

# White-bellied Heron: Will We See Them in The Future?



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A river has meandered & flowed far away. The name of the river is very beautiful: "Namdhapa". The water is as cold as ice. Along the two sides of the river, there are small and big mixed stone lands and the two sides of the river are surrounded by a beautiful dense forest. I don't know how many different animals, birds, insects live there. Hey! Hey! Look there; I that a bird on the river? Probably 5-6 are standing there. Long neck, long legs & the color of the body are grey but chest is full of white. They are busy for eating fish on the river. At this time, a group of local tribal peoples appeared at the riverside. But when they are crossing the river on a wooden bridge, then all the birds flew away & disappeared into the nearby forest. I have never seen a bird like this before. I didn't recognize that bird. Because they can't be seen anymore. There are none other than; they are White-bellied Heron (*Ardea insignis*).

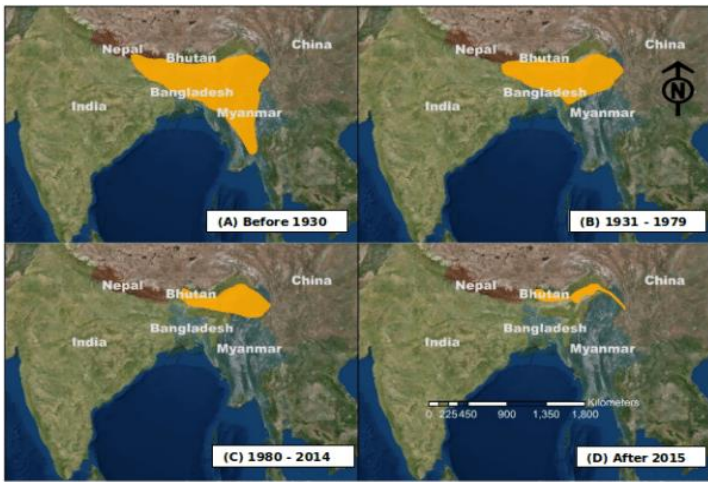
Long Mountain ranges of Himalaya & its glacier formation some high-altitude riverine system that is found in the northeast part of India. This riverine system is surrounded by unique biodiversity forests. This forests & the river is the home of a very rare & secretive species of bird. A one such Hponkanrazi Wildlife Sanctuary & Hkakaborazi National Park. According to RSPN's annual WBH Report 2022, the 24 individuals recorded, 22 individuals were observed in the wild including one dead & two individuals in the white-bellied heron conservation centre.

White-bellied Heron is a significant indicator species. The local people are benefiting themselves from them because they provide essential ecosystem services. Their presence ensures clean water sources, channels etc. But from last few years, white-bellied heron is quietly disappearing. Namdhapa Wildlife Sanctuary is the only breeding ground of this bird. But they are highly sensitive to human presence. The 'Lhisu' tribes of Vijaynagar & Gandhinagar in Arunachal Pradesh are walking through the forest because it is the shortest distance to reach the near market or hospital for collecting ration or medical emergency purpose. Those tribal people are making their own pathway by cutting trees. Due to the cutting of those trees the habitat of the white-bellied heron has losing because they make their nests in tall trees. Hunting is also the reason of disappearing of them. During winter season, a many of white-bellied herons arrive in the Namdhapa Wildlife Sanctuary riverine area because it's time to hunt for an insect. But they die as a result of hunting because like



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many forests local tribal communities hunting has been a traditional practice. In the last few decades over 130 dams are proposed in Arunachal Pradesh by the government. Therefore, their riverine habitats are also severely degraded. Due to damming, the number of fish has decreased. Thereby reducing their food resources have also caused of decreasing their populations. As well as the forest fire is the reason of degrading of the population.



**Figure 2:** Change in the distribution (orange) of white-bellied Heron over the century and current global distribution.

**Image Source:** Source from ResearchGate. The article “The current population, distribution and conservation status of the critically endangered White-bellied Heron (*Ardea insignis*) in Bhutan” by Indra Prasad Acharya.

Many organizations have been working on the conservation of the white-bellied heron. The Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), an organization has working to protect & surveys on

white-bellied heron in Northeast India, Myanmar & Bhutan, The Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology & Environment (ATREE), has been working on the conservation the white-bellied heron in Assam & Arunachal Pradesh & The Habitats Trust (THT), an organization working to protect natural habitats in Arunachal Pradesh along key river valleys. White-bellied Heron is protected in Myanmar & Bhutan both countries legally & culturally. The white-bellied heron is protected under schedule 1 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 in India. According to RSPN’s survey report, the highest number of white-bellied heron was found in Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, Bhutan. The last herons sighted in the zone I (Phochhu to Kamichhu) & zone II (Kamichhu, Harachhu to Taksha) were in 2018. Those organization has been taking many actions to protect this particularly heron’s family &the government as well as.

When we think of the worlds critically or endangered species, white-bellied heron is never the first name that comes to our mind. If we don’t take any action as soon as possible to protect or conserve this bird, one day the world may never see this rare species again. So, we will hope that this bird will protect & gaining their populations through successful breeding. Then those birds will return from the verge of the extinction.