

Status of the Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* in Pakistan based on historical and recent sighting records

AHMAD KHAN, NAJAM UL HUDA KHAN, SHARIF UDDIN & AZAN KARAM

Summary: The Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* occurs in Pakistan both as a rare passage migrant and a scarce winter visitor. Records cluster in 23 localities, 14 in the north (1 in Gilgit-Baltistan, 12 in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa, 1 in northern Punjab) and 9 in the south (4 in Balochistan, 5 in Sindh); 13 localities reflect historical (pre-1990) records and 10 reflect recent (post-1990) records. Most recent records were obtained from hunters we interviewed or found on social media; their collective testimony suggests that the species wintered in good numbers locally in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa several decades ago. More focused efforts would clarify various aspects of the species' migration and wintering habitat in addition to threats from hunting pressure and habitat degradation.

INTRODUCTION

Over most of its range in Europe and Asia, the Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* is in decline owing to various drivers including hunting and habitat loss (Roberts 1973), leading to its current IUCN status of Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2018). A monotypic species within the family Otididae, the Little Bustard is a medium-sized Palearctic steppe species that breeds in dry open grasslands and cold steppe in Russia and Central Asia and migrates south to the Caucasus and similar latitudes, so is only a scarce winter visitor to Pakistan (Hume & Marshall 1879, Morales *et al* 2013). This study focuses on finding and assembling the evidence of the Little Bustard's occurrence in Pakistan.

METHODS

To assess the Little Bustard's status in Pakistan we used four main sources. First, we reviewed the historical records from the jurisdiction of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Second, we analysed recent sightings on the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), as Khan *et al* (2024) found an increasing trend in the reporting of bird sightings to GBIF in Pakistan. Third, we collected information through emails and social media messaging apps from key wildlife officials in the country. We anticipated obtaining more recent information about the bird's presence, especially since there is a strong focus on research into the Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii* as a key species hunted by Arab Sheikhs in Pakistan (Mian 1986, Ata *et al* 2019). Finally, we gathered records from hunters in personal communications or via social media.

RESULTS

Historical records

Historical records and observations (here treated as up to 1990 when large-scale land-cover changes were observed in the Little Bustard's breeding ground following the collapse of the Soviet Union) suggest that the Little Bustard in Pakistan occurs from Lasbela on the Makran coast to Gilgit in the Hindu Kush Himalayas (Figure 1). Mirza (2012) considered the species a 'very rare, irregular winter visitor' to the country's north-east and south. Indeed, almost all historical records come from either the northern provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab or the very south of the country in Balochistan and Sindh.

Biddulph (1881) reported collecting a male specimen on 27 March (probably 1878 or 1879) and seeing another on a stony plain around six miles from Gilgit. McMohan (1901) mentioned that JM Johnson collected two specimens between Malakand and Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa between December and April 1894, as mentioned by Sharpe (1894).

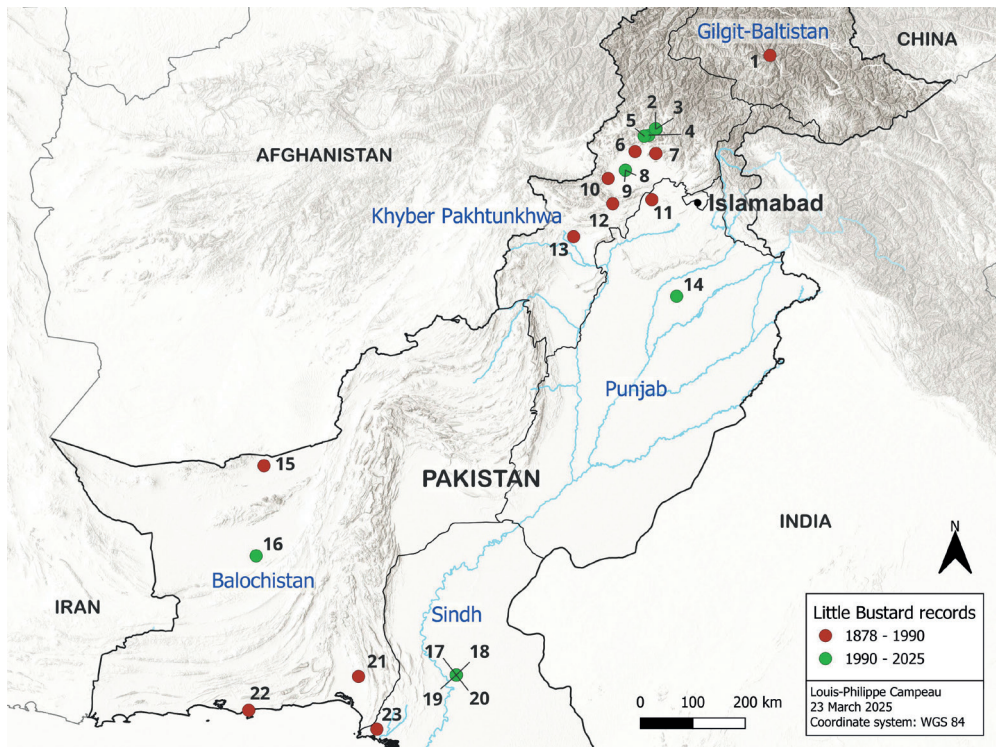


Figure 1. Historical and recent records of the Little Bustard from Pakistan. Numbers refer to sites listed in Table 1.

These are preserved in the British Natural History Museum (NHMUK). According to Oates (1898), while it could sometimes be found in India, the Little Bustard was more frequent west of the Indus and in the North West Frontier (now the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces). Whitehead (1909) recorded the species from around Kohat and Bannu (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in the early 1900s. Baker (1921) referred to it as the ‘Butterfly Houbara’, with sufficient numbers wintering in Balochistan and north-west India (currently Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) for a hunter to bag a dozen in a day’s hunt; he suggested it was a popular amusement to hunt Little Bustards with Saker Falcons *Falco cherrug*. Ali & Ripley (1980) further validated its occurrence in north-west Pakistan. Finally, Roberts (1991) mentioned two birds recorded by Rohail Nana from the Kala Chitta Range in Punjab in 1976. Roberts (1991) also suggested that the Little Bustard occurred in the sandy, grassy stretch of northern Swabi district, between Buner in Swat and the Gobati canal.

The second important area is on the south coast of Pakistan, in Balochistan and Sindh. In Balochistan it is called *charaz* in Balochi, while in Punjab it is called *Chota tilur* (Baker 1921). According to Roberts (1991), a bird was collected by WD Cummins in 1904 at Ormara, Balochistan (its wings are preserved in NHMUK), and another was shot in Lasbela in the mid-1960s by J Anderson. Further inland, Afsar Mian reported a single bird near Yakmuch in the Chagai desert in December 1985 (Roberts 1991). In neighbouring Sindh, a museum specimen of a juvenile was recorded by Abdulali (1969). Two other undated records mentioned by Roberts (1991) are from near Karachi and the Jamrud plain near Peshawar, while the species is listed among the birds found in Peshawar district (Gazetteer of Peshawar 1931).



Plate 1. Little Bustard shot in Udigram, Swat, 10 February 2021. Anon



Plate 2. Little Bustard killed in Gado Dagay, Swat, on 12 November 2024 (left) is preserved on a wall of trophies (right) by an anonymous hunter.

Recent records

There are only three records in the GBIF database for Pakistan, all of birds hunted in the north. These comprise one from December 2020 on the outskirts of Sargodha city in Punjab and two from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: one from Kota, Swat district, in November 2020, and the other from Thana, Malakand district, in February 2021.

Direct communications with hunters revealed more records. In addition to the bird shot in Thana mentioned above, Zoor Talab Khan (pers comm) confirmed the shooting of a Little Bustard in Udigram, Swat, and an anonymous hunter from the same locality confirmed the killing of another bird on the same day (Plate 1). Information from local hunters confirmed the shooting of two other Little Bustards out of a flock of four in the same locality during February 2021. The most recent record from Swat is of a bird killed in Gado Dagay on 12 November 2024 by a hunter who withheld his identity (Plate 2). Finally, Mr Muhammad Tahir Khan (2025 and pers comm) mentioned hunting one on 2 March

2025 near Sardaryab, Charsadda, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Plate 3) and reported that another hunter had killed one in 2008 in the same area. These records support the testimony of other hunters and knowledgeable individuals that wintering birds occurred locally in good numbers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa several decades ago.

Hunters and local wildlife officers whom we contacted through emails, WhatsApp and social media platforms reported no recent observations from the southern part of the country. Large-scale Asian Houbara surveys also failed to reveal the presence of Little Bustards in these areas, although they tended to focus on drier, less appropriate habitats. However, two Facebook posts, most likely from Sindh, revealed records from the south of Pakistan: Mr Zafar Khan (2015) referred to two kills of Little Bustard, one by himself on 8 January 2015, the other by his friend Mr Sajjad Solangi in 1990, while another hunter, Mr Adeel Solangi (2017), posted pictures of a bird he killed on 9 January 2017 (Plate 4). Yet another Facebook post revealed that Mr Farooq Baloch killed two birds while another hunter killed one on 15 November 2024 in the Washuk area of Balochistan (Baloch 2025; Plate 5).



Plate 3. Facebook record of Little Bustard caught alive in Charsadda on 2 March 2025. Anon



Plate 4. Facebook records of Little Bustard hunting probably in Sindh. Left (Sajjad Solangi in 1990 in Khan (2015)); centre (Zafar Khan 2015) and right (Adeel Solangi 2017).



Plate 5. Facebook record of Little Bustard kill, probably in Washuk, Balochistan, on 15 November 2024. Anon

Table 1. Historical and recent records of Little Bustard in Pakistan. Numbers in column 2 refer to sites mapped in Figure 1.

Date of observation	Map reference	Number of birds	Age/sex of bird	District & location	Province	Citation
Historical records (1878–1990)						
27 March 1878 or 1879	1	2	1 male	Gilgit Baltistan	Gilgit	Biddulph (1881)
1894	6	2		Mardan	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	McMohan (1901) & Sharpe (1894)
1900	12	1		Kohat / Bannu	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Roberts (1991)
1900	13	1		Bannu	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Roberts (1991)
1904	22	1		Ormara	Balochistan	Roberts (1991)
Mid-1960s	21	1		Lasbela	Balochistan	Roberts (1991)
1969	17	1	Juvenile		Sindh	Abdulali (1969)
1976	11	2		Kala Chitta Range	Punjab	Roberts (1991)
1985	15	1		Yakmuch, Chagai	Balochistan	Roberts (1991)
1990	18	1	Female		Sindh?	Facebook post (Zafar Khan)
Undated	7			Swabi	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Roberts (1991)
Undated	10			Jamrud	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Roberts (1991)
Undated	23			Karachi	Sindh	Roberts (1991)
Recent records (post-1990)						
2008	8	1		Charsadda	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	pers comm
8 January 2015	19	1	Female		Sindh	Facebook post (Zafar Khan)
9 January 2017	20	1	Female?		Sindh?	Facebook post (Adeel Solangi)
November 2020	4	1		Kota, Swat	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	GBIF
December 2020	14			Sargodha	Punjab	GBIF
February 2021	5	1		Thana, Malakand	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	GBIF
10 February 2021	3	4	1 female	Udigram, Swat	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	pers comm.
12 November 2024	16	3		Washuk	Balochistan	Facebook post (Farqooq Baloch)
15 November 2024	2	1	Juvenile	Gado Dagay	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	pers comm
2 March 2025	9	1	Juvenile	Charsadda	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	pers comm

DISCUSSION

Hunting in general—and in arid regions in particular, being a key habitat for wintering Little Bustard—might have played a significant role in the decline of its population (Maydon 1937). This is borne out by the fact that recent evidence in Pakistan is derived from hunting reports. The human population of Pakistan has increased by over 1600% since 1800 and has seen an associated expansion of land under cultivation (Roberts 1991), presumably with negative consequences for Little Bustards. The grazing of ever higher numbers of livestock could also reduce habitat quality and cause disturbance to the species. Moreover, climate change impacts are increasing the likelihood of unseasonal extreme weather and pose a threat to the survival of many species.

On recent evidence, the Little Bustard still occurs, albeit very sparsely, in most of its perceived range over the winter (Table 1). However, the data are far too few to assess where the species might occur regularly and which areas might therefore be given protection. More information might be collected through interviewing a larger sample of hunters and knowledgeable locals and officials. Such an enquiry could identify a suite of areas for targeted surveys. This would enable us to profile the Little Bustard's current status and distribution in Pakistan and suggest priority actions for its conservation, including on the problem of hunting. Even a small-scale satellite telemetry project could yield valuable information about the visiting birds' origins, migration patterns and habitat use. All such knowledge could be fed to wildlife officials as a first step towards an effective conservation programme in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are thankful to all who provided information and guidance for this paper. In particular, we thank Mr Fazal Maula and Mr Zoor Talab Khan for sharing their experience and records, the unknown persons who provided information with pictures of their recently killed Little Bustards in Udigram and Gado Dagay, Swat, and Messrs Adeel Solangi, Zafar Khan, Muhammad Tahir Khan and Farooq Baloch for sharing their hunting records on Facebook. We extend our thanks to Louis-Philippe Campeau and Nigel Collar for editing the article and for mapping the Little Bustard records from Pakistan.

LITERATURE CITED

- Abdulali, H. 1969. A catalogue of the birds in the collection of the Bombay Natural History Society – 5. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 66: 542–559.
- Ali, S & SD Ripley. 1980. *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. Volume 2. Second Edition. Oxford University Press, Delhi, India.
- Ata, S, B Shahbaz, MA Watto & MT Siddiqui. 2019. Short-term land acquisition, long-term impacts: the case of houbara bustard hunting in south Punjab, Pakistan. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 54: 390–408.
- Baker, ECS. 1921. *The Game-birds of India, Burma, and Ceylon* (Vol. 2). Bombay Natural History Society.
- Baloch, F. 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=9432470580132991&set=p.9432470580132991&type=3>.
- Biddulph, M. 1881. On the birds of Gilgit. *Ibis* 5(1): 35–102.
- BirdLife International. 2018. Species factsheet: Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*. Downloaded from <https://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/little-bustard-tetrax-tetrax> on 30/10/2024.
- Gazetteer of Peshawar. 1931. N.W.F. Province Gazetteers: Peshawar District (vol. A). Civil and Military Gazette Ltd., Lahore.
- GBIF.org (28 October 2024). GBIF Occurrence Download: <https://doi.org/10.15468/dl.dv74bp>.
- Hume, AO & CHT Marshall. 1879. *The Game Birds of India, Burmah, and Ceylon*. Regents of the University of Minnesota.
- Khan, BU, A Ahmad, A Farooq, MB Zia, HU Din & MA Majeed. 2023. Quantifying pattern of recorded biodiversity observations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from GBIF database. *Pakistan Journal of Forestry* 73: 94–102.
- Khan, MT. 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3896081617326164&set=pcb.3355666974576228>.
- Khan, Z. 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=839598562774056&set=pcb.839601062773806>. [Accessed 28 January 2025]

- Maydon, H. 1937. *Big Game of India*. New York, C. Scribner's Sons. India. Retrieved from <https://coilink.01>. Notes on fauna of Dir and Swat. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 70(II): 7-12.
- Mian, A. 1986. Ecological impact of Arab falconry on Houbara Bustard in Pakistan. *Environmental Conservation* 13: 41-46.
- Mirza, ZB. 2012. *A Field Guide to Birds of Pakistan*. WWF Pakistan.
- Morales, M, J Traba, MP Delgado & E García de la Morena. 2013. The use of fallows by nesting Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* females: implications for conservation in mosaic cereal farmland. *Ardeola* 60: 85-97.
- Oates, EW. 1898. *A manual of the game birds of India. Part I: Land Birds*. AJ Combridge & Co, Bombay.
- Rasmussen, PC & JC Anderton. 2005. *Birds of South Asia: the Ripley Guide*. Smithsonian Institution, Michigan State University & Lynx Edicions, Washington, DC, Michigan & Barcelona.
- Roberts, TJ. 1973. Conservation problems in Baluchistan with particular reference to wildlife preservation. *Pakistan Journal of Forestry* 23: 117-127.
- Roberts, TJ. 1991. *The Birds of Pakistan, vol. I. Non-Passeriformes*. Oxford University Press, Karachi.
- Sharpe, RB. 1894. *Catalogue of the Fulicariae and Alektorides in the Collection of the British Museum*. British Museum (Natural History), London.
- Silva, JP, JM Palmeirim & F Moreira. 2010. Higher breeding densities of the threatened little bustard *Tetrax tetrax* occur in larger grassland fields: implications for conservation. *Biological Conservation* 143: 2553-2558.
- Solangi, A. 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1406646682713725&set=pcb.1406647166047010>. [Accessed 28 January 2025]
- Whitehead, CHT. 1909. On the birds of Kohat and Kurram, northern India. With an introduction by Major H. A. F. Magrath. Part II. *Ibis* (9)3: 214-284.
- Ahmad Khan, Assistant Research Professor, Department of Geographical Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. Email: akhan234@umd.edu
- Najam Ul Huda Khan, Deputy Director (Wildlife), Upscaling Green Pakistan Programme, Islamabad. khannajam@gmail.com
- Sharif Uddin, Chief Conservator of Wildlife, Balochistan Wildlife Department, Quetta, Balochistan. sharifccwlb@gmail.com
- Azan Karam, Research Associate, World Pheasant Association, Pakistan. Email: iazankhan4@gmail.com