

Bird species from Afghanistan displayed at Kabul Zoo A preliminary report

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Summary — On 28 August 2006, I visited Kabul Zoo accompanied by Dr Kadr, the senior veterinary officer. The zoo displayed c. 60 specimens of 13 bird species originating from Afghanistan. Apparently all these specimens were collected in the wild before being donated to the zoo. Despite relatively overcrowded cages, I observed few medical disorders, mostly bumblefoot problems in griffon vultures and steppe eagles, and old eye injuries.

As per our visit of 28 August 2006, Kabul Zoo displayed c. 60 specimens of 13 bird species native to Afghanistan and to neighboring countries (Table 1). It also presented a small number of exotic bird species (e.g. the ring-collared parakeet *Psittacula krameri*) and one species of doubtful origin. According to Dr Kadr, the senior veterinarian at the zoo, and to Mr Fazil Saidal, the education officer, all native bird specimens were offered to the zoo by private donors from all over the country. Indeed, it seems very plausible that the majority of displayed species had been collected from the wild in Afghanistan. The eagle owl (*Bubo bubo ascalaphus*), the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), the booted eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), the long-legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), the black vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), the lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*), the black kite (*Milvus migrans*), the Himalayan snowcock (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*) and the chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*) breed in the country. The steppe eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*), the steppe buzzard (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*) and the demoiselle crane (*Anthropoides virgo*) occur in Afghanistan in spring and autumn, during migration periods. These three species breed in Central Asia. The origin of the pelican (*Pelecanus* sp.) is confusing, as it is said to have been brought from Pakistan (Mr. Fazil Saidal, pers. comm.).

The zoo retains relatively large flocks of eagle owls and griffon vultures (Table 1), two species most often collected from nest when still unfledged and brought to the zoo when becoming too difficult to maintain at home or too expensive to feed (Dr Kadr, pers. comm.). Because of the policy of the zoo to accept all gifts and donations, the two pens receiving these species are now significantly overcrowded.

Table 1 — List of wild-caught bird species displayed at Kabul Zoo on 28 August 2006.

Common name	Scientific name	Number	Status in Afghanistan
Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	1	b, m
Black vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	4	b
Booted eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1	b, m
Chukar partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	4	b
Demoiselle crane	<i>Antropoides virgo</i>	1	m
Eagle owl	<i>Bubo bubo ascalaphus</i>	16	b
Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	1	b
Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	13	b
Himalayan snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>	1	b
Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	1	b
Long-legged buzzard*	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	2	b
Pelican*	<i>Pelecanus</i> sp.	1	unk
Steppe buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	4+	m
Steppe eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	5	m

b=breeding species in Afghanistan; m=migratory species in Afghanistan; unk=unknown status;

* identification to be confirmed upon handling.

We did not handle bird specimens, but we ambition to do so in November 2006 as part of a capture operation to identify and vaccinate animal collections at the zoo. Upon visual examination of the birds, we noticed bumblefoot problems in griffon vultures, steppe eagles and the golden eagle. In addition, we also recorded old eye injuries on one steppe buzzard, the booted eagle and the golden eagle. These injuries might have resulted from inter-specific conflicts in relatively overcrowded pens.

We observed no clinical symptoms of infectious diseases (apart from bumblefoot). However, Dr Kadr mentioned that, on several occasions in the past, avian collections of the zoo suffered outbreaks of a neurologically-expressed disease that could have been Newcastle disease.

From the point of view of taxon conservation, all bird species maintained at the zoo, except the black vulture, are categorized as ¹Least Concern by IUCN (IUCN, Red List of Threatened Species www.iucnredlist.org downloaded on 29 August 2006). The black

¹ Least Concern (LC) — A species is assessed as Least Concern when it has been evaluated against the criteria and does not qualify for Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable or Near Threatened. Widespread and abundant taxa are included in this category.

vulture is classified by the same authority as ²Near Threatened. Yet, the regional conservation status of all these species is poorly known and would definitely require more investigations.

Capture of bird species from the wild is a common practice in the country (see also report on Kabul bird market). Although its impact on bird populations is unknown, it is of concern that some relatively rare species are donated to the zoo. It has recently been the case of a 'near-to-fledge' lammergeier. Afghanistan is in need of public and institutional awareness about how to protect and preserve its wildlife.

Kabul Zoo could contribute to such awareness by diffusing the message that capturing wild birds has become a questionable practice in view of the increasing threats affecting avifauna regionally and worldwide. To be coherent, such awareness campaign would require that the zoo changes its policy concerning incoming animals and refuses in the future gifts and donations of animals captured in the wild or from doubtful origin. To have a chance to be successfully implemented, such drastic change in zoo policy should not be imposed but thoroughly discussed with the managerial staff and perhaps introduced progressively according to a case by case evaluation.

In addition, participating to wild animal trade by selling donated animals to private buyers is another dubious practice, which contributes to deplete wild animal populations, indirectly supports illegal wildlife trade, and is in contradiction with the conservation message zoos should advertise. Such practice if occurring should stop being implemented.

As mentioned above we plan to revisit the zoo in November 2006 after the autumn bird migration. In collaboration with the zoo staff, we will capture as many bird specimens as possible, identify them, vaccinate them against Newcastle disease, sample them for avian influenza check and perform any medical or surgical intervention they would require. We will also take this opportunity to check the identity of several specimens and train the staff in handling, immobilization and sampling techniques. Hopefully these actions will also help diffusing a conservation message among the staff.

² Near Threatened (NT) — A species is assessed as Near Threatened when it has been evaluated against the criteria and does not qualify for Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable now, but is close to qualifying for or is likely to qualify for a threatened category in the near future.