

Status of the Great Bustard *Otis tarda tarda* in Kyrgyzstan

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Summary: Kyrgyzstan has very little suitable habitat for Great Bustards, but the species is known to have nested in four widely separated areas. Currently, it is recorded mainly on migration, rarely in winter, in steppe and semi-desert areas and intermontane valleys, often at 2500 m above sea level. Threats are habitat loss and poaching. Steps to restore populations must include greater local community awareness, incentives for farmers who could have the species nesting on their land, protected areas on flyways and wintering grounds, and control of poaching.

INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country with very little habitat suitable for the Great Bustard *Otis tarda tarda*. Nevertheless, the species has been recorded breeding in four widely separated areas, with observations of migratory birds in several other places. Hunting and habitat loss have led to the species being listed as Critically Endangered (CR: R, A1) in the country (Shukurov & Kasybekov 2007). A brief overview of records follows.

PAST AND PRESENT DISTRIBUTION AND POPULATION

During 1900–1910, the Great Bustard regularly nested in steppe areas and cereal fields in the Chui valley (Shnitnikov 1949; Figure 1, Chui province). During the 1940–1950s, it was also found nesting in the mountain valleys of the Naryn river, near Kulanak (Figure 1, site 1) and Toguz-Toro (Figure 1, site 2) villages at altitudes up to 2500 m above sea level (Yanushevich *et al* 1959). In the middle of last century, the species nested and wintered in Osh province in the south of Kyrgyzstan (Figure 1, Osh province), although there is no recent information about its presence in that area. Breeding of this species in the republic is known only from the period 1900–1950 and is not currently observed (Shnitnikov 1949, Yanushevich *et al* 1959).

Great Bustards arrive at their wintering sites at the end of October through early November in small flocks of 5–7 individuals. Historically, they were recorded regularly

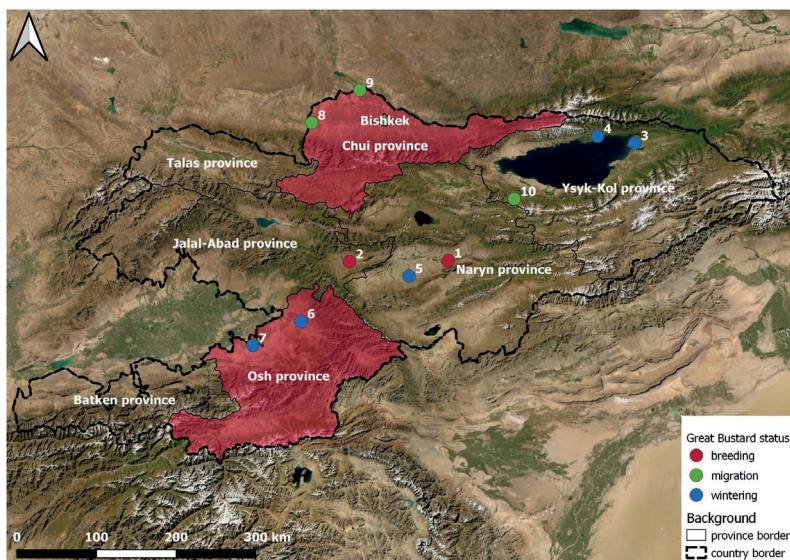


Figure 1. Distribution of Great Bustard breeding sites, stopover and wintering sites in Kyrgyzstan. Numbers refer to the respective references to the locations in the text. The two provinces mentioned in the text as breeding areas of Great Bustard are highlighted in red.

in the eastern part of the Ysyk-Kol valley in winter (Figure 1, site 3) and on migration (Shnitnikov 1949, Yanushevich *et al* 1959). In winter 2001–2002, three Great Bustards occupied a field near the village of Ananevo (north-eastern shore of Ysyk-Kol lake; pers obs) (Figure 1, site 4). In the western Ysyk-Kol lake basin, Naryn, Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces, they remained in the foothills and adjacent agricultural fields from fall through winter, where they fed on orthopterans, grains and safflower seeds (Figure 1, sites 5,6,7; Yanushevich *et al* 1959). After snowfall, the birds gather along the southern slopes of foothills (Shnitnikov 1949, Yanushevich *et al* 1959). However, snow cover is not frequent or long-lasting at these sites and typically melts within 1–2 days. Great Bustards also use piedmont regions near Chaldovar village in the Chui valley (Figure 1, site 8), adjacent to Kazakhstan, as migratory stopovers (Shnitnikov 1949, Yanushevich *et al* 1959). A large migratory gathering of some 300 Great Bustards was observed on 14 April 1958 in the Chui valley, feeding in a cereal field in groups of 10–15 birds close to the border with Kazakhstan (Figure 1, site 9; Yanushevich *et al* 1959). In October 2019 local shepherds caught one injured Great Bustard in an area near Toguz-Bulak village, Tong district, Ysyk-Kol province (Figure 1, site 10; pers obs).

The Great Bustard’s main habitat in Kyrgyzstan is steppe and semi-desert areas, as well as cereal cropfields. Its latitudinal and especially altitudinal distribution depends on the presence of suitable habitat. This species has been found in mountain foothills and intermontane valleys at altitudes of up to 2000–2500 m above sea level (Yanushevich *et al* 1959).

At present, the Great Bustard is extremely rare everywhere in Kyrgyzstan, where it is still found in small numbers mostly during migration and more rarely in winter (Table 1). There has been some increase in the number of birds observed in the northern border regions in recent years, perhaps influenced by an increase in neighbouring Kazakhstan (Rustamov & Kovshar’ 2007).

Table 1. Expert evaluation of the current Great Bustard population in Kyrgyzstan in each season.

Season	Number of Great Bustards	Number of sites	Quality of estimate, from 1 (low-quality) to 5 (high-quality)
Breeding	1–2	2	1
Gathering for migration	4–10	3	3
Wintering	2–5	2	3

THREATS AND CONSERVATION MEASURES

Some researchers believe that the main factors influencing the recent increase in number of Great Bustards have been associated with the decline in agriculture and other economic activities in breeding areas after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Rustamov & Kovshar’ 2007). Despite this, high anthropogenic pressure, including habitat transformation, high grazing pressure and direct persecution by poachers remain major limiting factors impacting the presence and abundance of this species.

Special measures are needed for the restoration of Great Bustard populations in Kyrgyzstan, including awareness-raising among local inhabitants, and incentives for farmers in places where the species might breed (cropfields and pastures). Special seasonal protected areas should be established in migratory and wintering territories. Enforcement of existing regulations and prevention of poaching are also necessary.

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