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### NECK-DROOPING POSTURE OF ORIENTAL WHITE-BACKED VULTURES (*GYPES BENGALENSIS*) IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO HUMAN OBSERVERS

KEY WORDS: *Oriental White-Backed Vulture*; *Gyps bengalensis*; *diclofenac*; *neck-drooping*; *posture*; *thanatosis*.

Populations of three *Gyps* vulture species on the Indian subcontinent have undergone recent rapid declines due to elevated rates of mortality from diclofenac poisoning (Green et al. 2004, *J. Appl. Ecol.* 41:793–800; Oaks et al. 2004, *Nature* 427:630–632; Shultz et al. 2004, *Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B.* 271 (Supplement 6):S458–S460; Gilbert et al. 2006, *Oryx* 40:388–399). Researchers proposed that vultures adopted a previously undescribed neck-drooping posture prior to death (Prakash 1999, *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 96:365–378; Prakash et al. 2003, *Biol. Conserv.* 109:381–390) that was used to identify ailing vultures (Cunningham et al. 2003, *Anim. Conserv.* 6:189–197). However, Gilbert et al. (2007, *J. Raptor Res.* 41:35–40) showed that neck-drooping was a poor predictor of ill-health and death in Oriental White-backed Vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) and most likely serves a normal thermoregulation function. Here we describe observations of Oriental White-backed Vultures (OWBV) adopting the neck-drooping posture in the presence of human observers. The context of the observations suggests that neck-drooping has additional functions which are not yet understood.

All observations were made at our study sites in Pakistan, described by Gilbert et al. (2006), between December 2000 and August 2004. On the first occasion, a juvenile Oriental White-backed Vulture that had just bathed was observed standing on the ground on a frequently-used footpath. The bird's feathers were waterlogged, and it was standing with wings extended and head erect, in a pose characteristic of sunning raptors (Houston 1980, *Ibis* 122:366–369). A man riding a donkey approached the vulture, which responded by folding its wings and standing erect and alert. As the man rode to within approximately 2–3 m, the vulture adopted the neck-drooping posture and remained motionless as the man paused to look at it and the donkey approached to within 0.5 m. After the man and donkey departed, the vulture resumed its erect, alert posture, and eventually took flight.