

MRS HUME'S PHEASANT "NONG-IN" - a flagship bird of Manipur

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Courtesy: Internet

The Hume's Pheasant, *Syrmaticus humiae*, also known as Mrs Hume's barredback Pheasant or bar-tailed pheasant, is a large (male 90 cm and female 60 cm) and long-tailed (*Syrmaticus* spp) forest pheasant. Although closely resembling Elliot's Pheasant (*Syrmaticus ellioti*), a male of this species has a grayish brown head, bare red facial skin round its eyes, yellowish bill, brownish orange iris,, glossy steel-blue feathers on its throat, neck and upper breast; deep chestnut-brown plumage on its abdomen and flanks, and three conspicuous white bars on the upper wings. Besides, it has black and chestnut bars all across its long tail in silvery-grey colour. The female is the chestnut brown bird with whitish throat, buff-colour belly and white-tipped tail.

Range :

The Hume's Pheasant is endemic in the regions of northeastern India, Myanmar, Thailand and China. Two subspecies are named from these places; one is *Syrmaticus humiae humiae* in the hills of Manipur, Mizoram through western Myanmar south to the river Irrawady, while the other, *Syrmaticus humiae burmanicus* finds its habitat in the forests of south western China, northern and eastern Myanmar and extreme northern part of Thailand.

Nong-in Legend:

The Hume's Pheasant is lovingly called Loining-koi or Noining-koi or Nong-in, in Manipuri or Wa-ru in Lamkang or Tikaren in Tangkhul. The bird is, indeed, very colourful and attractive. It usually resides near rivers with rocky hillsides abundant with scrub forests. The people of Manipur had the belief that the eternal soul of an orphan or a loving couple dying from hunger and thirst transformed themselves into an elegant-looking pair of birds to be known as Nong-in. In fact, this bird earned its name 'Nong-in' because of its ability of knowing changes in weather conditions or cycle of cloud in the sky (Nong- meaning rain, in - meaning to follow: one knowing the rain/weather cycle). Admired by lyricists and naturalists of all ages, Nong-in is often described as the most talented lover of song, dance and moonlight. its ability of knowing changes in weather conditions or cycle of cloud in the sky (Nong- meaning rain, in - meaning to follow: one knowing the rain/weather cycle). Admired by lyricists and naturalists of all ages, Nong-in is often described as the most talented lover of song, dance and moonlight.

Distribution :

Although, the exact population-size and status remain virtually unknown, today, Nong-in in Manipur appears very rare and vanishing. Its past range covers Ukhrul, Valley of Barak River and its tributaries, mouth of Thoubal River etc between 900-1800 metres. Here the bird was frequently seen along the open dry evergreen, mixed pine-broadleaf forests on the steep rocky hillsides, interrupted by scrub and grassy plains. Roosts were mainly located along ridges, and in other relatively open areas. They often spend time by feeding and resting in pair scenes of rejoicing in mud-bathing or sunbathing continues hours together or till

MRS HUME'S PHEASANT
Syrmaticus humiae humiae
 (NONGYEIN / NOEININGKHOI / LOEININGKHOI)
 Size : 90cm (Male), 60cm (Female)
 Colour : Most ornamental game bird in existence.
 Male - Brightly coloured chestnut and blue, white banding scapulars and wings, barred tail;
 Female - Less colourful

eventide. When a sudden danger or change of weather was sensed, the frenzy birds crawled behind the rock-clefts with noisy calls. When a pair from a cleft-shelter started calling, another pair nearby responded, and thus within a short period the whole air is filled with a chord of their calls. Trawlers took advantages of it for locating the presence of the bird.



In October 2005, a 60-70 aged Tamenglongian revealed his past experiences of Nong-in, locally known as Azuina/Thangding in Rongmei (these names are not certain) in small flocks mostly one male with three-four females near brooks with rocky hillsides and plenty of sand deposits along the course. They came out mostly during early morning and after a feeding all through the morning, they perched and took rest. Frequently a bird or so lays over its one wing and the other wing and legs, stretching out in one direction, which may be a form of complete rest in tranquil environment.

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Threats :

During the recent past, habitat modification and overexploitation in the form of deforestation and extension of developmental programmes are the main courses for complete decimation of wild denizens. In Manipur the bird's habitat has been destroyed and severely fragmented by extensive shifting cultivation and uncontrolled annual forest fires. Besides, a more direct threat is posed by the practices of poaching and snaring of the bird continued for years; and these, especially, as the range of the species overlaps with hill tribes, and in spite of having several preventive laws and regulations, their hunting lifestyles are still rampaging. The very fact that Manipur is home to Hume's pheasant and the bird has attained an emblematic status to represent state is not very well known to them. A highly adhesive gum prepared from certain locally available herbs is often used for capturing the bird. Such preparations may be left on the ground or smeared on logs near the water places where the bird frequents. As a result, not only the Nong-in, the other pheasants of the state have become endangered and they are waiting for a gory death to face. Though, fortunately, no pheasant species has yet disappeared (Green Peafowl?) from the state's soil, continuing pressures pounce upon them and their peculiar habitat-critical to their survival-will be fatal, if the practice continues.

Conservation Concern :

In the history of wildlife conservation in Manipur, concern for Sangai protection has been addressed often more seriously than any of the wild denizens including Nong-in. The centrality of the deer in the psyche of local people is manifested through folklore, legends and religion, and boosted by the current status of the deer. In fact, one can find Sangai images in many public places, travel agencies, hotels/restaurants, industrial products etc.

The Concerns for the animal has led to the creation of Keibul Lamjao Sanctuary/National Park (1954/1977) as well as wide spread of media coverage and launching of special programmes across the country and abroad. 'Species of the Year' by Nandankanan Zoo, Orissa, 'Our Sangai' by Sri Chamarajendra Zoological Garden, Mysore (1992), a slogan campaign 'Conservation of your Sangai is now our Business also' by British Airways (1992), 'Ningthem' (mascot) by the 5th National Game, Manipur (1999), to name a few.

The species and cultural status of Nong-in is not inferior to that of Sangai. Both are flagship species of the state. Nong-in also gained the status of Manipur State Bird in the same year as Sangai did in 1989. However, no action, so far, for Nong-in's conservation in-situ or ex-situ has taken up. Some critics decry this

Barak Basin at Tamenglong District of Manipur, - a former habitat of Nong-in

recognition of Nong-in as state's insignia as a preoccupation of an elitist of bird and animal lobby. But, it seems, the steps taken by the authority simply aims essentially at protecting natural wealth and ecological security of an endangered species. In this context, therefore, the range areas of the species in Manipur should be identified; the core area of such flagship species is to keep as 'inviolable' areas free from incompatible human uses. But the current question is: where lies Nong-in's 'inviolable' area. In view of this, every effort, whatsoever, for whereabouts of the species should not be left unturned and fast step vigil for its discovery must be prioritized.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (Manipur Rules, 1974) cannot reach the hills of Manipur. Wildlife matter is yet to be prioritized, actually as it should be. A conservation model, exclusively or otherwise, does not appear to be working in the hills, despite the advantages of more stretches of forests, with relatively low human population density, and far less developmental pressures. To cite an example, many forests in places of Tamenglong are yet in a tranquil world untouched by the destructive cynicism of technological progresses. Perhaps, it is the only left-out place in the state where battles between human greed and wilderness were being marginally fought.

Two reasons are important. Firstly, the Manipur Land Revenue Act is not enforced yet in the hills and as such social dominance and control over of land vests largely with local communities and secondly, hunting and poaching were going on the rampage as traditional rights in these regions. Under such circumstances, the authority is a largely passive bystander witnessing the massive overkill and consumption of wildlife. A conservation model strictly ensuring the hill peoples of their possible rights towards the lands and wildlife, providing them a stake in the sustainability of biodiversity which is crumbling into non-biodegradable would be the need of the hour □



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