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Indian Grey Hornbill Returns to Gir After Four Years

14 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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Indian Grey Hornbill Returns to Gir After Four Years

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WHY IN NEWS

*In , a **peer-reviewed study** published in the journal **Birds** confirmed that the **Indian Grey Hornbill (Ocyeros birostris)**, reintroduced into **Gujarat's Gir landscape from 2021** after local extinction in the **1950s to 1960s**, has **survived, established territory and bred** over four years. **One pair** bred in the first year and **three more pairs** nested in the second, marking one of India's few documented bird reintroduction successes.*

A SPECIES BROUGHT BACK TO ITS FORMER RANGE

The Indian Grey Hornbill had vanished from the Gir landscape by the mid twentieth century, a local extinction driven by habitat change and the loss of the large, old trees that hornbills need to nest. **Species reintroduction** is the [deliberate](https://ujjyari.com/vocab/deliberate/) (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/deliberate/>) release of a locally extinct species back into a part of its former range, and it is a demanding conservation tool: the released animals must not only survive but also settle, defend territory and reproduce for the effort to count as a success.

That is exactly what the new study documents. Beginning in **2021**, birds were introduced into the Gir landscape, and researchers then tracked them across four breeding seasons. The results were unusually clear.

YEAR	OUTCOME
Baseline (1950s to 1960s)	Locally extinct in the Gir landscape
Reintroduction begins	2021
First breeding year	One pair bred
Second breeding year	Three more pairs nested
Verdict (2026 study)	Survived, held territory and bred over four years

The progression from a single breeding pair to multiple nesting pairs is the metric that matters. It shows the population is not merely present but **self-sustaining in the making**, the **threshold** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/threshold/>) that separates a genuine reintroduction from a temporary release.

WHY HORNBILL MATTER TO A FOREST

Hornbills are not just charismatic birds; they are **ecological engineers**. Their significance for the exam and for the ecosystem rests on two roles.

Keystone Seed Dispersers

Hornbills are **frugivores**, or fruit-eaters, and they range widely as they feed. As they move, they carry and drop seeds far from the parent tree, which is why they are described as **keystone seed dispersers**. A forest that loses its hornbills loses one of its main agents of natural regeneration, and over time the mix of tree species can shift. Restoring the hornbill therefore helps restore the forest's ability to renew itself, a benefit that reaches well beyond the single species.

Cavity Nesters With a Remarkable Habit

Hornbills are **cavity-nesters**, depending on natural hollows in large, mature trees. Their breeding behaviour is one of the most distinctive in the bird world: the **female seals herself inside a tree cavity** during nesting, walled in with a narrow slit through which the male passes food. This makes hornbills acutely sensitive to the loss of old trees, and it explains why their return is read as a sign that the habitat itself has recovered enough to support them.

THE CONSERVATION STATUS

The Indian Grey Hornbill is listed as **Least Concern** on the **IUCN Red List**, meaning it is not globally threatened. The Gir story is therefore less about rescuing a species from extinction and more about **restoring an ecological function** to a landscape that had lost it, and about proving that a well-planned reintroduction can work in Indian conditions.

The Gir landscape itself carries a special weight in Indian conservation: **Gir in Gujarat is the only wild habitat of the Asiatic lion**. A programme that adds a locally extinct frugivore back into this celebrated landscape strengthens the ecological completeness of a forest already central to India's conservation identity.

WHY IT MATTERS

The success invites a larger question that the exam likes to test: **reintroduction versus habitat protection**. Reintroduction is expensive, uncertain and slow, and it can only succeed where the underlying habitat has already been secured. The Gir result suggests the two approaches are complementary rather than rival: protect the habitat first, then use reintroduction to restore the species and the functions that were lost. The open challenge is **replicability**, whether the same careful method can be applied across India's many degraded but recoverable habitats.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, biodiversity, and environmental ecology, including species recovery programmes and the ecological role of frugivores in forest regeneration.

Prelims pointers:

- The **Indian Grey Hornbill (Ocyrceros birostris)** is listed as **Least Concern** on the **IUCN Red List**.
- Hornbills are **keystone seed dispersers** that aid forest regeneration and are **cavity-nesters**; the **female is sealed into a tree cavity** during nesting.
- **Gir in Gujarat** is the **only wild habitat of the Asiatic lion**.
- **Species reintroduction** restores a locally extinct species to its former range.
- The bird was locally extinct in the Gir landscape by the **1950s to 1960s** and reintroduced from **2021**.

Mains question: "Species reintroduction is only as strong as the habitat that receives it. In light of the Indian Grey Hornbill's recovery in the Gir landscape, examine the role of frugivores in forest regeneration and assess reintroduction against habitat protection as strategies for restoring degraded ecosystems." (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNER

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Species: Indian Grey Hornbill, *Ocyrceros birostris*; Least Concern on the IUCN Red List.

Event: July 2026 study in the journal *Birds* confirmed a successful reintroduction into the Gir landscape, Gujarat.

Timeline: locally extinct 1950s to 1960s; reintroduced from 2021; one pair bred in year one, three more pairs nested in year two.

Ecological role: keystone seed dispersers and cavity-nesters; the female seals herself into a tree cavity during nesting.

Gir: the only wild habitat of the Asiatic lion.

Concept: reintroduction restores a locally extinct species to its former range; success is measured by survival, territory and breeding.

Sources: *Gujarat Forest Department* (<https://forests.gujarat.gov.in/>), *the journal Birds*, *Central Chronicle*

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