

Status survey and sighting records of Lesser Florican in Maharashtra

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The Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indicus* breeds in India in Gujarat, south-east Rajasthan, north-west Maharashtra and western Madhya Pradesh, with some dispersal to south-east India in the non-breeding season. It is a rare summer visitor to the *terai* of Nepal. Formerly widespread and common, it has been declining since at least 50-60 years. From 1982-1989, its population declined by nearly 60%. However, by 1994, it had increased by 32% to 2,206 birds. These population fluctuations are directly correlated with breeding season rainfall patterns. They indicate that it is susceptible to extinction in the event of severe, prolonged drought (Birdlife, 2010). It is listed in endangered category (EN) in the IUCN Red List as evaluated by BirdLife International - the official Red List Authority for birds for IUCN. The main breeding areas of Lesser Florican in Maharashtra were apparently in the districts of Nashik, Ahmednagar and Sholapur (Islam and Rahmani, 2002). Not much information is available about the recent status of Lesser Florican. Hereby we summarise the sighting records data and findings of the surveys. The survey conducted in 1999 did not include Maharashtra (Sankaran, 2000).

Sighting records in Akola district, 1998:

The officials of the Forest Department were searching the endangered Lesser Florican during 1996 and 1997 in Akola and Buldhana districts of Vidarbha. Relying on the information gathered from senior knowledgeable locals, the forest officers believed that the florican



Map showing old and new records of Lesser Florican in Maharashtra

occurs near Geru and Matargaon villages in Buldhana districts. One Mr. Himmat Pawar belonging to Pardhi community informed the officers that he had seen a Lesser Florican hen near the farm of Mr. Sanjay Dhotre who was the honorary wildlife warden of Akola district. This particular farm is located between two villages Sisa and Masa henceforth mentioned as Sisa-Masa.

On 27th September 1998, Mr. Himmat Pawar led a team of foresters of the Wildlife Wing of the Forest Department to the Sisa-Masa area. A Lesser Florican was sighted in the grasslands (called '*shivar*' locally) near Sisa-Masa villages in Akola district of Maharashtra. On 3rd October 1998, the same team revisited the '*shivar*' with Himmat Pawar. In Pardhi dialect the Lesser

Florican male is known as '*Khalchida*' and the female is known as '*Bhandewdi*'. On this day, this team succeeded in taking photographs of the florican and even took video shooting.

On 17th November 1998, an injured Lesser Florican female was found by Mr. Himmat Pawar. Mr. Vijay Kulkarni and Sandeep Agrawal of the Pakshi Mitra Sanghatna rushed to Sisa-Masa village and took possession of the injured florican. Mr. Deepak Joshi, District President of *Pakshi Mitra Sanghatna*, in turn rushed the florican to the hospital of Dr. Sadhna Lote (Human Gynaecologist). The intestine of the florican had come out and it was seriously injured by some unknown reasons. The bird was treated and given five stitches. It was rested at the doctor's

residence. The next day, on 18th November, 2009, the florican was released in the Sisa-Masa area in presence of Mrs. Shomita Samirkumar Biswas, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Mr. Deepak Joshi, Mr. Koustubh Pandharipande and Mr. Nitin Paranjape, both members of Vidarbha Nature and Science Centre, Nagpur.

Recent sighting record in Akola district, 2010

On 29th April 2010 morning, the second author, Prashant visited Borgaon Manju dam area (20° 43' 0" N and 77°09' 0" E) along with his birder friend Vijay Khawale. The dam is approximately 25km east of Akola city. This dam is locally called *Machchi Talao*. Approximately 500meters away from the dam, there is a good patch of grassland.

At around 0920hrs Prashant saw a hen like bird in grass on roadside. As he tried to take a photograph of the bird, a speeding motorcycle arrived from the opposite direction thus disturbing the bird. The bird took a flight and landed far off. The second



Prashant Gahale

A Lesser Florican female sighted in Akola district

author could take a picture of the bird in flight. The photograph is reproduced here. The photograph clearly shows a hen like appearance, sandy colour of the wings, heavily marked wing coverts and the buff background colouration of the barred flight feathers. These indicated the bird to be a female Lesser Florican. The identification was confirmed by Dr. Asad Rahmani, Director, Bombay Natural History Society.

Sighting record in Yavatmal district, 1982

In February, 1982, one fine morning a Pardhi, namely, Mr. Ramdas Sarapsingh Pawar arrived at the residence of Mr. Maruti Chitampalli who was a forest officer at that time. Mr. Pawar had brought a Lesser Florican with him. Coincidentally, the 'Vidarbha *Pakshimitra Sameelan*' (Gathering of bird lovers of Vidarbha) was going on in Nagpur city at that time. This florican was displayed to all the bird lovers during the '*sammelan*' (gathering). This proved to be the most authentic record of the existence of the rare bird in Vidarbha. The bird was ringed and released to the grasslands near Ganeshpur *beda* in Yavatmal district.

Sighting record in Kolhapur district, 2002

One Mr. Balu Dhondiba Shinde residing in a small village called Ambap found a female Lesser Florican on 30th October 2002 (pers. com. to Mr Sanjay Karkare). He informed about this unusual bird to many people, including Dr. Sandeep Labde, who informed the press about the finding of the Lesser Florican. Dr. Labde kept the bird in his clinic for some time. He suspected that the bird had hit an electric wire and got injured. This small village 'Ambap' is 20km off the Pune-Bengaluru highway.

Survey for Lesser Florican in Vidarbha

A survey for Lesser Florican and about the hunting practices among the Pardhi community in Vidarbha was conducted by famous ornithologist of Maharashtra, Mr. Maruti Chitampalli (pers.com.) during September-October, 1981.

Another survey of the hunting practices of the Pardhi community was conducted by the first author in Vidarbha and some of the areas overlapped with the previous survey conducted by Mr. Chitampalli.

The first author tried to learn the dialect of the Pardhi community and collected the names of 91 species of birds in the Pardhi dialect (Kasambe, 2007). Because of this knowledge gained by the first author, the Pardhis co-operated him and provided information about the birds and other fauna in general. He conducted the survey during 1999 to 2004.

Results of the survey

Both the surveys indicated that the Pardhis know the Lesser Florican very well. Also many of them have seen it in Akola, Washim, Yavatmal, Amravati, Wardha and Buldhana districts of Vidarbha. They hunt the Lesser Florican and sell it for money. They are familiar with the display of the male and vividly describe it.

Threats:

1. The biggest threat to the Lesser Florican in these districts is the members of the Pardhi community. Because, otherwise nobody else can trace the bird which is so rare. That also means, only Pardhis can save the Lesser Florican.
2. The second threat is conversion of grasslands into agriculture. In Vidarbha some good grasslands are encroached by many farmers including some by the members of the Pardhi community for agriculture. The legal cases are pending in various courts in the name of '*jabran jot*'.

For the conservation of Lesser Florican we suggest:

1. Involvement of the Pardhi community in the conservation of Lesser Florican.
2. Provide other means of sustenance to the community as many members of the community still rely on poaching of birds and wildlife and other illegal means for their livelihood.
3. The community needs better educational facilities for their

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children and better treatment by the government officials and awareness about the laws and opportunities to them.

4. A status survey of the Lesser Florican in Maharashtra is needed to estimate the population and threats.

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