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Conservation of the Great Indian Bustard

Published On: 27-03-2024

Why is in news? How Supreme Court is overseeing conservation of the Great Indian Bustard

The Supreme Court on March 21 constituted a seven-member committee to find a balance between conservation measures for the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) and efforts to generate renewable energy in the same regions.

The development came during the hearing of the case, **M.K. Ranjit singh v. Union of India**, which goes back to 2019. Although the top court had given a judgment in the case in 2021, it continued to hear the case to ensure a smooth implementation of its ruling.

The Supreme Court had ordered the **installation of bird diverters** where overhead power lines already exist, while leaving the door open for the **conversion of overhead cables into underground power lines** and the **installation of underground power lines for future projects**.

About GIB:

The GIB is an avian species, which was classified as '**Critically Endangered**' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2011 — there are **currently less than 200 GIBs in India** and they are mainly found in **Rajasthan and Gujarat**

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PRESENT GIB POPULATION

State	Birds
Rajasthan	128
Gujarat	10
Maharashtra	8
Karnataka & AP	10

THREATS

- Fatal collision with power-lines
- Nest predation by native predators (fox, mongoose, crow, monitor lizard) and free-ranging dogs
- Hunting in Pakistan
- Agricultural expansion
- Pesticide prevalence (food reduction and contamination),
- Grazing pressure
- Plantation of shrubs and tree species in grasslands,
- Poor land-use policies
- Habitat Loss



POPULATION DECLINE

- GIB population fell by 90% in the 50 years since 1969
- Population size was 1,260 individuals in 1969
- Fell to 745 in 1978
- 600 in 2000
- 250 around 2011
- Less than 150 GIB in 2019

It is the **State bird of Rajasthan**.

GIBs are **the largest among the four-bustard species** found in India. The other three being MacQueen's bustard, lesser Florican and the Bengal Florican.

Being terrestrial birds, they **spend most of their time on the ground** with occasional flights to go from one part of their habitat to the other.

They feed on insects, lizards, grass seeds etc. GIBs are considered the **flagship bird species of grassland** and hence barometers of the health of grassland ecosystems.

As per the **2021 report of the IUCN**, they are on the **verge of extinction** with hardly 50 to 249 of them alive.

GIBs' historic range included much of the Indian sub-continent but it has now shrunk to just 10 per cent of it.

Among the heaviest birds with flight, GIBs prefer grasslands as their habitats.

A **Maximum number** of GIBs were found in Jaisalmer and the Indian Army-controlled field firing range near Pokhran, **Rajasthan**.

The other areas include **Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh**.

The **biggest threat** to these birds is the overhead power lines as frequent collisions have resulted in the death of many GIBs.

These birds, **due to their poor frontal vision**, cannot detect power lines in time and their weight make in-flight quick manoeuvres difficult.

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In the case of low-voltage lines, electrocution is often the cause of death due to smaller phase to phase separation distance. High voltage lines do not cause death due to electrocution but cause death due to collision.

Some important steps for protection:

The Great Indian Bustard is listed in **Schedule-I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.**

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES): **Appendix 1**

Convention on Migratory Species (CMS): **Appendix I**

Important habitats of Great Indian Bustards are **designated as National Parks/ sanctuaries.**

The species has been identified for conservation efforts under the component '**Species Recovery Programme**' of the **Centrally Sponsored Scheme- Development of Wildlife Habitats.**

Sites for establishment of a **conservation breeding centres** for the Great Indian Bustard and Lesser Florican birds have been identified in consultation with the Forest Departments of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

In-situ Conservation Proposal by Rajasthan government.

WWF-India has provided inputs in developing the '**Guidelines for the State Action Plan for Resident Bustard Recovery Programme**'.

Conservation Breeding Facility: MoEF&CC, the Rajasthan government and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) have also **established a conservation breeding facility** in Desert National Park at Jaisalmeer in June 2019.

Project Great Indian Bustard: It has been launched by the Rajasthan government to construct breeding enclosures for the species and develop infrastructure to reduce human pressure on its habitats.

Intervention of SC:

The **SC in April 2021** ordered that all overhead power transmission lines in core and potential GIB habitats in Rajasthan and Gujarat be made underground.

The SC also **formed a three-member committee**, including **Devesh Gadhvi**, the member of the bustard specialist group of IUCN, to help power companies comply with the order.

Again, **in November 2022**, the court sought reports from chief secretaries of the two states in six weeks on installation of bird diverters in priority areas.

It also asked them to assess the length of transmission lines need to go underground.

On **January 19, 2024**, multiple solar and wind energy producing companies filed applications in the Supreme Court claiming that the April 2021 order was interfering with their ability to set up business in the Thar and Kutch regions.

The Central government also appeared and highlighted the **practical and financial difficulties** involved in implementing the decision as **over 80,688 square kilometres** had been identified as '**potential**' GIB habitat and **13,550 square kilometres** as '**priority**' GIB habitat and pushed for a balance between GIB conservation and renewable energy efforts.

On March 21, created a **seven-member technical committee** was constituted by the Ministry of Power to give **recommendations on the undergrounding of power lines.**

Conclusion:

Above all are some of the efforts that are ongoing to conserve this species, including habitat protection and awareness programs. From time to time, the SC also intervene and look over the conservation initiatives.

If the GIB will extinct, it will be the first avian species to go extinct since independence.