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Impact assessment of nest collection on the Edible-nest Swiftlet in the Nicobar islands



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R Sankaran

Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History

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Foreword

Misconceived beliefs and human avarice have lead to a burgeoning trade in animal and animal products, endangering many a species. The Musk Deer, Rhinoceros, Elephant and Tiger are a few of the glaring examples. Added to this growing list of species that are critically endangered because of trade is the Edible-nest Swiftlet.

Although collection of swiftlets nests dates back to antiquity, these nests became an important commercial item only since the 16th century when the Chinese began to value the culinary delicacy of the bird's nest soup. Today, the wholly white edible nests of swiftlet rank amongst the world's most expensive animal products, being US \$ 2629-4060 for a kilogram in Hong Kong. That populations of Edible-nest Swiftlet are now unable to withstand the magnitude of exploitation is reflected both in the decline of populations as well as the quantum of nests that are harvested annually. This is true of the Nicobar islands as well, where there has been a decline of nearly 85% of the population of the Edible-nest Swiftlet over the last few decades.

Realizing the rapid decline of the population of Edible-nest Swiftlet, SACON undertook a project under the endangered species programme of the Avian Ecology Division to assess the impact of nest collection on the Edible-nest Swiftlet. The first part of this study has been confined to the Nicobar islands. Field work on this species is a hazardous occupation as one has to collect data of the nests in high, dark and dank caves. I record my appreciation on the determination and hard work of Dr R Sankaran, of our Avian Ecology Division, who could successfully complete the study and give useful suggestions for the conservation of this species.

Dr V.S. Vijayan
Director

Abstract

Ever since swiftlet nests became an important item in Chinese cuisine and pharmacy, Edible-nest Swiftlet have been exploited throughout their range. Today, at US \$ 2629-4060 a kg, the edible nests of swiftlet rank amongst the world's most expensive animal products. India has two species of swiftlet that make edible nests. The Indian Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia unicolor* is found in the Western Ghats, the Malabar coast and in Sri Lanka. The Edible-nest Swiftlet *C. fuciphaga* occurs in the Andaman & Nicobar islands. The nests of *C. unicolor* have an admixture of grass, moss or feathers, and is of a lesser value. *C. fuciphaga* makes nests wholly of saliva, which is of a very high commercial value. The Edible-nest Swiftlet are currently not covered by International Trade Laws, and in India receives no protection by Law as it is not even in Schedule IV of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act.

The population of *C. fuciphaga* was estimated to be between 2500 and 3600 breeding birds. Nest collection had taken place in 24 of 36 caves in the Nicobar islands; in 23 it was very intense. In 16 of these, the proportion of plucked nests to the total nests was 90% or more, and in 12 it was 100%. In only one cave was it very low (6 %). Intensity of nest collection was the greatest in the Great Nicobar group where only 14% of the nests were intact. In the Nancowry group, 24% of the nests were intact (excluding the one cave where nest collection pressures were unusually low). The decline in population was evidenced through a decline in yields, which ranged between 40% and 95% over the last decade or two, with only one cave not having undergone a significant loss in yield.

The Edible-nest Swiftlet in the Nicobar islands is Critically Threatened (IUCN criteria Alc), as it has undergone a reduction in numbers greater than 80% over the last 10 years. The immediate measure to be taken is to include this species in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972). The only practical way of conserving the species is by effectively stopping the movement of swiftlet nests between and out of the islands, by checking people and cargo embarking or disembarking on all ships and flights to the mainland. Inclusion in at least Appendix II of CITES, will result in importing countries not accepting consignments from India, which would help the conservation of the endangered Indian populations of the Edible-nest Swiftlet.

Keywords: Edible-nest Swiftlet, Andaman & Nicobar islands