



WWF-Pakistan's Position Statement on hunting of the Asian Houbara Bustard, *Chlamydotis macqueenii*

1.1. Conservation status of Asian houbara bustard

Chlamydotis macqueenii, commonly known as the Asian houbara bustard (hereafter 'houbara'), is listed as *vulnerable* in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of threatened species. It is also listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), pertaining to species that are vulnerable to hunting and poaching. Appendix I of CITES lists those wildlife species that are threatened with extinction and prohibits their international trade in any form. CITES allows limited non-commercial trade of Appendix I listed species under exceptional circumstances such as for scientific research. In these exceptional cases, trade may take place provided it is authorized by the granting of both import and export permits. Appendix II of the CMS lists those migratory species that have an unfavourable conservation status and require international agreements to ensure their conservation and management. Pakistan is a signatory/party to both aforementioned international conventions.

1.2 Global population and trend: The global population of houbara has been estimated to be between 78,960 and 97,000 individuals in 2014. It must be emphasized, however, that accurately establishing the global population is extremely challenging, and this figure should be treated as a tentative 'best estimate'. The population is therefore expected to fall within the population band for 50,000 - 99,999 individuals, which is assumed to equate to ca. 33,000 - 67,000 mature individuals. The population is estimated and projected to be declining by 30-49% over a three-generation (20-year) window, stretching from the past into the future. Overexploitation remains the foremost threat to the species, primarily as a result of unsustainable levels of hunting and poaching¹.

Resident and wintering population in Pakistan: Wintering birds reach Pakistan via Afghanistan, arriving from the second half of September through to the end of the year, with a peak from mid-October to mid-November. The wintering range extends across most of Balochistan, Sindh and southern and western Punjab. The individuals wintering in western Balochistan typically originate from central Kazakhstan, whilst those wintering further east in Punjab's Cholistan Desert tend to come from the Mongolian Plateau.. Return migration begins in early February, and by the second week of March the majority of migrants have departed the country. A small and declining resident population persists in western Baluchistan, chiefly in the Chagai and Kharan districts. This population is believed to have declined significantly since the 1980s and fewer than 100 individuals may remain².

¹ BirdLife International (2020) Species factsheet: *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 10/12/2020.

² BirdLife International (2014) Review of the global conservation status of the Asian Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. Report to the Convention on Migratory Species Office–Abu Dhabi. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.

1.3. The Houbara Bustard Commission: The honourable Chief Justice of the Lahore Highcourt on 15 June 2017 appointed the Houbara Bustard Commission to carry out field surveys to:

- i. Assess whether hunting of houbara is a sustainable activity in Punjab province,
- ii. Assess whether the said hunting is beneficial for the local community and any other recommendations for the protection and conservation of houbara.

The members of the Commission included national species experts, representatives from the Punjab Wildlife and Parks Department, academia, conservation organizations, legal practitioners and local residents. The Commission agreed to conduct reliable surveys to determine the population trend of houbara in Punjab province, formulated survey teams including representatives of relevant stakeholders and also conducted public hearings to reach out to the public representatives and members of the civil society of the area. The survey teams along with Commission members conducted houbara population assessment surveys in Cholistan, Thal and Rajanpur-Rojhan areas for three years from 2017-2019 on standardized methodology and protocols. The Commission concluded that populations of houbara observed in sampled transects (direct counts) and estimated population had declined in Punjab province over the three year period from 2017-2019. The Commission therefore concluded that hunting of houbara bustard in Punjab province is not a sustainable activity.

The Commission suggested that permits for hunting of houbara should not be issued and the hunting of houbara bustard must be banned, with immediate effect, for three years from 2020 to 2022. In the meantime, the Punjab Wildlife and Parks Department along with WWF-Pakistan, IUCN Pakistan and Houbara Foundation International Pakistan should continue the monitoring of houbara populations in Punjab province by adopting the same methodology and protocols. After three years, if the population shows an increasing trend to a sustainable level then the position can be reassessed to determine the controlled sustainable hunting protocols. This must be closely tied to only those geographic areas that show an increase in population, with a strictly controlled number of licenses³.

2 WWF-Pakistan's position statement: Therefore, WWF-Pakistan does not support the hunting of houbara bustard in Pakistan under the current scenario. The organization supports the strict implementation of all national and international policies, and obligations following a scientific approach to maintaining the houbara population in Pakistan.

3 Recommendations

Keeping in view the vulnerable IUCN Red List status of the houbara and threats faced by the species in its entire range in general and in Pakistan in particular, WWF-Pakistan proposes the following steps to maintain the population:

- 3.1 Permits for hunting of the houbara bustard should not be issued and hunting of the houbara must be banned, with immediate effect.
- 3.2 Population surveys following standard census protocols must be conducted on an annual basis with the involvement of relevant stakeholders to determine the population status and trends of the species in the country. The survey results should be published in peer-reviewed journals to establish the reliability of the data.

³ The Houbara Bustard Commission (2019). Second supplemental report of the Houbara Bustard Commission. Population assessment of houbara bustard in Punjab from 2017-19.

- 3.3 Controlled hunting of the houbara should only be allowed and a bag limit should only be determined once the information is available as mentioned in section 3.2.
- 3.4 The Foreign Office (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) should seek guidance from the Ministry of Climate Change (national CITES management authority) and the relevant provincial wildlife departments before issuing hunting permits to foreign dignitaries to ensure compliance with the Pakistan Trade Control of Wild Fauna and Flora Act 2012 and provincial wildlife legislation.
- 3.5 The houbara bustard should be included in the protected category of all provincial wildlife acts and, more importantly, it should remain unchanged in that category throughout the period of moratorium.
- 3.6 Strict measures should be taken to control poaching, hunting and destruction of the houbara habitat with the involvement of communities.
- 3.7 The breeding populations and associated habitats of houbaras in Pakistan should be efficiently protected.
- 3.8 To make the protection and conservation efforts more effective, a dedicated Protection Force is needed throughout the range (including Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces) of the houbara bustard in Pakistan with all allied facilities. The resources required include construction of check posts, vehicles, motorbikes, wildlife supervisors, wildlife inspectors, wildlife watchers, and vehicles and motor bikes drivers etc.
- 3.9 Training and capacity building of relevant stakeholders and awareness campaigns about the conservation of the houbara should be carried out.
- 3.10 A governing body (National Houbara Conservation Committee) including representatives of Ministry of Climate Change, relevant provincial wildlife departments, WWF-Pakistan, IUCN Pakistan, Houbara Foundation International Pakistan, and local communities should be established to conduct the population monitoring of the houbara bustard through surveys and oversee the development of sustainable hunting guidelines.
- 3.11 A ten (10) years Action / Management Plan should be developed for the conservation of the houbara in Pakistan by involving all the stakeholders and implemented through the already established Houbara Bustard and Migratory Birds Endowment Fund by Government of Pakistan. This Plan should be reviewed and updated every ten (five) years.
- 3.12 The Government of Pakistan should move a Concerted Action for Asian Houbara Bustard under the Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

WWF-Pakistan urges the Government of Pakistan to take action to implement the aforementioned recommendations.