The majestic birds are home again





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The picturesque valley of Phobjikha in Wangdue is a wide alpine valley. It is considered one of the largest and the most significant wetlands in the country. At 3,000 metres above the sea level, it is the roosting ground for the endangered black-necked cranes.

Locally known as *thrung thrung karm*, these majestic birds have migrated to Phobjikha valley from the Tibetan plateau, crossing the Himalayas. They arrived in the valley towards late October and will depart in February. Classified as vulnerable under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s red list categories, these birds are legally protected in the country.

In Phobjikha, the arrival of the cranes signals the end of the harvest season. People are unwinding their work in the fields and stay warm inside their homes.

A villager in Phobjikha, Tshering, said black-necked cranes always had a sacred identity in the Bhutanese culture and it has often appeared in folktales, songs and historical texts.

"These birds are an integral part of our culture. They are revered as heavenly bird (*lhabja*). They appear in many stories, wall paintings and embroideries. They represent and symbolise longevity and elegance," Tshering said.

Due to such reasons, black-necked cranes are legally protected in the country and have been protected since time immemorial by the local people's traditional respect for all living beings.

Of the global estimated total of about 11,000 black-necked cranes, around 500 of them fly to their winter habitats, namely Bumdeling in Trashiyangtse, Chumey in Bumthang and Phobjikha in Bhutan.

Every year, over 300 of the estimated 500 cranes that migrate to the country spend their winter months in this valley. The arrival of the cranes is the main attraction for tourists visiting the valley.

Records with the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) show that 609 birds arrived this year, highest number recorded in 29 years.

RSPN has been monitoring the birds in Phobjikha since 1986 and the government leased the area to RSPN for protection and sustainable management since 2003. The Wildlife Conservation Division under the Department of Forest and Park Services looks after the spe-

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cies conservation in the country.

Despite limited studies conducted about the black-necked cranes, the banding programme began in the late 1990s and has been continuing since then. All these banding programmes show that black-necked cranes in Bhutan migrate to the Tibetan Plateau in China.

According to RSPN's zoological research on current population status and conservation initiatives, it shows that arrivals of the black-necked cranes are on the rise since 1987.

In the last 27 winters, from 1987 to 2014, an average of 415 cranes arrived in the country annually. Every year from 1987 to 2014, the number of arrivals in the country increased by six on an average.

The rise in arrival has been largely attributed to the 251 percent growth in the number of cranes visiting Phobjikha valley. As per the research, overall arrival has been steadily rising since 1987 although crane arrivals in some wintering grounds such as Bumdeling, Khotakha and Bumthang are declining.

Black-necked cranes visiting the country steadily increased over the past two and half decades. While Phobjikha valley has a gradual increase in black-necked crane arrivals, Bumthang, Bumdeling and Khotokha have seen fewer cranes especially after the early 1990s.

According to the research, the black-necked cranes face various threats to their habitat with construction development and clearing land for agriculture. The biggest threat to these birds is changes in the land use associated with modern developmental activities.

Already most of the wetlands in Phobjikha, Khotokha and Bumthang have come under agricultural and other developmental activities related to urbanisation, the research states. "Such developments can pose a long-term threat to the survival of the birds and other associated species. For instance, in Phobjikha, people started cultivating potatoes in the early 1980s, which accelerated in the 1990s. Currently about 91 percent of the local community's income is generated from potato cultivation alone and 97 percent of the households are involved in farms and related activities."

Around the globe, primary threats impacting black-necked cranes are agriculture and tourism. Conservation initiatives in these habitats include habitat rehabilitation, habitat and predation studies, awareness programmes and banding research activities. Sustainable livelihood programmes have also been implemented in Phobjikha and Bumdeling with the former receiving more attention, the research states. "The Black-necked Cranes in Bhutan share their habitat with the local people, therefore maintaining the needs of both the bird and the human population is becoming a challenge."

The day is coming to an end. Tshering and his family unwind the day after a hard day's work. Phobjikha valley becomes silent as the night falls. But then one can intermittently hear the cranes from afar.

These majestic birds are here to stay in the beautiful valley of Phobjikha for the next three months.



