



Once abundant Yellow-breasted Bunting declines rapidly

Research shows unsustainable hunting in recent times is the main cause

Mumbai: 10th June 2015: Birds are often a clear indicator of the state of the environment of a region. BNHS studies have regularly highlighted the decline of several bird species across India. Recent studies by the UK-based BirdLife International and its India partner, BNHS India, have shown that one of Eurasia's most abundant bird species, Yellow-breasted Bunting, has declined by 90% and retracted its range by 5,000 sq.km since 1980. A research paper recently published in the journal *Conservation Biology* suggests that unsustainable rates of hunting, principally in China, have contributed to the catastrophic loss of numbers and shrinking of its distribution range.

Yellow-breasted Bunting was once distributed over vast areas of Europe and Asia, its range stretching from Finland to Japan. In India, it is reported as a winter visitor, mainly in the northeastern states of Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur, in West Bengal, and also in the Terai region of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is also reported from Nepal and Bangladesh. In India, it is found from early October till April, in small to large flocks of up to 200.

Unsustainable hunting

During migration and in its wintering grounds, these birds gather in huge flocks at night-time roosts, making it easy to trap them in large numbers. They have been traditionally trapped for food using nets. But in recent times, hunting has reached unsustainable proportions. In China, where the fall in numbers is most prominent, hunting of the species – known in Chinese as the 'rice bird' – was banned in 1997 following an initial decline. However, millions of these birds and other songbird species were still being killed for food and sold on the black market as late as 2013.

Consumption of these birds has increased in East Asia and the once prevalent subsistence hunting has been replaced by large-scale commercial hunting to meet this demand. One estimate from 2001 suggests that 10 lakh buntings were consumed in China's Guangdong province alone. Comparatively, the rate of trapping and consumption is less in India, where bunting meat is referred to as *Bageri*. During winter in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and parts of Jharkhand, Yellow-breasted Bunting is trapped along with Red-headed Bunting.

"The magnitude and speed of the decline is unprecedented among birds distributed over such a large area," said Dr Johannes Kamp from the University of Münster, the lead author of the paper.

Solutions

If birds such as Yellow-breasted Bunting are to be saved, large scale nature education and effective implementation of laws by authorities is urgently required. Education about need for nature conservation and the revival of subsistence hunting practices is extremely important.

Commenting on the catastrophic decline, Dr. Asad Rahmani, Director, BNHS said, "The decline of a once common species like Yellow-breasted Bunting that is a winter visitor to India further proves that illegal hunting could be the reason for the disappearance of many once common Indian bird species. Only

poaching of large mammals is reported in the media and sometimes action is taken. But what about the insidious and clandestine trapping of large numbers of birds that still goes on in some parts of our country? The authorities should bring a halt to all types of poaching and trapping. The complete stoppage of Amur Falcon killing in Doyang area of Nagaland achieved by the forest department shows that authorities can take effective measures. Forest department, police, civil authorities, NGOs and civil society should come together to stop or at least curtail poaching of all wild species.”

“To reverse these declines we need to better educate people of the consequences of eating wildlife. We also need better law enforcement”, said Simba Chan, Senior Conservation Officer, BirdLife International.

Moreover, coordinated monitoring activities are urgently needed in East Asia. A new agreement between China, Japan, Republic of Korea and Russia is the first step in developing a coordinated monitoring of migratory birds. The situation is so serious that the Convention on Migratory Species has agreed to develop an international action plan for the recovery of Yellow-breasted Bunting throughout its range by 2017.

--- Atul Sathe, Assistant Director – Education & Communication, BNHS India