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BNHS welcomes Rajasthan Government's decision to declare the Lesser Florican Conservation Reserve in Ajmer

PRESS RELEASE

Ajmer (11/04/2023):BNHS, a premier NGO working for research and conservation of bird species welcomes the decision of Rajasthan Government to declare the Lesser Florican Conservation Reserve in Ajmer district of Rajasthan. The Government have issued a notification yesterday on 10th April 2023 to declare a conservation reserve on 931 ha grassland in Ajmer district. The bird is only found in India and as per the estimation only less than 700 mature individual birds are left in India and it is on the verge of extinction.

Lesser Florican is the smallest bird of the bustard family which was formerly a common game bird of Indian grasslands. But now with a global population of 250-300 males confined in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan with an IUCN status of CR (Critically Endangered). The Ajmer landscape of Rajasthan is one of the last remaining breeding grounds where it is surviving in a human-dominated landscape.

Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) started working with the Rajasthan Forest Department on its conservation project in 2017. BNHS scientist and their teams collected data regarding its status, distribution, behavior, habitat, etc. in Rajasthan with the help of local communities and the forest department. "Our teams identified 26 sites (73 locations) spread across 50 villages in the Ajmer district and recorded many important observations on its strong site fidelity; its movements in the grasslands and croplands before settling down in its breeding site', said scientist Dr. Sujit Narwade, Asst. Director of BNHS and project head working in Rajasthan and other parts of India. The data and observations recorded by BNHS now helping Rajasthan Forest Department to take policy decisions to save this species from extinction.

Change from traditional crops like Jowar, Moong, and Urad growing up to a height of 50-100 cm to irrigated cash crops and the use of heavy machines and music systems on tractors seems to be affecting the birds in this landscape, Dr.Sujit Narwade mentioned further. An increase in free-ranging dogs, land use changes, chemical spray, uncontrolled tourism, and unavailability of grasslands was recorded as threats to be addressed immediately.

Except for a few reserve forests, there are no Protected Areas in the Ajmer landscape for the conservation of floricans. Hence BNHS had suggested a landscape where Lesser Florican Community Conserved Areas (LFCCAs) could be notified to save the grassland habitat for the bird by sensitizing locals. As Government issued the notification, the conservation efforts will be expedited now, said Kishor Rithe, Honorary Secretary and Interim Director of BNHS. This will

be the first designated area with protection planning for Lesser Floricans in Rajasthan and may lay a path to designate more such community conservation reserves, Rithe stated further.

BNHS has started a community sensitization program from February 2020 called Kisan Chaupal (phrase in Hindi meaning 'a meeting of farmers') to enable the discussions on the conservation of Lesser Florican jointly by the Forest Department, State Biodiversity Board of Rajasthan.

Lesser Florican mainly breeds in the North-west part of India in monsoon and spends winter in the Deccan plateau. Therefore, the participation of locals is essential for the survival of the species which requires mosaics of the grasslands and crop fields. Interstate and interdepartmental coordination are the key to save the species from extinction.

It is to be noted that the NGT, Bhopal had given a judgment dated 3 March 2020 to stop the mining in Lesser Florican areas, identify and declare community/conservation reserves for GIB and LF immediately. Through a series of meetings with local villagers and follow-up by forest officers finally an area of **893 ha.** near **Arward, Kheeriya and Goyla** have been decided to be declared as **Lesser Florican Conservation Reserve** by Ajmer Forest Division.

Though it is full of *Prosopis juliflora*, the forest department has started removing the dense plantation under habitat restoration work. Sightings of male Lesser Florican increased in the adjoining areas in last 3 years. In March 2021, the Forest department also fenced part of this area to minimise the grazing pressure in this already degraded grassland under the supervision of BNHS. It should be further noted that previously the area was under the jurisdiction of Ajmer Forest Division but recently a separate wildlife range has been created to look after this matter properly by Jaipur Forest Division & Pushkar Range of Wildlife.

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