# MID-TERM ACTIVITY REPORT

# BIFA2_07: Filling a longstanding data gap for birds: the Central Highlands of India

Contents

## Executive summary

Our aim in this project is to fill a major biodiversity data gap in the Central Indian Highlands by mobilizing existing avian occurrence records, carrying out fieldwork in under-surveyed locations, and conducting training sessions and workshops for both experts and enthusiasts in mobilizing further records beyond the duration of the project.

Thus far, we have brought on board a few local organisations and the Forest Departments of the two states to assist with resources and permits. Do note that permits from the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department are yet to be received. A preliminary round of workshops have been held across 4 cities and some gaps have been identified. Two bird enthusiasts have been trained to document the biodiversity of the region as well as conduct workshops across the state while looking out for existing information that can prove useful to our overall aim of filling the information gaps in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

Looking ahead, we intend on surveying areas of the region that are accessible based on divisions that ease and help coverage better (such as using agro-climatic zones to demarcate regions instead of administrative boundaries). Existing data sources have been identified and work is ongoing to digitise and publish their data. Workshops in other regions, and amongst groups outside bigger cities need to be conducted.

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## Introduction

This document reports on progress made during April-September 2017 in the project "Filling a longstanding data gap for birds: the Central Highlands of India". The major goals of this project are to (i) identify, digitize and publish existing data, (ii) identify gaps and target field data collection there, (iii) train local naturalists in collected biodiversity data.

The progress of this project was intended to be assessed in terms of the number of records being generated, the number of people trained in workshops, finding and digitising historical records, and the progress of fieldwork. These indicators have been assessed either quantitatively (eg number of records, number of people trained) or qualitatively (progress of fieldwork). Another qualitative measure is the amount of goodwill (or "buy-in") generated among local naturalists and groups by our outreach, since we expect this to lead to generating long-term and continued information even after the project has ended.

Project partners will use this mid-term evaluation to assess the magnitude of their efforts and whether any course-corrections are required. In particular, partners liaise directly with our project personnel in the two States of activity, and provide coordination and support for this. This evaluation will help them re-assess the amount and nature of this support.

## The project and its objectives

The project started in April 2017 and is expected to run for 12 months (ie until end March 2018). We got off to a rather slow start, since recruitment of project personnel was delayed by 1.5 months. We wanted to ensure that personnel were recruited from the two specific States of operation (Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh), and finding suitable people took longer than expected. Subsequently, progress has been happening as planned, and the project will end as scheduled.

Key project participants and stakeholders are as follows:

Suhel Quader, Project Lead
Ramit Singal, Project Coordinator
Praver Mourya, Project Associate (Madhya Pradesh)
Ravi Naidu, Project Associate (Chhattisgarh)
Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh (Government Department)
The Nature Volunteers, Indore, Madhya Pradesh (NGO)
Citizens for Nature, Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh (NGO)
Forest Department of Chhattisgarh (Governmnent Department)
Birds and Wildlife of Chhattisgarh, Raipur (Voluntary group)

The project aims to build interest and capacity in collecting and contributing biodiversity information among all the stakeholders listed here.

The project objectives are to fill a major biodiversity gap by (i) mobilizing existing bird occurrence records, (ii) carrying out fieldwork in under-surveyed regions, and (iii) conducting training for naturalists in mobilizing further data beyond the duration of the project. The deliverables are (a) a sharp increase in the number of occurrence records from the project region, though a combination of mobilizing historical data and fieldwork, (b) a doubling of the rate at which naturalists add observations from the region to eBird, (c) training a minimum of 300 naturalists, and (d) from this experience, a plan to similarly fill gaps in other under-represented regions of India.

## Project activities completed by mid-term

Project activities that have been completed or are approaching completion:

**Compiling biodiversity data holding inventories:** A large amount of information has been either collected or identified - particularly eBird observations and occurrence records held by local naturalists and local groups. This is a first step such that the rest of the project can be prioritized and planned. Please note that we decided not to focus on data contained in museum specimens and in the published literature, as inventorying and digitizing them is not as time-critical as uncovering unpublished information available with private individuals (mostly amateur naturalists), who often do not have adequate storage and archiving mechanisms. The deliverables associated with these activities (digitizing and publishing the records) are in the process of being produced.

**Employ and train two bird enthusiasts, who will form the core team:** These two people – Praver Mourya from Madhya Pradesh and Ravi Naidu from Chhattisgarh have been employed and trained to uncover existing information and data sources about the region's avifauna, fill gaps by conducting surveys in underbirded regions and conduct capacity-building workshops with the assistance of regional stakeholders. Most of the deliverables from this project will be produced by these project personnel.

**Conduct a series of capacity-building workshops:** So far, five such workshops have been conducted. These have been in Raipur (Chhattisgarh) and Jabalpur, Bhopal, Indore and Ujjain (all in Madhya Pradesh). These have been attended by a total of c.140 naturalists and Forest Department personnel, contributing to deliverable #3 (training a minimum of 300 people).

## Project Communications

In our communications plan, we had intended to work largely through our local partners in publicizing the project in the target region. They have been doing this through social media (largely Facebook and Whatsapp groups). In addition, the regional-language (Hindi) media covered several of our workshops in August/September and described the larger effort of which the training was a part. The image on the right is a clipping from the *Patrika* newspaper, describing our workshop in Indore on 1 September 2017.

At this point, we have no additional items to add to the project page on GBIF, but should soon have something to include there.

# Mid-term evaluation findings and recommendations for the remaining project implementation period

**Project activities**

We have recruited the two project personnel, who have been working on the various activites described in the proposal. Five workshops have been carried out across the breadth of the region, and we hope to have conducted another five by the end of this year. We have identified a number of naturalists with detailed historical information from the region, including AMK Bharos, PM Laad, Bhalu Mondhe, Jagatjot Singh Flora, Mohit Sahu, and R. Jayapal. They are in principle amenable for their records to be digitized and uploaded to eBird or directly published to GBIF, as is most appropriate. Gaps in information have been identified through a combination of information already available on eBird as well as consultation with local partners and stakeholders. Fieldwork to fill these gaps is underway. Preparing bird checklists and data papers will be undertaken during the last three months of the project.

The most visible (for the moment) output of the activities undertaken so far is a sharp increase in the number of records being uploaded to eBird. The table below shows the number of records in September compared with the previous month, as well as with the same month last year.

*Table 1. Total number of records uploaded to eBird-India from the two target States for different months. Our first training workshops took place in the last week of August, and their effect should be visible from September onwards.*

|  | Chhattisgarh | Madhya Pradesh |
| --- | --- | --- |
| September 2016 | 1,268 | 1,661 |
| August 2017 | 3,601 | 1,956 |
| September 2017 | 7,095 | 4,260 |

In both States, the project has been received with a great deal of enthusiasm, both by the relevant government departments (the Forest Departments of the two States) and by naturalists and volunteer groups. The ground had been laid particularly well by our partners in Chhattisgarh. Consequently we have been given an official letter of support by the Chhattisgarh Forest Department, and a Memorandum of Understanding describing more general cooperation is currently being prepared. The workshop in Raipur (Chhattisgarh) was attended by c.60 participants, some of whom had travelled overnight to attend, and we are seeing a marked uptick in data sharing activity (via eBird) from the State. There are signs of increased enthusiasm and willingness form birders to digitize older records as well. Our local partners along with the trained naturalists are looking on track to finish surveying as many districts in the state as is possible - particularly the interesting regions in the central and southern parts of the state.

The situation in Madhya Pradesh is not as advanced. This is a far larger State, with no one group that has a presence across the entire State, and it looks like there are far fewer birdwatchers for the size of the State. The Forest Department of the State has promised us support, but we have not yet received an official letter. Despite conducting

workshops in four locations across the State, the increase in activity is markedly less than in Chhattisgarh. The cause appears to be a lack of strong local leadership among naturalists in the State, and we are planning other forms of outreach (including using social media) for Madhya Pradesh. Still, there is a slow but steady increase in spatial coverage of field work and filling the gaps.

## Project relevance

Our project partners and stakeholders are interested in several outcomes from this project. One is authenticated checklists of the birds of the two States separately. Following from this is information on the relative abundance of different species. Forest Departments are interested in checklists of each District as well as particular locations (eg Protected Areas). The Forest Department Management Plans for each Protected Area require lists of biodiversity found within the management unit – but such information has not been available for most areas, even for birds. Other partners (naturalist groups and individuals) are excited about the chance of making their observations more meaningful, but at the moment this excitement is restricted to a few people, and we are working towards making a 'cultural' transition in the community towards a greater enthusiasm for data collection and subsequent sharing.

## Project implementation

Implementation of the project has not been as efficient and effective as it could have been. Part of the delay in recruiting project personnel was unavoidable (eg, a candidate who originally was offered a position, turned it down after considerable delay), but the project team could also have been more efficient in pursuing this. In Chhattisgarh, the project is proceeding as well as could be hoped, but our activities have not been as effective in Madhya Pradesh, owing partly to delays in receiving official letters of support from the Forest Department and to lukewarm support by local groups. Part of this response is not under the control of the project team, but more communication between the Project Lead/Coordinator and the local groups and Forest Departments of the two States would certainly help things along. We are devising a strategy for more frequent and smooth communication between the project team and the various stakeholders.

## Successes to build on

One of the main tasks in the early phase of the project was to establish a relationship between the project team and the various stakeholders. A personal rapport and understanding is essential for cooperation and support in various ways. Our initial visits to the region, and one-on-one discussions with those in the two States have generated remarkable goodwill and energy for the project.

Individual naturalists as well as our local partners have been eager and quick to help and carry out tasks when required. Amateur birders across the region have expressed support for the project and in both states, come forward and helped when required. The Forest Departments, too, have been responsive and have been advising on the structure and implementation of the project.

Still, translating this goodwill into change on the ground takes time. We hope to have a translated much of the positive feeling to meeting the outcomes and deliverables of the project. But we feel confident that there is going to be a long-term dividend in terms of greater collection and sharing of species occurrence information on platforms like eBird and iNaturalist.