

Project Update: November 2009

We had a discussion with Mr Harsh Vardhan, a keen wildlife and environmental conservationist, who has been working with the people and Great Indian Bustard (GIB) for the past three decades, to get his ideas and knowledge on the study site and the birds, in addition to knowing the contact person in the area. Mr Vardhan ensured his support in both the fieldwork and also creating awareness and educating the locals.

We also met the Forest Department (FD) Officials of Rajasthan, Ajmer Division on two accounts: 1. To inform them about the study we intend to do for the conservation of the GIB; and 2. To try and get all information they had in connection to the Sokliya GIB area.

The FD officials ensured their full support to the study and us, even though there was no forest area or grass plot under their control. Since the GIBs are using this area they have their three staff monitoring the movement of the birds. Further, they gave us the names of the villages where the mining for feldspar is going on. A hand drawn map showing the villages and the environs, location of grass area, mines and the GIBs was also obtained from the FD.



Using this map we tried and delineated the areas that were not having mines and also which have been demarcated as GIB use areas, and found two distinct clusters, which we need to work on that include the full extent of four villages and half of two villages in the first cluster, while entire area of three villages and half of two villages formed the second cluster. This was one exercise that was done based on the information gathered from the FD. The names of the villages and their location with clear demarcation of the two clusters would be provided in the map form once the land use map of the area was prepared. This map would have the other important data like the extent of the entire study area, extent of each land use, and more importantly the ownership of each land use.

We went to the Sokliya village and met the village head or surpanch as known locally, who was a lady and discussed with her about the GIBs, in addition to asking her who would provide us proper information about the GIBs and their intense area of use. Based on Mr Vardhan's knowledge and the information that we gather through some other local sources, came to know that a local villager called Mr Goga was involved in monitoring the GIB in this area for the past 25 years. We contacted him and found that earlier there were around 40 bustards in the area and now there are only 10 to 11 birds, which are found in two separate populations of five

and six birds. He stated that degradation of grasslands, which was mainly due to decrease in rainfall, overgrazing by the livestock and lack of a proper water source, the birds have disappeared and numbers had gone down. Mr Goga was the person who was mainly providing information on the whereabouts of the GIB to the FD and others who were interested on this species. He also said that last month, he had seen five birds (two young or subadults, two females and a male) moving towards a degraded grass (grazing land) patch surrounded by ploughed agriculture fields after drinking water from a small puddle in a pond and on another occasion seen two immature/sub adult birds and a adult female in another patch of grassland. Based on the discussion, we found that Mr Goga has a vast and very good knowledge about the areas and also the GIB. We have decided to have him as one of our field assistants who would be involved in getting data on the monthly locations of the GIB, help us in meeting the village heads and support in mobilizing the meeting with the villagers where we would try and find out the peoples' views on developing the grasslands and how it would benefit them and through which the globally threatened GIB and its habitat would be conserved, as all these would lead to finding out the feasibility of developing the grasslands or grazing lands of the common or grazing lands of the concerned villages.



Then Mr Goga accompanied us in the field and took us around the area to show us the locations where he had seen the birds earlier, the potential habitat or sites for the GIB and to which village the area belonged. Most of the areas or sites were village livestock grazing lands that are called gauchers or charagalands locally.

We visited 12 different sites or grasslands (village grazing lands) and the adjoining agricultural fields, which were mostly ploughed but without any crops. During this survey Mr Goga mentioned that another reason for the bird numbers going down in this area was due to non-availability of certain food grains like groundnut that they feed after the harvest from the fields. Decrease in rainfall and lack of water has restrained the local from growing these crops now.

However, we did not see any GIBs. At each location we recorded the present state of the sites by noting down the dominant species of grass, type of grass, levels of encroachment of shrubs and trees, threats in these grasslands and the village it belonged. In addition the present status of the adjoining agricultural lands was also recorded. The coordinates of each location /site was recorded using the GPS along with notes on the major land use. This information will be used in preparing the land use map using GIS and remote sensing. From what Mr Goga had said, it is clear that the GIB is still breeding in this area as he has seen two males displaying during mid-

May and immature and young birds with adult females during September and October. The main breeding season of this species extends from mid- May to mid-October. Presently the birds are probably using the crop fields with crops and the grass grown along the edges in the agricultural lands for nesting and raising their young. In this area the cultivation is mainly rain-fed and the rainy season is from July to September. Further, the people do not hunt these birds, which is very encouraging. So any effort made toward improving the grasslands in the area would benefit the birds and provide them a more secure habitat that would improve the breeding potential and availability of habitat for more birds and probably attract more individuals of the same species. It would also serve as better habitat for another smaller bustard species the lesser florican, which is also presently said to breed in the agricultural lands.

In the next month we would get one more field assistant who along with Mr Goga would help us in the Sokliya area and monitoring the GIB. We are preparing the formats for collecting data on the sites where the birds are located. Using this we would train the field assistants on various methods to be used in collecting data on GIB and what would be their role in trying to know the peoples opinion on restoring and developing the grasslands, in addition to taking part in awareness creation and education of local people in the villages of the two clusters.