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IUCN Red List 2026: Four Indian Open-Ecosystem Birds Uplisted

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)**ALSO FROM THE CREATOR****BharatNotes**Free UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com →**ADVERTISE****Advertise with Ujiyari**

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IUCN Red List 2026: Four Indian Open-Ecosystem Birds Uplisted

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WHY IN NEWS:

The **IUCN** released its latest **Red List update in May 2026**. Of **12 Indian species** reassessed, **4 were uplisted (worsening status)** and **8 downlisted (improving)**. The uplisted set comes overwhelmingly from **Open Natural Ecosystems (ONEs)** — grasslands, scrub, and semi-arid landscapes that remain under-protected under India’s colonial-era “wasteland” land-use classification.

ABOUT THE IUCN RED LIST

- Established in **1964** by the **International Union for Conservation of Nature**
- The **world’s most comprehensive inventory** of global conservation status
- **IUCN founded:** 1948 at Fontainebleau, France
- **HQ:** Gland, Switzerland
- Tracks **~167,000+ species** (2025)
- Updated **semi-annually**

IUCN RED LIST CATEGORIES

CODE	CATEGORY
EX	Extinct
EW	Extinct in the Wild
CR	Critically Endangered
EN	Endangered
VU	Vulnerable
NT	Near Threatened
LC	Least Concern
DD	Data Deficient
NE	Not Evaluated

OPEN NATURAL ECOSYSTEMS (ONES)

Definition

Non-forest natural habitats – **grasslands, scrub, savannah, semi-arid landscapes, wetlands, deserts, and ravines.**

Key Features

- Cover **~10% of India's land area**
- Host **distinctive biodiversity** – bustards, foxes, hyenas, gazelles
- **Misclassified as “wastelands”** since the colonial era
- Vulnerable to “afforestation” via tree-planting drives in the **Aravallis** and **Banni grasslands**

INDIA'S GRASSLAND BIRD CRISIS — UPLISTED IN 2026

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	STATUS	POPULATION
Great Indian Bustard	<i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i>	CR	<150 individuals
Bengal Florican	<i>Houbaropsis bengalensis</i>	CR	Few hundred
Lesser Florican	<i>Sypheotides indicus</i>	CR	<750 individuals

- All three are listed under **CMS (Bonn) Convention Appendix I**
- Found largely in **Desert National Park (Rajasthan)** and **Kutch (Gujarat)**

INDIA'S GRASSLAND CONSERVATION EFFORTS

- **Project Great Indian Bustard (2013)** — led by **Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun**
- **Captive breeding centre at Sam, Jaisalmer (Rajasthan)**
- Conservation breeding programme delivered its **first chick in June 2019**
- **Powerline diversion** measures in Rajasthan Desert NP and TN's Karera

LANTANA CAMARA — A CROSS-CUTTING THREAT

- Invades scrub and grassland — the direct habitat of ONEs
- Affects **~13 million hectares** across India
- Often discussed alongside ONE policy in CSE's State of Environment Report 2026

STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

- **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** — amended 2022
 - **Schedule I** (highest protection): Great Indian Bustard, both Floricans
- **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** — amended 2023
- **National Wildlife Action Plan, 2017–2031**

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

- **CITES** — Appendix I/II listings for endangered species
- **CMS (Bonn Convention)** — Appendix I for migratory species

- **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) obligations**

COMPARABLE ONE WILDLIFE IN INDIA

SPECIES	STATUS IN INDIA
Caracal (<i>Caracal caracal</i>)	EN — extirpated from many states
Indian Wolf (<i>Canis lupus pallipes</i>)	EN
Striped Hyena (<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>)	NT
Chinkara (Indian gazelle)	LC but declining
Blackbuck (<i>Antelope cervicapra</i>)	LC

THE “WASTELAND ATLAS” PROBLEM

- Published by the **Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Rural Development**
- Treats grasslands and scrublands as “**wasteland**”, incentivising “improvement” via afforestation
- This **classification error** lies at the root of the ONE crisis

RECENT IUCN / CITES DECISIONS FOR INDIA

- **Indian Star Tortoise**: moved from **CITES Appendix II to Appendix I at CoP18 (Geneva, 2019)**
- **Pangolins** (Indian and Chinese): Appendix I since 2017
- **Asian Elephant**: critically endangered in some range regions

WAY FORWARD

- **Reclassify ONEs** as natural ecosystems, not wastelands
- Adopt a dedicated **ONE Protection Framework**, separate from forest law
- **Halt blanket afforestation** in semi-arid regions
- Strengthen **Project Great Indian Bustard** and powerline mitigation
- Scale **community conservation** — including the **Cheetah reintroduction** considerations for Banni grasslands

UPSC RELEVANCE

- **GS Paper 3:** Environment, biodiversity, conservation
- **GS Paper 1:** Geography, ecosystems
- **Prelims:** IUCN founding year, Red List categories, GIB scientific name, CITES CoP18 decisions
- **Mains:** “India’s open natural ecosystems remain the blind spot of its conservation policy.” Critically examine.

FACTS CORNER:

IUCN Red List update: May 2026

12 Indian species reassessed: 4 uplisted (worsening), 8 downlisted

IUCN founded: 1948 (Fontainebleau, France); HQ Gland, Switzerland

IUCN Red List established: 1964

Red List Categories: EX, EW, CR, EN, VU, NT, LC, DD, NE

Great Indian Bustard: CR (<150 individuals)

Bengal Florican: CR

Lesser Florican: CR (<750)

Project GIB launched: 2013 (WII Dehradun)

Captive breeding centre: Sam, Jaisalmer

First GIB chick hatched: June 2019

Lantana camara invades: ~13 million hectares of India

Indian Star Tortoise: moved CITES App II → App I at CoP18 Geneva 2019

WLPA 1972 Schedule I includes GIB and Floricans

CMS — Convention on Migratory Species (Bonn Convention)

National Wildlife Action Plan 2017–2031

Sources: [IUCN](#), [MoEFCC](#), [WII](#)

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[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/daily/2026/05/25/iucn-red-list-india-open-natural-ecosystems-2026/>

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