeing and facilitating activities concerned with the conservation of herons worldwide. This requires that it be structured with an efficient communication network to assist effectively in developing conservation and research projects. Since the creation of the HSG in 1982 (Hafner et al., 1986), responsibilities for its operation have been shared between two chairs, Old World (Heinz Hafner) and New World (James Kushlan), who have carried out business by correspondence.

1.3 Species, subspecies and populations of conservation concern in Asia

Asia has some of the most threatened herons in the world, e.g. white-bellied heron *Ardea insignis*, Chinese egret *Egretta eulophotes*, white-eared night heron *Gorsachius magnificus*, and Japanese night heron *Gorsachius goisagi*. For these species and a number of subspecies and populations, data is insufficient to address conservation requirements adequately. Surveys need to be continued for these taxa, and methods developed for determining habitat used and its availability.

1.4 Status update on the white-eared night heron, *Gorsachius magnificus*, in south China

Considered to be the most endangered heron of the world by the HSG, this species has been surveyed intensively from 1998 to 2001 by the HSG and the Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden Corporation (KFBG), a conservation charity based in Hong Kong.

1.5 Preparation of a worldwide Action Plan for the Conservation of Herons

Despite many gaps in knowledge, the results of a plethora of studies by such a multinational group as the HSG over the past twenty years on all continents and producing synthetic treatises on heron biology (Kushlan and Hancock, 2003) and conservation (Kushlan and Hafner, 2000) provide the foundation for preparing a worldwide Action Plan for herons.

2 Outcomes

2.1 Attendance of meeting

63 delegates attended the meeting, including 26 from Asian countries/regions (China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong), many of them potential members of the HSG. Because of them, ensuing discussions were particularly enlightening and valuable.

2.2 Improving coordination in Asia and global conservation planning

H. Hafner continues as Chair of the HSG, with J. Kushlan as Deputy Chair and 7 Vice Chairs be recruited and appointed for West Asia, East Asia, Australia-Oceania, Europe, Africa-Malagasy, South America and North America. Major initiatives taken were: (1) development of a website that includes resources, a newsletter and topical chat rooms, and (2) development of a global population data base accessible via the internet. As in the past, the HSG will continue to meet at International Ornithological Congresses, and regionally where appropriate, and hold symposia on topics of interest and concern to heron biology and conservation.

2.3 Species, subspecies and populations of conservation concern in Asia

An overview presented by H. Hafner generated much interest and discussion. Concrete decisions were made for future surveys and research on the Malayan night heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* in central Taiwan and the white-eared night heron *Gorsachius magnificus* in south China. The research team working on the Malayan night heron in Taiwan, Cheng-Te Yao, Liang-Kong Lin and Shao-Pin, have already put together a fine data set on nesting success in this little known species. In south China, the KFBG and HSG will continue surveys of the white-eared night heron and prepare a species action plan together.

2.4 Status update on the white-eared night heron, *Gorsachius magnificus*, in south China

Lee Kwok Shing from the KFBG presented a comprehensive update of the status of the white-eared night heron, based on the surveys carried out between 1998 and 2000 (Fellowes et al., 2001) and in 2001. This species has the most restricted breeding range of any heron, with just two known breeding sites: one in southern Guangxi and another suspected in neighboring Guangdong Province (Chebaling Nature Reserve). In the 1990s, one nest (Zhou F, 2002) was also found in Shennongjia Nature Reserve and environs, Hubei Province. Prime habitat there, however, has since been converted into a reservoir, and subsequent surveys in 1999–2001 failed to find the species. Outside China, the white-eared night heron has also been reported from North Vietnam, including one recent record. Several remote

areas in south China, where isolated breeding sites may have gone unnoticed in forested mountain habitats, have yet to be surveyed to clarify population size and distribution.

2.5 Preparation of a worldwide Action Plan for the Conservation of Herons

A draft Action Plan prepared by James Kushlan and Heinz Hafner was distributed to all attendees, who were asked to comment as they felt obliged. Its aim: to identify priorities, set goals and detail specific actions needed for conservation of the herons of the world. It will be the first global plan for conservation action for herons to be published by the IUCN.

References

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