

# Wild vagrants and intentional releases? Records of Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* in the Arabian peninsula

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**Summary:** The globally Near Threatened Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* is a vagrant to the Arabian peninsula. A search of published and online resources, together with expert interviews, identified a total of eight records of birds believed to have occurred naturally, involving three of the seven countries concerned: Saudi Arabia (5 records), Oman (2), United Arab Emirates (UAE) (1). Apart from UAE, no evidence indicating importation or captive breeding of the species was obtained. Vagrants to the region are vulnerable to hunting and monitoring of social media in relation to this activity may produce records in the future.

## INTRODUCTION

Although western European populations of the globally Near Threatened Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* are mainly sedentary or dispersive, eastern populations are almost wholly migratory, moving south to spend the winter from Türkiye to the north-west Indian subcontinent, with a particular concentration in Azerbaijan (BirdLife International 2018, Collar *et al* 2020, Farajli & Mammadsoy 2023). The severe fragmentation of the species' range, population data and reasons for its decline are reviewed by Morales & Bretagnolle (2021).

Little Bustard is regarded as a fairly common winter visitor to the northern plains of Iran (Ashoori *et al* 2025). As it is also a rare passage migrant and winter visitor to the Levant and Iraq (Aidek *et al* 2025, IRDC 2025, Perlman 2025) and the eastern Mediterranean, with vagrants reaching Cyprus (Porter *et al* 2024), there is the possibility of its occurrence, primarily during winter, in the countries of the Arabian peninsula. We summarise the known status of the species in this area, which comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen.

## METHODOLOGY

All readily available sources, both print (see Table 1 for citations) and online (www.ebird.org, www.gbif.org, www.inaturalist.org), were searched for records of Little Bustards from the area of interest. iNaturalist had no records, whilst all those in GBIF were also listed in eBird; hence only eBird is cited as a source in Table 1. In addition, an attempt was made to contact at least one expert resident in, or with a comprehensive knowledge of, each country (see Table 1 and Acknowledgements).

As well as investigating records of the species in an apparently wild state, we attempted to gather information on captive birds in each country. Records of permitted trade in this species were sought from the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) trade database (trade.CITES.org, v 2024.1) to identify individuals which may have been produced in, or released from, captivity. Since 1987 the Little Bustard has been listed on CITES Appendix II, which requires exporting parties to the convention to issue permits and confirm that trade is not detrimental to the species within its borders.

## RESULTS

Records and their sources are summarised in Table 1. Porter *et al* (2024), Blair *et al* (2024) and eBird (2025) were consulted for all countries and are not explicitly cited therein. Records of Little Bustard in an apparently wild state were identified within three of the seven countries under study: Oman and Saudi Arabia have two and five records respectively,

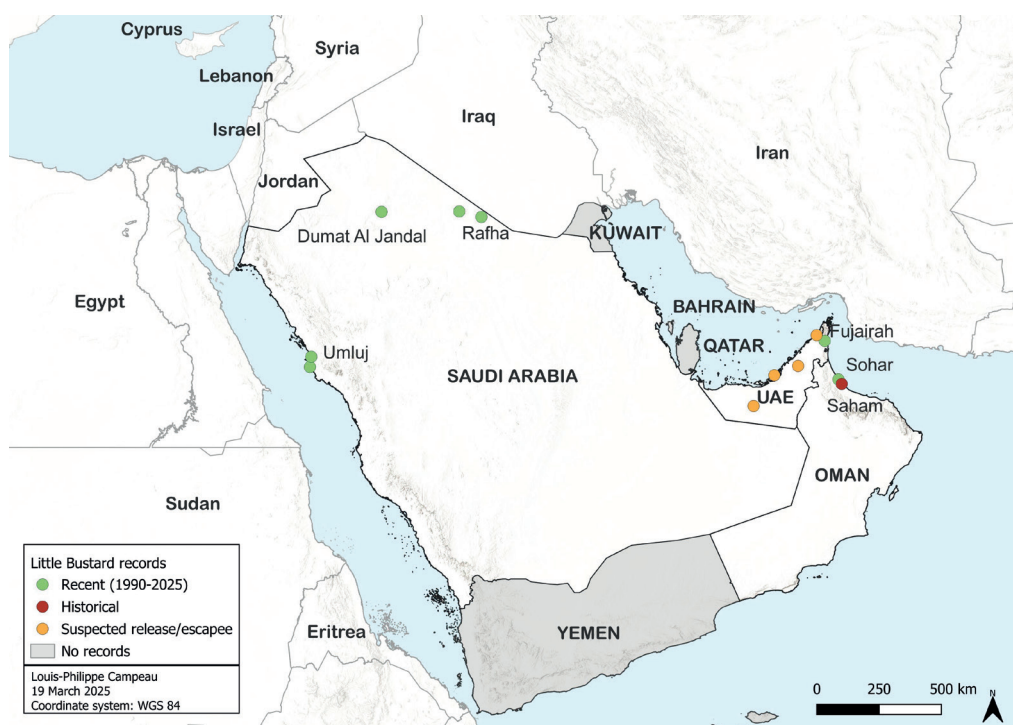
**Table 1.** Summary of Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* records from the Arabian peninsula

Country	Records believed to pertain to wild birds	Records believed to pertain to captive birds	Source(s)
Bahrain	None	None; no known importation or releases	H King in litt.
Kuwait	None	None; no known importation or releases	A Al-Sirhan in litt, Pope & Zogaris (2012), Kuwait Birds (2025).
Oman	One, Saham, Al Batinah, 17 Dec 1964 One, Sun Farms, Sohar, Al Batinah, 25–26 Dec 2011	None; no known importation or releases	J Eriksen in litt, Eriksen & Victor (2013).
Qatar	None	None; no known importation or releases	G Farnell in litt, Birds of Qatar (2025).
Saudi Arabia	One, near Dumat Al Jandal, Al Jawf, 8 Oct 2017 One, south of Umluj, Tabuk, 21 Apr 2018 <sup>\$1</sup> Three, Luga, near Rafha, Northern Borders region, first week of Jan 2023* One, Rafha, Northern Borders region, winter 2023-24* One, near Umluj, Tabuk, 20 Dec 2024*	None; no known importation or releases	G Askew in litt; J Babbington in litt; S AlWoseamer pers comm; Boland & Alsuhaiwany (2020).
United Arab Emirates	One, Wamm Farms, Fujairah, 1–5 Dec 2016 <sup>\$2</sup>	One, Mushrif Palace Gardens, Abu Dhabi, 16 Dec 1996 One, Ras al-Khaimah 22 Nov 2008 Approximately 30, held in captivity, Abu Dhabi, 2009 onwards# Three, Dubai desert, Dubai, 2009 (exact date uncertain) One, Madinat Zayed, Abu Dhabi, 8 Dec 2010 <sup>\$3</sup> “A few” individuals kept in a private collection in Ras al-Khaimah (date uncertain)	A al Ali in litt, M Mazrouie in litt, V Motteau in litt, Pedersen et al (2025).
Yemen	None	None; no known importation or releases	O AlSaghier in litt, RF Porter pers comm, Porter & Suleiman 2022.

Table key:  
\* = These records appear not to have been previously published in ornithological literature; source is social media and interviews with falconers by ST AlWoseamer, hence dates imprecise.  
# = Given to an Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii* breeding facility after confiscation by customs (see Discussion for further details).  
\$ = Online photographs available, at following sources:  
\$<sup>1</sup> = See [www.ebird.org/checklist/S46988165](http://www.ebird.org/checklist/S46988165)  
\$<sup>2</sup> = See [www.ebird.org/checklist/S33223474](http://www.ebird.org/checklist/S33223474), [www.ebird.org/checklist/S33145007](http://www.ebird.org/checklist/S33145007)  
\$<sup>3</sup> = See [www.ebird.org/checklist/S60531519](http://www.ebird.org/checklist/S60531519)

and there is one record from the UAE (Table 1, Figure 1). Seven of the eight observations occurred after 2010. Of birds photographed and viewable online (links in Table 1), one (UAE, 2010) was likely to be a juvenile (record not accepted as a wild individual by the Emirates Bird Records Committee, as considered a possible captive bird; see Discussion), another (UAE, 2016) was either a female or a juvenile, and a third (Saudi Arabia, 2018) was a male in breeding plumage.

The CITES trade database yielded two records relevant to our study area (not listed in Table 1). In 2011 a permit was issued to transfer one body of a Little Bustard from the UAE to Kazakhstan for scientific purposes; the specimen was reported to be a wild-born individual originating from an unknown country. In 2022 two liquid samples from Little Bustards were transferred from the UAE to Europe for scientific purposes. The bird or birds (the number of samples is specified, but not the number of birds) from which the samples were taken was or were reported as having been bred in captivity (*ie* CITES source code C on the permits).



**Figure 1.** Map of documented observations of Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* in the Arabian peninsula, as listed in Table 1.

## DISCUSSION

### *Number and location of observations*

The Little Bustard is a vagrant to the Arabian peninsula, with only eight records in three countries believed to relate to wild birds. Of the four countries that have not recorded the species at all, perhaps most surprising is Kuwait, which is both relatively well-watched and close to the regular wintering grounds of the species. Seven of the eight records are post-2010, but the general increase in ornithological observations across the region

as a whole makes it difficult to draw conclusions with regard to trends in the regional occurrence of the species.

The greater frequency of records from Saudi Arabia, despite the relatively low level of ornithological activity there until recent years, may reflect that country's much greater area and northerly position on the Arabian peninsula, and its location along two potential migratory pathways. However, the size of the hunting community, estimated at approximately 20 000 active falconers (Saudi Falcons Club in litt), may be an equally important factor; indeed, three of the five Saudi Arabian records derive from hunting reports and a fourth (in 2018) was captured in circumstances that are uncertain. Clearly, observations and successful hunts of species unusual to the region are particularly likely to draw interest within this community's social media.

As with the 2018 Saudi record, circumstances surrounding the records from Oman (1964) and Saudi Arabia (2017) are also not clearly known. The records from Oman (1996) and UAE (2016, Plate 1) were made by birdwatchers. The observation of a male Little Bustard in breeding plumage (Saudi Arabia, 2018) stands in contrast to the general trend of predominately female or juvenile migrants or vagrants noted in other parts of the Middle East (eg Aidek *et al* 2025).

### *Phenology of observations*

Discarding the Saudi Arabian record lacking a precise date, six records are from December to early January and are likely to reflect overshoots fleeing particularly severe weather conditions in Central Asia or the northern Middle East, or disorientated birds that misjudged distance to their wintering grounds. Data are too few to reliably correlate occurrence in the Arabian peninsula with temperatures on the usual wintering grounds,



**Plate 1.** Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*, Wamm Farms, UAE, 3 December 2016. This bird represents the only UAE record accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee as a wild vagrant. © Mark Smiles



although the UAE record in early December 2016 coincided with a remarkable influx of other Central Asian species, particularly Black-throated Thrush *Turdus atrogularis* (Campbell & Smiles 2020).

Two of the four dated records from Saudi Arabia are rather different in timing and, at first glance, would appear referable to early autumn (8 October) and late spring (21 April) migrants. However, both are somewhat peculiar dates, given that the species is unknown before the second week of October at the migration watchpoint of Beshbarmag, Azerbaijan (which lies at nine degrees of latitude, and hence c1000 km further north than the northernmost part of Saudi Arabia; Heiss *et al* 2020); indeed, it does not become particularly numerous there until late October. Spring passage of Little Bustard at Beshbarmag involves only a very small proportion of the birds that use it on autumn passage but peaks sharply in late March, and the species is unknown there from 10 April onwards (Trektellen 2024). Note that Trektellen summary data mask enormous annual fluctuations in numbers at this watchpoint but, even so, against the pattern presented there, records from as far south as Saudi Arabia as early as 8 October in autumn and as late as 21 April in spring seem remarkable.

One explanation may be that records of Little Bustard from the Red Sea coast and north-west Saudi Arabia originate from wintering or breeding populations in Türkiye, rather than the Caucasus region. Records from Iraq and Syria, particularly in October (Aidek *et al* 2025), may support this conjecture. However, the species is regarded in Türkiye as rare and infrequent at any time of the year (Kirwan *et al* 2008, Özgencil *et al* 2025).

Given the rapid spread of agriculture—in particular, large fields of various fodder grasses, wheat *Triticum aestivum* and alfalfa *Medicago sativa*—across the Arabian peninsula in recent decades (Jennings 2010), and the increasing use of such agricultural areas by globally Critically Endangered species such as Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, for example in Saudi Arabia (Babbington & Roberts 2017) and the UAE (OC pers obs), it would not be surprising if Little Bustard were found to occur with somewhat greater frequency regionally than it has in the past. However, unlike Sociable Lapwing, Little Bustard does not routinely cross the Arabian peninsula, and its sensitivity to hunting may constrain it to northern borderlands of the Middle East where, for much of the year, hunting and disturbance are limited (eg in Iran; Yousefi *et al* 2018).

### *Issues associated with hunting*

Outside border zones and agricultural zones with strictly controlled access, at least some sites on the Arabian peninsula likely to be attractive to vagrant Little Bustards are unquestionably targeted by hunters. This is the case across much of northern Saudi Arabia, where hunting pressures in autumn and winter are particularly severe (OC & MK pers obs). Most reports of the species in Lebanon (where it is a vagrant or a scarce non-breeding visitor) are based on monitoring of hunting records (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2017, Aidek *et al* 2025). Given that nine individuals were reported as shot in Lebanon in December 2016 (compared to none found first by birdwatchers), that country may represent a ‘sink’ for individual birds unfortunate enough to reach it during winter, although birds not killed may be forced to move to neighbouring countries by the disturbance associated with hunting.

Hence, it would not be surprising if future records of the species in the Arabian peninsula originate from hunters at least as often as from ornithologists. Indeed, the April 2018 record from Saudi Arabia involved a bird that was found injured (cause uncertain). The monitoring of social media posts from hunters and associated groups may result in additional records of the species regionally. However, this task is both time-consuming and logistically difficult as such posts are visible only to subscribers and disappear after

viewing. Even screenshotting a post on some platforms (eg Snapchat) is not possible without the author being alerted to this happening. If the author has concerns that this screenshotting may lead to negative consequences (eg a report of illegal activity to authorities) they may remove the subscriber from future access to their posts, and there may be undesirable social consequences within the hunting community.

### *Captive individuals and records from trade*

As listed in Table 1, records believed to pertain to captive birds are exceptional in the region and were only identified within the UAE. However, this may reflect the difficulty of investigating the existence of such birds, and it would not be unexpected if private collections in various countries in the region held the species. The three UAE records believed to pertain to captive birds and with a definite date are all from months that would be compatible with natural vagrancy and, indeed, it is by no means impossible that some may be the result of that; however, the individual circumstances of each record either are unclear or, where known, could be taken to imply a non-natural origin. Hence these records were deemed by the Emirates Bird Records Committee to be too associated with doubt to be reasonably regarded as pertaining to natural vagrancy (Pedersen *et al* 2025). For example, the 1996 bird was recorded in a small urban park, an unusual location for a wild vagrant. The 2010 record was of a hunted bird which was reported to behave as a wild bird, and its location was compatible with natural vagrancy, but the record occurred soon after a number of Little Bustards were confiscated by UAE customs, who deposited them in a breeding facility for Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii* (V Motteau in litt). The CITES record from 2011 would appear to concern the transfer of the body of one of these birds.

The second CITES record, of specimens from captive-bred Little Bustard(s) in 2022, suggests that the birds taken into custody had bred in captivity, as there are no CITES permits registering the importation of other Little Bustards to the UAE to serve as founder stock for captive breeding. Together, these records indicate that there is some degree of interest in trade and breeding of Little Bustards in captivity. A motivation may be the use of this species in hunting and falcon training, as it is known that Little Bustard flocks in Azerbaijan are a target of 'falconry tourism', which is commercially advertised and highlighted in social media posts (Collar & Kessler 2021).

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