

Status of the Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* in Afghanistan

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Summary: From the 19th century the Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* was reported as a winter visitor in the north-west, north and south-east of Afghanistan. Nowadays, limited detection efforts do not allow us to update its distribution and status, although given its impact on other cursorial species, hunting is likely to be the main threat to the species in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Little information has been published on the ornithology of Afghanistan, and a complete account of the birds of the country is impossible to undertake given current knowledge. Historically, several compilations attempted to indicate which species were known to be present and what information was available on their status. The first of these syntheses brought together material about the ornithology of Afghanistan from the mid-19th century until 1937 (Whistler 1944, 1945a,b,c,d). It was followed, almost 15 years later, by Knut Paludan's 'On the Birds of Afghanistan' (Paludan 1959), long considered the best reference on the Afghan avifauna as it enriched Whistler's lists with collections and direct observations made throughout the country in 1947–1948. Finally, Sayer & van der Zon (1981) comprehensively updated the previous lists with information collected and occasionally published during the 1970s.

The collection of ornithological information did not resume until the twenty-first century, after the military intervention of the Soviet armed forces and the successive civil wars which plunged Afghanistan into institutional chaos for 25 years. The most up-to-date compilation available is the monumental two-volume 'Birds of South Asia – The

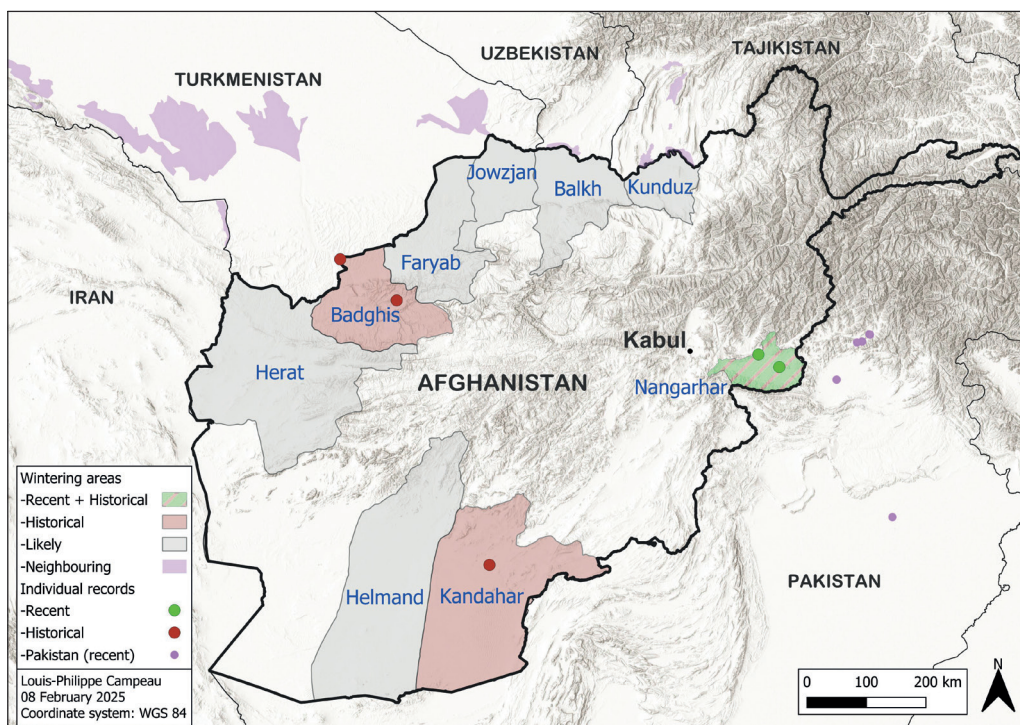


Figure 1. Historical and recent Little Bustard sightings in Afghanistan.

Ripley Guide’ (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The checklist proposed by these authors is probably the most reliable to date because it is largely based on museum specimens and confirmed field observations.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) began its involvement in Afghanistan in the early 2000s and has had a permanent presence there since 2006. That year, it set up an internal database on birds where it logged observations made by its staff and several external consultants. To be included in this database, records must involve (a) clear identifications made by experienced observers, (b) identifications by less experienced observers providing sufficient details, or (c) observations supported by extant specimens, photographs or details establishing specific identities.

METHODS

To determine the past and current presence of the Little Bustard in Afghanistan, I examined the previously mentioned literature as it relates to the current political boundaries of Afghanistan. I enriched this bibliographic research with information published since 2003 in peer-reviewed journals, unpublished reports and grey literature, but only including well-corroborated records. I also searched for sightings of Little Bustards in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries posted online on the eBird platform up to November 2024.

RESULTS

There are five confirmed records of Little Bustard in Afghanistan dating to the mid and late 19th century, two from Badghis in the north, two from Kandahar in the south, and one unclearly located from Nangarhar or Kunar in the east (Table 1). I found only two recent records of Little Bustard in Afghanistan, both from the WCS bird database, of which only one could be properly confirmed (Table 1). Both sightings were made in winter in Nangarhar province, eastern Afghanistan, bordering the Khyber district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, where the species is a rare and erratic winter visitor (Grimmett *et al* 2008).

Table 1. Known records of Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* in Afghanistan. ASB (formerly) = specimen registered in the Asiatic Society of Bengal catalogue but now missing from the Zoological Society of India, Kolkata; NHMUK = Natural History Museum, UK.

Date	Description	Confirmation element	Source
(winter?) 1840	One, unsexed, collected in Koolsei near Khujah, Nangarhar province (locality is unclear and could also be in adjoining valleys of lower Kunar River)	Specimen in NHMUK	W. Griffith cited in Whistler (1945d)
October 1878 – April 1881	He ‘saw several specimens shot by sportsmen at Kandahar’, and ‘shot one 12 miles south of Kandahar in April.’	Visual observation	St John (1889)
November 1880	One, female, collected in Kandahar province	Specimen in NHMUK	C. Swinhoe cited in Whistler (1945d)
12 March 1884/85	One, unsexed, collected in Maruchak near Murghab, Badghis province	Specimen in ASB (formerly)	C. E. Yates cited in Whistler (1945d)
December 1884/85	One, unsexed, collected in Chaman-e-Bed, Badghis province	Specimen in ASB (formerly)	C. E. Yates, cited in Whistler (1945d)
14 December 2008	Two, unsexed, flying west of Darunta Lake, Nangarhar province	Visual observation	WCS Afghanistan database
3 February 2013	One, unsexed, shot near Barikav, Nangarhar province	Photo seen but not shared	WCS Afghanistan database

DISCUSSION

Historical information suggests that the species was a winter visitor to Afghanistan, although the few surveys and an April sighting near Kandahar (St John 1889) cannot rule out the possibility that individuals remained in the country after winter. These old data are too few to be able to deduce the past abundance of this species in Afghanistan. Nowadays, and despite the absence of recent studies in most suitable areas, the species is probably a rare winter visitor to the open plains of the north-west, south and east of the country.

However, the paucity of recent ornithological reports does not necessarily indicate the rarity of the Little Bustard in Afghanistan. The country has received very little attention from ornithologists in recent years because of chronic insecurity. Historical data suggest that the wintering grounds of the species in Afghanistan would stretch across the provinces of Badghis, Balkh, Faryab, Helmand, Herat, Jowzjan, Kandahar and Nangarhar (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), where security conditions have been poor for the past two decades. Of the 644 eBird lists collected in these provinces, more than 80% were collected on military bases and less than 5% during winter (November–February). None of these lists contained sightings of Little Bustards. Similarly, since 2006 WCS field teams worked only on few occasions in Balkh, Herat and Nangarhar provinces, and never visited the provinces of Badghis, Faryab, Helmand and Jowzjan.

Difficulties in accessing international border areas in Afghanistan also limit surveys in areas of interest for Little Bustards. Kreuzberg-Mukhina (in Balmer & Betton 2002) reported flocks of up to 150 Little Bustards in the Sukhandarya region of Uzbekistan, in green grain fields along the Amudarya river, only a few kilometres from similar habitats across the river in the Balkh province of Afghanistan. In Tajikistan, a flock of 23 birds was photographed on 30 January 2025, in the Tigrovaya Balka protected area bordering Afghanistan (Muhammadsoleh Oev pers comm). In Iran, Yousefi *et al* (2017) determined that the main wintering grounds of Little Bustards in the north-east of the country are in the border regions adjoining Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Wintering Little Bustards in Iran use agricultural land, grazed meadows and halophilic shrub steppes associated with wetlands (Sehhatisabet *et al* 2012) and all these habitats are present in the neighbouring Afghan province of Herat. It is therefore plausible that the species visits suitable habitats (eg agricultural lands) in the border areas of Balkh, Kunduz and Herat provinces (Figure 1), which are only a few kilometres from the confirmed wintering areas in south Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and eastern Iran.

Although the current security situation makes it easier to visit certain remote regions of Afghanistan, the country remains difficult to explore. Satellite telemetry could enable this exploration 'from the office'. As with the wintering of the Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, this technology (Combreau *et al* 2011) deployed on pre-migratory birds in Central Asia could reveal a much greater use of Afghanistan by Little Bustards in the winter than the current lack of information seems to indicate.

In contrast to what is observed across most its eastern range (Collar *et al* 2017), the Little Bustard is probably less affected by agricultural intensification and linear infrastructure in Afghanistan than in other countries. However, this respite could prove short-lived as large projects are in progress for agriculture development and irrigation, involving the expansion of powerlines, especially from Turkmenistan (Sabory *et al* 2022) and eg the 285-km-long Qosh Teppe Canal planned to divert waters from the Amudarya river (Rudenshiold 2023). This could add to pressures on Little Bustards wintering in north and north-west Afghanistan. Also, while the species does not seem to be targeted by the live bird trade, which is very popular in Afghanistan (Ostrowski *et al* 2014), hunting is likely to



Plate 1. Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis* and Calandra Larks *Melanocorypha calandra* hunted in 'the north' of Afghanistan and sold as food by street vendors in Kabul, 24 November 2013. © WCS Afghanistan

be the most serious threat to the species in Afghanistan. That is unlikely to diminish in the near future, given the economic and cultural importance of the practice, the proliferation of shotguns and ammunition, and poor environmental law enforcement (Bashari 2014, Mostafawi *et al.* 2017, Mostafawi & Poya Faryabi 2021). Partridges and sandgrouse are commonly sold as food by street vendors in large towns in late autumn and winter (Plate 1). Just like cranes, which occasionally appear in street markets, Little Bustards, although very rare in Nangarhar, are said to be choice eating (anonymous hunter, pers comm).

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