

Sighting records of Great Indian Bustards *Ardeotis nigriceps* in Vidarbha

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The Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* is a threatened species and listed as Endangered in the Red Data Book. It is protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972. During the last 10-12 years the bustard population has crashed in many areas, and now the population could be as low as 500 (Islam & Rahmani 2002) and is declining.

There are old records of sightings of this species from Vidarbha and was probably an uncommon species throughout Vidarbha in the grasslands (D'Abreu, 1923). D'Abreu has mentioned about Great Indian Bustard (then *Choriotus edwardsi* Gray) as "Resident; breeds in July and August, laying a single drab or olive egg, faintly marked as a rule with brownish clouds, streaks and mottlings. It is deposited in a hollow on the ground with or without a lining of grass. An egg taken at Nagpur measured 3'4" by 2'15." He had collected a specimen of the bird from Nagpur. After D'Abreu there were no confirmed records of the species in Vidarbha.

Mr. Gopalrao Thosar, a senior birder, had a report of sighting of a male Bustard near Umbargaon on Umred road in Nagpur district from a poacher who had shot and consumed the bird in 1982. Umbargaon is approximately 15 kilometers southeast of Nagpur city and its geographical location is 21°04'N and 79°11'E. Also this poacher had some feathers of the bird, which had confirmed the bird to be a Great Indian Bustard beyond doubt. Mr. Ramesh Ladkhedkar, Mr. Prakash Garde and Mr. Thosar, three senior birdwatchers saw a Great Indian Bustard in flight in fallow cultivated land near Umbargaon village on Umred road in Nagpur district (Pimplapure, 2001). The locals here call Bustard as "Hoom" after its "boom" call (Rahmani, 1987) produced during the courtship display.

Members of Vidarbha Nature and Human Science (VNHS) Center, Nagpur, viz., Mr. Ramesh Ladkhedkar, Dr. Pimplapure, Mr. Prakash Garde and Mr. Thosar then took up the task of searching the Great Indian Bustards in Vidarbha on a massive scale. Success came only after six years of toil and meticulous follow-up by the team of VNHS. On 4th October 1991 one Bustard was again sighted in the same habitat, i.e., near Umbargaon village on Umred road (Pimplapure, 2001). The next day it was photographed. One more bird was sighted here afterwards. These two birds were then frequently sighted till 2001 after which there were no sightings.

Besides this, two more birds were sighted in the grasslands near Dighori village. Dighori village is on the Nagpur-Bhandara road and its geographical location is 21°07'N and 79°13'E. These two birds were regularly sighted till 2005, when one male bustard disappeared. In 2006 Mr. Gopalrao Thosar has sighted only one bird. The VNHS conducted a survey of upland birds in Vidarbha and submitted its report to the forest department in 2001. The report underlined the prospective habitats for Great Indian Bustard, Lesser Florican *Syphoetides indica* and Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in Vidarbha.

Mr. Deepak Joshi, an avid birdwatcher from Akola sighted a Bustard near Balapur town in Akola district in 1997 (pers. com.). The geographical location of Balapur town is 20°36'N and 76°48'E.

The Maharashtra Forest department took up a survey of the Bustards in Maharashtra on 17th July 2005. During this survey the surprise news came. Four Great Indian Bustards were sighted by Mr. B. T. Belsare a forester and Mr. V. V. Choudhary, Range Forest Officer in the fallow and cultivated lands between Marda and Wanoja villages 3 kilometers to the west of Warora town in Chandrapur district. The geographical location of Warora is 20°15' N and 79°00'E. Dr. Anil Pimplapure, Mr. Ramesh Ladkhedkar and Mr. Gopal Thosar soon confirmed this sighting with the addition of two more Bustards in the count as they saw six birds simultaneously. Surprisingly this area was highlighted by the VNHS report as a prospective habitat for Bustards. Looking at the declining population of the species, the sighting of six birds at Warora assumes great importance.

A similar Bustard census was conducted on 16th July 2006 in Maharashtra. On this day only four Bustards were sighted by the birdwatchers at Wanoja near Warora. Mr. Raju Kasambe, Mr. Kamlesh Thakur and Mr. M. S. R. Shaad sighted one solitary male and two females in the same area on 28th August 2006. The birds were foraging in rice and soyabean cultivation. The birds flew to shade of *Acacias* when approached.

Status of *A. nigriceps*:

The known population of Bustards in Maharashtra has reached a precariously low number. During the Bustard Survey on 17th July 2005, 22 Bustards were sighted in Nannaj Bustard Sanctuary (in Solapur district), two Bustards were sighted in protected grasslands near Nashik. Including these sightings and the six birds at Warora the total known population was put at a precarious 30 birds. Mr. Manoj Kulkarni, Solapur (pers. com.) sighted 14 Great Indian Bustards in Siddheshwar Vanvihar near Solapur (17°43'N and 75°56'E) in 2004 and in 2005. The birds were there from July to January. But it is not clear whether these were the same birds sighted in Nannaj or whether they are in addition to the census figures.

The Bustard survey on 16th July 2006 yielded sightings of 27 birds at Nannaj Bustard Sanctuary, 5 birds in Nashik district and 4 birds near Warora. Mr. Shaad participated in this Census at Nannaj and counted 16 birds, which included 9 females and 7 males. Thus the total number of birds actually sighted this year is put at 36 birds (12 males and 24 females) (Anon. 2006).

The population of *A. nigriceps* was estimated to be between 1500 to 2000 birds in India including about 100 birds in Maharashtra (Rahmani, 1987). The total population of six states viz., Gujrat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, targeted for research in the 1980s, as assessed in 1983, came to 650-900 individuals, and as assessed in 1990, to 770-1920 individuals (Islam & Rahmani 2002). During the last 10-12 years the bustard population has crashed in many areas, and now the population could be as low as 500. It is extinct in Karera and Sorsan bustard areas, and practically gone in Ghatigaon Bustard Sanctuary (Islam & Rahmani 2002). Western Rajasthan is the only place where it is found in continuous stretch: in other areas it has disjointed distribution. It has disappeared from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Orissa and Tamil Nadu, except for stray individuals here and there (Rahmani 1987).

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