

Celebrating International Vulture Awareness Day

VULTURE WATCH

September 7, 2024



Wildlife and Biology Conservation Research Foundation



Wildlife and Conservation Biology (WCB) Research Foundation is a Non-profit organization registered with Government of India established in September 2020. The foundation is established with the goal of accelerating action-oriented research and enhances the capacity of students for research and development in the field of wildlife and conservation biology. We are committed to science-based conservation and outreach activities through research and development.

The major thrust areas of research at WCB are mammalian ecology and behavior, habitat evaluation and modeling, wetland biology and monitoring, biodiversity monitoring and environmental biotechnology. We are also engaged in consultancy work such as biodiversity monitoring, soil and water testing and green audits.

Since the establishment of the WCB Research Foundation, we have had many interns and dissertation students. We offer and encourage exchange programmes with organizations and institutes with similar interests and open for bilateral programmes related to wildlife and conservation biology.

Currently we have 10 ongoing research and conservation projects in different parts of Gujarat. Our future goal is to encourage young students to make their career in the field of wildlife and conservation and enhance the capacity through training and workshops. Apart from this, we publish scholarly research articles and observations focused on the field of wildlife and conservation biology in our triannual journal "Prithivya". We are also engaged in community services such as wildlife rescue, plantation, science-based restoration and biodiversity monitoring and assessment.

Centre of Excellence for Wildlife and Conservation Studies



The Centre for Wildlife and Conservation Studies (CWCS) at Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University (BKNMU), Junagadh, Gujarat, is a premier institution dedicated to wildlife research, education, and conservation. Located near vital wildlife habitats such as Gir Forest and the Little Rann of Kutch, CWCS engages in essential research on endangered species, habitat restoration, human-wildlife conflict, and ecosystem health.

The Centre offers specialized courses and training in wildlife biology, health, GIS & remote sensing, and conservation genetics, promoting academic development through workshops and public awareness initiatives. By partnering with government agencies, NGOs, and local communities, CWCS encourages sustainable coexistence between humans and wildlife. It continues to be a key contributor to conservation efforts in Gujarat.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Wildlife and Conservation Biology (WCB) Research Foundation and the Centre for Wildlife and Conservation Studies (CWCS) at Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University (BKNMU), we extend our deepest gratitude to the esteemed individuals and institutions whose invaluable contributions ensured the success of the Vulture Watch programme.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the Directors of the WCB Research Foundation, its Steering Committee for their valuable approval and guidance, and the Activities and Event Coordination Group for their remarkable efforts in arranging and managing the event. Your collective contributions were instrumental in making the programme a success.

Thank you to the Vice Chancellor of BKNMU for your unwavering collaboration and support, which played a key role in the success of this initiative. We also extend our gratitude to the Director of CWCS for your valuable guidance and leadership throughout the programme, helping to shape its impact and reach.

A special thank you goes to our expert guides, Dr. Anoop Vijayakumar and Mr. Mayank Judal, whose knowledge and dedication greatly enhanced the experience for all participants. Your engaging discussions and invaluable insights into vulture ecology significantly enriched the learning experience and the event's overall success.

To the participants, volunteers, and students, we acknowledge your enthusiasm, hard work, and dedication. Your involvement in the observation and documentation of the vulture population has left a lasting impact on the event's success.

Lastly, we are thankful to the supporting staff whose efforts behind the scenes ensured the seamless execution of the event. The success of the Vulture Watch programme is a testament to the collective efforts of everyone involved, and we look forward to your continued support in future conservation endeavors.

~ Event Coordinators, Vulture Watch Event



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Event Summary

The Wildlife and Conservation Biology (WCB) Research Foundation and the Centre of Excellence for Wildlife and Conservation Studies (CWCS) at Bhakt Kavi Narsinh Mehta University jointly organized a "Vulture Watch" event on September 7, 2024, at Girnar Mountain in Junagadh, Gujarat, India. This event was held to coincide with International Vulture Awareness Day and aimed to educate and ignite curiosity among the local community about the important role of vultures, nature's cleaning crew. The focus species for this event was the Indian Vulture (*Gyps indicus*), also known as the "Giranri Gidh" due to its habitat in the Girnar region.

The primary objectives of the Vulture Watch event were:

1. To increase awareness about the ecological importance of vultures, particularly the Indian Vulture, in the Girnar ecosystem.
2. To educate participants about the biology, behavior, and conservation challenges faced by vultures in the region.
3. To provide hands-on experience in vulture observation and identification.
4. To foster a sense of community engagement in wildlife conservation efforts.
5. To inspire young participants to join vulture research and conservation by volunteering in projects.

Event Location: Girnar Mountain, Junagadh

The Vulture Watch event was held at Girnar Mountain, a significant geological and ecological landmark in the Junagadh district of Gujarat, India. Girnar, also known as Girinagar or Revatak Parvata, is a group of mountains forming a roughly circular complex with five principal peaks:

1. Gorakhnath Peak (altitude 1,117 MSL)
2. Guru Dattatreya (altitude 1,000 MSL)
3. Amba Mata (altitude 975 MSL)
4. Oghad Sikhar (altitude 985 MSL)
5. Kalka (altitude 525 MSL)

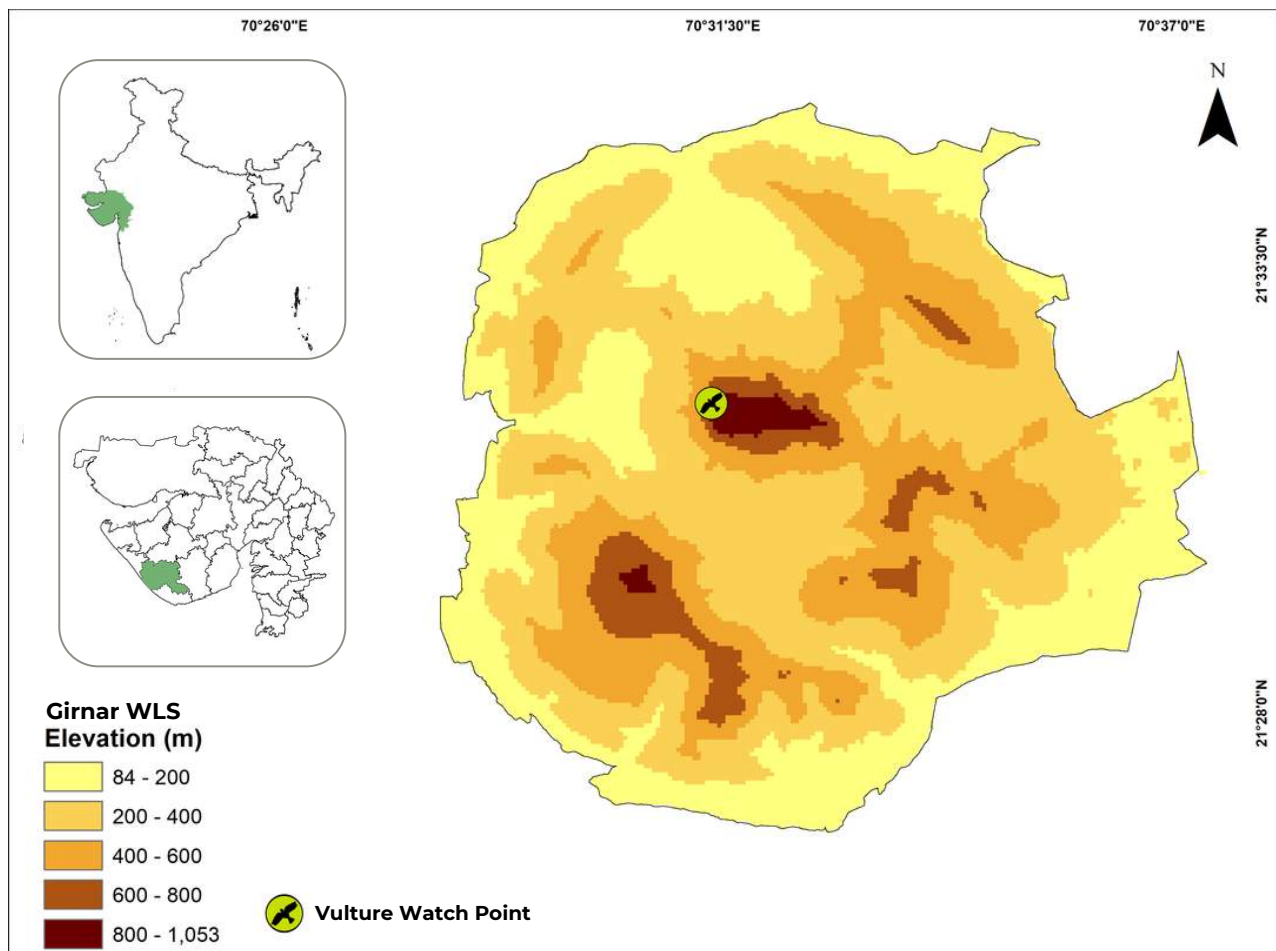


Figure 1: Map showing Vulture Watch Point in Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary along with elevation

The mountain is not only a biodiversity hotspot but also a site of great religious and historical importance, with numerous Jain and Hindu temples dotting its landscape. The Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 2008, covers an area of about 178 square kilometers around the mountain complex. The unique topography of Girnar Mountain, characterized by steep cliffs, dense forests, and diverse vegetation, makes it an ideal habitat for various wildlife species, including the Indian Vulture. The mountain's ecosystem supports a rich array of flora and fauna, with the vulture population being a crucial component of this delicate balance.

Selection of Girnar mountain for this event allowed participants to observe vultures in their natural habitat while also experiencing the broader ecological context in which these birds thrive. The mountain's accessibility combined with its ecological significance made it a perfect setting for the Vulture Watch event.

The Girnar Mountain offers secure nesting sites for vultures along its steep cliffs. The surrounding areas provide ample food sources for these scavenging birds. Additionally, the mountain's high elevation and topography create thermal updrafts, which are essential for vulture flight and soaring behavior. As a part of the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary, the mountain offers a relatively safe haven for vultures, protecting them from various anthropogenic threats.



Figure 2: Pilgrims ascending the steps of Girnar Mountain, surrounded by its majestic landscapes

Focus Species: The Indian Vulture (*Gyps indicus*)

The Girnar region is home to several vulture species, with the Indian Vulture (*Gyps indicus*) being the primary focus of the Vulture Watch event. Other species reported from here are White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*), Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*), and one sighting of Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*). Indian Vulture was most abundant species among all other vultures and having known roosting and nesting sites. This resident species is classified as critically endangered by the IUCN. This species has faced one of the most drastic declines, with over 99% of its population lost in the last few decades. The primary reason for this alarming decline was Diclofenac poisoning, a veterinary drug that was toxic to vultures. Additionally, habitat loss leading to fewer good nesting and resting sites, collisions with power lines, and food scarcity have further threatened the survival of the Indian Vulture.

The presence of multiple vulture species in the Girnar region underscores the area's importance as a vulture habitat and highlights the need for comprehensive conservation efforts. The Vulture Watch event focused primarily on the Indian Vulture due to its critically endangered status and its significance in the local ecosystem, but participants were also educated about the other vulture species present in the area.



Figure 3: Vulture species reported in Girnar WLS (Indian Vulture, White-rumped Vulture, Red-headed Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Bearded Vulture from left to right)

Image Credits: Canva Library

Event Activities

The event began early on the morning, with participants gathering at Bhavnath Taleti near the new steps by 6:45 AM. Dr. Nishith Dharaiya, the Director of CWCS, warmly welcomed the group and provided a comprehensive explanation of the initiative's aims and objectives. This was followed by a round of introductions, during which each participant shared their academic and professional background, as well as their motivations for attending the event. After receiving quick instructions and safety briefings, the group commenced their trek at 7 AM. As they ascended the mountain, participants engaged in casual conversations, getting to know one another and sharing their interests in wildlife and conservation. Participants interacted with the experts Dr. Anoop Vijayakumar and Mr. Mayank Judal, discussing various aspects of the local ecosystem and vulture biology.

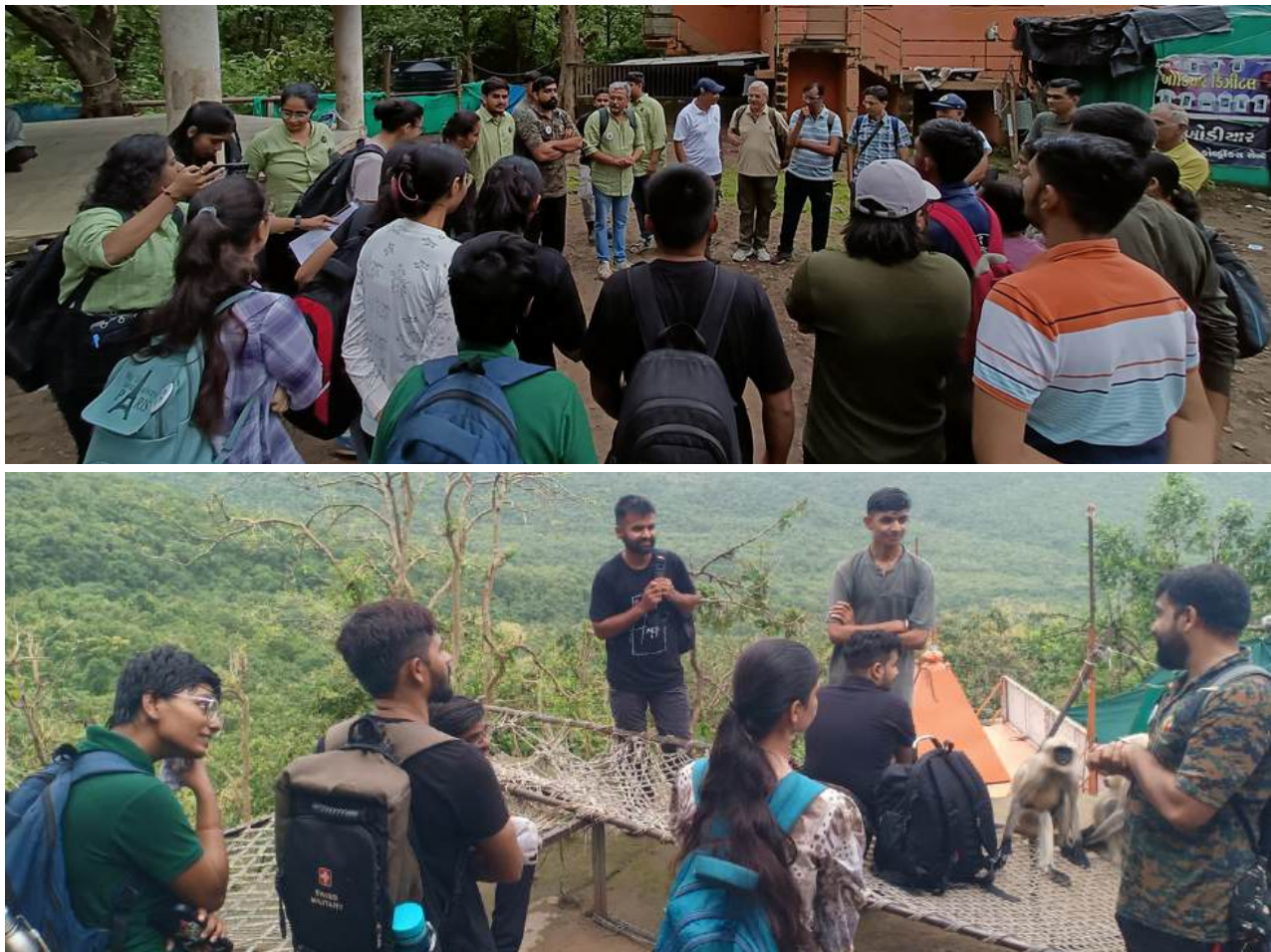


Figure 4: Brief introduction and engaging discussion with participants during the ascent

Despite the long and tiring climb, spirits were lifted at the 1500-step mark when the group spotted three raptors soaring overhead. After careful observation, these birds were identified as Indian vultures, much to the excitement of the participants. Using binoculars provided by the organizers, participants had the opportunity to observe these majestic birds up close and even take photographs. The experts seized this moment to conduct an impromptu educational session, teaching the participants how to identify this specific vulture species. They then expanded the discussion to cover vulture species found worldwide, explaining the differences between old and new world vultures. The conversation naturally progressed to focus on the vultures of India and their unique characteristics, followed by a more localized discussion on the vultures of Gujarat and their distribution. The experts also elaborated on the adaptations that make vultures the best obligate scavenger species. This informative session concluded with a brief Q&A, allowing participants to clarify their doubts and satisfy their curiosity.



Figure 5: Experts conducting a quick discussion on vultures, their identification and characteristics immediately after spotting the Indian vultures.

As the trek resumed, participants were treated to sightings of various other wildlife species. Upon reaching the intended number of steps, the group diverted onto trails that led them through water streams. As they approached the final point, excitement peaked when two Indian vultures were spotted in the crevice of a nearby cliff. However, the highlight of the trek came moments later when the group's attention was drawn to a green patch on the cliff face. Upon closer inspection, participants were thrilled to discover not just one or two, but a group of eight vultures. A thorough examination of the entire cliff revealed a total of 15 Indian vultures, a sight that left all participants exhilarated.



Figure 6: Expert pointing out vultures nestled in the crevices of a cliff, and providing detailed information



At the final destination point, the experts initiated an in-depth discussion covering various aspects of vulture ecology and conservation. Topics included the role of scavengers in ecosystems, different scavenger species, the ecological importance of vultures, threats facing vulture populations, and ongoing conservation initiatives. The experts also shared insights from their own research and conservation work. This session was highly interactive, with some participants sharing their personal experiences with vultures. The experts provided information on how individuals can contribute to vulture conservation efforts, and young participants were particularly encouraged to volunteer for research and conservation projects.



Figure 7: Experts leading an interactive discussion on vulture ecology, conservation challenges, and how individuals, especially young participants, can contribute to ongoing efforts

During this engaging discussion, the group was treated to the awe-inspiring sight of vultures soaring overhead. After ample time for observation and discussion, the group began their descent around noon. They reached the bottom of the mountain at approximately 1:30 PM and reached the end meeting point, where a well-deserved lunch was provided. The event concluded with the distribution of certificates and informational materials, leaving participants with tangible reminders of their educational and inspiring experience.



Figure 8: Participants observing soaring vultures, witnessing their graceful flight



Image Credit Kaushal Maheriya



Image Credit Kaushal Maheriya

Event Outcomes & Feedback

The Vulture Watch event at Girnar Mountain proved to be highly successful, yielding several positive outcomes and generating enthusiastic feedback from participants. One of the most significant outcomes was the increased awareness and knowledge about vultures among the participants. Many expressed surprises at the complexity of vulture behavior and their critical role in ecosystem health, with 90% reporting a significant improvement in their understanding of vultures, their biology, and ecological importance. The event also succeeded in its goal of enhancing participants' identification skills, with majority of the participants feeling more confident in identifying Indian Vultures and distinguishing them from other vulture species in the region. The conservation message of the event resonated strongly with attendees, as evidenced by participants expressing a heightened sense of urgency regarding vulture conservation and the need for immediate protective action. This increased awareness translated into a commitment to action, with all of participants pledging to engage in specific activities to support vulture conservation efforts, such as volunteering for local projects or spreading awareness in their communities.

The overall event experience received high praise, with most of the participants rating it as "Excellent" or "Very Good." Attendees particularly commended the well-planned nature of the event and the informative content provided throughout the day. The guided trek and expert talks delivered by Dr. Anoop Vijayakumar and Mr. Mayank Judal were highlighted as especially valuable components of the program. Many participants appreciated the hands-on nature of the event, noting that the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical observation significantly enhanced their learning experience. The event also sparked a broader interest in wildlife conservation among several participants, who reported viewing Girnar Mountain not just as a pilgrimage site but as a crucial wildlife habitat requiring protection.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Vulture Watch event at Girnar Mountain successfully combined education, conservation awareness, and hands-on experience to create an impactful learning experience about the Indian Vulture. The enthusiastic response from participants, along with the valuable insights and feedback, underscores the potential of such events in fostering community engagement in wildlife conservation.

The event achieved its primary goals of raising awareness about vulture conservation, providing hands-on learning experiences, and inspiring participants to become advocates for these critically endangered birds. The high levels of engagement and the commitments made by participants to support conservation efforts indicate that the event has the potential to create lasting impact beyond its immediate duration.

Moving forward, the organizers, in collaboration with the CWCS and local authorities, recommend the following actions to build upon the success of this event:

- Organize regular Vulture Watch events at Girnar Mountain to maintain public interest and involvement in vulture conservation. Consider expanding the program to other important vulture habitats in the region.
- Develop a comprehensive citizen science program for ongoing vulture monitoring in the Girnar region. This program could leverage the network of enthusiastic participants from the event and expand to include local communities and schools.
- Create educational materials, such as informative brochures, videos, and interactive displays, based on the event's content. These materials can be disseminated within local schools, community centers, and nature clubs to reach a wider audience.
- Establish a regional network of vulture enthusiasts, researchers, and conservation organizations. This network could facilitate knowledge-sharing, joint initiatives, and long-term monitoring of the vulture population.

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