Conservation status of Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* (Gmelin, 1789) (Gruiformes: Otididae) in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and adjoining areas, eastern Nepal

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Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* is considered to be one of the rarest florican species of the world (del Hoyo et al. 1996) and was at one time described as the most threatened bird species in the Indian subcontinent (Inskipp & Collar 1984). It is a globally threatened species (IUCN status Critically Endangered; BirdLife International 2011), inhabiting alluvial grasslands in India, from the Kumaon terai of Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) through Bihar and West Bengal to the foothills and plains of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya, Nepal (in the Terai), Cambodia and southern Vietnam (Ripley 1982; Ali & Ripley 1987; del Hoyo et al. 1996). Two subspecies of Bengal Florican have been recognised: *H. b. bengalensis* from the Indian subcontinent and *H. b. blandini* from Cambodia and Vietnam (del Hoyo et al. 1996). Populations have declined chiefly as a result of
habitat loss and hunting and in the Indian subcontinent, the species no longer occurs outside protected areas (BirdLife International 2000, 2001). However, it is not known where the species goes during the non-breeding season. The most up-to-date estimate from Cambodia is 666–1004 mature birds (David Buckingham pers. comm. 2011). Nepal populations for subspecies *bengalensis* is estimated between 28–36, but there are no recent estimates from India (BirdLife International 2011).

A pioneering study on this species including the protected areas in the southern belt of Nepal and the northern part of India was conducted in 1982 with estimates of 56–82 as the total Bengal Florican population in Nepal (Inskipp & Inskipp 1983; Inskipp & Inskipp 1991). The study concluded that all important populations of the species lie within protected areas of lowland Nepal. Since 1982 there has been no systematic study carried out on this species at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve.

In Nepal, a number of studies have been carried out since then, notably in Sukaphanta and Bardia (Weaver 1991), Bardia (Pokharel & Dhakal 1998), and Sukaphanta, Bardia and Chitwan (Baral et al. 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2003). Baral (1995a) and Rai (1996) have highlighted the urgency of surveys and some of the threats to the Bengal Florican. Repeat surveys of the Bengal Florican have found a decline in the population from three protected areas of central and western Nepal (Baral et al. 2003; Poudyal et al. 2008 a,b,c). A revisit to Nepal’s lowland protected areas by the researchers who first surveyed floricans in 1982 further confirmed the degraded quality of grasslands (Inskipp & Inskipp 2001). Baral (2001) and Baral et al. (2002b) have concluded that the biggest threat to the Bengal Florican in the protected area is inadequate management of grasslands. Baral et al. (2002b) have further suggested that there may not be a viable population in Nepal. Poudyal et al. (2008 a,b,c) gave the most up-to-date survey data on this species from Chitwan, Bardia and Sukaphanta, the major Nepal strongholds of the species.

As one of the major recommendations by Poudyal et al. (2008a) and BirdLife International (2011), we gathered information on this species whilst working on Himalayan Nature’s biodiversity related project activities and the Reserve’s regular monitoring activities in the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and adjoining areas of the Koshi River, eastern Nepal.

It is normally assumed that if a species is found within a protected area then it is safe and doing well (Krebs 2009). However, the above mentioned studies suggest that grassland management supportive to critically threatened species like the Bengal Florican is also needed inside protected areas.

The largest number of Bengal Floricans recorded for Koshi was 10 in April 1982 (cited in Inskipp & Inskipp 1983). This may be an underestimation because during that time, only partial coverage of the area was possible during the survey; for example the reserve could only be covered on elephant-back at that time (Carol Inskipp in litt. to H.S. Baral 25 June 2011). More recently, following the loss of grassland south of the barrage, this species has become a very rare bird at Koshi (Baral 1995b). Single birds have been seen in the western part of Koshi Tappu, within the reserve (Baral 1995a) and north of Koshi Tappu outside the reserve since 2004 (Badri Chaudhary pers. obs. 2011; Som G.C. pers. comm. 2010; Inskipp et al. 2011). A multitude of problems has been discussed as threats to this species in Koshi Tappu (Baral 1995a).

Systematic surveys have mostly focused in other protected areas and Koshi has been left out during organized surveys mainly because the area was considered unsuitable for Bengal Floricans. Koshi Tappu is a small reserve compared to others but is difficult to survey due to logistic problems. Koshi Tappu and its adjoining areas were surveyed in April and May 2011 for the Bengal Florican. Current study in Koshi area reveals an unknown population of Bengal Florican in the country and draws the attention of wider conservation community for more effective planning for its protection.

**Study area**

Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (= Koshi Tappu henceforth, 26°35′N & 87°05′E) occupies 175 km² of the Sapta Koshi River floodplain at the most northeasterly extension of the Gangetic Plain (Image 1). It ranges in altitude from 75–81 m (Sah 1997). The reserve is located between two flood control embankments and is subject to annual flooding. An estimated 70% of the reserve’s land area is covered in grasslands “phantas” followed by water and riverine forests. *Typha* and *Saccharum* are the main components of the grassland communities found here, although patches...
of Imperata and Phragmites are often seen (Pect et al. 1999). Medium size phantas (patches of short grasslands) interspersed with young Dalbergia sissoo / Acacia catechu trees are found on sandy islands. Riverine vegetation with Acacia catechu / Dalbergia sissoo forest dominates on the islands and edges of the reserve. Mostly young trees grow inside and on the edges of the reserve within embankments, most old mature trees being swept away by annual monsoonal floods. The wetlands in the reserve have been identified as Nepal’s first Ramsar Site (Sah 1997).

North of Koshi Tappu (26°47’N & 87°07’E), for about 20km, lies grassy islands, small settlements and farm areas with an estimated area of 70km². Part of this area is subject to annual inundation from the Koshi floodwaters whereas the rest of the area remains above the floods. Areas subjected to annual inundation have grasslands and large shingle banks. Towards the northern end, on a private property, lies the recently established Kosi Bird Observatory (KBO) from where some of these observations have been possible (Image 1).

South of Koshi Tappu lies the Koshi Barrage area (26°36’N & 87°03’E). This area is 7km from north to south and nearly 5km from east to west, totaling nearly 35km². More than 50% of the wetland area at the barrage is covered by water, and the remaining area is subject to intensive agriculture at certain times of the year. During dry periods, several islands are vegetated with Saccharum spp., Imperata cylindrica and Typha elephantina dominated grasses. There is human disturbance in the form of grass collection for
fodder and livestock grazing. Koshi Barrage and Koshi Tappu have been identified as one of the 27 Important Bird Areas of Nepal by BirdLife International (Baral & Inskipp 2005).

Methods
Koshi Tappu and its adjoining areas to north and south were visited in April and May 2011 during a programme of vulture counts, regular bird watching, and during routine monitoring of the Reserve for about 45 days. Field visits were undertaken using inflatable rubber boats, trained elephants, all-terrain vehicles or on foot, depending upon the purpose of the activity.

All Bengal Florican sightings were logged, along with information on habitat use, numbers and activity. Bengal Florican numbers were estimated based on these records and discussion with the Reserve staff.

Results
Bengal Floricans were recorded from nine different sites along a 39-km north-south stretch of the Koshi River. Eliminating double counts of the same individuals from the same area, in total, 17 birds were recorded from these sites, of which seven were males and 10 were females. Only five individuals were recorded outside the reserve, two pairs from Jabdi (north of Koshi Tappu, near KBO) and one female seen twice near the Koshi Barrage area.

From the sightings this year, we estimated at least eight to 12-pairs of Bengal Florican for Koshi Tappu for the Spring/Summer of 2011. Five to nine pairs were located inside the reserve. As this information resulted from opportunistic sightings and surveys, a systematic and well planned survey may produce clearer results and better estimate of the status of floricans from Koshi Tappu and adjoining areas.

The size of the grasslands where florican were found varied from 0.05km² to nearly 1km². The larger patches were within the reserve and some of these were islands with a mosaic of various grass species. All sightings with dates, number and localities are presented in Table 1.

Discussion
We have seen more floricans at Koshi this year compared to previous years during the same period of time. Probably habitat within the reserve improved as compared to the past years. Ashok Kumar Ram, Warden of Koshi Tappu, claimed that the number of privately owned cattle inside the reserve had been drastically reduced because the Reserve Authority was actively controlling cattle grazing. Several hundreds of privately owned cattle have been driven out of the reserve (Ashok Kumar Ram pers. comm. 2011). Removal of grazing probably resulted in regeneration of grass communities preferred by the floricans.

Using a 4-wheel drive vehicle, the western side of the reserve was visited for the first time in many years. This has increased the frequency of visits by the Reserve staff to the interior of the Reserve and probably increased sightings of the floricans. Increased monitoring and patrolling activities by Reserve staff may have also reduced illegal entries of locals into the Reserve, making the area safer for the floricans. However, this alone cannot be the main cause of increased numbers of florican as the eastern part of Koshi Tappu is now frequently visited by bird watchers.

As for the sighting of two pairs north of Koshi Tappu, nearly 15km outside the boundary, it may not have had much to do with the Reserve’s better protected status. The pre-monsoon rains had been more frequent this year compared to the previous years. Early rains this year might have helped to make the grasslands more habitable for the floricans by speeding up the growth of grasses. Additionally, areas north of Koshi Tappu may have been covered more frequently this year compared to last year resulting in more sightings of the species. The recently established Kosi Bird Observatory is acting as a major research station for birds in this region.

Recommendations
The present paper is based on compilation of various observers’ records. It is likely that there are more sites which hold Bengal Florican populations. Therefore, a scientifically planned survey of Bengal Florican should be carried out in Koshi Tappu, north and south of the Reserve in the Spring of 2012. The southern side should include parts up to the Nepal/India border south of the Koshi Barrage. The northern side should include all the islands, and grasslands up to the Kosi Bird Observatory (Jabdi).

The survey should be well coordinated. It will be best to position experienced observers in several
Table 1. Records of Bengal Florican during April and May 2011 from Koshi Tappu and adjoining areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Habitat</th>
<th>Habitat Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28.iv.11</td>
<td>Jabdi, north of Koshi *</td>
<td>07:00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standing in grassland</td>
<td>Cut over Saccharum/Imperata grasslands less than half m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.3km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.iv.11</td>
<td>Jabdi, north of Koshi *</td>
<td>07:10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Displaying</td>
<td>Cut over Saccharum/Imperata grasslands less than half m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.3km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.iv.11</td>
<td>Jabdi, north of Koshi *</td>
<td>07:20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking in grassland approximately one km away from the first male</td>
<td>Cut over Saccharum/Imperata grasslands less than half m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.3km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.iv.11</td>
<td>Jabdi, north of Koshi *</td>
<td>08:15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standing in grassland whilst the first female still being watched by the group</td>
<td>Cut over Saccharum/Imperata grasslands less than half m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.3km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.iv.11</td>
<td>Prakashpur, Koshi east *</td>
<td>06:36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One female flying, male and female standing in grasslands</td>
<td>Dominated by Saccharum spontaneum</td>
<td>0.15km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04.v.11</td>
<td>Prakashpur, Koshi east *</td>
<td>06:30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standing in a new grassland</td>
<td>New, uncut grassland less than quarter of a metre, adjacent to older grassland near 2 m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.2km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.iv.11</td>
<td>Madhuban, Koshi east *</td>
<td>17:10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male flying and female walking along the edge of the grassland</td>
<td>Dominated by Saccharum spontaneum and with &lt;5% Typha elephantina coverage</td>
<td>0.06km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.iv.11</td>
<td>Madhuban, Koshi east *</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male flying and female walking along the edge of the grassland</td>
<td>Saccharum/Imperata with other woody species running longer north south parallel to the river width nearly 500 metre</td>
<td>Island nearly 1km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04.v.11</td>
<td>Madhuban, Koshi east **</td>
<td>09:40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flying west, crossing one of the river channels</td>
<td>Flying --grassland to grassland, 1.5 high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.ii.11</td>
<td>North Simlaighari, west Koshi **</td>
<td>11:30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Walking along the edge of the grassland</td>
<td>Dominated by Imperata cylindrica with average sward height of 50 cm with other species Saccharum spontaneum and small (1.5 m) Acacia catechu</td>
<td>0.05km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.iv.11</td>
<td>Koshi Barrage *</td>
<td>16:32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking along the edge of the grassland</td>
<td>Cut over Saccharum/Imperata grasslands less than 1m high</td>
<td>Island nearly 0.05km² in size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.ii.11</td>
<td>Koshi Barrage **</td>
<td>15:00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flying above S. spontaneum grassland</td>
<td>Dominated by Imperata cylindrica with an average sward height of 50 cm with Saccharum spontaneum as a codominant species</td>
<td>0.1km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.iii.11</td>
<td>Near Mariya, south Simlaighari, west Koshi **</td>
<td>15:20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Standing amongst Acacia catechu bushes</td>
<td>Dominated by Saccharum spontaneum and Imperata cylindrica with few Acacia catechu trees (1.5m)</td>
<td>0.07km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.iv.11</td>
<td>Mariya, west Koshi **</td>
<td>16:00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking in grassland</td>
<td>Imperata dominated grasslands (60 cm ft) with thilly dotted Acacia trees soon after burning</td>
<td>0.1km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.iv.11</td>
<td>Pilot channel head, west Koshi **</td>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flying above grassland</td>
<td>Imperata cylindrica 40 cm and Saccharum spontaneum grasslands 70 cm soon after burning</td>
<td>0.05km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01.v.11</td>
<td>Pilot channel head, west Koshi **</td>
<td>13:25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking along the edge of the grassland</td>
<td>Mainly Saccharum spontaneum 60 cm dotted with Acacia trees 150 cm</td>
<td>0.1km²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* - Watched by a group of birders including one of the authors; ** - Reserve Staff

lekking areas and areas that are likely to be used by the floricans. The survey should be done in April-May for about two months. Reserve staff should be involved wherever possible to build their research capacity.

Habitat information and other details should be recorded systematically so that the results of such a study can contribute to better grassland management aiming to increase the florican’s population.

REFERENCES


