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Review Article

PHEASANTS FOUND IN HIMACHAL PRADESH, NORTHWESTERN HIMALAYA, INDIA: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Himachal Pradesh, located in the northwestern Himalaya, harbors a remarkable diversity of pheasants, several of which are globally threatened and serve as flagship species for Himalayan conservation. Among them, the Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*), Cheer Pheasant (*Catreuswallichii*), and Himalayan Monal (*Lophophorusimpejanus*) hold significant ecological, cultural, and conservation importance. This review highlights the diversity, distribution, and conservation status of pheasants in the region, while assessing the major challenges posed by habitat fragmentation, poaching, unregulated tourism, and climate change. Efforts undertaken through protected areas such as the Great Himalayan National Park, along with community-based conservation initiatives, have contributed to safeguarding pheasant populations. However, knowledge gaps remain regarding population dynamics, habitat use, and the long-term impacts of anthropogenic pressures. Strengthening habitat protection, promoting eco-tourism, enhancing community participation, and implementing robust monitoring programs are essential for ensuring the survival of these species. This article emphasizes the urgent need for integrated conservation approaches to secure the future of pheasants in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Pheasants, Himachal Pradesh, Northwestern Himalaya, Conservation challenges, Galliformes.

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Introduction

Pheasants, belonging to the family Phasianidae, represent an ecologically and culturally significant group of ground-dwelling birds widely distributed across the Himalayan region. These birds are vital components of mountain ecosystems, contributing to seed dispersal, maintaining trophic dynamics as prey for carnivores and raptors(Johnsgard 1986), and serving as reliable bioindicators of habitat quality and ecosystem health. Their presence often reflects the integrity of forest and grassland habitats, making them important species for monitoring environmental changes (Miller, 2010). Himachal Pradesh, located in the northwestern Himalaya, is especially rich in pheasant diversity due to its steep altitudinal

gradient, varied climatic conditions, and heterogeneous landscapes. The state spans four major ecological zones, Shivalik Hills, Lesser Himalaya, Higher Himalaya, and Trans-Himalaya, which together provide habitats ranging from subtropical foothill forests and temperate oak-pine woodlands to subalpine scrublands and alpine meadows (Saikia et al., 2011; Thakur et al., 2018). This mosaic of environments supports both widespread species, such as the Kalij Pheasant (*Lophuraleucomelanos*), and highly localized, range-restricted endemics like the Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*).Beyond their ecological roles, pheasants also hold cultural and aesthetic importance in Himachal Pradesh, featuring prominently in local folklore, religious symbolism, and traditional hunting practices. This study seeks to document the pheasant species of Himachal Pradesh while highlighting the threats they face and outlining appropriate conservation strategies.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

Himachal Pradesh, located in the northwestern Himalaya, covers an area of 55,673 km² between latitudes 30°22′–33°12′ N and longitudes 75°45′–79°04′ E (Fig. 1). The state's elevation ranges from 248 m to 6,735 m above mean sea level (Upgupta et al., 2015). Precipitation shows a sharp gradient, with about 3,000 mm annually on the outer slopes decreasing to nearly 150 mm in the arid trans-Himalayan rain shadow. Temperature regimes are equally variable, spanning subtropical conditions in the low valleys, where summer maxima remain below 40 °C, to permanently frozen environments at the highest altitudes. The region exemplifies characteristic Himalayan conditions and is broadly divided into four distinct geological and ecological zones: the Shivalik, Lesser Himalaya, Higher Himalaya, and Trans-Himalaya (Maikhuri et al., 2001).

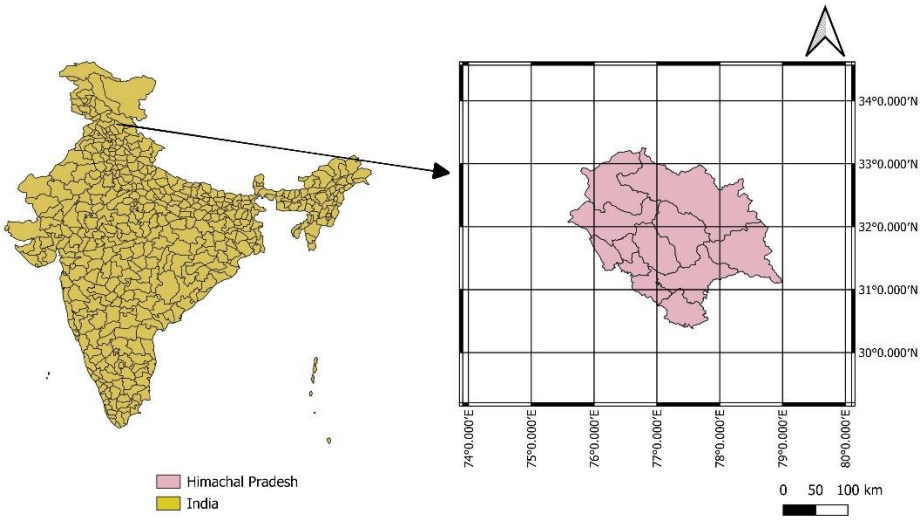

Figure 1. Map of India and Himachal Pradesh

Methodology

Drawing on field studies, government reports, and scientific literature, this review article aims to pinpoint the major drivers of biodiversity loss and assess their ecological impacts.

Results and Discussion

Himachal Pradesh harbors a rich assemblage of pheasants and allied game birds, with around 18 species recorded across its varied landscapes (Kumar, 2015). This includes high-altitude specialists like the Snow Partridge (*Lerwalerwa*) and Himalayan Snowcock (*Tetraogallushimalayensis*), mid-elevation forest pheasants such as the Western Tragopan and Koklass Pheasant (*Pucrasiamacrolopha*), and lower-elevation game birds like Grey Francolin (*Francolinuspondicerianus*) and the Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The majority of these species are not globally threatened – most are assessed as Least Concern by IUCN, indicating relatively stable populations in a broad sense. However, two flagship species stand out as conservation priorities: the Western Tragopan (*Tragopan melanocephalus*) and the Cheer Pheasant (*Catreuswallichii*). Both are classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List due to their limited distribution and ongoing declines (Table 1).

The pheasants of northwestern Himalaya occupy distinct ecological niches along the region's pronounced altitudinal gradient. Western Tragopan, for example, is confined to the temperate broadleaf–conifer forests between roughly 2,400–3,600 m elevation (Singh and Tu, 2008).It favors undisturbed old-growth forest with dense understory (often with bamboo and rhododendron), typically in secluded ravines and hillsides of the Lesser and Greater Himalaya (Ahmad 2017).By contrast, the Cheer Pheasant inhabits open scrub-grassland mosaics on steep, rugged slopes at mid elevations (1,200–3,000 m). Cheer Pheasants show a marked preference for early-successional and human-influenced habitats – they frequent grassy hillsides with scattered shrubs and patches of secondary growth near village grazing lands or recently cleared areas.This species' range overlaps largely with the mid-hill Chir pine belt, where periodic disturbances (like fires or grazing) maintain the open habitat structure it requires (Jolli, 2011).

At the highest elevations, beyond the treeline, several galliform species have adapted to the harsh alpine environment. The Snow Partridge (*Lerwalerwa*) and Himalayan Snowcock (*Tetraogallushimalayensis*) occur on alpine meadows and rocky slopes above ~3,500–4,000 m. These birds can withstand extreme cold and thin air; they forage on alpine grasses and tubers in areas often blanketed by snow in winter. In the cold desert of the trans-Himalaya (e.g. upper Lahaul-Spiti), the Tibetan Snowcock (*Tetraogallustibetanus*) is also found, surviving on sparse scrub at elevations up to ~5,000 m. Conversely, in the foothills and valleys (below ~1,200 m), pheasants give way to francolins, quails and peafowl. Grey Francolin and Black Francolin (*Francolinusfrancolinus*) are common in the scrubby grasslands and cultivated fields of the Siwalik hills and low valleys, where they thrive in warm, dry habitats with ample ground cover (Negi, 2019).The Indian Peafowl, though primarily a bird of the plains, occurs locally in Himachal's outer foothills as well, especially in open woodland near agriculture. This clear stratification of species by altitude highlights how habitat heterogeneity supports pheasant diversity in Himachal Pradesh. From subtropical thorn scrubs to temperate oak–fir forests and alpine tundra, each habitat zone harbors its own characteristic galliform community, illustrating the birds' diverse ecological adaptations.

Most Himalayan pheasants not being globally endangered, the interplay of habitat loss, human disturbance, direct persecution, and environmental change is causing local declines. Many smaller subpopulations in unprotected areas have already been extirpated or are in decline – for example, villagers in parts of Kullu District recall that Western Tragopans used to descend to low oak woods near their fields in winter decades ago, but these birds are no longer seen in those areas. The above threats, if left unmitigated, could further isolate and erode the remaining pheasant strongholds in Himachal Pradesh.Climate models for the western Himalaya project significant changes in vegetation distribution and snow cover in

coming decades. For pheasants, this could mean changes in food availability and breeding timing. For instance, the Western Tragopan's habitat suitability may actually increase in some area's upslope under certain future climate scenarios (Mukesh et al. 2016; Shah et al. 2022), but such potential gains could be offset by other factors like increased human access or mismatches in plant phenology.The above threats, if left unmitigated, could further isolate and erode the remaining pheasant strongholds in Himachal Pradesh.

Conservation Implications

The presence of globally significant species like the Western Tragopan and Cheer Pheasant makes Himachal Pradesh a priority area for pheasant conservation in India. Several protected areas, including the Great Himalayan National Park, Pin Valley National Park, and Tirthan Wildlife Sanctuary, provide critical habitats. However, effective conservation requires:

- Strengthening community-based conservation programs in buffer zones.
- Enhancing long-term monitoring to track population trends.
- Implementing eco-sensitive tourism to reduce disturbance.
- Promoting awareness and education to curb hunting and habitat encroachment.

Table 1: Pheasants found in Himachal Pradesh

Sr. no.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Resident Status	IUCN Status
1.	Chukar	*Alectoris chukar*	R	LC
2.	Snow Partridge	*Lerwalerwa*	R	LC
3.	Tibetan Partridge	*Perdix hodgsoniae*	R	LC
4.	Hill Partridge	*Arborophilatorqueola*	R	LC
5.	Tibetan Snowcock	*Tetraogallustibetanus*	R	LC
6.	Himalayan Snowcock	*Tetraogallushimalayensis*	R	LC
7.	Grey Francolin	*Francolinuspondicerianus*	R	LC
8.	Black Francolin	*Francolinusfrancolinus*	R	LC
9.	Common Quail	*Coturnix coturnix*	R	LC
10.	Rain Quail	*Coturnix coromandelica*	SM	LC
11.	Jungle Bush-Quail	*Perdicula asiatica*	R	LC
12.	Western Tragopan	*Tragopan melanocephalus*	R	VU
13.	Koklass Pheasant	*Pucrasiamacrolopha*	R	LC
14.	Himalayan Monal	*Lophophorusimpejanus*	R	LC
15.	Red Junglefowl	*Gallus gallus*	R	LC
16.	Kalij Pheasant	*Lophuraleucomelanos*	R	LC
17.	Cheer Pheasant	*Catreuswallichii*	R	VU
18.	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	R	LC

Abbreviations: R – Resident, IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature, LC – Least Concern, VU – Vulnerable.

There have been some conservation successes: for instance, Western Tragopans are flourishing within well-guarded sanctuaries like GHNP, and Cheer Pheasants have started to rebound in areas where hunting was curtailed and reintroductions initiated (Awan, 2016). These instances show that with timely interventions, population declines can be halted or

reversed. Going forward, an integrated conservation approach is required – one that combines habitat protection, community engagement, scientific monitoring, and policy support.

Himachal Pradesh has established dedicated conservation breeding centers for these birds – notably, the *Western Tragopan* Breeding Center at Sarahan (in Shimla district) and the *Cheer Pheasant* Breeding Center at Khadiyun (Chail). These facilities have been operating for over a decade to maintain captive populations with the aim of eventual reintroduction into the wild. As of 2022, the Sarahanpheasantry held over 40 Western Tragopans and has successfully bred multiple generations in captivity (Anonymous, 2022-23).Overall, Himachal Pradesh supports a high diversity of pheasants, reflecting its unique topographic and ecological settings. While most species remain secure, the declining populations of the Western Tragopan and Cheer Pheasant demand urgent conservation interventions. Protecting these species will not only safeguard regional biodiversity but also preserve the ecological integrity of the northwestern Himalaya.

Conclusion

Himachal Pradesh, with its remarkable altitudinal range and habitat diversity, serves as a critical stronghold for pheasants and allied game birds in the northwestern Himalaya. The presence of globally significant species such as the Western Tragopan and Cheer Pheasant underscores the state's conservation importance. While most pheasant species remain stable at a global scale, localized declines driven by habitat loss, hunting, human disturbance, and climate change pose serious challenges. Evidence from successful interventions, such as thriving Western Tragopan populations in protected areas and the Cheer Pheasant's rebound following reintroductions, demonstrates that focused management can reverse negative trends. Sustaining these gains will require an integrated approach that strengthens community-based conservation, improves long-term monitoring, promotes eco-sensitive tourism, and enhances awareness to mitigate anthropogenic pressures. Continued support for breeding and reintroduction programs, alongside effective habitat protection and policy measures, will be essential to secure these iconic birds and maintain the ecological integrity and biodiversity of Himachal Pradesh's fragile mountain ecosystems.

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