

Our Diminishing Heritage

THE AUSTRALIAN BUSTARD (Wild Turkey) has vanished from most of the agricultural lands of the South West.

Like his overseas relatives the shy and wary Australian Bustard has been driven from his breeding areas by the spread of agriculture. His numbers have also been reduced by a considerable amount of illicit shooting which takes place every year.

Although fully protected by law for more than 30 years, this splendid bird is still found on the table as an occasional Sunday dish.

The unfortunate Bustard has many enemies including foxes and Wedge-tailed Eagles which attack and kill the young. Crows and ravens are known to take eggs. Man, however, is by far his worst enemy.

Despite the fact that it is an extremely timorous bird, and is difficult to approach on foot, the shooter may get within point-blank range from a car with disastrous consequences for the Bustard.

Evidence from other countries shows conclusively that these species are unable to withstand shooting pressure. The Great Bustard which used to live in Britain, ceased to breed about 1830 in the face of excessive hunting. Overhunting has also reduced their range in India and Africa, and in Western Europe, the bird is almost non-existent.

A similar situation exists in Australia where the species is believed to be extinct in Victoria and is rare in New South Wales and South Australia.

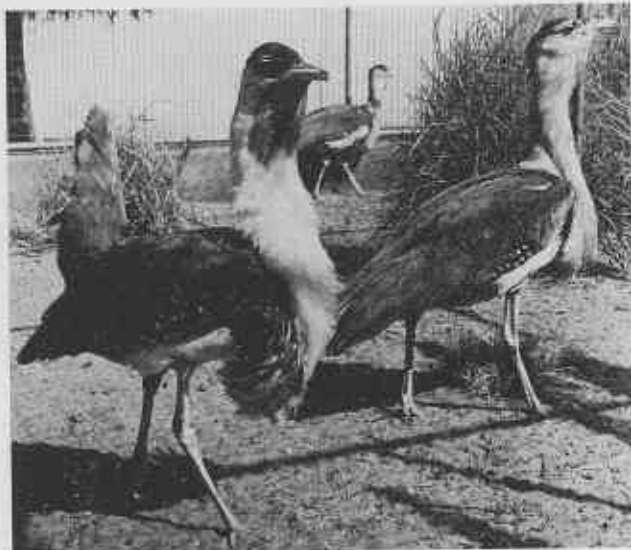


Photo by courtesy of "Sunday Times"

Another contributing factor in the world-wide decline in the Bustard's numbers is its slow rate of breeding. Females do not lay eggs until about four years of age and the male is not sexually mature until six or seven.

The nesting season of the Bustard is from July to November; the female lays one egg (sometimes two) on bare ground usually close to low scrub. The egg is light olive-green, marked with irregular blotches and streaks of olive-brown.

When first hatched the young are covered with mottled brown and black down and they leave the egg-site soon after hatching.

When protection of the Bustard was first sought, one of the prime considerations was its value as an insect suppressor. According to "Birds of Western Australia" (Serventy and Whittell, 1967) the food of the Bustard is mainly grasses, seeds and fruits of native plants, varied with mice, crickets, beetles and grasshoppers. The crop of one bird examined contained 150 caterpillars, 60 ground weevils (50 of which were an inch in length) and 35 millipedes.

Apart from being a big eater the Australian Bustard is one of the largest terrestrial flying birds in the world. Males are 43-45 inches in length with a 6 ft. 3 in. to 7 ft. wing span; the female averages 30-33 inches in length with a wing span of 5 ft. 5 in. to 5 ft. 9 in. Males range from 14 to 18 pounds in weight, and are occasionally heavier—the heaviest known being a Victorian bird which weighed in at 32 lb! Females normally weigh 10 to 14 pounds.

The Bustard's tail, back and wings are dark brown with light brown markings. On the wing coverts there is a black patch patterned with white. The crown of the head and crest-like nape feathers are black. The abdomen is white and the legs are yellowish or cream coloured.

In recent times mining development has opened the back country making the breeding areas of the Bustard more accessible to shooters. Reports from Honorary Wardens and other sources indicate that this bird is being hunted near mining centres in the North West. The inevitable result of this illegal activity will be the reduction of their range even further until only isolated populations struggle for survival.

While maximum publicity and legislation (a fine of up to \$400) are directed towards the protection of these magnificent birds, little else may be done to improve their perilous state without a complete change of attitude among some sections of our community.

AUSTRALIAN BUSTARD

Eupodotis australis



Photo by courtesy of "Sunday Times"

DISTRIBUTION:

Nomadic birds likely to be found all over the State in open country, particularly in areas where recent rains have fallen and insect populations are high.

Now rare in the South-West of W.A.

LOOKS:

Wing, tail and back—dark brown with light brown markings.

Crown of head and crest-like nape feathers—black.

Foreneck—greyish-white.

Abdomen—White.

Iris—white.

Beak—dull-white to brown.

Legs—Yellowish or cream-coloured.

WING SPAN:

Male—6 ft. 3 in. to 7 ft.

Female—5 ft. 5 in. to 5 ft. 9in.

LENGTH:

Male—43 to 45 inches.

Female—30 to 33 inches.

WEIGHT:

Male—14 to 18 lb. (occasionally heavier).

Female—10 to 14 lb.

NESTING:

Nesting season from July to November. Female lays 1 egg on bare ground usually close to low scrub. Egg measures 75-81 x 52-55 mm and is light olive-brown. When first hatched the young are covered with mottled brown and black down and they leave the egg-site soon after hatching.

DIET:

Consists mainly of grass, seeds, and the fruits of native plants. The diet is varied with crickets, beetles, grasshoppers, mice and sometimes young birds.