

Short Communication

A Report of Great Bustard *Otis tarda* from Northern Iran

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The Great Bustard *Otis tarda* is evaluated as Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2008). It occurs in grassland habitats discontinuously from eastern Asia west to the Iberian Peninsula (Alonso *et al.* 2000). This species has been recorded in eight provinces (West Azarbaijan, East Azarbaijan, Kordestan, Hamedan, Kermanshah, Mazandaran, North Khorasan and Khorasa-e Razavi) in Iran, mainly in the west of the country, from West Azarbaijan in the northwest to Kermanshah in the centre-west. West Azarbaijan and Kordestan support the largest populations (Evans, 1994, Amini 2000, Barati & Amerifar 2008). In recent decades human-induced habitat destruction and land use changes have caused the species to decline sharply everywhere.

As recently as the 1970s, there were two separate populations of Great Bustards in Iran: a partially migratory breeding population in western Iran, and a migratory population from the former Soviet Union (Rahnamaee *et al.* 1996) that spent the entire winter in the vast deserts of northeastern Iran (Kahrom 1979). However, in recent years the breeding population has become limited mostly to Gharah Gheshlagh and Sotav Plain in West Azarbijan and Zarrineh Obato, Yazibolaghi and Gaveshleh in Kordestan (Amini 2000, Barati & Amerifar 2008), and there have been no reports of Great Bustards wintering in northeast Iran since the late 1970s. Human interference has had severe effects on Great Bustard numbers in Iran (Amini 2000, Barati & Amerifar 2008), the causes including commercial, local and government activities, *e.g.* farming, sheep-herding, hunting, changes in land use,

mining and other physical disturbance of birds, especially during the nesting season.

On 21 January 2008, during the Mid-winter Waterbird Census in southwestern Miankaleh Wildlife Refuge and on the Miankaleh Peninsula, a male Great Bustard was observed in the open grassland and dry farmland of Hossein-Abad village, Behshahr, Mazandaran Province (Naserkhan Hashemi farmland at 36°46'38.7"N, 53°26'45.6"E). The bird was very wary, not permitting close approach, and flew off to land some 1.5 km further away, still in dry wheat farmland. K.R. followed it in his binoculars, and eventually we were able to take some photographs (Fig. 1). We know of only one other record of Great Bustard in the southeast Caspian region in recent decades: a female observed on Miankaleh Peninsula, Mazandaran, on 3 January 1971 (D.A. Scott, pers. comm.; Evans 1994).

The winters are extremely cold in northwestern Iran and much of the Great Bustard's habitat is frozen and under snow cover for several months of the year. There is definitely movement of birds into Iran from breeding areas in other countries (*e.g.* the entire wintering population in the northeast). We might speculate that the Great Bustard observed in January 2008 is representative of occasional migration from the Turkmenistan Republic to northern Iran when the weather in Turkmenistan becomes particularly harsh in late January and February. In April 2008, during our visit to the Hasangholi Biosphere Reserve in the Turkmenistan Republic where is near to Miankaleh Wildlife Refuge, we saw a mounted specimen of a Great Bustard (illegally hunted in the winter of 2008) in the reserve's collection. The species was listed as a seasonal

migratory bird, and this was confirmed verbally by the reserve manager. A. Kazakov (head of Bukhara hunting inspection) also observed the flock of about 100 Great Bustards there in autumn 2007. The winter of 2007/08 was exceptionally severe in Central Asia, with temperatures in Uzbekistan falling to minus 15–20 °C. A very large influx of Great Bustards occurred in Uzbekistan in January 2008 (from breeding areas in Kazakhstan), and presumably the bird in Mazandaran was part of this exceptional hard-weather movement (E. Kreuzberg-Mukhina per Editor). But a closely-related species, Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii*, has been radiotagged on migration flights from Abu Dhabi to China and back (UAE Checklist 2008).

Movement within and migration into Iran of Great Bustard populations to other habitats of Iran is possible (Rahnamae *et al.* 1996). However, we know of no evidence that this species migrates from countries to the west and northwest of Iran into the north or northeast of the country. There is also definitely some movement of Great Bustards within Iran (*e.g.* the birds breeding at higher elevations in the western provinces moved down to lower elevations in winter). Numbers are generally lower in winter than in summer suggests that there is some emigration of birds, presumably to neighboring Iraq.

Further surveys on the status of the Great Bustard in autumn and winter are essential in suitable habitat in northeast and north Iran, in the provinces of Khorasan-e Razavi, North Khorasan, Golestan and eastern Mazandaran.



Figure 1. A male Great Bustard *Otis tarda*, Hossein-Abad, SW Miankaleh Wildlife Refuge, Mazandaran, 21 January 2008, © K. Rabiee.

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