

## WHERE TO SEE: INDIAN BUSTARD

## Indian Bustard Wildlife Sanctuary, Nanaj, Maharashtra, India

DAVE SHOWLER, ALEXANDER LEES, RAJENDRA N. NALE & BILAL HABIB

### Introduction

Surrounded by cultivation and scattered villages, Nanaj is a 10 km<sup>2</sup> island of remnant grassland and *Acacia* savanna lying within a much larger zone designated the Great Indian Bustard Wildlife Sanctuary (GIBWS). This encompasses an area of 8,496 km<sup>2</sup> and includes the city of Solapur within its limits. Established to protect the endangered and endemic Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*, it supports around 65 individuals—a significant proportion of the estimated world population of 600–700 birds (BirdLife International 2001)—Nanaj is the core of the GIBWS as it is the only place where bustards regularly breed. It is also possibly the only site in India where the bustard population is increasing. However, this gives little ground for optimism as the small area of suitable habitat is unlikely to be able to sustain a viable population indefinitely. Consequently, there exists an urgent need to establish a 'Project Bustard' to ensure the species's long-term survival (Rahmani 2002). For most birders the chance of observing this awesome bird is the main reason for visiting. However, the locality, although familiar to Indian ornithologists, has largely escaped the attention of western birders. Its strategic position (within striking distance of Goa) and lack of bureaucratic boundaries combine to make this perhaps the easiest place to see this species in the world.

Bustards aside, many other interesting birds occur, such as resident Painted Francolin *Francolinus pictus*, Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus*. Winter visitors include Montagu's *Circus pygargus* and Pallid Harriers *C. macrourus*, Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, Orphee Warbler *Sylvia pallida* and Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*. Another endangered otid, the nomadic Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica*, is very occasionally seen.

The GIBWS also has a population of around 450 blackbuck (an endemic Indian antelope) and other mammals which one has a good chance of seeing include wolf, Indian fox and black-naped hare. A savanna landscape with small groups of sparring spiral-horned blackbuck providing the backdrop to a posturing and booming Indian Bustard is a memorable sight.

### Location

The GIBWS, Nanaj, is situated 2 km south-east of Nanaj village [17°46'N 75°54'E], 22 km north of the town of Solapur, in the province of Maharashtra, central-west India (see Fig. 1). Mumbai (Bombay) lies c. 400 km WNW, Pune (where the nearest airport is located) 250 km to the west and the small Indian province of Goa c. 350 km south-west.

### Accommodation and food

Accommodation is available at the Forest Rest House at the Wildlife Sanctuary HQ. This is situated c. 2 km south-east of Nanaj village alongside the little-used public road which runs through the reserve. There are four large double rooms complete with ceiling fan, shower and toilet (Rupees 500/night/person). In order to ensure accommodation is available it is advisable to book in advance, although if you visit during the week it is probably not necessary. At weekends there are likely to be more visitors and occasionally parties of schoolchildren and students visit. Accommodation can be booked through: Rajendra Nale (Range Forest Officer), Tel.: (91) (217) 2341676 or Deputy Conservator of Forests (WL), Western Region Pune, Type 5/ 2 and 3, Survey No. 49, Vanvadi. Opposite Salinkivihar, Pune - 411040. Tel: 020 5124182.

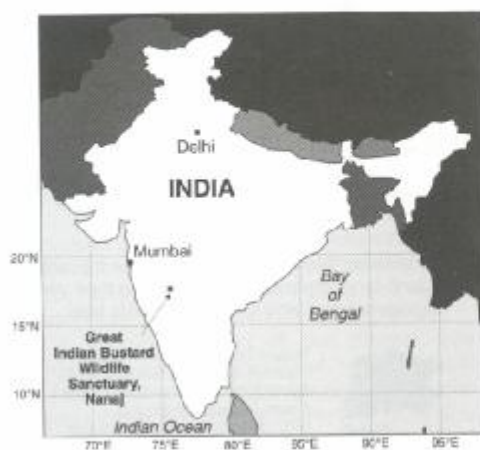


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Nanaj village.

There is a reserves fee of Rupees 10/day/person and for a light motor vehicle Rupees 20/day. An ordinary camera permit costs Rupees 50; a professional camera permit Rupees 1,000/day; a video camera (for commercial purposes) Rupees 5,000/day.

Meals, prepared by the amenable staff, are available upon request. This is both convenient and helps promote ecotourism by generating a little more income for the local community. Let them know approximately when you'd like to eat so that it fits with your birding plans for the day. The food is simple but adequate, e.g. evening meals consist of dhal baht (lentils and rice with vegetable curry) and chapatti (flat bread). At breakfast, omelette, salted fried potato and milky, cardamom-spiced tea was the speciality. Food amounted to about Rupees 150/day (c. £2 sterling) each.

Alternative food options would be to drive to Solapur for an evening meal or bring provisions with you. Bottled mineral water can be bought locally at Nanaj village.

### Strategy

Most western birders visit India in the winter months (November to February) and this is a good time to visit Nanaj to see both Indian Bustards and wintering Palearctic migrants. At this time much of the grass has died back, facilitating easier observation of bustards and other birds. The humidity at this time of the year is low in comparison, for example, with the coastal lowlands, but daytime temperatures can reach 40°C in the heat of the day when a siesta is a pertinent idea. Nanaj is also accessible during the monsoon (July–September) and this is a popular time to visit as bustard display activity peaks at the onset of the rains. Additional nomadic birds arrive with the monsoon, e.g. Rain Quail *Coturnix coromandelica*, and some resident species inconspicuous during the winter months become more obvious, such as Indian Courser, which gather in impressive flocks of 30 or more birds.

Goa has become a favoured destination for European birders and has a strong tourist and birder-friendly infrastructure with a set of well known, easily accessible birdwatching sites to visit. For those staying for more than a week, the more adventurous might consider incorporating into their itinerary a three-day (two-nights) trip to Nanaj. The easiest and most efficient way to do this is to hire a driver and car either through your guesthouse or hotel, or by asking one of the local taxi drivers, many of whom will be willing to broker a deal. Be prepared to haggle, and if the cost can be shared between two or three people prices are very reasonable. We (DS,AL) hired a driver and car from

Calingute/Baga (on the coast of Goa), where the majority of birders are based. The cost for four days (three nights) was Rupees 9,000, equivalent to £109 (inclusive of petrol which amounted to Rupees 1,960). Food and accommodation for the driver amounted to an additional £12.

Considering the eccentricities of local motorists and poorly signed routes, having an Indian driver will make reaching the site considerably easier. An additional advantage, as opposed to travelling by public transport, is that if you see anything of interest en route you can stop. Hiring your own car is not recommended as the cost, including insurance, will probably amount to more than having your own driver.

The best route from Goa is via Kholapur (where the lake/reservoir in the town centre is extremely attractive to waterbirds including Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*) and thence Solapur.

An early morning departure (05h30–06h00) is recommended: the journey takes about nine hours. As you enter Nanaj village from the south, take a sharp right almost doubling back on yourself (there is a rusty metal bustard sign indicating the route) down a small road which leads to the Sanctuary HQ situated 2–3 km down the road on the left-hand side. An early start pays dividends as it leaves two or three hours before dusk (c. 19h00) in the coolness of the late afternoon to go birding and hopefully see some bustards before dinner.

Getting to Solapur by public transport from e.g. Goa or Mumbai would be feasible. Buses and trains run to Solapur but it would be a rather long and arduous trip requiring several changes en route. From Solapur one could take a local taxi the remaining 22 km to the Sanctuary.

### Birds

The primary attraction is Indian Bustard. Solitary, dominant males display throughout the year, tail fanned over their back, head held up, gular pouch inflated and distended almost to the ground, intermittently emitting a deep, low hollow 'boom' whilst strutting slowly about their territory seeing off any encroaching subordinates. In common with the other large bustards of the genus *Ardeotis*, they establish territories from which other males are excluded and do not form dispersed leks as is the case with the majority of bustard species (del Hoyo *et al.*, 1996). In February 2004, a dominant male, two subadult males and two females could be observed by scanning the grassland from alongside the concrete hide by the watchtower. The hide and watchtower are located about 1 km down the road south of the HQ and accessed from the road by a well-worn footpath running c. 500 m across the grassland. Do not climb the tower unless given

permission to do so, as it is exposed and disturbance to the bustards is likely. Most birding was undertaken in the grassland, scrub and cultivated areas on the opposite side of the road where we were free to roam as there were no bustards present, but ask and make sure this is the case at the time of your visit.

An hour before dawn (05h30) is the best time to hear, and as the sky lightens, see Indian Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus*. Walk down the road from the HQ and two or three should be heard within a few hundred metres. Look on prominent perches 1–3 m off the ground and also on the road itself, and with a little persistence one should obtain reasonable views. Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus* and the less common Painted Francolin are also most frequently encountered at first light. Again a good tactic is to walk down the road, listen for their calls and watch for them scurrying across open ground. They can also be flushed from tall grassy and scrubby areas perhaps along with the elusive Rock Bush Quail *Perdicula argoondah*. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse inhabiting more sparsely vegetated areas are often seen in flight in small flocks in the early morning and

evening, and can also be encountered feeding during the day. Another sought-after species, Indian Courser, is distinctly more problematic and may require a lot of legwork searching expanses of open dry ground including lightly cultivated areas. Once located they are surprisingly conspicuous, running around rapidly and sporting a dazzlingly white supercilium. In these arid areas Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus* may also be encountered.

The open terrain attracts a high diversity of larks with Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark *Eremopterix grisea* the dominant species, males performing their undulating display flight whilst emitting a far-carrying rather mournful whistle. A central Indian endemic, Sykes's Lark *Galerida deva*, resembling a small, short-billed Crested Lark *G. cristata* with a buffy wash to the breast and heavily streaked upperparts, is less numerous. Rufous-tailed Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus* may be encountered in ones and twos in more barren areas whilst Indian Bushlark *Mirafra erythroptera* is frequent in open scrub. Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* and Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula* exhibit a preference for dry fields around the

Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*



ASAD BOHMANN



ALEX LEES

Observation hide at Nanaj (observers from the front: Poonaji Simepunushkan, Rajendra Nale, Alex Lees, Dave Showler), 7 February 2004.

periphery of the reserve. Look out also for Grey-necked Buntings foraging rather unobtrusively around the field margins and check out the noisy House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* flocks in the trees—Black-headed Buntings *Emberiza melanocephala* are often amongst them and Red-headed Bunting *E. bruniceps* also occurs.

Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* are common, perched in the small *Acacia* trees along with lesser numbers of *lahtora* race Southern Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis*, a subspecies that may warrant full species status. The acacias and other small trees are good for Sykes's Warbler, along with lesser numbers of its rounder-headed *Phylloscopus*-like congener Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*. Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* race *blythi* is common in this habitat, along with the odd Orphee Warbler. Large Grey Babblers *Turdoides malcolmi* are unmissable as they forage in noisy gangs in the undergrowth.

An hour or so before dusk is a good time to return to the vicinity of the watchtower to observe Montagu's and Pallid Harriers drifting in over the savanna gathering to roost; the sight of 16 male and one female Montagu's and two male Pallids involved in aerial dogfights over an impassive herd of Blackbuck, a sleepy wolf and the displaying Indian Bustard is not easily forgotten.

**References**

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ALEX LEES

Indian Bustard sign, Nanaj, 8 February 2004.

**Bird species recorded at the Great Indian Bustard Wildlife Sanctuary, Nanaj**

This list is based on observations by DS and AL (7–9 February 2004) and records from Bilal Habib and Rajendra Nale (indicated with an asterisk). Birds are considered resident at Nanaj unless otherwise indicated: s=summer w=winter v=vagrant ?=status uncertain.

- Painted Francolin *Francolinus pictus*
- Grey Francolin *F. pondicerianus*
- \*Rain Quail *Coturnix coromandelica* (s)
- \*Rock Bush Quail *Perdica argoandah*
- \*Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*
- \*Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncho* (s)
- \*Yellow-crowned Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis*
- \*Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*
- Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrocus birostris*
- Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (r/w)
- \*European Roller *Coracias garrulus* (v)
- Indian Roller *C. benghalensis*
- White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
- \*Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* (s)
- Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*
- \*Pied Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* (s)
- \*Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierocaccyx varius* (r/m)
- Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*
- Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*  
 \*Plum-headed Parakeet *P. cyanocephala*  
 \*Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (?)  
 \*Spotted Owllet *Athene brama*  
 \*Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* (w)  
 Indian Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus*  
 Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*  
 \*Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*  
 Red Collared Dove *S. tranquebarica*  
 Eurasian Collared Dove *S. decora*  
 Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*  
 \*Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* (?)  
 \*Demoiselle Crane *Grus virgo* (vw)  
 Chestnut-bellied Sandpiper *Pterocles exustus*  
 Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (w)  
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleuca* (w)  
 Indian Courser *Cursarius coromandellicus*  
 \*Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* (s)  
 \*Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (r/w)  
 Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus*  
 Red-wattled Lapwing *V. indicus*  
 \*River Tern *Sterna aurantia* (s)  
 Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*  
 Black Kite *Milvus migrans*  
 Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*  
 \*Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* (?)  
 Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* (w)  
 Montagu's Harrier *C. pygargus* (w)  
 Shikra *Accipiter badius*  
 Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* (w)  
 \*White-eyed Buzzard *Buteo teesa*  
 \*Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* (?)  
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (w)  
 \*Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera*  
*Falco* sp. (Peregrine *F. peregrinus* or Laggar *F. jugger*)  
 \*Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (s)  
 \*Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (s)  
 Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*  
 Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*  
 \*Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* (s)  
 \*Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa* (s)  
 \*Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* (s)  
 \*Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus* (s)  
 Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*  
 Long-tailed Shrike *L. schach*  
 \*Southern Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis lahtora*  
 House Crow *Corvus splendens*  
 Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos*  
 Ashy Wood swallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*  
 \*Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* (w)  
 \*Large Cuckooshrike *Coracina maculosa*  
 Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*  
 Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*  
 Common Woodshrike *Tephrodarnis pandiceianus*  
 Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*  
 Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*  
 Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulcata*  
 \*Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* (w)

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus* (w)  
 Pied Bushchat *S. caprata*  
 \*Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* (v)  
 \*Isabelline Wheatear *O. isabellina* (v)  
 \*Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* (?)  
 Rosy Starling *S. roseus* (w)  
 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*  
 Great Tit *Parus major*  
 Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*  
 Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*  
 Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*  
 Ashy Prinia *P. socialis*  
 \*Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*  
 Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* (w)  
 Sykes's Warbler *H. ramia* (w)  
 Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* (w)  
 Orphean Warbler *S. pallida* (w)  
 Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*  
 \*Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*  
 Large Grey Babbler *T. malcolmi*  
 Indian Bushlark *Mirafra erythroptera*  
 Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark *Eremopterix grisea*  
 Rufous-tailed Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus*  
 Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* (w)  
 \*Sykes's Lark *G. deva*  
 Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulguia* (r/w)  
 \*Purple-rumped Sunbird *Nectarinia zeylanica*  
 Purple Sunbird *N. asiatica*  
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*  
 \*Chestnut-shouldered Petronia *Petronia xanthicollis*  
 \*White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* (w)  
 \*White-browed Wagtail *M. maderaspatensis* (s)  
 \*Citrine Wagtail *M. citreola* (w)  
 Grey Wagtail *M. cinerea* (w)  
 Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*  
 Tawny Pipit *A. campestris* (w)  
 Blyth's Pipit *A. godlewski* (w)  
 \*Bay Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* (s)  
 Indian Silverbill *Lonchura malabarica*  
 Scaly-breasted Munia *L. punctulata*  
 Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani* (w)  
 Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala* (w)  
 Red-headed Bunting *E. bruniceps* (w)

Dave Showler, 24 Waldeck Road, Norwich, NR4 7PG,  
 Norfolk, UK; dashowler@hotmail.com

Alexander Lees, Western House, Main Street, Foston,  
 Grantham, NG32 2JU, Lincolnshire, UK;  
 alexanderlees@btopenworld.com

Rajendra N. Nale (Range Forest Officer, G.I.B.S.),  
 'Sai Krupa' Yojana Soc., 8/A, Bijapur Road,  
 Solapur Maharashtra - 413004, India;  
 rajendranale@yahoo.co.in

Bilal Habib (conservation biologist), G.I.B. Sanctuary,  
 Nanaj, N.Solapur, Maharashtra - 413222, India;  
 bilalhabib1@yahoo.co.in