

THE GREAT BUSTARD (*OTIS TARDA* LINNAEUS, 1758) SIGNALLED IN BRĂILA COUNTY AFTER 1950

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ABSTRACT. The Great Bustard was permanently seen in the North Bărăgan Plain until the 1960s, afterwards being found occasionally only in a few places. The harsh winter of 1953-1954 and the intensification of agriculture led to the decline and the extinction of the species.

Key words: Great Bustard, Brăila County, Romania.

REZUMAT. Semnalări ale dropiei (*Otis tarda* Linnaeus, 1758) în județul Brăila după 1950. Prezența dropiei în fauna Câmpiei Bărăganului Nordic a fost continuă până în anii '60 ai secolului trecut, după care s-a observat ocazional, în câteva locuri. Iarna grea din 1953-1954 și intensificarea agriculturii au determinat declinul și extincția populației speciei.

Cuvinte cheie: dropie, județul Brăila, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Bustard (*Otis tarda* Linnaeus, 1758) is the most robust bird in Romania's fauna. Until mid-20th century, it used to live in certain Romanian Plain areas, one of them being Brăila County. In the 1950-1960s strong human pressure made it disappear from the study-area. However, a few specimens, migrating from other regions, could still be seen in some places of this County.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The data have been collected in a survey among hunters and locals, as well as from the archives of some forestry and cynegetic institutions.

PRESENCE OF THE SPECIES

Brăila County (4,766 km²) is situated in the south-east of Romania; its territory encompasses sub-units of the Romanian Plain (60%) and floodplains (40%).

The Bărăgan Plain has two units: Brăila Bărăgan in the north and Ialomița Bărăgan in the south, the two being separated by the Călmățui Valley. In the past, its fauna also includes the Great Bustard, called also „the Bărăgan Metropolit”.

In 1951, flock of ten birds each could be seen near the northern boundary of the County, in the fields of three villages: Romanu, Găvani and Scorțaru Nou.

As far as 1952, flocks of 10-15 birds were observed in the fields around Spiru Haret-Polizești-Bertești-Mihai Bravu settlements, that is, on the south-east edge of the County.

After the severe winter of 1953-1954 the population of this typically steppe bird fell drastically.

In 1955, Great Bustard effectives in Brăila County (at the time part of Galați Region) numbered some 60 specimens (Barbu, 1976), but only 35 remained in the spring of 1958 (Popescu & Scărlătescu, 1961).

A few individuals had been poached on glazed frost (January, 1962) close to the Însurăței Village. In 1965, five birds were still observed on the territory of Scorțaru Nou Village (about 20 km west of Brăila Town).

It should be mentioned that from 1956 to 1970 the Great Bustard disappeared from most of the area south of the Călmățui Valley, and from the fields extending north of the Ianca Lake; in other parts of the County they had already disappeared before 1956 (Iana, 1974) through poaching (especially on frosty days) and intense mechanisation and chimification of agriculture.

In 1964-1965 a few specimens still existed in the fields between Șuțești and Râmnicelu villages (in the west of Brăila County). Worth recalling are some stuffed birds seen at Camnița Forest challet in the Buzău Floodplain, a former property of Prince Șuțu, hunted near-by in the inter-war period.

In 1970, some individuals were noticed in the communes of Ulmu and Ciocile, as well as in the north of the Insula Mare a Brăilei (isle), south-east of Brăila Town.

A flock of 12 Great Bustard birds were observed in the summer of 1972 (after wheat had been threshed) near the Călmățui Floodplain, on the righthandside of the road connecting Viziru and Însurăței communes; the following year three more birds were detected close to Cireșu Village; four specimens were seen south of Ulmu Commune in 1995.

Finally, we mention a stuffed specimen acquired by the Brăila Museum Natural Sciences Section, on December 24, 1983: it had been hunted in the inter-war period on the Însurăței Commune territory. Biometric measurements show this individual to be 93 cm long in all, with a 5 cm long beak, 60 cm long wing and 21 cm long tail.

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