

PROTECTING THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD

--- MADHINI, CHENNAI, TAMIL NADU, INDIA

Bustards (family : *Otididea*) are magnificent, cursorial birds, inhabiting open country. Over a century ago, they were in large numbers in different parts of the European continent and other countries. But today they are reported in small numbers only in some parts of Africa, Europe, Australia and India. Bustards are large gallinaceous birds and their size ranges from that of a domestic cock to larger than a peacock. They feed on grassed, herbs and plant parts as well as on insects, especially grasshoppers, locusts, bugs, mice, lizards, snails and other small animals.

The species found in India is known as Great Indian Bustard (GIB) (*Choriotis nigricaps*). The Red Data book of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has placed this species in the critically endangered list. It is included in Schedule-I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and about 13 sanctuaries have been established for its protection. In 1969, the number of GIB was reported as 1260. The first scientific study conducted revealed that the species was rare and that habitat destruction coupled with poaching and trampling of its eggs are chief causes of its decline. The population has come down to 150 now. Of these 122 are in Rajasthan, concentrated near the Desert National Park. Some are sighted in Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh. The involvement of the local community is crucial in conserving the GIB and protecting its natural habitat.



Stamp on GIB issued by India Post in 1980



India hosted the 13th CMS CoP wherein the GIB was the mascot of the event, which gave wider publicity of the conservation of the species. Special cover released on this occasion is shown above.

According to scientists, the GIBs are slow breeders and they build their nests on the ground. Since the main threat is the High Tension power line crisscrossing their habitat in Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Supreme Court of India came to the rescue of the GIB and ordered that wherever possible the power line should be re-routed or made to go underground and till such time divertors should be installed to drive away the GIB from hitting the powerlines.