

## Giant Ibis (*Pseudibis gigantea*) in Southern Lao PDR

On 19 February 1997 I positively identified, from close distance, a group of five adult Giant Ibis (*Pseudibis gigantea*) along the edge of the Houay Khaliang Stream in the Southern part of the Xe Pian National Biodiversity Protected Area (NBCA) in Khong District, Champasak Province, Southern Lao PDR (the sighting was approximately located at 14 02'N, 106 03'E). Bruce Jefferies, from the National Biodiversity Conservation Areas Sub-Programme of the Government of Lao PDR–FINNIDA–World Bank–Global Environment Facility Forest Management and Conservation Programme, also observed the birds when we flushed them.

The birds were seen in mid-afternoon while we were walking up Houay Khaliang from the confluence of the Houay Chang Nang Stream. The area is approximately 110 metres above sea level, and is close to the Lao border with Siam Pang District, Stung Treng Province, Cambodia. The Houay Khaliang originates in Lao PDR and passes into Cambodia before flowing into the Sekong River, a major tributary of the Mekong River. The medium-sized stream of Houay Khaliang was not flowing when we saw the birds, but there was still a considerable amount of stagnant water in stream pools. Water is found in some of these pools all year round.

The stream's riparian forests are mixed deciduous and dry dipterocarp. The riparian habitat is still in relatively good condition, although some large trees were selectively logged from along the edge of the Houay Khaliang prior to the establishment of the Xe Pian NBCA in 1993.

Apart from the five Giant Ibis confirmed, a sixth Giant Ibis was tentatively identified by me a little downstream from where the five Giant Ibis were seen on the same day. In addition, foot tracks and holes in the sand believed to have been made by the long narrow beaks of Giant Ibis were also observed in the upper part of the Houay Chang Nang by other members of the World Wildlife Fund–organized biodiversity survey team that we were a part of. We observed the same type of foot and beak signs around where we saw the Giant Ibis. Excrement of Giant Ibis found along the Houay Khaliang appeared to contain pieces of pulverized shellfish. Villagers claimed that Giant Ibis feed mainly on earthworms and shellfish.

The site where the Giant Ibis were seen is believed to be identical to where a single Giant Ibis was observed on 3 February 1993 by researchers surveying the area (THEWLIS & TIMMINS, 1996). They spelt the name of the stream "Houei Kaliang". Other recent sightings of Giant Ibis include two along the Xe Pian River, northeast of the Houay Khaliang, on 13 March 1993. These 1993 records were the first confirmed sightings for the species for over 30 years (THEWLIS & TIMMINS, 1996).

Since then, there has been one confirmed sighting from the Tonle Sesan River in Ratanakiri Province, northeast Cambodia in 1994, and in May 1995 two Giant Ibises were separately sighted on the Xe Pian River within 20 km of where the 1993 Xe Pian River sightings were made (THEWLIS & TIMMINS, 1996). On 1 May 1996, two Giant Ibis were

flushed from Nongsonghong pool in the proposed Dong Khanthung NBCA in Mounlapamok District, Champasak Province (TIMMINS & VONGKHAMHENG, 1996), and villagers living in the area later reported that a significant number of Giant Ibises occurred in adjacent wetland areas in parts Cambodia bordering with Dong Khanthung (pers. comm. WILLIAM ROBICHAUD, 1997).

The ethnic Lao people living near the Houay Khaliang said that they have two names for the Giant Ibis: "Nok Oum La" and "Nok Oum Loua". Villagers from Ban Phon Visay said the call of the Giant Ibis sound like "gawk gawk". Villagers claimed that the calls of Giant Ibis can be heard mainly in the morning. I did, however, not hear them. Villagers also claimed that Giant Ibis are "common" year round residents along the Houay Khaliang. They said that the birds are almost never hunted by local people because Giant Ibis meat is "bad smelling" and "not delicious". There were no reports of Giant Ibis having been live-captured for trade in the area. The Giant Ibis is a protected species in Lao PDR.

Apart from the above-mentioned confirmed recent sightings, Giant Ibis have also been reported by local people to be present but rare in the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia (MUNDKUR ET AL., 1995), and local people report the species to be present but rare along the mainstream Mekong River in Thalaborivatt District, Stung Treng Province. Lao speaking villagers living along the Mekong River in Northeast Cambodia also call the Giant Ibis "Nok Oum La". In the villages of Phum Koh Saneng and Phum Koh Langa, both situated on islands in the Mekong River south of the Cambodian border with Laos but north of Stung Treng town, locals estimated that only 10% of the historical population of Giant Ibis remained in May 1997. This claim could not be verified, although it is noteworthy that locals from two different villages independently made the same estimation (BAIRD, in prep.). In March, 1997 the chief of Siam Pang District, Stung Treng Province, reported that Giant Ibises are also found along Cambodian streams bordering the Xe Pian NBCA. The ethnic Lao living in Siam Pang also call Giant Ibis "Nok Oum La" and "Nok Oum Loua".

In April 1997, locals living in the Dong Phou Vieng NBCA in Phine District, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR told me that a small number of Giant Ibises still occur along the Xe Bang Hieng River and its smaller tributaries. They call it "Nok Khi Kadeuan", or "earthworm bird", due to the bird's habit of using its long pointed beak to catch earthworms in the sand along river shores. DAVID-BEAULIEU (1949–1950) reported two Giant Ibis were sighted along the Xe Bang Hieng River.

In that the Giant Ibis is believed to have been extirpated from Thailand (LEKAGUL & ROUND, 1991), and is classified as a Critically Globally Threatened species (TIMMINS & VONGKHAMHENG, 1996), it is significant that an apparently resident population of this very rare large waterbird still exists in Southern Lao PDR.

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