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Project Great Indian Bustard: Captive Population Hits 70 as Programme Enters Fourth Year

15 March 2026

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15 March 2026 · 7 min read ·

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WHY IN NEWS

On **13 March 2026**, Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change **Bhupender Yadav** announced that two new chicks have hatched at the **Conservation Breeding Centre in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan**, taking the total captive population of the **Great Indian Bustard (GIB)** to **70 birds** — the highest since the captive breeding programme began. One chick hatched through natural mating and the other through artificial insemination, as the programme enters its fourth year.

The Great Indian Bustard is one of the heaviest flying birds in the world and one of the most endangered. Three decades ago, it roamed across twelve Indian states in open grassland and scrub habitat. A 2025 scientific survey using distance sampling methodology recorded **198 GIBs in the Jaisalmer region alone** (up from 128 in 2017), with the vast majority concentrated in Rajasthan. The captive breeding programme is the most critical active conservation intervention for the species — and the milestone of 70 birds in captivity represents both a biological success and a signal that India's most ambitious bird conservation effort is gaining traction.

THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD — PROFILE OF A CRITICALLY ENDANGERED SPECIES

The Great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*) belongs to the family **Otididae** and is the **State Bird of Rajasthan**. It is listed as **Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List** — the highest category before extinction in the wild. Once distributed across open grasslands from Punjab to Tamil Nadu, covering approximately 11 states and 1 union territory, the species has suffered a catastrophic contraction. A 2025 nationwide scientific survey using the Occupancy and Distance Sampling technique recorded **198 GIBs in the Jaisalmer region** (Desert National Park, open landscapes, and the Pokhran army firing range), a significant increase from 128 in 2017. A small isolated population survives in the Naliya grasslands of the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat.

Why GIBs Are So Difficult to Breed and Protect

The Great Indian Bustard faces an unusual convergence of threats. Its habitat — open dry grasslands, scrublands, and fallow agricultural land — is not protected under India's forest laws. India's wildlife protection framework is designed around forests; grasslands have no equivalent statutory protection and are routinely converted to agriculture, plantation, or infrastructure.

Power line collisions are the most acute immediate cause of death in the wild. A 2021 study estimated that **18 birds per year** were dying from high-tension power line strikes in Rajasthan alone — a catastrophic loss rate for a population of under 200. The Supreme Court in **M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India** in 2021 directed the undergrounding of power lines in GIB habitat, but implementation has been contested by the renewable energy sector, which has extensive solar and wind projects in Rajasthan.

Bustards have an extremely low reproductive rate: females typically lay **only one egg per year**, with long intervals between breeding seasons. They reach sexual maturity late, making population recovery inherently slow even under optimal conditions.

THE CAPTIVE BREEDING PROGRAMME — STRUCTURE AND PROGRESS

Project GIB — Launch and Design

Project Great Indian Bustard was formally launched on **5 June 2013** by the Government of Rajasthan. The **Conservation Breeding Centre at Sam, near Jaisalmer**, became operational in **2019**, with a partnership between the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**, the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)**, and the **Rajasthan Forest Department**. A second centre at **Ramdevra** became operational in **2022**.

The breeding methodology draws on peer-reviewed avian conservation science. Eggs are collected from wild nests and brought to the centre for incubation in controlled conditions — a technique that has dramatically improved chick survival rates. Artificial insemination has been added to expand genetic diversity without requiring the physical pairing of wild-caught birds.

Fourth Year — Key Numbers

The programme entered its fourth year in 2026. The captive population crossing 70 is significant because conservation biologists consider a captive assurance population of approximately 50–100 individuals a minimum threshold for a viable ex-situ backup against wild extinction. Reaching 70 means India's captive GIB population has crossed the lower bound of that threshold.

Survival rates for captive-hatched chicks have improved by **20–30%** compared to the programme's early years, attributed to improvements in incubation protocols, dietary management, and disease prevention.

The Two March 2026 Chicks

The two chicks announced on 13 March 2026 are particularly significant for two reasons. First, one hatched through **natural mating**, demonstrating that captive birds are reproductively active — a critical sign of programme health. Second, one hatched through **artificial insemination**, confirming that the technique is operationally established at the centre, allowing the programme to manage genetic diversity without relying entirely on natural breeding pairs.

THE NEXT PHASE — SOFT RELEASE

The Ministry has announced that the programme will move to its next critical phase: the **soft release** of captive-bred chicks into designated protected areas in Rajasthan. Soft release involves a gradual, monitored transition to the wild — birds are initially held in large enclosures within their natural habitat, introduced to natural food sources and weather conditions, and then allowed increasing access to open habitat.

This is the most challenging phase of any ex-situ conservation programme. Captive-bred birds of any species that have not learned survival skills in the wild face significant challenges from predators, power lines, and unfamiliar food sources. GIBs present particular challenges because of the power line collision risk.

THE POLICY GAP — GRASSLAND PROTECTION

The most important policy gap underlying the GIB crisis is the absence of a **Grassland Protection Act** or equivalent statutory framework. India's grasslands — estimated at approximately **10 million hectares** — have no legal protection comparable to forests. The **Forest Rights Act, 2006** and the **Forest Conservation Act, 1980** apply to forests; open grasslands are regulated only through revenue land laws that generally permit conversion.

Without protecting the habitat, the captive breeding programme — however successful — has nowhere to release birds. A recovered captive population released into degraded or fragmented grassland will not survive.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Great Indian Bustard, Ardeotis nigriceps, IUCN Critically Endangered, Project GIB, Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Conservation Breeding Centre Jaisalmer, M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India (2021), Otididae family, State Bird of Rajasthan.

MAINS GS-3:

Conservation of endangered species; ex-situ vs in-situ conservation; grassland ecosystem protection; human-wildlife conflict; biodiversity and habitat loss in India.

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GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD — SPECIES PROFILE:

Scientific name: Ardeotis nigriceps

Family: Otididae

IUCN status: Critically Endangered

State Bird of: Rajasthan

Wild population (2025 survey): 198 in Jaisalmer region (up from 128 in 2017); small population in Rann of Kutch, Gujarat

Primary range: Thar Desert, Rajasthan (Desert National Park, Pokhran firing range)

Egg-laying rate: One egg per year per female

PROJECT GIB — KEY FACTS:

Launched: 5 June 2013, by Government of Rajasthan

Partners: MoEFCC + Wildlife Institute of India (WII) + Rajasthan Forest Department

Breeding centres: Sam, near Jaisalmer (operational 2019) + Ramdevra (operational 2022)

Captive population (March 2026): 70 birds

Programme year: Fourth year as of 2026

March 2026 milestone: Two new chicks — one by natural mating, one by artificial insemination

Survival rate improvement: 20–30% better than early programme years

KEY THREATS:

Power line collisions: ~18 birds/year killed in Rajasthan alone (2021 estimate)

Habitat loss — grasslands have no statutory protection equivalent to forests

Low reproductive rate — one egg/year

Disturbance from human activity, stray dogs, and infrastructure in nesting zones

KEY LEGAL / POLICY CONTEXT:

M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India (2021): Supreme Court directed undergrounding of power lines in GIB habitat

Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: GIB listed in Schedule I (highest protection)

No Grassland Protection Act exists in India — key policy gap

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

IUCN Red List categories: Least Concern → Near Threatened → Vulnerable → Endangered → Critically Endangered → Extinct in the Wild → Extinct

Ex-situ conservation = breeding outside natural habitat (zoos, breeding centres)

In-situ conservation = protecting species in their natural habitat

Minimum viable captive assurance population threshold: 50–100 individuals (GIB now at 70)

India's grasslands cover ~10 million hectares — none protected by a dedicated statute

Sources: PIB , ANI , The Print , Wildlife Institute of India

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