HABITAT

Little Rann of Kutch: Salt, Sea and Survival in a Magical Habitat

Journeying through the Little Rann, where salt lakes gulmar on mudflats mirages, and an ancient ecology fights against the myth of the "wasteland"

Text: Mr. Jaideepsinh Jayesh Jadeja and Jaideepsinh Jadeja

Updated: April 24, 2026

Print Read

Listen to this article • 06:24 min

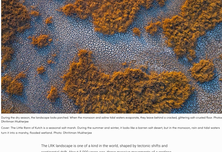
On the evening of 3rd, just 1000, the first full moon of the new year (also called the wolf moon of 2026) appeared larger and brighter as it reached its closest point to Earth. The moonlight on a cool, endless, and salt desert slowly turned it from its initial red to a silver grace. As the wind in the desert grew cold, a stunning celestial event unfolded, and we heard the faint of wolves howling on a dark, moonlit night.

Mirages and Celestial Wonder

In the Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) in Kachchh, with an expanse of 5,000 sq km, both terrestrial and celestial events are magnified. The orange sun rises from the edge of a mashy desert, and the sky turns into a canvas of shimmering mirages and ever-changing colors, while the salt flats act as a giant mirror, reflecting the sky and creating a surreal landscape. Yet, the shimmering mirages are not the greatest miracle, such as the Raann wild ass, locally known as ghudkhar, a full-time resident of LRK, seem to gallop on the mirages water in a surreal way. Stars, shimming colors of the Milky Way, varied constellations, and meteor showers crowning the nights.

Driving the dry plains, the landscape turns another. What the tourists and other field visitors experience, the Raann wild ass (left) is a crucial gathering spot (Lower Photo: Photo Credit: Jaideepsinh Jadeja)

Cover: The Little Rann of Kutch is a seasonal salt marsh. During the summer and winter, it looks like a barren salt desert, but in the monsoon, rain and tidal waters turn it into a nesting, flooded wetland. Photo: Dhirenver Khakhariya

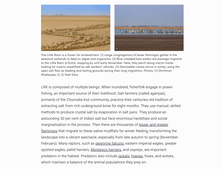


The LRK landscape is one of a kind in the world, shaped by tectonic shifts and continental drift. About 5,000 years ago, these massive movements of a restless earth raised the land surface, leaving this shallow, extended land almost completely cut off from the Arabian Sea. Water, such as the tides, deposited massive amounts of salt, creating a unique ecosystem. Although it looks like a barren desert, this seemingly harsh landscape is home to thousands of species of birds from the sky, which orbiters, through a narrow creek. On a recent two-day trip, we glimpsed just how unique LRK is.

On our first day trip, we were puzzled to see a boat stranded in the middle of the desert. Our tourist told us that during the monsoons, the entire area is inundated with about a metre of water, a mix of seawater from the Gulf of Kachchh, freshwater from inland, and rainfall.

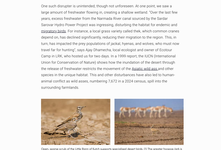
Elevated Islands of an Ancient Sea

While LRK seems like an endless expanse of land, there are dots of elevated land, essentially, little scrub-covered plateaus (locally called bets) of rock sediment, that have survived the ancient sea. These bets are home to Indian Wild Ass, Chinkara, mongoose, Asiatic Asiatic Wolf, Desert Fox, and other mammals. Apart from being central to the wild animals here, these plateaus are a lesson in earth movement and geology, and hold a wealth of information on fossils and deposits spanning different geological periods. At recent set, we were humbled to realise that our sense of time, measured in minutes, years, centuries, becomes immaculate when viewed from the perspective of these rocks, fossils, seabed sediments, drifting tectonic plates, that hold deep time. They are alive and moving even if they seem still to the human eye and experience.



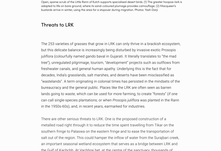
The Little Rann is known for ecotourism. (1) Large congregations of lesser flamingos gather in the seasonal wetlands to feed on algae and organisms. (2) Blue-cheeked bee-eaters are a passage migrant to the Little Rann of Kutch, stopping by until early November. Here, they perch along Harish Nala, hawking for insects. (3) Rosy pastor, a winter visitor, forages in the tamarisk scrub and feeds on ripe seed pods for keeping and storing plant-eating mainly during their long migrations. Photos: (1) Dhirenver Khakhariya, (2, 3) Nehil Dhruv

LRK is composed of multiple biomes. When inundated, fisherfolk engage in prawn fishing, an important source of their livelihood. Salt farmers (called agariyas), primarily of the Charaniya Kolí community, practice their centuries-old tradition of extracting salt from rich underground brine for eight months. They use manual, skilled methods to produce crystal salt by evaporation in salt pans. They produce an astounding 30 per cent of Indian salt but face enormous hardships and social marginalisation in the process. There then are thousands of Agaryi and Andaar Banniyas that migrate to these saline mudflats for winter fielding, transforming the landscape into temporary settlements. Although the Little Rann is a Ramsar site (since February), Many agariyas, such as agaryiya Sabaya, western migrant eagles, greater spotted eagles, pallid harriers, Montagu's harriers, and cranes, are important predators in the habitat. Predators also include Indian foxes, foxes, and wolves, which maintain a balance of the animal populations they prey on.



Hallmarks of the Little Rann of Kutch: Lesser congregations of migratory waterbirds in the center. (1) Black-petticoat gamber or large finch, feeding conspicuously on fish. (2) Lesser spoonbills sweep their bills in shallow water to feed on small fish. (3) Pallid harriers, a winter visitor, circumnavigate their roosts. Mid-day is their most active time. Photos: (1) Nehil Dhruv, (2, 3) Dhirenver Khakhariya

Over 30 mammal species and 350 bird species have been recorded in LRK. So important are the ecological and ecological and wildlife attributes that it was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1973 and is part of the Kachchh Biosphere Reserve. But this designation has not fully saved it from various kinds of ecological damage. "In LRK, the ecosystem has been severely impacted by various factors, including overgrazing caused by intermittent from industrial, unbridled construction, excessive tourism, excessive fishing and salt farming, among others", says Dr Arun Mani Dixit, formerly with the Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology, who has done extensive work on LRK's ecology.



Open, pelagic scrub of the Little Rann of Kutch supports specialised desert birds. (1) The greater hoopoe lark is adapted to the arid ground, where its short-legged gait provides concealed. (2) Pharaoh's bunting arrives in winter, using the area for a stopover during migration. Photos: Nehil Dhruv

Threats to LRK

The 250 varieties of grasses that grow in LRK can only thrive in a brackish ecosystem, but this delicate balance is increasingly being disturbed by invasive exotic Prosopis juliflora (colloquially named gando bawal in Gujarat. It literally translates to "the mad tree"), unequivocally prickly, tourism, "development" projects such as surfaces from freshwater canals, and general human apathy. Underlying this is the fact that for decades, India's grasslands, salt marshes, and deserts have been mischaracterised as "wastelands," a term originating in colonial times has penetrated in the minds of the human and has been reflected in policy. Dr Dixit says, "Grasslands are been bulldozed to make way for plantations, or used for more farming, or simply "forested" (if we can call monoculture plantations), or when Prosopis juliflora was planted in the Rann in the 1970s-1980s, and in recent years, warmarked for industries.

There are other serious threats to LRK. One is the proposed construction of a metalled road right through it to reduce the time spent travelling from Tikar on the southern fringe to Pakaana on the eastern fringe and to ease the transportation of salt out of the region. This could hamper the inflow of water from the Sundiari creek, an important seasonal wetland ecosystem that serves as a bridge between LRK and the Gulf of Kachchh. At Vachhing bet, at the centre of the sanctuary, thousands of Prosopis juliflora trees have been felled for a proposed tourism project. This deliberate promotion has resulted in hundreds of vehicles racing through the desert to disgorge thousands of devotees there. Usually, tourists entering the sanctuary for birding, photography, and wildlife viewing must pay a fee to the Forest Department, but pilgrims don't. The easy access without any monitoring has led to tonnes of garbage, vehicles zipping through the habitat, pollution, disturbance to wildlife, and overgrazing of the sparse grass on the bet by cows owned by the temple. "A couple of years ago, when I took photographers for an expedition, it was not so difficult to sight the Wild Asses (wahna) here, but now it is rarely seen," added Ajay, lamenting the dramatic changes that have occurred in a short time.

Raptors are a prominent presence in the Little Rann. (1) Eastern imperial eagles have been sighted infrequently. (2) Pallid harriers are the Rann's common overhead and have been observed for feeding. Mid-day is their most active time. (3) Long-legged buzzard (Pernis ptilorhynchus) flying in search for prey. Photos: Nehil Dhruv

Ajay runs Eicotour Camp at Jogadi village, encouraging tourism with ecological sensitivity. The camp has five comfortable traditional-style "bunga" huts, and the food is delicious traditional Gujarati fare. Ajay's father, Deepsinhe Dharmesha, is legendary for his efforts to promote LRK's ecology and culture and to protest it from disruptive activities, including a proposed car rally through the Rann.

It was 2:30 p.m., the sun was high and sharp, though gentle winds gave us some respite. We stood there mesmerised watching the tortoises mate and with squatters lesser and greater flamingos. It was the largest congregation we had ever seen. Like one being, thousands of them flew together painting the sky pink. Through binoculars, we watched them attentively, gracefully pumping water in and out with their tongues, cleaning out food and filtrating this rather quiet landscape with their trunks, clucks, grunts, and groans. This shape-shifting entity, acting as a single organism, offered us a strange anchor point in this otherwise restless world.

The Eagle, second from left of the Rann is threatened by several developments, including Proposed Tata Chemicals and Exclusive SEZ of Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Limited (Adani SEZ). (2) Beyond the hoods through tractor tracks that lingered its terrain. (3) Greater flamingoes and great pewits forage in wetlands overshadowed by hoodoos. Photos: Nehil Dhruv

Home of the Asiatic Wild Ass

Driving back from this spot, as the sun burned its way down to the horizon, we couldn't help but murmur a silent prayer for all astonishing beings who inhabit this landscape. As we approached a herd of Asiatic wild asses, staring back at us with what seemed to be curiosity, we felt doubly blessed. These incredible, high-speed creatures, with sandy backs and grey coats, blend into the background of the salt desert and marsh. Their slender legs and curled tails seemed to echo something divine in the vast, stark landscape they inhabit. As they started trotting away from us, we enjoyed the moment of looking at these animals living in a landscape that feels ancient and timeless. The Asiatic wild ass, with its distinctive black stripe along its back, with bases tube edge under Prosopis juliflora, with waves glowed unfettered by our presence, and we all witnessed the sun set and the moon and Jupiter rise. In that twilight moment, all of us breathed, witnessed, heard, and absorbed the magic that is LRK.

About the Authors

JAIDEEPSIN JADEJA

A researcher, writer, school working at the intersections of environmental justice, more than human governance and ecological restoration. Author of Kachchh Desert Wildlife, Mudja Tungari (Alternatives, Confluences), Global Tapestry of ...

ASHISH KOTHARI

is an Indian environmentalist and author. He has worked with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Global Tapestry of Alternatives. He is the co-editor of Alternative Futures, and Pluriverse.

Search Related Tags

Grasslands | Arid And Semi-Arid Grasslands | West | Gujarat | Little Rann Of Kutch | Rann Of Kutch | Kutch | Arid

© 2026 Roundglass