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Farmers cry foul over bid to expand Nannaj bird sanctuary

By Rajneesh Joshi

The Times of India News Service
SOLAPUR: The state forest department's proposed move to expand the Nannaj bird sanctuary, located 17 km from here, has run into opposition from the locals.

Home to the endangered Great Indian Bustard (referred to locally as 'malbhok'), the sanctuary sprawls across 350 acres of land. However, these are not adjoining each other; to ensure that they do, the department decided to acquire the connecting land from local farmers, explains S.V. Hiremath, chief conservator of forests.

The Pune zonal office of the forest department accordingly issued a notification which specified that only non-cultivable land will be acquired and that, too, with the consent of the respective owners.

However, Solapur revenue officials on November 21 directed the talathi of Nannaj village to acquire the lands of 58 farmers and the latter's consent was not taken.

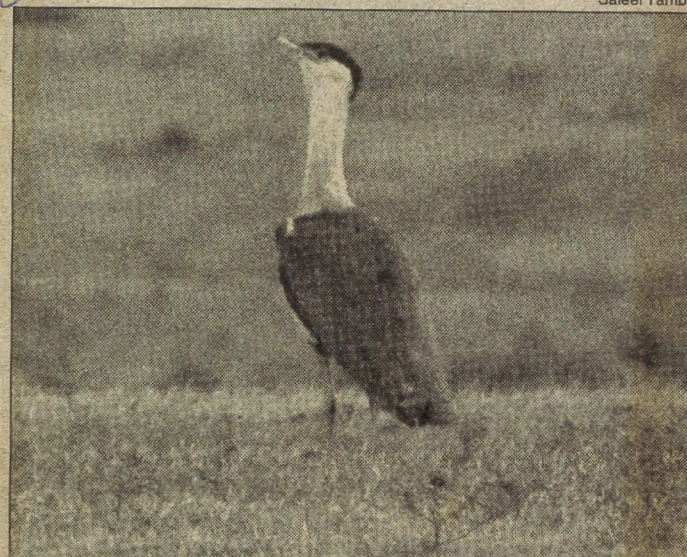
The revenue department also started issuing survey numbers and other details of land in 14 adjoining villages, to the forest department. This came to light when a few farmers applied for copies of the 7/12 extracts pertaining to

their land holding. They were shocked to discover that their land had been included in the sanctuary without their knowledge.

A group of the affected farmers recently met district collector Deepak Kapoor to seek a clarification. Mr Kapoor professed ignorance of the developments but agreed to stay the land acquisition process. The forest department, however, is yet to respond accordingly.

This has intensified feelings of apprehension and resentment among the affected farmers, which threatens to make expansion process a stormy one.

Saleel Tambe



A male Great Indian Bustard clicked on a rare sighting in the wild.

Great Indian Bustard numbers shrink further

By Rajneesh Joshi

The Times of India News Service

SOLAPUR: The Great Indian Bustard (local name Maldhok) is headed for extinction in the Nannaj bird sanctuary in Solapur district, which ironically, was founded for its very protection in 1984!

Solapur-based ornithologist Prof B.S. Kulkarni, who first discovered significant numbers of the species in the region in the '70s and was instrumental in getting the area declared a sanctuary for the bird, says the latest count has dipped to 39.

Nannaj forest official S.V. Hiremath admits that sightings of the Maldhok in the sanctuary have indeed become rare.

Issues related to the conservation of this rare species will come up at the All-India Ornithologists conference slated to be held from January 26 to 28 at Pal, Prof. Kulkarni revealed.

The Maldhok thrives in grasslands where its diet of insects and small snakes and lizards is abundant. A bird sanctuary like Nannaj needs to make special efforts to cultivate the grassland, says Prof. Kulkarni in a paper published in the Bombay Natural History Society gazette.

The 350-acre sanctuary, located 16 km from here, has nevertheless become home to a growing number of deer, buck and wolves, making it unpopular with the locals. The district administration's efforts to acquire portions of land to bridge large gaps in the sanctuary limits has also met with strong protests from local farmers.

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Great Indian Bustard falls victim to callousness

By Neil Pate
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Pune: Human interference, rapid destruction of grasslands and the absence of a comprehensive wildlife management plan has left Asia's biggest Great Indian Bustard (GIB) sanctuary in Maharashtra with only 29 bustards.

According to a survey conducted by the Pune wildlife division, there were as many as 61 birds in 1994.

Commonly known as GIB or *Maldhok* in Marathi, the bird is among the rarest in the Indian sub-continent and is commonly found in parts of Solapur-Ahmednagar districts.

Realising the destruction of

the GIB's habitat and their dwindling population, the Maharashtra government had declared conservation of the bird and reserved a total of 8,496.44 sq km as GIB sanctuary in 1979. However, ornithologists, nature conservationists and wildlife officials say that much of the government's plans to conserve the endangered *maldhok* remain on paper only.

Wildlife conservation activist and founder of the NGO, Pugmarks, Anirudh Chaoji, told TNN that the wildlife department had failed to protect the sanctuary and also did not conduct any GIB awareness pro-

gramme as was done in Rajasthan. He said the bird count had dwindled in the last 10 years. Admitting the declining popu-



Year	GIB population
1994	61
1995	No survey
1996	33
1997	33
1998	28
1999	38
2000	17
2001	15
2002	29

lation of the *maldhoks*, Pune wildlife division deputy conservator of forests (wildlife) Rajendra Mangrulkar said it was impossi-

ble for the department to safeguard the entire sanctuary area.

"The sanctuary is the biggest in Asia and spreads across a massive 8,496.44 sq km. It consists of areas from Karjat, Shringoda, Newasa talukas of Ahmednagar district and Solapur, Madha Mohol and Karnala talukas of Solapur district," said Mangrulkar, adding that the forest department had forwarded a proposal to senior inquiry officers to reduce the sanctuary area to 370 sq km.

Mangrulkar said destruction of the bird's natural habitat, human interference, haphazard irrigation activities, cattle movement

and paucity of funds were some of the reasons.

"We need a comprehensive forest and wildlife management plan. We also have to curb the increasing sugarcane and grape cultivation activities in the pockets of the sanctuary," Mangrulkar said. Only 24 *maldhoks* were spotted during the recent monsoon, he said.

City ornithologist Saleel Tambe said the GIBs breed between March and September and usually dwell on grasslands. "They are around five feet tall and have a wing span of around 2.5 metres. The bird prefers to run before taking off. Thus, they become easy targets for poachers," Tambe said.