

Display by Macqueen's Bustard in Little Rann of Kachchh

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The Macqueen's Bustard (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*), also known as the Asian Houbara, is a small to mid-sized bustard, and categorized as a 'Vulnerable' species (BirdLife International 2017). Three subspecies of the Houbara Bustard were recognized earlier: *C. u. undulata*, the nominate subspecies found in North Africa; *C. u. fuertaventure*, the Canarian Houbara, and *C. u. macqueenii* or the Macqueen's Bustard, from Central Asia and the Middle East, which is now considered as a separate species. The Macqueen's Bustard is an uncommon winter visitor in Gujarat, mainly seen in the Little – and Greater Rann of Kachchh, with isolated records from Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016).

On 18 October 2015, at around 09:00 hrs, we were birding in the eastern part of the Little Rann of Kachchh. Our guide took us to an area in the Rann with scattered shrubs and grassland near Kharaghoda (23° 13' N, 71° 39' E), where the Macqueen's Bustard is known to occur. After we reached there, we waited for it. After waiting for some 15-20 minutes in our car, the bustard appeared from the bushes, though

it was a little hesitant. It cautiously approached closer and after some time, it started displaying some unusual behaviour. It started opening up its tail feathers like a fan and ducking its head into the body while doing this. We observed this behaviour and took many photos. We did not see any other individual(s) in its vicinity.



It is possible that this type of a display could be a threat display. This individual may have felt threatened by our presence and thus given this display, but this is just conjecture. In a study of different types of behaviours of the Macqueen's Bustard, such tail fanning is seen in 'threatening', and is usually directed towards members of the same or opposite sex, or is a 'predator defence display' (Launay & Paillat 1990). Here, it is more probable that it was a predator defence display. In images of the Macqueen's Bustard posted on the popular website orientalbirdimages.org, three images show the male displaying (Devasar 2006, Mistry 2008, and Bhatt 2010), by erecting the neck feathers and fluffing up its body feathers. However, the tail is not fanned in these images, which is different from what we saw. While it is well known that the Macqueen's Bustard has a spectacular courtship display (BirdLife International 2017), it is unlikely that the display by these birds here could be a courtship display. Very little is known about the behaviour of this species during its wintering in India, and it is more likely that these are threat displays. Behavioural study of this species in the winter will help in its conservation.

References

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