

Observation of Red-Billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) Removing Fur from Himalayan Tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*)

¹Marco Baietto, ¹Simone Masin, ²Serena Vaghi and ¹Emilio Padoa-Schioppa

¹Department of Environmental and Landscape Sciences, University of Milan Bicocca,
P.za della Scienza, 1, Milan, 20126, Italy

²Via Keplero, 10, Milan, 20124, Italy

Abstract: During an expedition in Sagarmatha National Park (Khumbu-Nepal), from 6 to 20 April 2002, we observed 10-12 Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) perching on the backs of five Himalayan tahrs (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*). The choughs were removing hair from the grazing tahrs and flying away with it in their bills. We presumed that because Red-billed Choughs feed on parasites from tahr backs all year round, they may have learned to pick hair for an easy source of nest material during the spring. Moreover, tahrs showed no signs of irritation at this behavior, perhaps because they were shedding.

Key words: Expedition, Himalayan tahrs, Choughs

INTRODUCTION

The Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax himalayanus*) occurs in the Palearctic from Spain to China, including the Himalayas. Over most of its range, it is found in mountainous areas near meadows or close-cropped fields; it also occurs in quarries with suitable cliffs and surrounding pastures. Breeding occurs from March to May in a nest built in cracks and crevices in rocks. The nest is composed of roots and stems and sometimes is lined with wool or hair, mainly from sheep (Ali and Ripley, 1987).

The Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*, Fig. 1) is one of three species of tahr. The original distribution of the species is in the southern Himalayas (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan), but it has been introduced in the New Zealand Alps (Caughley, 1970). Its habitat is rocky mountain slopes above 3,500 m, either wooded or above tree line. Himalayan tahrs live in herds ranging from 2 to 23 animals (Nowack, 1991). During winter, the tahr has a dense, reddish to dark brown woolly coat with an undercoat; males grow long, shaggy manes around their neck, shoulders and upper legs; in the spring, they lose much of their coat and it becomes lighter in color (Huffman, 2004).

On 8 April 2002, during an expedition to Sagarmatha National Park in Khumbu Valley-Nepal (27° 50' N, 86° 40' E), near Thame Og (3,650 m), on a shrub by slope, we observed 10-12 Red-billed Choughs perching on the backs of five Himalayan tahrs (Fig. 1); up to three or four

choughs were present on a single tahr. Choughs were removing hair from the tahrs' backs as the ungulates grazed. The choughs flew away with hair in their bills. The tahrs showed no sign of irritation at the choughs' behaviour.

This behaviour lasted at least 15 min.

To our knowledge, such interactions among corvids and living mammals are not reported in the literature. A similar behaviour was recorded by Smith (1985) who observed Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*) collecting hair

Fig. 1: Two Red-billed Choughs perching on the back of a Himalayan tahr, 8 April 2002, Khumbu Valley-Nepal (Photo of Vaghi S.)

from the back of a juvenile black bear (*Ursus americanus*). Alpine Choughs (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) have been observed during springtime in the Alps pulling hair from chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) that died in avalanches (A. Scarsetti pers. comm.).

It is known that (a) the Red-billed Chough and the other corvids of the area (Alpine Choughs; Common Raven, *Corvus corax*; and Jungle Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos*), use mammal hair to line their nests (Ali and Ripley, 1987); (b) in Pamir, the Red-billed Chough (*P. p. centralis*) remove parasites from the backs of wild and domestic animals (Cramp and Perrins, 1994) and (c) crows are renowned for their learning skills and plastic behavior (Hunt and Gray, 2003; Emery and Clayton, 2004). A possible explanation for the observed interaction might be that, in the past, Red-billed Choughs removed some hair by chance during their search for parasites and found this to be an easy source of nest material.

The advantage to the Himalayan tahr is not so clear, but it is known that in the spring, this species sheds its winter coat (Huffman, 2004) and many herbivores allow insectivorous birds to groom their coats in order to control parasites (Mooring and Mundy, 1996). The Himalayan tahrs seemed quite tolerant of this behavior, perhaps because hair loss is painless during shedding.

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