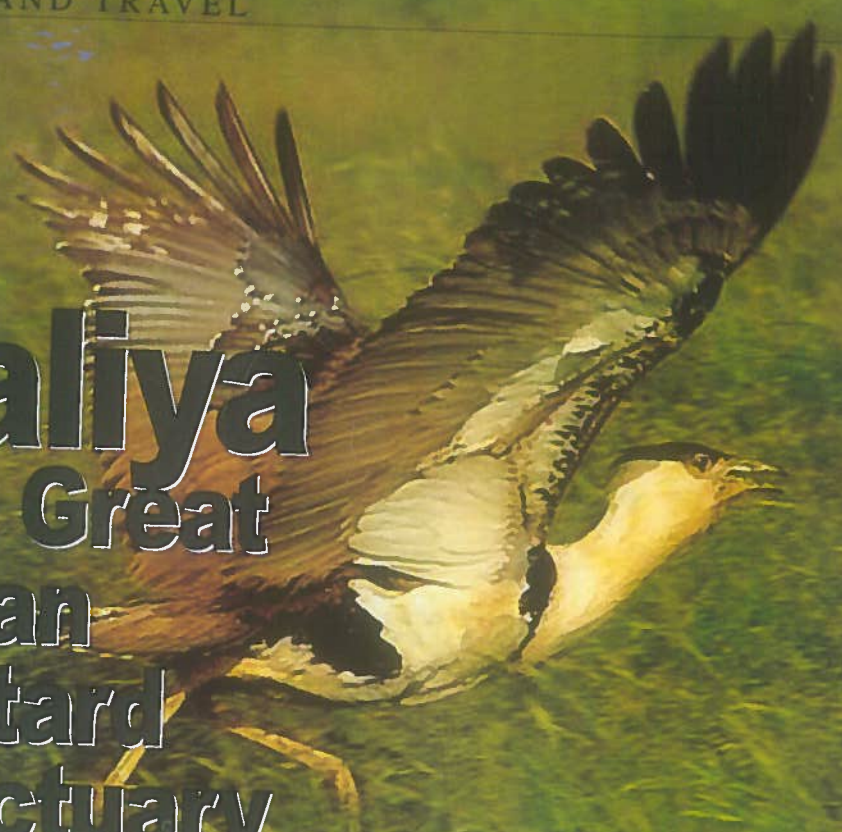


# Naliya The Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary



While in the sanctuary, one needs to observe great caution to spot the royal bird, which is very shy by nature. ■ by Murli Menon

A seven-day safari through the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary was a most memorable experience. One of the most tranquil spots to meditate in Kutch is at Naliya, a two-hour drive from Bhuj. It is home to the great Indian bustards, which live around the grasslands that surround Naliya.

Naliya is one of the coldest places in Gujarat during the peak of winter and temperatures can go down to 2 degrees Celsius in January. The ideal time to visit Naliya is between May and June.

The Indian bustard is a shy creature and it takes great effort to sight one in the wild. It is a large, ground-dwelling bird, with a long neck and long, bare legs and somewhat similar

to a young Ostrich. Its standing height is more than a metre, wing span is 2.5 m and weight about 18 kg. It is omnivorous in diet, mainly relying on grass, small shrubs, insects, rats, *chana*, groundnut, *bajri* etc.

One needs lots of faith and

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patience while trying to spot the elusive bustards at Naliya. After trekking through the knee-high grass for several kilometres, one has to wait under a tree for hours, keeping a steady eye on the wide expanse of the grass, searching for any unusual movement.

The clear, blue skies and the dark-green grass offer a contrast to the grey-feathered birds and, after a six-hour wait, we were able to sight the fluttering of the bustard's wings among the grass. Slowly, we moved towards it on all fours, crouching in the grass.

After about an hour, we could make out the faint outline of the bustard – but, one more step and the bustard with its keen eyesight, could feel our presence, and flew away.



However, tracking bustards through the grasslands of Naliya is an adventure in itself and one should not get too attached to the results.

The bustards feed on the grasslands that surround Naliya. They are extremely sensitive to human presence and dart off at almost supersonic speed, if they hear human footsteps. So, all you can see is the bustard disappearing into the grass before you can click your camera.

Tracking them on foot through the grasslands is exciting. During my week-long stay at Naliya, I could spot the bustard only thrice. All I could see was the flapping of wings and the bustard soaring way into the skies before ducking into the grass.

### An extraordinary location

The great Indian bustard is an endangered species and conservation efforts of the local forest officers are working well, and the number of bustards in Naliya may cross three digits, in the years to come. All the officers I met were highly motivated and made an extra effort to see that the bustard population is undisturbed.

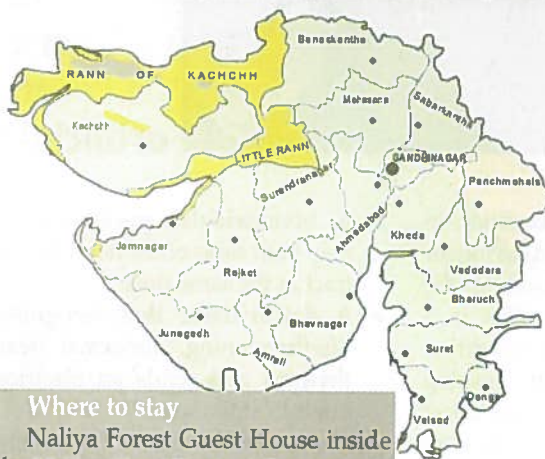
However, unscrupulous windmill operators, including some greedy corporates, have set up windmills on the periphery of the sanctuary. These windmills hardly generate any energy but the generators supplying power to the windmills are a constant source of disturbance for the birds.

Besides this, the turbines injure and maim all the migratory birds that fly through Naliya. Sparrows, pigeons and mynahs have to pay with their lives, because of the windmills. The progress of a society can be judged by the way they treat their animals and these windmills need to be removed from Naliya with immediate effect.

Naliya, situated in the Thar Desert, was established in January 1972 as a sanctuary for the great Indian bustard. This extraordinary area gets partly inundated by about



The great Indian bustards: The pride of the Thar.



#### Where to stay

Naliya Forest Guest House inside the Naliya Great Bustard Sanctuary is a value-for-money proposition. The simple yet comfortable accommodation costs ₹ 500 to ₹ 700 per night, on a twin-sharing basis.

#### Where to eat

Lots of small restaurants, serving Gujarati, Kutchi and Kathiyawadi vegetarian cuisine, dot Bhuj. Freshly-steamed vegetables with spices, pumpkin cooked in mustard paste, boiled spinach with pulses, to mention a few popular dishes, are served with millet (*bajra*) rotis cooked in an earthen oven at most roadside *dhabas*.

The food at the high-profile hotels is good for the gastronomically adventurous, who like greasy food.

Fresh, tropical fruits, including water-melons, papayas, tender coconuts, and pineapples, are available at the local market.

two feet of water in the monsoon months (July-September). Once below sea level, this area was raised by earth movements, which cut it off from the Gulf of Kutch, and was broken up by later earth movements into the flat, saline areas (where people can be seen making salt), and higher grounds with sandy, salt-free soil.

The bustard depends on the soft grass and thorny scrub of the higher ground area for its feed. The other wildlife to be found inside the Naliya Bustard Sanctuary include blue bulls, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats, and caracals.

#### How to get there

**By road:** Visitors travelling by road have to drive from Ahmedabad to Bhuj, which is approximately 330 kms. Naliya is 100 km from Bhuj. The non-stop drive from Bhuj to Naliya should not exceed two hours.

**By air:** The nearest airport to reach Naliya is at Bhuj. Bhuj is connected by direct flights from New Delhi and Mumbai.

**By train:** Bhuj is connected by trains from all over India. ■