

First record of MacQueen's Bustard from Rajkot, Gujarat



Image 1. Habitat shot of MacQueen's Bustard.

MacQueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* is a winter visitor to Pakistan and northwestern India. It breeds in southern Pakistan (Grimmett et al. 2016). The IUCN Red List has categorized and evaluated this species as Vulnerable (VU).

MacQueen's Bustard also known as Asian Houbara was for long regarded as a subspecies of the African Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*, which is native to northern Africa and southwestern Asia. Recent studies of courtship behavior, vocalizations, and mitochondrial & nuclear DNA have shown consistent differences between MacQueen's and Houbara Bustard. Together with clear-cut plumage differences, these new data suggest that MacQueen's and Houbara Bustard are best treated as separate

species (Sanster et al. 2004). MacQueen's Bustard is a partial latitudinal migrant while the Houbara Bustard is more sedentary. The central Asian populations are known to migrate southwards for wintering.

MacQueen's Bustards are large birds that are able and fast flyers. They prefer, however, to run on the ground and favour open landscapes with vegetation low enough to allow for long distance vision (Lampen et al. 2005). The MacQueen's Bustard is found in sandy desert, semi-desert type mixed with bushes and grassy clumps. Another typical habitat is sand dunes on the coast. It also visits open low hills and broken stony ground. It is able to camouflage itself extremely well and becomes difficult to spot even in open (Dharmakumarsinhji 1957).

On 11 October 2020 around 08.06h, the first author (JR) noticed a big bird in flight which resembled a bustard. The habitat where the bird was found, Khambhala Vidi (22.309605 N, 70.685555 E; Image 1) is a grassland area of approximately 100ha. Majority of the area is open with very few trees; mostly covered in grasses like *Heteropogon contortus*, *Chloris* sp., *Cenchrus biflorus*, *Eragrostis* sp., and *Themeda* sp. The grassland is dotted with some patches of thorny bushes and small trees such as *Vachellia nilotica*. Topographically, the area is generally flat with some small, rolling hills. The region is situated right at the edge of the city and surrounded by farmlands along its periphery (Image 2).

He was able to take a few pictures and confirmed the bird as MacQueen's Bustard (Image 3). He also observed and photographed a Black Drongo chasing the bustard (Image 4) until the bird landed in the grassland. After landing, the bird camouflaged well in the grassland and the author

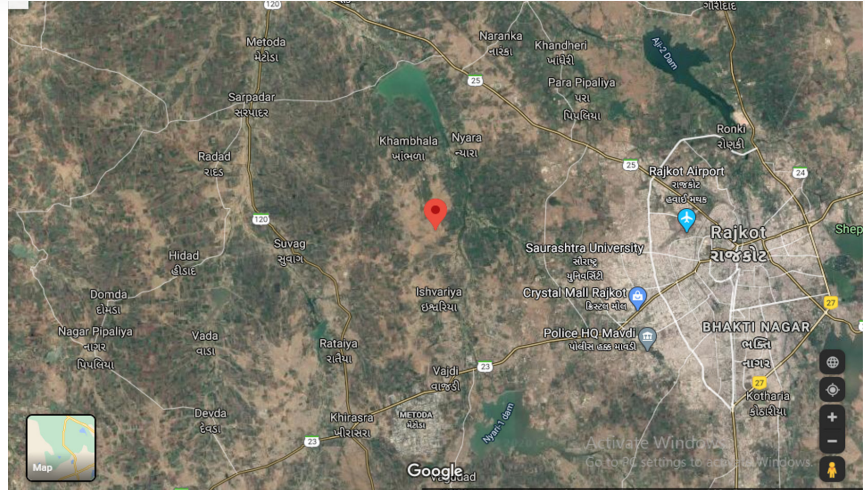


Image 2. Overview of the location taken from Google maps.



Image 3. Black Drongo chasing the bustard.



Image 4. MacQueen's Bustard in flight.

was not able to find it. JR visited the same place for four consecutive days but the bird was not sighted again. The bird may be a passage migrant in this grassland or it may be a winter visitor to the area with local movement in the nearby grasslands.

Status and conservation: Rapid population declines of about 50% were seen in their breeding grounds in Kazakhstan between 1998 and 2002 and thought to be due to hunting, especially in their winter grounds (Tourenq et al. 2004). Annual declines over a 10-year period across Asia were estimated at 27–30% in 2004. The main threat to the species is degradation of semi-desert habitat by the introduction of agriculture and by infrastructure development such as roads and electricity, which are responsible for increased mortality of birds. They also are at considerable risk during migration from heavy poaching as well as a lack of suitable habitats (Tourenq et al. 2005).

Past records from Gujarat: In Saurashtra, it is an uncommon but regular visitor in the northern portion from Jamnagar to Dhrangadhra; specimens have been shot in Wankaner and Jasdan, and it is a straggler to eastern Saurashtra, having been recorded in Bhavnagar a number of times (Dharmakumarsinhji 1957). It is an uncommon winter migrant to Gujarat with scattered sightings from Little Rann of Kutch area and Greater Rann of Kutch area, where it winters in small numbers. Recently, there have been isolated photographic records from Jamnagar District (Jamnagar City outskirts

and Positra near Dwarka) and few unconfirmed reports from other areas (Ganpule 2014).

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<https://ebird.org/checklist/S51245763> (with photograph)
<https://ebird.org/gbbc/checklist/S27641910> (without photograph)
<https://ebird.org/checklist/S52135920> (without photograph)

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Citation: Rindani, J., P. Bhatnagar & K. Adhiya (2021). First record of MacQueen's Bustard from Rajkot, Gujarat. *Bird-o-soar* #67, In: *Zoo's Print* 36(1): 16–18.