

Plight of Grasslands and its iconic keystone species Great Indian Bustard

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It isn't anything new that India's grasslands are categorised as wastelands and the species that call them home suffer from development. Hence why, it isn't surprising that India's grassland species have mind-numbing population status. All four of the bustard species found in India have been seeing an extremely concerning decline with extinction being closer than ever.

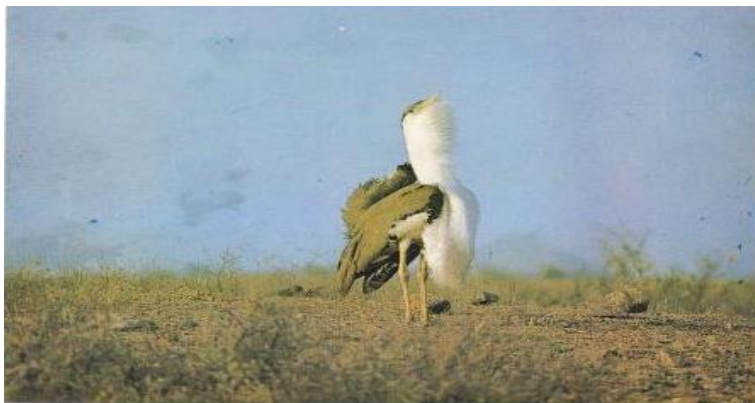


Hence why, I say, these birds show the plight of India's grasslands.

The most concerning of the four bustards and the subject of this article is the great Indian bustard. It is the heaviest flying bird in Asia. A somewhat long neck and legs give it a metre in height.

It has mostly brown wings, a black crown and a white neck. The male in the breeding season stands tall in open ground, with neck and tail raised, white

feathers fluffed, and filled gular sac giving its neck a distinctly larger look.



About 500 years ago, Babur the founder of the Mughal empire wrote the Baburnama. Since he was a foreigner to the Indian subcontinent, his foreign perspective gave us good records of wildlife back

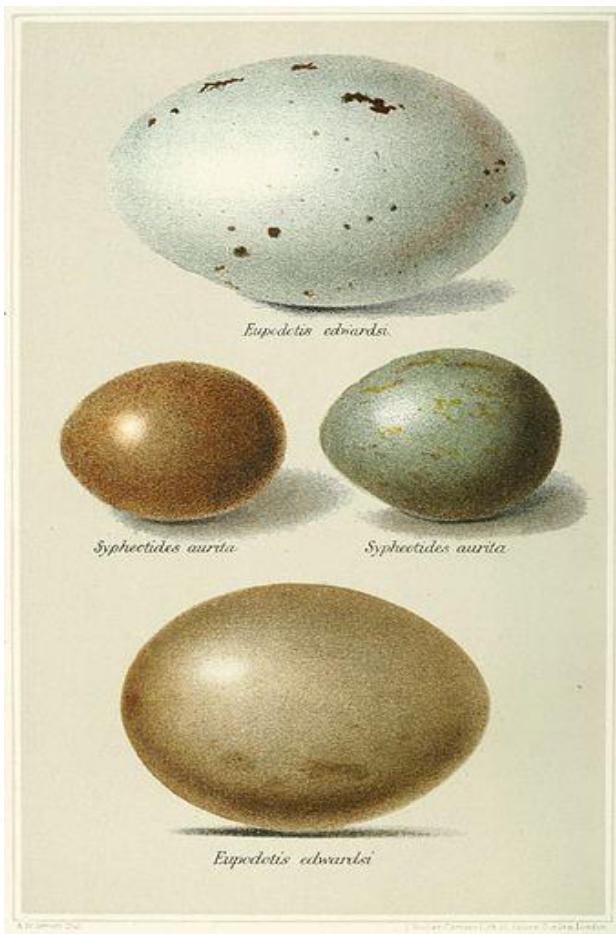
then. Among many animals mentioned, he wrote of GIB as tasting good, adding that some birds' legs taste good and some birds' breast tastes good. This may not give us any idea of what he may or may not have observed about GIB in its natural habitat, but the fact that it's such a casual mention shows how familiar and common a presence this bird was in those days.



Babur's grandson, Akbar the third Mughal emperor, had a study of GIB in its natural habitat painted by Ustad Mansur, the Mughal painter famous for his detailed artworks of flora and fauna depicting the beauty of the natural world.

Hunting for sport and meat continued well into the British era. Famous for its wary nature, it was sought after by sportsmen looking for the thrill of the hunt.

The practice of egg collections was prevalent among experts and enthusiasts of the time, and since it lays only one egg an year, collecting eggs of a breeding population had severe impacts. Of course, you need to trap or kill the mother for collecting the egg as well. We can see how the plight of the bird just kept increasing as the time went on.



It was in 1830 that Vigors first described it to science for the first time as *Otis nigriceps*. Historically, it was spread across large parts of the subcontinent—from Sindh in the west, to Odisha in the east and from Punjab in the north, to Tamil Nadu in the south. This huge distribution was documented by several naturalists. Thomas C. Jerdon even

described it as being 'found throughout considerable part of India'. He went on to note observing flocks of twenty-five or more and even referred to someone having seen a flock of more than thirty birds on just 'one small hill'.

Vernacular Names. *Ghorar*, Kathiawar; *Tuqdar*, Punjab; *Gurayin*, Haryana; *Sohum*, *Gughumbher*, *Hukna*, *H.*, *Serailu*, *H.* (Nerbudda); *Bherar*, Saugor; *Hum*, Mahr; *Mardonk*, *Maldhonk*, *Karadhonk*, *Karlunk*, Deccan; *Tokdar* of Mahomedan Falconers; *Gurahna*, Sind; *Bat-Meka*, *Bat-myaka*, Tel.; *Batta-mekha*, Yanadi; *Gunad*, Pardi; *Kanal-Myle*, Tam.; *Heri-hukki*, *Arl-kujina-hukki*, *Yereladdu*, Can; *Dhoom chiriya*, Mirzapur.

Distribution.—The distribution of the Great Indian Bustard, which is not, of course, found outside Indian limits, is thus given by Blandford in the fourth volume of the 'Avifauna of British India.' The plains of the Punjab between the Indus and the Jumna, also Eastern Sind, Cutch, Kattyawar, Rajputana, Guzerat, the Bombay Deccan, the greater part of the Central Provinces, extending as far east as Sambalpur, the Hyderabad Territories, and parts of the Madras Presidency and the Mysore State as far south as Southern Mysore and perhaps further south. Stragglers may be found outside the area specified, as in Western Sind, Meerut and Oudh; but the Bustard is unknown in Behar, Chota Nagpur, Orissa and Bengal, on the Malabar Coast and in Ceylon.

Owing to the wide distribution, and commonplace visibility in the open country, local names for the bird were common across the range. In fact, early naturalists who documented the range, characteristics etc. would more often make a note of how different regions had different names in local tongues. Godawan in western Rajasthan, Nahar-

goonjni or Goonjan Park in Kota and Ajmer regions, Maldhok in Maharashtra, Beta-meka or Ghanad in Andhra Pradesh, Yerreladdu in Karnataka, Gorard in Gujarat and Son-chiryra or Haank in Madhya Pradesh. The local variations with dialects can be found too—for example, Hookna, Hookne and Hookan in Shivpuri and Gwalior districts. Over time, as the great Indian bustard vanished, these names were lost in the pages of history as well, just a memory that didn't pass into the later generations.

Their ideal habitat of the plains had a larger battle to fight for the survival of all the species that called it home, the British Raj was devastating for it. Since they lacked productive timber, its classification as 'wasteland' meant no protection from 'productive use' and the animals there suffered. This, in particular, is important as the persecution of GIB was being accompanied by

habitat loss, ultimately leading to an extreme effect in their populations.

Hunting records are essential in painting a picture of the eventual disappearance of GIB from the Indian savannah. The pursuit of the bird for sport and



THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD.
Euphonia edwardsi.

meat can be found in the writings of various hunters across centuries. Col Robert Mansfield had hunted 961 in 25 years, while Jerdon talked of a sportsman having killed more than a thousand and he himself had shot many too. It's interesting that in 1921 E. C. Stuart commented that they were 'not as common' as they used to be fifty years ago and doubted the possibility of anyone shooting a thousand birds in his time as someone had done in Jerdon's time. He had hoped that it would survive and stated that it 'requires protection just as much as our other game-birds do'. An officer in Malegaon had come across a flock feeding in a jowari field, where he shot seven of them "as they rose, like so many partridges". Hume had recorded that they occurred "somewhat plentifully throughout Mysore" and that he had frequently shot them. E. C. Stuart had compared the way hunters here hunted with the way hunters shot the European bustard, stating that driving was seldom used here, and that stalking on foot was the widely used strategy. I find Major R. W. Burton's words at the end of a successful hunt to hold immense meaning,

"There is no finer bird than a male of the Great Indian Bustard, and the delight in handling the magnificent plumage was mingled with a genuine feeling of regret—now the excitement was over—that the stately bird would no more proudly stalk his native plains."

By 1947, the bird was already very rare. In the first meeting of Indian Board



of Wild Life, it was placed in the fully protected list of endangered birds, with all the states accepting the recommendation. This, however, did not result in any fruitful outcome as the population kept declining. In May 1960, the 12th conference of International Council of Bird Preservation was held in Tokyo—here, the idea of each country having a 'national' bird was brought up. An interesting suggestion was put forth in 1961 by Salim Ali, the Birdman of India, famous for surveying several birds and fighting for their conservation in times of weak

protection laws and diminishing wildlife. He believed that it was obvious the great Indian bustard should be given the status as the national bird was supposed to be 'in greatest need for protection in each country', calling the Indian Board of Wild Life's suggestion peafowl 'meaningless'. Alas, the peafowl did win the race and became the national bird, because of a concern that a small spelling mistake in the name of the great Indian bustard can be embarrassing for India on a global stage. In a different world, this would've made GIB the iconic flagship of India's grasslands, furthering the ends of several of the grassland species.

Our National Bird

The idea of each country designating a national bird for itself was recommended by the XIIth World conference of the International Council for Bird Preservation held in Tokyo in May 1960. Its purpose was to pinpoint public interest and attention to some particular bird species that stood in the greatest need of protection in each country, especially where it was threatened with extinction owing to public apathy or direct human persecution. By the very nature of its

constitution and functions this was the only aspect of a 'national' bird that could concern the International Council for Bird Preservation, namely to create an intelligent awareness and marshal public opinion for affording nation-wide protection to such a bird. The 'national' bird idea is based upon this consideration alone. It was never intended in the sense of a national emblem, which all countries, including our own, already possess. neither had it primarily anything to do with whether the bird was particularly ornamental or of mythological, sentimental or similar significance. In this context, I submit that the selection of the Peacock by the Indian Board for Wild Life is totally misconceived and meaningless. It was not at all obligatory for India, as a member of the International Council, to adopt a 'national' bird, but if it is conceded that doing so may further the ends for which the step was recommended, then it is obvious that the Great Indian Bustard is a species that merits this distinction. This bustard is a large and spectacular bird, indigenous to India, whose numbers, in spite of the legislative ban on its killing, are dwindling at an alarming rate due to poaching by vandalistic gunners and also encroachment upon its natural habitats. It needs an urgent nation-wide effort to save the bird from its impending doom.

Salim Ali

Chairman, Indian National Section, I.C.B.P.

In 1957, R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji studied the ecology of the bird and went on to conduct the first nationwide population assessment in 1969. Results were horrifying—only 1260 birds were left. The same year, Balakrishna Seshadri rightfully called it 'the ornithologist's worry'.

In 1978, the figure was down to 745, in 2001, it was 600 and it declined even further by 2006 as Dr Asad Rahmani reported less than 300 birds left. In 2011, Sutirtha Dutta, a scientist from the Wildlife Institute of India, conducted research on the declining bird, and IUCN gave it the status of a Critically Endangered species, recognising that the bustard has disappeared from more than 90% of its historical range. In 2018, their population got to the concerning figure of 150. Today, Gujarat has just 4 individuals and the



collective population of other states except Rajasthan is less than 10. Desert National Park in Rajasthan shows the only breeding population of GIB. Predation by free-ranging dogs is a threat to the existence of wildlife in the DNP landscape. Moreso for slow breeders like GIB, as you can not only lose

a precious individual to them, but you can also lose eggs, which they lay only once a year.



Since they live in the open country of grasslands, which of course is officially categorised as wasteland, the development activities hit them hard. The status of Desert National Park is highly concerning. The 2018 report showed there were 128 GIB left in DNP, and since then several cases of deaths have been reported. It is a large area of 3162 sqkm but over-the-head powerlines and windmills are a major cause of casualties in birds. Many birds like GIB do not have the ability to see in front of them while flying from afar. Since their eyes are on the sides to see predators, they have somewhat of a blind spot in front and thus end up colliding with power lines and windmills. Ironic really, that such a widely used source of renewable energy like a windmill isn't 'green' in

the truest sense of the word. Can we really call something ‘green energy’ if it threatens the very existence of multiple species?

In 2019, Mr. M.K. Ranjitsinh and other conservationists filed a petition to make the powerlines in the habitat underground and Supreme Court ordered for it to be done. In 2022, the governments of Rajasthan and Gujarat were ordered to install bird diverters on such high-voltage wires to stop the casualties in collision. Neither of the two orders came to fruition on ground and the birds have kept dying.

“18 GIB likely die per year from a population of about 128 ± 19 individuals in Thar. Such a high mortality rate (at least 15% annually due to power lines alone) is unsustainable for the species” stated the Wildlife Institute of India in its 2018 report.

The great Indian bustard needs the same sense of awareness that the tiger got in the late 50s and throughout 60s, eventually leading to Project Tiger in 1973. The problem, however, is that GIB can’t wait for 10-15 years. So not only does it need the same kind awareness and attention, but it also needs it faster at this point. Even though there’s *some* success achieved in captive breeding them, habitat protection and declining wild population are still issues of great concern.

The Great Indian bustard encapsulates what our grasslands face—dying species and negligence of governments. If it goes extinct, it would be another thing we lost in our savannahs—lions disappeared from most of the range, cheetah is extinct, vast blackbuck herds are a thing of the past, wolf packs being common is nothing but a memory and of course GIB flocks across India are lost in the pages of history. Bottom line is, India will inevitably lose this bird if conservation work isn’t done. It is for us to decide. Do we want to let this bird go extinct?

