

## Our Endangered Bustards

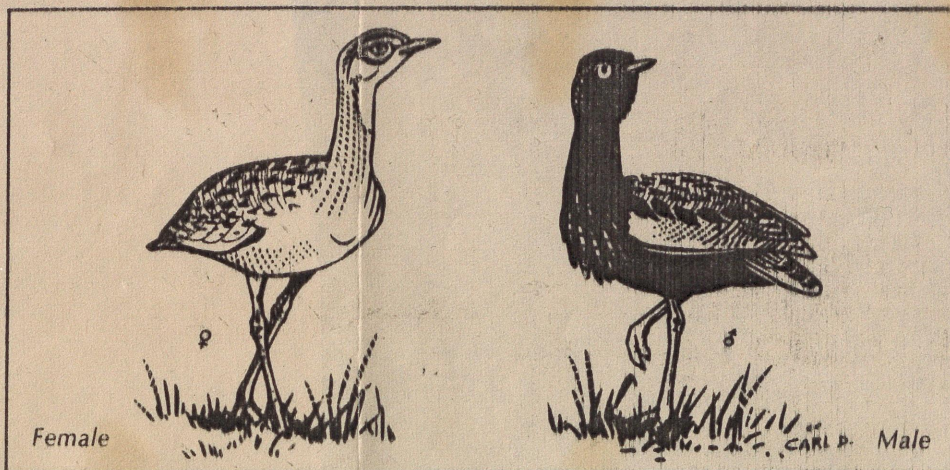
by Asad R. Rahmani

The bustards belonging to an ancient avian Family Otididae, comprise 22 species distributed in Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia. Of these 22 species four are found within the limits of our country, and three are more or less endemic. Only the Houbara Bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) is a winter visitor to Gujarat and Western Rajasthan.

The Great Indian Bustard (*Choriotis nigriceps*) is the most famous of all the Indian bustards. Formerly it was widely distributed from Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan and upto Tamil Nadu, but now it is found only in six states—Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. It prefers open scrub, grassland and lightly wooded savannah. It is never found in forests or near water (though occasionally it drinks). It is a majestic bird: the adult males may reach upto 120 cm., the females are smaller (90-95 cm.).

The Lesser Florican (*Sypheotides indica*) is the smallest bustard of India. The male is smaller than a domestic chicken, the female being slightly larger. During the monsoon it is seen in the grasslands of Gujarat, Eastern Rajasthan, Western Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. After the monsoon and breeding, it disappears and is supposed to winter in South India. Its larger cousin, the Bengal Florican (*Eupodotis bengalensis*) occurs in the grasslands of Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, Bihar, Bengal and Assam. It is extinct in Bangladesh. A separate population perhaps survives in Kampuchea.

During the breeding season, the males of both the florican species jump above the grass to advertise themselves to the secretive females. The male Lesser



A pair of Bengal Floricans.

Pic. Carl D'Silva/BNHS

Florican, while jumping, utters a croaking sound reminiscent of a frog's call.

All the three species of bustards in India have become highly endangered due to savage shooting and destruction of grasslands. The Bombay Natural History Society has been carrying on a study for the last four years on the Great Indian Bustard. One of the most encouraging results is that this bird is not as rare as suspected.

Since 1984, the Society has started another project on the floricans. As the floricans are small birds which live in thick grass, they are easily missed especially by a person who is not looking for them. Nevertheless, there must be many old shikaris and locals who must have seen these birds or know something about their habits.

The BNHS is planning to bring out separate monographs on the Great Indian Bustards and the floricans. In addition to doing its own studies, it is

collecting information about the movement and present distribution of these birds. Practically nothing is known about the movement of the Lesser Florican after the monsoon. The Society has printed five thousand posters of the bustards, four thousand of the floricans, and four thousand pamphlets for wide distribution to obtain valuable feedback.

Readers are requested to send to the Society any interesting information about the past or present distribution of these birds and any anecdotal description or legend connected with these birds. Information about the sighting of a Lesser Florican in winter or summer and any recent sighting of the Bengal Florican in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal are especially welcome.

For further information, please write to the following address:

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