

El Jable – Endangered Biological Heritage of Lanzarote

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The Role of El Jable

The vast semi-desert Plain of El Jable on Lanzarote is bordered by the coast of the Atlantic in the North, the Risco between Famara and Teguisse in the East and the villages of Tiagua, El Cotillo and Sóo in the West and South. Characteristic of the Eastern Canaries, this fragile area provides a habitat for a series of highly endangered specialised animal and plant species, many of which are endemic to the Canary Islands, some among them only to be found on Lanzarote. The importance of El Jable from the biological point of view is comparable to the significance of Timanfaya National Park National Park for its geological value.

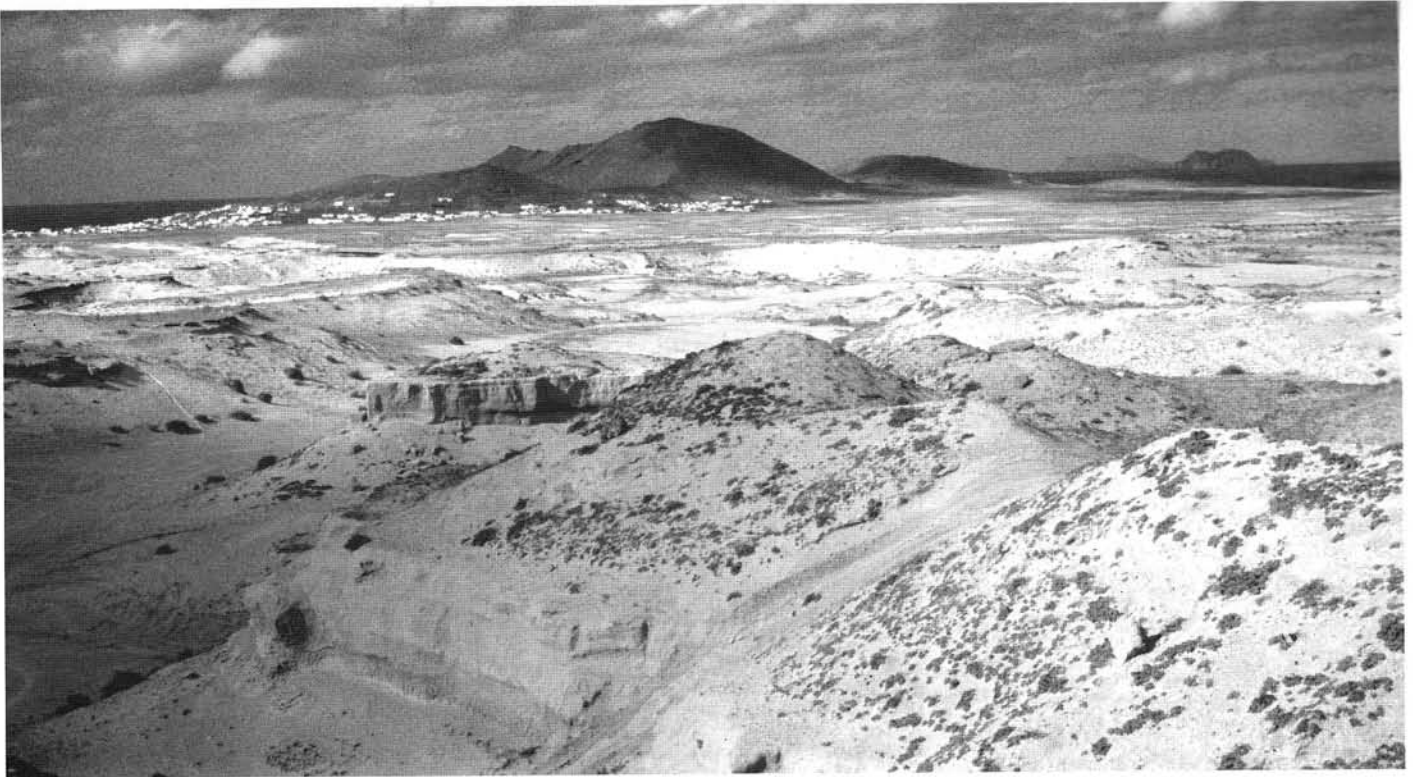
Although characterised by drought, El Jable, which owes its



The jable is an essential part of Lanzarote's ecosystem

The authors are calling for greater protection for the jable sandy soil area, home of many endangered species of flora and fauna





This shows the devastation of part of this area so vital for the preservation of the local environment

existence to the sea, rises out of the foam like the ancient goddess of Greece Aphrodite, until today. Smashed by the breakers of the Atlantic, the remnants of dark lava rocks and millions of shells of bivalves, snails, sea urchins, cuttle bones and crabs are washed on to the long shores of La Caleta de Famara and steadily blown by the trade winds into El Jable. Close to the coast, salt tolerant shrubs like *Traganum* (balancón) are trying to prevent the sand from wandering into the plain by forming small dune hills. They do not succeed, though, and the sand is moving further inland in part even by dunes shifting across the plain. Enormous masses of it have been transported in this manner for thousands of years as can be seen by layers 5 to 10m thick in the interior, far away from the coast.

Habitat of a Variety of Species

The harsh climatic characteristics animals and plants have to adapt to in this very fragile special habitat are lack of water,

“The importance of the biological value of El Jable is comparable to the significance of the geological value of Timanfaya National Park”

burning sun, little shelter and having to move underground due to wind-blown sand. In spring, the white flowers of the lily *Cebollín de Playa* (*Androcymbium psammophilum*), not to be found anywhere else in the world except for the plain of El Jable Plain and on Fuerteventura, blossom on top of the dunes. They lay flat on the surface to avoid damage through wind and sand. The string-like tracks of an endemic lizard species connecting different hiding places can be found everywhere.

Wherever there is shelter from the wind, ant lions build pitfalls to catch small insects. Darkling beetles avoid the heat during daytime by diving into the loose sand and thousands of snails close their shell openings to avoid drying up. Many of them may be found clinging to one single shrub,

waiting to feed at night. Everywhere grasshoppers are jump away, when birds or goats approach. Mysterious 2-3 cm large egg-like structures are scattered all over the ground. They are petrified remnants of breeding cells built by solitary bees extinct long ago.

Rare Birds

The surprisingly high numbers of animals – considering the harsh living conditions - supports the existence of some highly interesting bird species, most of them rare and endemic to Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. Shrikes, the metallic call of which is heard everywhere, and Kestrels sit on elevated stones or shrubs peering at prey. During springtime strange sounds can be heard at night. These are the





melodious mating calls of male stone-curlews made while flying over their breeding grounds. These birds are rarely seen during the day because they stop moving at once if anyone approaches. If lucky, one can detect a huge yellow eye peering at the observer to discover that it belongs to a medium sized well-camouflaged bird. In autumn, adults and juveniles gather in groups of up to 30 individuals. However, the most precious inhabitants of El Jable are the cream-coloured curser and the houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata fuertaventurae*). Both forms are endemic sub-species occurring only on Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. Although the houbara bustard is a large bird double the size of a hen, it is rarely discovered. Perfectly camouflaged by coloration and hiding away when approached it is usually only spotted at a great distance whilst already running or flying away.

Only in spring during pairing time are the males slightly less cautious. While performing their display run, they set up brilliant white collars formed by long feathers. El Jable is one of the two, and with respect to their number, the most important area, in which hubaras are still to be found on Lanzarote. Originally this bird also made its home on Gran Canaria and Tenerife before it became extinct there. The inhabitants and the authorities on Lanzarote have therefore a global



A rare variety of lily which protects its blossoms by lying flat on the surface of dunes to avoid damage from wind and sand



The Houbara Bustard is in danger of extinction, its only two remaining habitats are on Lanzarote and Fuerteventura

Grey Shrike



Stone Curlew



The hoopoe decorates the cover of Horst Wilken's book referred to below



"Important Bird Area"
(IBA) sign, ZEPA in Spanish

obligation to protect these birds and their habitat.

A Sea of Flowers

Whereas for most of the year, El Jable offers an extremely dry and desert-like impression, the visitor is entirely puzzled, when visiting this place in spring. At this time, after sufficient rainfall, the plain is completely covered by a gorgeously coloured sea of flowers stretching endlessly from horizon to horizon. Everywhere the sweet odour of the white flowers of

Heliotropium ramosissimum is in the air. Also animal life has become much more evident now. Large numbers of Lesser Short-toed Lark (*terrera marismena*) males flutter high above, humming their songs. Hidden in the vegetation, quails can be identified by their characteristic "pick-wick" calls. If not for the absence of large herds of mammals, one could imagine being in East African Serengeti at this time. Even the characteristic stone piles similar to the "kopjes" are present, formed here by black lava boulders.

Dune-Sand Culture

In harmony with nature, farmers are using parts of El Jable in a traditional manner. Especially close to the village of Sóo, they are still applying the *enarenado* dune-sand culture. It is the only place on Lanzarote where visitors can observe the sophisticated technique by which plants like the sweet potato, grain and melons can be grown in dry sand.

Lack of Adequate Protection
The biological value of El Jable is high. Its conservation status, however, is not equivalent to this significance. Indeed, comparatively small areas close to

the coast are integrated into the "Archipiélago Chinijo" Nature Park. In some zones hunting is forbidden (Zona de Reserva de Caza) and recently Important Bird Areas (ZEPA, IBA) have been claimed to protect the endangered bird species. Nonetheless, El Jable is being seriously damaged by people racing vehicles of all kinds over the terrain, especially motorbikes and quads. El Jable is also overgrazed by goats. By this, the food bases of the wild animals is drastically reduced and plant species, which do not tolerate grazing, are becoming extinct.

Above all, however, the devastation of large parts of the landscape by excavation of sand for house construction in the tourist urbanisations proceeds daily. The habitat of the rare *hubara bustard* and the cream-coloured curser is literally transported away by huge lorries, which additionally cause much disturbance. This is certainly not in accordance with the rules of the internationally protected World Biosphere Reserve, Lanzarote, in which most of El Jable is only a declared "transition area" the least-protected category. In order to save this unique biological heritage, the entire El Jable region should be robustly protected.

The author, Dr Horst Wilkens, Professor of Zoology at the University of Hamburg, has been conducting research, and published papers on, Lanzarote's biology and ecosystems since the 1970s. His knowledge of the fauna and flora of the island gathered over four decades is the basis for the nature guide he and his colleague Ulrike Strecker have published entitled *Lanzarote - Blind Crabs, Hoopoes and Volcanoes* available in the Souvenir Shops of the Cabildo Tourist Centres, Timanfaya Visitors Centre and at the Bookshop in Puerto del Carmen.