

BUSTARD POACHING IN PAK. DESERT SHOCKS ACTIVISTS

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A group of poachers led by a retired Major of Pakistan Army (in circle) with the carcasses of two GIBs in Cholistan desert.

The recent shooting of two Great Indian Bustards (GIBs) in Pakistan's Cholistan desert, with the poachers brazenly getting themselves photographed with the carcasses of birds in their hands and guns on their shoulders, has left wildlife activists in Rajasthan shocked and outraged. The GIB, which is the State bird of Rajasthan, is considered India's most critically endangered bird.

A group of hunters, allegedly led by a retired Major of the Pakistan Army, shot down two GIBs in a protected area of southern Punjab's Cholistan game reserve in Pakistan earlier this month. Retired Major Tanveer Hussain Shah, a resident of Rahim Yar Khan district, and his accomplices, also attacked wildlife officials of that country when they tried to stop the group from hunting GIBs and chinkara deer.

The grassland habitat with grass cover in the Cholistan desert, where the GIBs were foraging, is similar to the habitat in Rajasthan's Desert National Park (DNP), where the GIB's last remnant wild population is found. The DNP, situated near the towns of Jaisalmer and Barmer, forms a part of the mighty Thar desert.

The GIB's population of fewer than 100 in Rajasthan accounts for 95% of its total world population. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), a global authority on species survival, which categorised the GIBs as "endangered" in 1994, was forced to upgrade the species to the status of "critically endangered" in 2011 because of continued threats faced in the survival of these large birds.

The Tourism & Wildlife Society of India (TWSI) has condemned the poaching of GIBs, while expressing surprise that the people in the neighbouring country continued to kill this rare species of birds. "It cannot take place without the cover provided by the government authorities in Pakistan. This incident should be probed thoroughly," TWSI honorary secretary Harsh Vardhan said here on Friday. Mr. Vardhan said the wildlife authorities in Rajasthan had permitted captive breeding of GIB, protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, in the DNP through a project executed by the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India in 2019 after a prolonged debate. Sixteen chicks of GIB are in hands now being reared in DNP by a team supported by the Houbara Breeding Centre of UAE.

"As Rajasthan shares the international border with Pakistan's Sindh and Punjab provinces, it is suspected that Indian-bred GIBs will fly across to Pakistan's desert and will be easy prey for the gun-toting poachers there," Mr. Vardhan said.

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