



**CONVENTION ON
MIGRATORY
SPECIES**

UNEP/CMS/Concerted Action 13.11

Original: English

**CONCERTED ACTION FOR
THE BENGAL FLORICAN (*Houbaropsis bengalensis bengalensis*)¹**

Adopted by the Conference of the Parties at its 13th Meeting (Gandhinagar, February 2020)

(i). Proponent:

The Government of India (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, MoEF&CC).

(ii). Target species, lower taxon or population, or group of taxa with needs in common:

Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis bengalensis*) (J.F. Gmelin, 1789).

Only *H. b. bengalensis* has been included in Appendix I of CMS at the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The proposed Concerted Action is therefore foreseen to focus on this subspecies. However, it is anticipated that individual activities might concern and support the conservation of the other recognized sub-species, *Houbaropsis b. blandini* Delacour, 1928.

(iii). Geographical range:

Globally, the Bengal Florican is distributed in two isolated and disjunct populations recognized as distinct subspecies- one in South-East Asia in Cambodia (*H. b. blandini*) and the other in South Asia in India and Nepal (*H. b. bengalensis*). The global population is estimated at <1,000 mature individuals (Collar *et al.* 2017, BirdLife International 2018). It is already locally extinct from Bangladesh and perhaps from Vietnam as well. In India, the Bengal Florican inhabits patches of alluvial grasslands from Uttar Pradesh to the foothills and plains of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Rahmani *et al.* 2016, Rahmani *et al.* 2017 and Jha *et al.* 2018), while in Cambodia it is found at the Tonle Sap and Mekong floodplain.

The Concerted Action under CMS will strengthen the conservation coordinated action required between Range States.

(iv). Summary of Activities and expected outcomes:

1. Assessing distribution and population status in India, Nepal and Cambodia.
2. Understanding sex-specific seasonal variation in habitat use by the species in India and Nepal.
3. Identification of major threats to the species, locally specific as well as at the landscape level.
4. Conservation of the species through community involvement.
5. Grassland management focused on Bengal Floricans in selected protected areas.
6. Protection of non-protected Bengal Florican sites by declaring them as Community Conserved Areas through community participation.
7. Promotion of Bengal Florican sensitive agricultural practices on farmed lands within its range.

¹ The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CMS Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.

Activities

Following activities are proposed:

- Develop and implement standardized, coordinated national and trans-boundary monitoring protocol for Bengal Florican population
- Understand movement pattern, home range and habitat use of Bengal Florican using ringing and Satellite/GPS-GSM tracking during breeding and non-breeding seasons.
- Understand major threats to the species at specific sites and at the landscape level.
- Awareness of stakeholders for conservation of the species and its preferred habitat.
- Develop state-specific Recovery Plan for conservation of the species in range countries
- Conservation of the species through establishing Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) or (or any such appropriate designation) in non-protected areas.
- Promotion of Bengal Florican sensitive agricultural practices on farmed lands within its range.
- Restoration of suitable grasslands and control of invasive species in the grasslands where it was previously known.
- Ensure de facto protection and appropriate management of key grassland reserves used by breeding birds.
- Introduce appropriate mitigation measures for the collision risks with transmission lines
- Explore the possibility of conservation breeding as it may be required in the future, particularly in north India.

Expected Outcomes

Following outcomes are expected from the above activities:

- Present distribution and estimated population of the species across its Range States to understand the population trend at specific sites and landscape level.
- Ecological knowledge of the species such as movement patterns, home range and habitat use are known in certain extent, especially in north India and southern Nepal. No information is available on habitat use of the species during breeding as well as non-breeding season in north-east India which has the largest population of Bengal Floricans in the Indian subcontinent.
- Each Bengal Florican site presents different threats to the species. Therefore, for better implementation of conservation action plan, site-wise identification of threats will be an important outcome.
- The species is under tremendous threat from anthropogenic activities such as land use changes. Spreading awareness among stakeholders will be helpful in gaining support of the local people for conservation of the species and its habitats.
- A Recovery Plan for each State is necessary to implement targeted conservation activities in respective states.
- Declaring non-protected sites of the Bengal Florican as CCAs (or any such appropriate designation) will help in protection of the habitat and the species in North-east India.
- Bengal Floricans will be able to safely use farmed lands, at least during the non-breeding season.
- Probable recolonization of Bengal Floricans in those areas where the species has vanished.

(v). Associated benefits:

Conservation of grassland habitats for the Bengal Florican will help associated globally threatened birds and other fauna. such as (in India and Nepal) Slender-billed Babbler, Swamp Francolin, Swamp Grass Babbler, Jerdon's Babbler, Bristled Grassbird, Finn's Weaver, Indian Grassbird and

(in Cambodia): Chinese Grassbird, Yellow-breasted Bunting, as well as other grassland-dependent fauna.

(vi). Timeframe:

1. Satellite tracking of birds (India and Nepal) will depend on research permits from the authorities concerned (first two years).
2. Identification of major threats at specific site and landscape level are under process and will be available within 2-3 years.
3. Awareness programmes were already conducted in few areas and it will be continued to other sites from next year onwards - Continuous
4. State Recovery Plan will be ready and implemented from the year 2020
5. Proposing Community Conserved area will be initiated after selection of sites and understanding the interest of the local communities. - ten years in India, ongoing in Cambodia
6. Research on the ecology of vulnerable species to improve assessments of their spatial / habitat requirements and potential for mitigating management / offsetting (India and Nepal) – ten years
7. Develop tools / guidance for stakeholder outreach particularly to inform the financial risk associated with impacts of renewable energy on species, and to improve capacity-building of regulators and consultants (India and Nepal) – two years
8. Guidance for local communities about impacts on local biodiversity and how to avoid/mitigate them – ten years.
9. Protection and habitat management in breeding sites – ongoing and continuous
10. Promotion of Bengal Florican sensitive agricultural practices (ongoing in Cambodia).

(vii). Relationship to other CMS actions and mandates:

Following actions under Bengal Florican CMS proposal can be linked with various resolutions and initiatives:

1. Resolution 10.03 *The Role of Ecological Networks in the Conservation of Migratory Species*²
2. Resolution 11.25 *Advancing Ecological Networks to Address the Needs of Migratory Species*²
3. Resolution 10.23 *Concerted and Cooperative Actions*³
4. Resolution 11.10 (Rev.COP13) *Synergies and Partnerships*.

(viii). Conservation priority:

The Bengal Florican population is declining extremely rapidly throughout its distribution range mostly due to habitat modification and grassland habitat conversion to agriculture and is therefore listed as Critically Endangered in IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2018). Telemetry studies in India and Nepal and also Cambodia indicate that birds disperse from the Protected Areas annually during the flooding, probably because the grass grows too tall and dense. All three fatalities among 11 satellite-tagged birds occurred between mid-August and mid-September when birds left protected breeding areas for adjacent degraded grassland and farmland near human settlements (Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, DNPWC 2016, Jha et al. 2018), suggesting that they were victims of hunting or predation or powerlines, and that threat levels in non-breeding habitats are high and probably the critical/limiting factor for the species' survival. Non-breeding sites of the species in northeast India are still unknown. Identification of non-breeding sites and the key threats to the species are important for conservation.

In Cambodia non-breeding movements and habitat use are rather better known, but rapid agricultural intensification, construction of power lines and ongoing small-scale hunting are causing the population to decline very rapidly (Mahood *et al.* 2016).

² All consolidated in and superseded by Resolution 12.7 (Rev.COP13) *The Role of Ecological Networks in the Conservation of Migratory Species*

³ Superseded by Resolution 12.28 (Rev,COP13) *Concerted Actions*

(ix). Relevance:

There is transboundary movement of Bengal Florican between India and Nepal. The Mekong Delta population is located on the border area between Cambodia and Vietnam (Gray *et al.* 2007). Recent telemetry studies in India and Nepal indicate that birds disperse from grassland reserves to agricultural fields during non-breeding seasons (Jha *et al.* 2018). Concerted action from both countries is needed for conservation of the species during the birds' movement in the non-breeding seasons.

This CMS Concerted Action can help as a guiding framework to convince the agencies concerned to take up the proposed actions.

(x). Absence of better remedies:

In lieu of remedies such as adequate funding, community support, impediments in technology usage and inclusion of species in existing management plans of Protected Areas, it is rather difficult to secure the future survival of the species.

(xi). Readiness and feasibility:

The following significant issues exist for practical feasibility:

- Require large human resources to monitor the population within the relatively short breeding season
- Surveys and monitoring in some areas could prove difficult due limited or no accessibility
- Restoration of grasslands need large amount of funds or special provisions under management plans
- Government of India should give permission for satellite tracking
- Collaboration with state forest departments and local NGOs - Bird Conservation Nepal is a BirdLife Partner and works closely with Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), which is also the BirdLife International Partner in India. Concerted transboundary actions will help in the species' recovery. A grassland management plan for Protected Areas already exists but needs to be updated.
- Large numbers of farmers must be involved in habitat management plans outside of protected areas because birds are highly dispersed.

(xii). Likelihood of success:

Large teams of researchers and ample funds will be required to implement the proposed action with support from respective state forest departments. Monitoring of Bengal Florican populations periodically (every two years) in India and Nepal depends on many factors.

The risk factors include not obtaining permission for tagging Bengal Floricans with satellite transmitters to understand movement pattern and habitat use. Non-participation of communities in conservation of the species outside protected areas.

In Cambodia, intensive conservation action has stabilized one population of Bengal Florican and only needs to be replicated over a wider area.

(xiii). Magnitude of likely impact:

The proposed actions will help the population of Bengal Floricans in India, Nepal and Cambodia. The Bengal Florican can act as flagship species for conservation of many other grassland dependent species. The species is a grassland specialist and shares its preferred grassland habitat with many globally threatened birds and mammals, for instance in India and Nepal these include: Swamp Francolin, Slender-billed Babbler, Jerdon's Babbler, Swamp Grass Babbler, Pygmy Hog, Hispid Hare, Hog Deer, Swamp Deer, and Greater one horned Rhinoceros.

(xiv). Cost-effectiveness:

A set of guidelines towards formulating state-specific species recovery plan is available for three resident bustard species of India viz. Great Indian Bustard, Lesser Florican and Bengal Florican which has been endorsed by MoEF&CC (Dutta *et al.* 2013). The Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun has received substantial funding under CAMPA for the recovery of Great Indian Bustard and Lesser Florican to certain extent, but Bengal Floricans were neglected. MoEF&CC funded a project by the BNHS in the year 2014.

Activities such as range state meetings, satellite tracking of the bird, developing CCAs will be cost-effective. Concerted Action will help to avoid duplication of work. Achieving this is difficult, but any progress would mark the primary criterion for the cost-effectiveness of these projects.

(xv). Consultations-Planned/Undertaken:

At local level, the BNHS has carried out consultation workshops for the State Forest Departments of Assam and Uttar Pradesh. After consultative meetings, a draft Species Recovery Plan for the Bengal Florican was developed for Uttar Pradesh in the year 2017.

In November 2019, an international meeting was organized on wetlands, migratory waterbirds, and flyways of Asia by the BNHS. This event provided a common meeting ground for scientists, conservationists, managers, and BirdLife partners. A systematic expert-based assessment of progress and priorities for conservation of the Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* have been designed after consultation of concerned scientists from India, Nepal and Cambodia (Mahood *et. al.* 2018).

References

- BirdLife International (2018). *Houbaropsis bengalensis*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2018: e.T22692015A130184896. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2018-2.RLTS.T22692015A130184896.en>. Downloaded on 16 April 2019.
- DNPWC (2016). Annual Report (July 2015-June 2016). Nepal: Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation.
- Dutta, S., Rahmani, A., Gautam, P., Kasambe, R., Narwade, S., Narayan, G., and Jhala, Y. (2013). Guidelines for State Action Plan for Resident Bustards' Recovery Programme. The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. New Delhi
- Gray, T. N. E., Collar, N. J., Davidson, P. J., Dolman, P. M., Evans, T. D., Fox, H. N., Chamnan, H., Borey, R., Hout, S. K. and Van Zalinge, R. N. (2007). Distribution, status and conservation of the Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* in Cambodia. *Bird Conservation International* 19:1-14.
- Jha, R.R.S., Thakuri, J. J., Rahmani, A. R., Dhakal, M., Khongsai, N., Pradhan, N. M. B., Shinde, N., Chauhan, B. K., Talegaonkar, R. K., Barber, I. P., Buchanan, G. M., Galligan, T. H. and Donald, P. F. (2018). Distribution, movements, and survival of the critically endangered Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* in India and Nepal. *Journal of Ornithology*. 159 (3):851-866. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10336-018-1552-1>
- Mahood, S. P., Silva, J. P., Dolman, P. M. and Burnside, R. J. (2016). Proposed power transmission lines in Cambodia constitute a significant new threat to the largest population of the Critically Endangered Bengal florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*. *Oryx* 52:147-155.
- Rahmani, A.R., Rahman, A., Imran, M., Sagwan, T., and Khongsai, N. (2016) D'Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary: Report of Summer Survey in 2016. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai. Pp 46.
- Rahmani, A.R., Jha, R.R.S., Khongsai, N., Shinde, N., Talegaonkar, R. and Kalra, M. (2017). Studying movement pattern and dispersal of the Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*): A Satellite Telemetry Pilot Project. Final Report 2013-2016. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai. Pp. 157.