**Great Indian Bustard**

Scientific name: *Ardeotis nigriceps*

What?

The great Indian bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*) or Indian bustard is a bustard found on the Indian subcontinent. The great Indian bustard inhabits dry grasslands and scrublands on the Indian subcontinent; its largest populations are found in the Indian state of Rajasthan. When the "national bird" of India was under consideration, the great Indian bustard was a proposed candidate (strongly supported by the Indian ornithologist Salim Ali) but dropped in favor of the Indian peafowl with at least one reason being the potential for being misspelled.

A large bird with a horizontal body and a height of about one meter and long bare legs, giving it an ostrich-like appearance, this bird is among the heaviest of the flying birds. It is unmistakable with its black cap contrasting with the pale head and neck. The body is brownish with a black patch spotted in white. The male is deep sandy buff-colored and during the breeding season has a black breast band. The crown of the head is black and crested and is puffed up by displaying males. In the female which is smaller than the male, the head and neck are not pure white and the breast band is either rudimentary, broken, or absent.

Among bustards, this species is smaller only than the Kori bustard and the great bustard in size. It is also the largest land bird in its native range. The great Indian bustard stands at about 1 m (3.3 ft) tall, having a somewhat long neck and quite long legs. The female as in most members of the bustard family are typically considerably smaller.Males have a well-developed gular pouch which is inflated when calling during display and helps produce the deep resonant calls.

These birds are opportunist eaters. Their diet ranges widely depending on the seasonal availability of food. They feed on grass seeds, insects like grasshoppers and beetles, and sometimes even small rodents and reptiles. Adult great Indian bustards have few natural enemies, but they display considerable agitation around certain predatory birds, such as eagles and Egyptian vultures (Neophron percnopterus). The only animals that have been observed to attack them are gray wolves (Canis lupus). On the other hand, chicks may be preyed upon by felines, jackals, and feral dogs. Eggs are sometimes stolen from nests by foxes, mongooses, monitor lizards, and Egyptian vultures and other birds. The greatest threat to the eggs, however, comes from grazing cows that often trample them.

Where?

Historically, the great Indian bustard was distributed throughout Western India, spanning 11 states, as well as parts of Pakistan. Its stronghold was once the Thar desert in the north-west and the Deccan plateau of the peninsula. The bustard is critically endangered in Pakistan primarily due to a lack of protection and rampant hunting. A few birds were detected in a September 2013 survey of the Cholistan Desert in Pakistan.

In India, the bird was historically found in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Today the bustard is restricted to isolated pockets in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan (shared with Pakistan).

Great Indian bustards make local movements but these are not well understood although it is known that populations disperse after the monsoons. Males are said to be solitary during the breeding season but form small flocks in winter. Males may however distribute themselves close together and like other bustards, they are believed to use a mating system that has been termed as an "exploded or dispersed lek". The male is polygamous.

The habitat where it is most often found in arid and semi-arid grasslands, open country with thorn scrub, tall grass interspersed with cultivation. It avoids irrigated areas. The major areas where they are known to breed are in central and western India and eastern Pakistan. The dry semi-desert regions where it was found in parts of Rajasthan have been altered by irrigation canals that have transformed the region into an intensively farmed area. Bustards generally favor flat open landscapes with minimal visual obstruction and disturbance, therefore adapt well in grasslands. In the non-breeding season, they frequent wide agro-grass scrub landscapes. While in the breeding season (summers and monsoons) they congregate in traditional undisturbed grassland patches characterized by a mosaic of scantily grazed tall grass (below 50 cm). They avoid grasses taller than themselves and dense scrub like thickets.

Why?

In 1994 great Indian bustards were listed as an [endangered species](https://www.britannica.com/science/endangered-species) on the [International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species](https://www.britannica.com/topic/IUCN-Red-List-of-Threatened-Species). By 2011, however, the population decline was so severe that the IUCN reclassified the species as critically endangered.

Today, this species has disappeared from 90% of its former range, leaving fewer than 300 birds, mainly confined to the Thar Desert, Rajasthan. Historically, its decline was set in motion by widespread hunting for food and sport. The biggest threat to this species is hunting, which is still prevalent in Pakistan. This is followed by occasional poaching outside Protected Areas, collisions with high tension electric wires, fast-moving vehicles, and free-ranging dogs in villages. Today, its woes are compounded by habitat loss due to urbanization and the expansion of agriculture. With humans come domestic animals: stray dogs are currently one of the biggest risks to both adult birds and the single egg they lay each year. Offspring also risk being trampled by livestock, despite the female’s heroic habit of carrying her chick away under her wing when threatened.

One of the biggest dangers, however, are energy structures such as wind turbines and power lines. Needless to say, renewable energy is key to saving the planet – but when badly-planned constructions obstruct habitats or migration routes, they pose a huge collision hazard to this far-from-nimble flyer. The proposed expansion of renewable energy infrastructure, which may involve deploying solar panels over large areas of desert and grasslands is another threat to the bird's habitat.

Many croplands that once produced sorghum and millet seeds, on which the great Indian bustard thrived, have become fields of sugarcane and cotton or grape orchards. Hunting and poaching have also contributed to the decrease in population. These activities, combined with the species’ low fecundity and the pressure of natural predators, have left the great Indian bustard in a precarious position.

How?

In 2011 Birdlife International uplisted this species from Endangered to Critically Endangered, mainly because it has been extirpated from 90% of its former range and the population was estimated at perhaps fewer than 250 individuals in 2008.

The bird is found in Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat states of India. Desert National Park, near Jaisalmer and coastal grasslands of the Abdasa and Mandvi talukas of Kutch District of Gujarat support some populations. Ghatigaon and Karera sanctuaries in Madhya Pradesh once held sizeable populations. Other sanctuaries with the species include Kutch Bustard Sanctuary of Naliya in Kutch,[]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Indian_bustard#cite_note-ejwr-25) Karera Wildlife Sanctuary in Shivpuri district; Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary near Nannaj, 18 km from Solapur in Maharashtra, Shrigonda taluka in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, near Nagpur and near Warora in Chandrapur district in Maharashtra and Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, 45 km from Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh.

The rapid reduction of the population of India's bustards, their endangered status and the decline of grasslands led the Ministry of Environment and Forests to prepare species recovery programs in 2012 for three species of bustard; the great Indian bustard, the Bengal florican (Houbaropsis bengalensis) and the lesser florican (Sypheotides indicus). These programs remain to be finalized and executed by the state wildlife departments. The state of Rajasthan initiated "Project Great Indian Bustard", on World Environment Day 2013, identifying and fencing off bustard breeding grounds in existing protected areas as well as provide secure breeding enclosures in areas outside protected areas.

WWF-India has provided inputs in developing the ‘Guidelines for the State Action Plan for Resident Bustard Recovery Programme’. It has played an important role in raising awareness about the declining populations and highlighting the importance of implementing a focused bustard conservation program at the national level. WWF-India is undertaking initiatives towards conservation of Great Indian Bustard in and around Desert National Park. In the near future, WWF also plans to expand the work in Gujarat and is making efforts to raise funds towards this.

Bolstered by a set of major landmarks decided by the [Convention on Migratory Species](https://www.cms.int/) this February. Here, the Great Indian Bustard was added to Appendix I: the strictest level of protection. [BNHS](https://www.bnhs.org/), our Indian Partner, is working with the Wildlife Institute of India to satellite-track the species to understand its movements. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change plans to declare all Great Indian Bustard habitats conservation reserves, and bury power lines underground in these areas.

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| |  | | --- | | Life Expectancy | | 12-15 Years | | |  | | --- | | Estimated to be around | | 150 | |

Reference:

Wikipedia

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