

On the status of the Great Bustard, *Otis tarda* Linnaeus, 1758 (Aves: Otididae) in Kurdistan Province, Iran

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Abstract. The relative density and population fluctuations of Great Bustards, *Otis tarda*, were assessed during breeding and non-breeding seasons in Kurdistan province, western Iran, during 1975-2005. The survey was based on field studies (1992-2005) and data collected by the Department of the Environment of Iran, Kurdistan office (1975-1991), in five areas. At two of these sites (Chehar douli and Dashte-Ghaz), Great Bustards became extinct, while numbers in the other areas are declining rapidly due to a decrease of the size of suitable habitats. In 2005 only 10 Great Bustards were recorded in the whole province. Without effective conservation measures, it seems inevitable that the species will become extinct in this region and may face extinction in Iran.

Key words. Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*, population trend, Kurdistan, Iran, Middle East.

Introduction

The Great Bustard, *Otis tarda* Linnaeus, 1758, is a large steppe bird, classified as a globally threatened (vulnerable) species (COLLAR et al. 1994). It is distributed in grassland habitats from eastern Asia westwards to the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco (ALONSO et al. 2000, 2003). The species is known to occur in six provinces in Iran, mainly in the western part of the country; from the northern provinces to Kermanshah in the centre-west. The areas supporting the largest population are in west Azerbaijan and Kurdistan (AMINI 2000). In recent decades, human-induced habitat destruction and land use changes have caused a sharp decline in its population. The Iranian Department of the Environment (DoE) declared the Great Bustard a protected species in 1967 and banned hunting (Laws and Parliamentary Affairs Office, DoE 1997). The population trend is unknown in many parts of Iran and there are no reliable data on breeding numbers. One of the most important areas of its distribution is Kurdistan province in western Iran, where Great Bustards breed in farmland habitats cultivated with dry-wheat and chickpeas. In spite of some attempts by the DoE to control hunting and to develop management plans, the population is declining rapidly in Kurdistan province and requires urgent conservation measures. The main objective of this paper is to summarise field surveys in five potential bustard habitats in Kurdistan and to show the severe decrease in numbers in this region.

Study areas and methods

Kurdistan province (34°43'-36°26'N and 45°29'-48°16'E) extends over 28,000 km². The areas occupied by Great Bustards are generally located in areas of low human population density. Surveys were carried out in five important habitats (Fig. 1). Visits were made at least once every