



BACKGROUNDERS
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Rewilding the Great Indian Bustard - A 'Jumpstart'

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A Moment at Sam Sand Dunes

After nearly a decade of conservation breeding, the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) conservation programme has entered a new phase. In October 2026, **four male GIBs were released** into the wild at Desert National Park near Sam village in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. These **birds are among 10 GIBs earmarked for release** from conservation-breeding facilities at **Sam and Ramdevra**.

Historically distributed across the western half of India, the GIB has suffered a severe decline. The Wildlife Institute of India's 2016–17 annual progress report recorded a 75% decline in the population over the preceding 30 years. Habitat loss and human-induced pressures contributed to this decline, while the bird's slow reproductive rate complicates recovery. The risk of extinction, compounded by habitat loss and human-induced mortality, underscored the need to establish a captive population to support the species' recovery in the wild.

GIB RECLAIMS RAJASTHAN'S DESERTS



Release of male GIBs



In flight after release

Source: MoEFCC

The release marks an important transition from building a viable captive population to rewilding and strengthening the species in its natural habitat. Learnings from these releases will help progressively refine protocols for subsequent releases. This approach represents an important step in India's efforts to strengthen

the wild population of the Great Indian Bustard, a Critically Endangered species facing high risk of extinction in the wild.

Building a Conservation-Breeding Population

Releasing a bird into the wild begins long before it reaches the open grasslands. For the Great Indian Bustard, an early priority was to build a captive population that could eventually support the species' recovery in the wild.

The conservation-breeding programme was sanctioned in 2016 with an outlay of Rs.33.85 crore for five years. Its achievements include establishing conservation-breeding facilities at Sam and Ramdevra in Jaisalmer, securing part of the founder population, commencing captive breeding, advancing ecological research through surveys and telemetry, and using this information to guide habitat improvement.

The programme reached a major milestone in March 2023, when the first captive-bred Great Indian Bustard chick hatched at the Sam Conservation Breeding Centre.

In December 2024, **National CAMPA further approved ₹77.05 crore for a five-year Conservation Action Plan covering the Great Indian Bustard and Lesser Florican.** The plan provides for population surveys, development and implementation of artificial insemination techniques, habitat improvement and protection from predators. It also includes community participation, conservation awareness, telemetry and tracking of wild populations.

By October 2026, the two facilities housed **96 birds, including 40 originated from wild-origin eggs and 56 bred in captivity.** Of these, **86 birds are being maintained for captive reproduction**, while **10 have been earmarked** for release into the wild.

Captive reproduction has also gathered pace, with 24 live chicks produced in 2025 and **another 29 in 2026.** The growing captive population also created opportunities to support GIB conservation beyond the breeding centres.



Bridging Captive Breeding and the Wild

Building a captive population was only one part of the challenge. The larger goal was to ensure that conservation breeding could also help strengthen GIB populations in the wild.

One of the most innovative attempts was tried in Gujarat, where the situation was particularly difficult. Only three female Great Indian Bustards remained in the wild in Kutch, with no surviving males to produce a fertile egg. The conservation effort therefore turned to a different possibility: using an egg from the captive-breeding programme to bring a new chick into a wild population.

A viable egg from the conservation-breeding centre at Sam in Rajasthan was transported 770 km to Naliya,

Gujarat, in a portable incubator. After a journey of more than 19 hours, it was placed in the nest of a wild female GIB.

The female accepted the egg and completed its incubation. Four days later, the chick hatched. The field team subsequently observed the chick being raised by its foster mother in its natural habitat.

This “**Jumpstart Approach**” has resulted in **six chicks in Rajasthan and two in Gujarat**. It demonstrated how captive breeding could be used not only to build a population in conservation centres, but also to support GIBs living in the wild.

From Captivity to the Wild

Releasing captive-bred birds into the wild also meant preparing them for life outside the breeding centres. At Ramdevra, a dedicated **Rewilding Aviary has been established** to prepare captive-bred Great Indian Bustards (GIBs) for life in the wild. It is a large, pillar-less structure measuring 160 metres in length, 64 metres in width and 14 metres in height. It **provides unobstructed flight space for the birds** to develop their flight muscles, adapt to natural conditions and exhibit natural behaviour.

Successful reintroduction also depends on suitable habitat beyond the breeding centres. Around **200 square kilometres of fenced grassland enclosures** have been established within Desert National Park. Long-term telemetry studies by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) identified these areas as prime breeding habitats for the species.

A **soft-release facility** supports the transition from captivity to the wild by allowing selected birds to acclimatise gradually before release. The release process was carefully controlled, with limited human presence at the site to minimise disturbance to the birds. A GIB Soft Release Centre has also been developed near Naliya in Gujarat. Its infrastructure supports conservation, monitoring and the birds’ gradual adaptation to the natural environment.

With the birds conditioned for life beyond captivity and suitable habitat identified for their return, the conservation-breeding programme had reached the point where its birds could begin going into the wild.

A New Phase in GIB Conservation

The release of captive-bred Great Indian Bustards to the wild marks a change in the conservation effort. What began with securing the species through conservation breeding has now moved towards restoring a viable wild population.

The release also opens the way for learning from birds in the wild and refining the approach for those that follow. In that sense, rewilding is not the end of the breeding programme, but its next purpose: turning years of careful research, captive reproduction, preparation and field conservation into a pathway for strengthening the Great Indian Bustard population in the wild.

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