



BUSTARD

BUSTARD, any of a family (Otididae) of game birds of which three species, generally called *hūbar(r)a* in contemporary Persian, occur in Iran: the great bustard, *Otis tarda* L., the little bustard, *O. tetrax* L., and the houbara (bustard), *Chlamydotis undulata* Jacq. (see below for the specific Persian names of the species). Bustards are medium to large stocky birds (males may weigh as much as 16 kg) with long, strong legs, which enable them to run quite fast when endangered.

Hunters value them highly for their flesh, which is considered very tasty (cf. *Ḥabīb al-sīar*, 3rd printing, Tehran, 1362 Š./1984, IV, p. 700: “hunters are unanimous that the flesh of *toḡdarī/toḡderī* [Turk., bustard] is the most delicious fowl flesh”; cf. Tonokābonī, who, however, considers its flesh hard to digest; p. 273). These features explain the Persian name *hūbar(r)a*, which may be a shortened form of *āhū-bar(r)a* (both forms recorded by Zamaḡsarī, p. 474, and Schapka, s.vv.), lit. “gazelle [as a fast-running prized quarry]-lamb [as a young plump animal with a palatable flesh].” The arabicized form of the word is *ḥobārā* (see, e.g., Shirr, p. 50, who, however, gives the variant *obara* as the Persian original; cf. *ḥobroj*, another arabicized form of *hūbara* according to Mokrī, pp. 129-30). Persian names found in earlier sources include *čarz/jarz* (cf. Sanandaj Kurd. *čērg* “great bustard”; Mokrī, p. 61), *čāl* (probably referring to the little bustard; cf. *kar-čāl*, lit. “the great/large *čāl*”), *kar-čāl* (probably referring to the great bustard), and *tūdara* (persianized form of Turk. *toḡdarī*).

The great bustard, commonly called *mīš-morḡ*, lit. “ewe-bird/hen,” is a bird of the well-watered upland steppes and arable lands in Iran. The Persian name



alludes to its size (cf. Sanandaj Kurd. *mēša-sī*, and Turk. *toy-toğ(o)lī/tok(o)lī*, lit. “the plump she-lamb [*toğolī*] of a (wedding) banquet [*toy*],” thus “[a bird like] a plump she-lamb [worthy of being served at] a (wedding) banquet”; see Mokri, pp. 124, 129-30n.). Two distinct populations occur: a largely sedentary breeding population of 100-150 birds on the rolling plains of southern Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, and Kermānšāh (Bāktarān), and a wintering population of several hundred birds in northern Khorasan. Quite surprisingly, the breeding population remained unknown to ornithologists until the mid-1340s Š./1960s, but local people know the bird well and speak of a dramatic decline in its numbers in recent years, for which hunting and the mechanization of farming are thought to be responsible. The bird was given full protection in the 1340s Š./1960s, and in 1350 Š./1971 the Iran Department of the Environment (Sāzmān-e Ḥefāzat-e Moḥīṭ-e Zīst) initiated a program of research and management in an attempt to save the remaining birds. Because of the high value of agricultural land, however, it has not yet been possible to create special reserves for the species. The wintering population of great bustards in Khorasan is even less well known. The birds arrive in Iran in late autumn, remain in flocks of up to a hundred birds throughout winter, and depart in the spring, presumably to breeding grounds east of the Caspian in the Soviet Union.

The little bustard, currently called *zangūla-bāl* (Gīlakī *šablarz*), is a rare breeding bird of the open grasslands in the eastern Alborz mountains. Its name means literally “[the bird whose] *bāl* “wing” [sounds like a] *zangūla* “small round bell,” referring to the distinctive whistling sound caused by the wing beats of the male (cf. the French name of this species, *canepetière*). Only in autumn is there a large influx of these birds from the Soviet Union into northeastern Iran, and from October to March the species is commonly found in flocks of up to several hundred birds on the Turkman steppes and the lowlands of the Gorgān Bay area in Māzandarān. Much smaller numbers appear at this same time in northern Azarbaijan. In recent years the population of these birds has shown a marked decline. The species is still classed as a game bird and may be hunted during the general open season, but hunting pressures are low, and a significant proportion of the population enjoys complete protection in the Mīānkāla Protected Region at Gorgān Bay. It therefore seems likely that the decline is attributable to detrimental changes on the breeding grounds.

The houbara, the bird specifically referred to as *hūbar(r)a*, is by far the most



widespread bustard in Iran. It is a bird of the desert and semidesert, favoring rolling country with scattered shrubs during the breeding season but moving out onto more open plains in winter. It used to breed throughout the central plateau (Blanford, 1876), but its numbers have decreased drastically in recent decades, and it is now confined to the more remote and better-vegetated areas. In autumn there is a pronounced southward shift in the population, with birds moving out of more northerly breeding areas and spreading down into the lowlands of Kūzestān, the Persian Gulf coast, southern Baluchistan, and Sīstān. Houbaras are seen regularly on migration in the southeast Caspian lowlands; and it appears that the wintering population in Iran includes a large number of migrants from the Soviet Union. The houbara has traditionally been much esteemed as a game bird, particularly by falconers, and hunting pressures have been very high in the past. In an attempt to halt the decline in numbers the species was given full protection in the 1340s Š./1960s, and since then a number of large desert reserves have been created to protect the habitat of this and other threatened desert wildlife.

The *hūbara* usually relies on its running speed to escape its enemies, but will fly when pressed on land. During the flight, if attacked by a predator or a falcon flown at it, it tries by various maneuvers to get above the raptor and, at the right moment, splashes the pursuer with a shot of its dung, which is so sticky that a falcon, if hit by it, would fatally crash to the ground or, at least, would be unable to fly till the next molt. This unique defensive capability of the *hūbara*, though unnoticed by most professional ornithologists (e.g., Hübner and Étchécopar, Scott et al., as far as Iranian avifauna is concerned), has been pointed out by some nonprofessionals in the past (see, e.g., the early 5th/11th-century poet Zaynabī quoted in *Loġat-e fors*, ed. Dabīrsīāqī, p. 117, and Sūzanī Samarqandī [d. 562/1166?] quoted by Dehḵodā, s.v. *čarz*). The earliest mention of it in the Islamic period is probably that by Jāḥeẓ (ca. 160-255/ca. 776-868 or 869), quoted by Damīrī (742-808/1341-1405, I, pp. 320-22): “The *ḥobārā* has in his guts and cloaca a magazine always containing some liquid excrement (*salḥ*); whenever tenaciously pursued by a saker falcon (*ṣaqr*) he defecates on the latter, which [then] plucks its own [begrimed] feathers, thus causing its own death. The Almighty Allāh has made the *ḥobārā*’s *salḥ* his (defensive) arm (*selāḥ*).” (This quotation is not in Jāḥeẓ’s *Ketāb al-ḥayawān* “The book of animals,” where he, speaking of the *selāḥ*s of birds, simply says that “his *selāḥ* is his *salḥ*” [I, p. 29]). For a modern account of the *hūbara*’s defensive aids see Iran Department of the Environment, pp. 27-29.



Šahmardān b. Abi'l-Ḳayr provides additional details about *čarz* in his encyclopedic compilation *Nozhat-nāma-ye 'alā'ī* (composed probably ca. 490-95/1097-1102): “The *čarz* is said to be the most stupid bird . . . [the reason is given by Qazvīnī; see below]. Among Arabs this [stupidity] is proverbial: “Every one, even the *ḥobārā*, loves one’s child(ren)” [see Damīrī’s explanation below]. No bird flies farther and faster than the *čarz* [as evidenced by the fact] that [once] there was found in the maw of a bustard killed in Bašra a green, unaltered *ḥabbat al-kažrā'* (fruit of terebinth), which is not known to exist in that vicinity” (pp. 141-42). Zakarīyā' Qazvīnī (ca. 600-82/ca. 1203-83; p. 272) reported (from unnamed sources): “Among birds there is none more foolish than the *ḥobārā*, for she leaves her own egg(s) and sits on the egg(s) of another bird” (this “foolish” behavior may be real but is not reported in the above-mentioned modern sources). Damīrī (loc. cit.) also offers explanations for some unclear points about the bustard: “The *ḥobārā* is one of the birds with the strongest flight and the farthest [flying] range [as evidenced by the fact that] in the crops of bustards hunted in Bašra is found the *ḥabbat al-kažrā'*, the fruit of the tree *boṭm* [*Pistacia terebintha* L.] which grows at the borders of Syria . . . 'Oṭmān [Abū 'Oṭmān Jāḥež?] has said, “Every one, even the *ḥobārā*, loves one’s child,” [referring to] the proverbial stupidity of the [female] bustard, because despite her silliness, just like other animals she loves her child, feeds it, and teaches it how to fly.”

Arab and Persian authors have recorded for some parts of the bustard’s body a number of therapeutic and wonderful virtues, most of which can be traced back to the famous Moroccan geographer and naturalist Šarīf Edrīsī (d. 560/1166; quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, p. 5), and to Dā'ūd Anṭākī (d. 1008/1599; I, p. 100): “the *ḥobārā*’s heart wrapped in a piece of cloth prevents its bearer from falling asleep” (Šarīf Edrīsī; Damīrī, quoting Qazvīnī, who, however, does not mention this point; *Borhān-e qāṭe'*, s.v. *čarz*); a certain stone found in its gizzard stops nose bleeding (Šarīf Edrīsī; summarized by Tonokābonī, p. 273, s.v. *ḥobārā*); the inside lining of its gizzard, if dried, powdered, mixed with an equal amount of powdered rock salt, and used as a collyrium, is an effective remedy against early cataract (Šarīf Edrīsī; repeated with slight alterations by Qazvīnī, Anṭākī, and Tonokābonī); its right eye safeguards its bearer against the evil eye (Anṭākī, Tonokābonī); its nails will bring about affection and popularity for the person who carries them (Anṭākī; summarized by Tonokābonī); its blood is used by some as a remedy for asthma and dyspnea (Galen, as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, *ibid.*; repeated by Tonokābonī, who indicates that up to 3 *meṭqāls* of the blood is to be drunk with water and wine);



its flesh and fat, when taken internally, stop asthma and, when used externally, cure vitiligo (Anṭākī; Tonokābonī).

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