

IBAs in Danger

Text: Raju Kasambe and Siddhesh Surve

The Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme of BirdLife International – the world’s largest nature conservation partnership – began in the late 1970s, and since then over 12,000 IBAs, on land and at sea, have been identified, mapped, and documented worldwide. This programme represents the most comprehensive science-based effort to identify the world’s key sites for biodiversity conservation, by far.

In early 2013, BirdLife started an initiative to identify seriously threatened and insufficiently protected IBAs around the world. A hundred and fifteen BirdLife network countries and territories provided data on the pressures in their most threatened IBAs, which helped to identify IBAs at extreme risk of losing their biodiversity. The validated list of 333 IBAs was released during the 2013 BirdLife International World Congress in June 2013 in Canada. These, ‘IBAs in Danger’ will be used to target enhanced conservation effort on these insufficiently protected or poorly managed sites, through advocacy, campaigns, and local action.

This list will determine the priority in the implementation of conservation actions (whether local, national, regional, or global), based on need, opportunity, and capacity. The actions include selected campaigns, advocacy, and communication. The threats faced by the listed IBAs and the species that inhabit

them are generally assessed by three factors:

Timing: Some of these IBAs are already facing threats or are likely to face them in the near future.

Scope: Threats affect the entire or most of the population of one or more trigger or qualifying bird species (for which the site has been recognised as an IBA under any of the global or regional criteria) or their habitats within the IBA.

Severity: The degree of danger faced by the species or habitat components of these IBAs.

BirdLife’s India partner, BNHS, identified 466 IBAs in India in 2004. Of these, five were identified as ‘IBAs in Danger’ and the data was uploaded on BirdLife’s website. These five IBAs are discussed in this article. We also discuss the situation of four more sites that need attention and urgent action.

The five Indian IBA sites that qualified for inclusion in the list, with their site codes, are:

- Flamingo City (IN085)
- Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary (IN159)
- Mahul-Sewri Creek (IN161)
- Sailana Kharmor Sanctuary (IN151)
- Tillanchong Island (IN465)

Flamingo City, Gujarat

Flamingo City is a potential Ramsar site in the Kachchh district of Gujarat. In 1945, Sálím Ali estimated that half a million Greater and Lesser Flamingos

congregated here. It is possibly the only flamingo breeding ground of this magnitude in Asia. Flamingo City is part of the Kachchh Desert Wildlife Sanctuary.

In 2011, the Gujarat State Public Works Department (GSPWD) submitted a proposal which required diversion of 79.474 ha of forest land in the Kachchh Wildlife Sanctuary and Wild Ass Sanctuary for construction of the Gaduli to Hajipur-Odma-Khavda-Kunariya-Dholavira-Maovana-Gadakbet-Santalpur road. It was claimed that the proposed road would facilitate movement of the Border Security Force (BSF) in this region that falls on the Indo-Pakistan border. However, other sources claim that this project is nothing but a cover for promoting and expanding tourism in the region – BSF already has a frontier road. A highway through the area will not only jeopardise flamingos, but also other species including the Indian Wild Ass *Equus hemionus khur*, Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*, Indian Wolf *Canis lupus pallipes*, and Caracal *Caracal caracal*.

In September 2011, a three-member expert team from the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) assessed the potential ecological impact of the project. To quote from their site visit report, “the proposed road would in all probability result in the abandonment of this only breeding site of flamingos, which in turn could spell doom to the population of these birds in the Indian subcontinent.” They recommended the rejection of the

‘IBAs in Danger’ are sites identified nationally through IBA monitoring as being at greatest risk of losing their key biodiversity. They are sites which have Very High threat scores (in some cases IBAs with High scores have also been considered). In the first trial of this new initiative, BirdLife’s partner organisations provided details of up to five such sites per country. The limitation in number of sites was imposed to restrict the list to a manageable number of highest priority sites, in order to focus advocacy and action where it is most urgently needed, while ensuring participation across the BirdLife Partnership. The resulting list of IBAs in Danger currently comprises 333 sites across 115 countries and territories, as well as the high seas. The absence of an IBA from the list does not, therefore, mean that it is not facing threats.



ADITYA ROY

The Near Threatened Lesser Flamingo is the smallest species of flamingo

road proposal and an alternative alignment of the road, which would spare this fragile ecosystem from devastation, while serving the purpose of the BSF if needed.

Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary, Nannaj, Maharashtra

The GIB Sanctuary is spread across Solapur and Ahmednagar districts of

Maharashtra. The scattered grassland plots of this sanctuary are home to the Critically Endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB). The population of GIBs at the sanctuary has plummeted from 27 birds in 2006 to 12 birds in 2012, and a mere three birds in 2013.

The biggest threat facing the sanctuary is the severe antipathy of the locals towards the sanctuary and the GIB.

This was mainly because an extremely large, irrational area (8,496.44 sq. km) was declared as a sanctuary, even though the bustards inhabited a few protected grassland plots scattered in the area. Because of the declaration of the sanctuary, the locals were unable to buy, sell, or develop their own land as it came within the notified area. A proposed irrigation canal passing through the sanctuary awaits the approval of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) since the past several years. The people who would have benefited from the canal feel that the bustard “is the problem” and stands between them and “prosperity”. The impasse over the construction of the canal created a public uproar and a campaign was initiated against the GIB, which strangely and ominously coincided with a population decline in the species. The sanctuary area has been rationalised to 1,222.61 sq. km, many years after the recommendations of an expert committee. However, it appears to be a little too late!

Nannaj faces a number of other threats such as overgrazing outside the



BAJU PATIL

The Great Indian Bustard population at Nannaj has plummeted to merely three birds

protected grassland plots, habitat destruction, increase and intensification of agriculture, disturbance to breeding bustards by stray dogs, and lack of public support for conservation initiatives. It is certain that the GIB would not have declined to the point of local extinction; rather it would have increased in numbers, if these issues had been addressed early. There is no record of successful breeding in the sanctuary in the past few years, and there is a pressing need to implement the recommendations of the Species Recovery Plan published by the MoEF immediately, to save the species from extinction.

Mahul-Sewri Creek, Mumbai, Maharashtra

The mudflats of Mahul-Sewri IBA along the Arabian Sea in Mumbai are home to around 15,000 Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* and thousands of migratory waterbirds, including sandpipers, plovers, gulls, and terns. The area also has mangrove vegetation and supports diverse flora and is a potential Ramsar site.

The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) had

proposed a 22 km long freeway – the Mumbai Trans-Harbour Link (MTHL) – between Sewri and Nhava, which is pending for the past four decades. This freeway or sea link will reduce the commuting time between Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, and provide direct connectivity to the Mumbai Port Trust (MPT), Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), and the proposed international airport at Navi Mumbai. However, the link will pose a threat to the habitat of the Lesser Flamingo, a Near Threatened species, due to the disturbances that will result from the construction and use of the freeway.

On October 22, 2012, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra gave clearance to the project. The following day, the MoEF gave a conditional environmental clearance to the sea link project. Some of the conditions were that the MMRDA should put up noise barriers, replant five times the number of mangroves destroyed, no dredging and reclamation should be done, construction equipment with exhaust silencers would be used and work would be carried out in consultation with

BNHS to minimise the impact on migratory birds. BNHS, which does not oppose the idea of the sea link as such, has been advocating that the MTHL should be realigned at the Sewri end about 600 m to the south of the proposed route to save the flamingo habitat from destruction. However, the MMRDA did not accept the proposal and suggested mitigation measures instead. A little foresight and flexibility can help avoid such environmental disasters for a site which supports such a huge congregation of birds.

Apart from the MTHL, another threat to this IBA is the high level of pollution due to direct release of industrial effluents from many petrochemical industries, oil refineries, and power plants located along the fringe of the Mahul and Sewri Creek.

Sailana Kharmor Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh

The Sailana Kharmor Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh was declared as a Protected Area in 1983 to safeguard the endangered Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica*. Most of the sanctuary



NOOR KHAN

The Sewri mudflats are a refuge for thousands of migratory flamingos during their non-breeding season



NIRAV BHATT

The Lesser Florican, endemic to the Indian subcontinent, belongs to the bustard family, which is known for its remarkable courtship displays



ASAD R. RAHMANI

The untouched Tillanchong Island in the Nicobar archipelago is home to breathtaking natural wealth

consists of grasslands. Recently it is reported that the numbers of the Lesser Florican are decreasing, making it difficult to spot it. Major threats to this sanctuary are cattle grazing, agricultural expansion, and human intrusion.

In a census conducted in 1999 in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan for the species, 63 floricans were recorded in Madhya Pradesh. The number declined to 12 in 2011 (the national figures were 238 in 1999 and 84 in 2010). In 2012,

28 floricans were seen, whereas the number fell to a mere 12 in 2013. It is believed that loss of grassland and change in cropping pattern in the region are also forcing them out of the IBA. In Sailana, soyabean is cultivated near the florican breeding grounds, which needs regular application of pesticides. As floricans feed on insects, consuming insects sprayed with pesticides could be affecting them.

Tillanchong Island, Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Tillanchong Island is a wildlife sanctuary, and is uninhabited for most of the year, except when the Nicobarese people holding customary rights visit it for a few months each year during the fair season for hunting wild pigs. Tillanchong is home to virtually all the animal species found in the Nicobar archipelago, including endemic bird species such as the Nicobar Megapode *Megapodius nicobariensis*, Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri*, Glossy Swiftlet *Collocalia esculenta*, Edible-nest Swiftlet *Aerodramus fuciphagus*, Andaman Woodpigeon *Columba palumboides*, and Nicobar Parakeet *Psittacula caniceps*.

The Indian Navy had sought permission for temporary use of the island for missile testing and erection of a temporary structure as a target for testing the accuracy of missiles fired from submarines. The test firing is proposed to be carried out once a year for a period of 7 to 10 days.

The proposal was discussed during a meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL). In November 2011, the Committee examined the proposal and ordered a site inspection by a two-member panel to assess the impact of the test firing exercise on the Nicobar Megapode, a ground-nester, endemic to this ecologically sensitive area. Subsequently, the Chief Wildlife Warden along with Dr. Asad R. Rahmani, Director, BNHS, visited the site and submitted a report to the MoEF. The report mentions that this

threatened species occurs on the hillock where the RADAR station is proposed. The impact of allied activities after the RADAR installation, like construction of roads, and movement of people will be even more destructive than the installation of the RADAR itself.

In October 2012, the proposal was fortunately rejected, and the endemic Nicobar Megapode's pristine habitat was saved from destruction. However, there is fear that the proposal might resurface in the near future.

Other IBAs in 'danger'

Dihaila *jheel* and Karera Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh

Dihaila *jheel* is one of the richest wetlands of the state. The *jheel* or lake is entirely rainfed, and is the only source of water for wildlife in the Karera Wildlife Sanctuary. Across the waters lies Dihaila, a village whose inhabitants own land around the margins of the lake, and whose crops benefit from the guano deposited by waterbirds in the lake. Thousands of migratory birds congregate in the lake in winter. Experts have recorded 245 bird species in this sanctuary. The area also has around 2,000 Blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* and a fairly large number of Indian Gazelle *Gazella bennettii*.

The Karera Wildlife Sanctuary was notified in 1981 by the Government of Madhya Pradesh to protect the Great Indian Bustard. It is spread over an area of 202 sq. km, of which 146 sq. km is privately owned. The bustards have disappeared from this sanctuary, and owing to public pressure, the National Board for Wildlife and the Government of Madhya Pradesh have decided to denotify the sanctuary. The decision is now awaiting final approval from the Supreme Court of India, and should it come through, the sanctuary will become the country's first such reserve to lose official recognition after the flagship species has been lost.

Basai Wetland, Haryana

This wetland IBA is situated in Haryana near New Delhi. Recently the migratory bird count of this wetland has shown a decline, mainly because of habitat loss due to human encroachment. Many threatened species of birds are reported from this IBA including the Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca*, and Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*.

Rapid urbanisation is one of the reasons for the decline in bird populations. Several waterbodies in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, which used to attract migratory birds, have also dried up. Flamingos and Common Crane, which were once commonly sighted in this wetland, have declined in numbers.

Also, the population of the state bird of Haryana, the Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, has reduced owing to unfavourable alterations in its habitat.

Sardarpur Florican Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh

This sanctuary is located in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. It was established on the recommendation of Dr. Sálím Ali for the protection of the Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica*, an endangered bird seen in this sanctuary

during its breeding season. It arrives with the onset of monsoon by the end of June or in the beginning of July, and leaves by the end of October or in November.

Only three floricans were sighted during a census conducted in 2011. In 2012, four floricans were seen, whereas none were sighted in 2013. Human settlements, livestock grazing, and water scarcity are some of the major conservation issues in this sanctuary.

Ranebennur Blackbuck Sanctuary, Karnataka

Situated in the Dharwad district of Karnataka, this IBA was once home to 25 Great Indian Bustards. However, there have been no bustard sightings from the area for the last 15 years. The main threat to this site is from shepherds who allow their sheep to graze inside the sanctuary. There are thousands of sheep in the areas surrounding the sanctuary. Other threats include afforestation, poaching, and firewood collection.

The major conservation issue of this IBA is the disappearance of the Great Indian Bustard due to lack of attention towards its habitat requirements, which is open grassland. Exotic trees (eucalyptus) have been planted on a large scale in the grassland patches by the Forest Department. The grasslands outside



The Near Threatened Ferruginous Pochard visits the Basai Wetland



SUJIT NARWADE

Male Blackbucks are dark brown and white, and sport long, spiral horns. Females, on the other hand, are yellowish-brown and lack horns

the sanctuary face severe grazing pressures.

Most of our unprotected grassland and wetland IBAs are facing severe threats from afforestation, poaching, or because conservation policies are going in the wrong direction. The apathy or even antipathy of the local people has almost resulted in the extinction of flagship species like the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican for which the sites were declared as IBAs. IBAs near or in megacities are in danger of being lost due to the pressure of encroachments like construction of

highways. Unfortunately, major threats are looming from various projects which ask for IBAs to be given away partly or wholly for the cause of so-called “development”. This list of the five most threatened Important Bird Areas of India is just the beginning of an ever increasing list of sites

threatened with destruction. If we do not take steps to ensure their conservation, they are bound to disappear sooner or later, along with the birds they harbour. ■

For more information on the BirdLife IBA programme, visit: www.birdlife.org/datazone/site and www.ibcn.in



Raju Kasambe is the Project Manager, and Siddhesh Surve is the Project Assistant for the Important Bird Areas Programme at BNHS. Raju is an ornithologist and has studied the Indian Grey Hornbill for his Doctorate, and Siddhesh is an avid birder.



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