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Great Indian Hornbill’s Natural Habitat

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Great Indian Hornbill’s Natural Habitat

Four hornbill species share the Western Ghats. **Only one is India’s largest. It needs old, moist forest to feed and to nest.**



A Great Hornbill (Buceros bicornis) in flight. It is India’s largest hornbill. Photo by Lip Kee, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

At a Glance

Four facts to hold on to.

01
Habitat

Western Ghats, Himalayan foothills, parts of Northeast India.

02
Not found in

Sand deserts or salt marshes.

03
Needs

Old-growth moist forest.

04
IUCN status

Vulnerable.

Great Hornbill India's largest hornbill, with a yellow casque on its bill.
CasqueThe bulge on top of a hornbill's bill.
Keystone speciesA species whose loss changes the whole ecosystem.
Old-growth forest Forest with very old, large trees.

Where the Great Indian Hornbill Lives

Must Know

Western Ghats, and not a desert bird

- The Great Indian Hornbill lives in the **Western Ghats**.

- It also lives in the Himalayan foothills and parts of Northeast India.
- It does not live in the sand deserts of the northwest.
- It avoids the higher Himalayas and Gujarat's salt marshes.
- Sources: BirdLife International and Wildlife Institute of India.

India's largest, and forest dependent

- It is India's largest hornbill.
- It has black-and-white plumage and a large yellow casque.
- It needs moist, old-growth forest.
- Large fruiting trees give it food. Huge old trees give it nest holes.

> **Quick check 1.** The Great Indian Hornbill's natural habitat includes the sand deserts of northwest India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

The Western Ghats Hornbill Community

Good to Know

Four species, one range

- India has four hornbill species in the Western Ghats.
- They are the Great Hornbill, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Malabar Pied Hornbill and Indian Grey Hornbill.
- In the Anamalai-Parambikulam region, Great Hornbills persist mainly in medium and large rainforest fragments.
- Small isolated patches do not hold them.

Vulnerable

- The IUCN status is **Vulnerable**.

- This reflects its dependence on shrinking old-growth forest.
- Related reading: BirdLife International and Birds of India.

> **Quick check 2.** The Western Ghats hosts four hornbill species, including the Great Hornbill and Malabar Grey Hornbill. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Edge

Previous Year Questions

UPSC 2016 asked where the hornbill lives.

> **Quick check 3.** UPSC's 2016 question confirmed the Great Indian Hornbill is most likely found in the sand deserts of the northwest. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why It Needs Old Forest

Great to Know

A seed disperser, and a cavity nester

- Great Hornbills carry seeds of large-fruited trees over long distances.
- This makes them a **keystone species** for forest regeneration.
- They nest only in large tree cavities.
- Such cavities take decades to form.
- Logging old growth removes nest sites for generations.

Exam traps

- Habitat is the Western Ghats, not the northwest deserts.
- Status is Vulnerable, not Least Concern.
- Dense replanted forest is not the same as old growth.
- See also the Agasthyamala Biosphere Reserve in the Western Ghats.

Think it through: why can’t the hornbill simply move into replanted forest after old growth is logged?

Two needs depend on forest age. For food, it needs large fruiting trees that take decades to mature. For nesting, it needs big natural cavities that form as old trees age. A replanted forest has neither yet, however dense its canopy. So hornbills track old-growth fragments. Replanting does not solve the problem on any human timescale.

Quick check 4. Great Hornbills nest only in large tree cavities that take decades to form naturally. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 5. The Great Indian Hornbill's IUCN status is Least Concern, reflecting a stable population across its range. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick Q&A

Where does it live?

Western Ghats, among other places.

How many hornbills in the Western Ghats?

Four.

IUCN status?

Vulnerable.

Why a keystone species?

It disperses seeds of large-fruited trees.

Where does it nest?

Large old tree cavities.

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1. In which region of India is the Great Indian Hornbill most likely found in its natural habitat?

A. Higher Himalayas of Jammu and Kashmir

B. Salt marshes of western Gujarat

C. Western Ghats

D. Sand deserts of northwest India

See answer ↓

2. How many hornbill species are found in India's Western Ghats?

A. One

B. Six

C. Two

D. Four

See answer ↓

3. What kind of forest habitat does the Great Indian Hornbill depend on?

A. Dry scrubland with sparse tree cover

B. Grassland with scattered shrubs

C. Moist, old-growth forest with large fruiting and nesting trees

D. Young secondary forest under 20 years old

See answer ↓

4. What is the IUCN conservation status of the Great Indian Hornbill?

A. Vulnerable

B. Least Concern

C. Extinct in the Wild

D. Critically Endangered

See answer ↓

5. Why is the Great Hornbill considered a keystone species for forest regeneration?

A. It disperses seeds of large-fruited trees over long distances

B. It preys on all major forest pests

C. It pollinates every tree species in its range

D. It fixes nitrogen in forest soil

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The Great Indian Hornbill is found in the Western Ghats, along with the Himalayan foothills and parts of Northeast India. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** India has four hornbill species in the Western Ghats: the Great Hornbill, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Malabar Pied Hornbill, and Indian Grey Hornbill. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** Great Hornbills need moist, old-growth forest, with large fruiting trees for food and huge old trees for nesting. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The Great Indian Hornbill carries an IUCN status of Vulnerable, reflecting its dependence on shrinking old-growth forest. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Great Hornbills disperse seeds of large-fruited forest trees over long distances, making them a keystone species for forest regeneration. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **True.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5

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