



## ORNITHOLOGY

## The Houbara: Headed for Oblivion?

The elusive Asian houbara bustard could fall victim to falconers and poaching without strong international protection

**URUMQI, CHINA**—When Yang Weikang stalks his quarry in the Junggar Basin of western China, he needs all the patience he can muster. “The creature is shy—and very cunning,” says Yang, an ecologist at the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Urumqi. The elusive animal is the Asian houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii*), a cranelike bird with sandy buff plumage, mottled with dark-brown spots, that nests in open desert and dry steppe. Yang’s team uses telescopes for observations; with its superb vision and a clear line of sight, houbaras can spot threats from hundreds of meters away.

But the houbara’s guile alone will not save it from oblivion. The bird has the unhappy fate of being the favorite prey of falconers. Over the past few decades, hunting pressure across a wide swath of Asia has risen in concert with two other threats: poaching and habitat loss as arid land is converted to farms or urban sprawl.

To address these woes, bird experts are negotiating with governments to establish protected areas in key countries where the bird breeds or winters. “We’re working on this very seriously,” says behavioral ecologist Olivier Combreau, director of the National Avian Research Center (NARC) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Creating new reserves where taking houbaras is banned and enacting stiffer penalties for poaching and overhunting are components of an action plan the signatories of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals are now reviewing. “If we do nothing, there is no hope for the houbara,” says Yang.

The houbara’s downward spiral began with the economic rise of the Persian Gulf, and it accelerated after the Cold War ended. Adults, which are about 60 cm long, have a wingspan of 140 cm, and weigh in at around 2 kg, breed in early spring in China, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. Around late September, houbaras head south on a journey of up to 7000 km. Some migrate to Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, while others flock to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Houbaras that winter in the Persian Gulf often end up on dinner plates. Falcons are trained to hunt the delicacy. Falconry, an Arab tradition, soared in popularity as the oil-producing nations grew rich; falconers, who until the 1960s struck out on horse or camel, now roll into the desert in four-wheel drive convoys. “Before oil, hunting was a way to make a living,” says Yang. “Now it’s mostly for sport.” As houbaras became scarcer, falconers descended on wintering grounds in Pakistan. The Soviet disintegration in 1991 opened a new frontier; newly independent central Asian countries were soon welcoming hunting parties to bag houbaras during its spring and fall migrations.

Researchers knew the embattled bird was on the ropes. But when a team led by Combreau undertook surveys in China, Kazakhstan, and Oman from 1998 to 2002, they discovered that houbaras were vanishing before their eyes. During the 4-year study, houbara numbers declined by 63% in China, 60% in Kazakhstan, and 50% in Oman, the researchers reported in *Biological Conservation* in 2005. Some experts have pegged the Asian population at about 50,000, but Combreau says no one really knows how

◀ **Second nature.** Reared at NARC and set free in the UAE desert, this houbara bred 2 years later.

many are left. One thing is certain, he and his colleagues warned in their 2005 paper: “The Asian houbara may face extinction in the wild in the foreseeable future.”

The houbara’s decline has continued over the past few years, Combreau says. His team keeps a close eye on Kazakhstan, where their surveys show drops of between 5.5% and 8.3% a year. Because most houbaras breed in Kazakhstan and the rest migrate through the vast country, decreases there “give a fairly good idea” of the overall population’s vulnerability, Combreau says. As a last resort, he says, NARC’s successful captive-breeding program could reintroduce houbaras into areas in the wild where the bird goes locally extinct.

Averting that doom will mean reining in falconers. In China and Mongolia, taking houbaras is outlawed. In UAE, hunting is limited to a couple of months a year in a few spots. “They will not stop the hunt, of course. It’s tradition,” Combreau says. “But there is a genuine effort here to promote sustainable hunting.” Many other countries regulate hunting, he says, but lack the means for enforcement.

One bright spot is Pakistan. Falconers are a rare sight there these days because of the deteriorating security situation. “Last year, hardly any hunting took place,” says Mukhtar Ahmed, president of Houbara Foundation International Pakistan in Lahore. And poaching has declined, he says, because Gulf nations have cracked down on the market for houbaras used to train falcons. Still, NARC estimates that up to 7000 houbaras each year are spirited into UAE alone.

The houbara’s decline pains Yang, who holds the bird in high esteem. To lure a fox or other predator away from her nest, a female will bravely hobble away from her eggs, pretending to have a broken wing. Once the predator is off the scent, she’ll drop the charade and run back to the nest. A female once put similar moves on Yang’s jeep: “She ran slowly in front of us, trying to guide our car away from her nest,” he says.

Such rare encounters require spending weeks in the field. In China and Kazakhstan, there’s roughly one bird per 10 square km. “It’s very unlikely one would see a houbara in the wild,” Combreau says, except when males are putting on breeding displays for females. Otherwise, “they’re almost impossible to detect.” Unless countries act quickly and forcefully, it soon may be impossible even for the falcons to detect the furtive, and fading, houbaras.

—RICHARD STONE