

The global Great Bustard conservation publication

# Otis

**GREAT  
BUSTARD  
GROUP**



Summer 2011



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*GBG Cycling Team is halfway there!*



**Bustards, Stone Curlews, Vultures & more**

*Bustard news from across the globe and  
some exciting GBG developments*

The magazine of the Great Bustard Group

Issue 36



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# Editor's note



## GREAT BUSTARD GROUP



The Great Bustard Group is the UK registered charity and membership organisation formed in 1998 to re-introduce the Great Bustard *Otis tarda* to the UK.

The GBG is actively involved in Great Bustard conservation and is working with other organisations, both nationally and internationally to save the world's heaviest flying bird.

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Hello and welcome to the Summer 2011 edition of Otis – and isn't it great to be able to put the words 'summer' and '2011' in the same sentence? Winter seemed to outstay its welcome this year and although this March was the driest on record it's taken until mid-April for the temperature to pick up and for the wildlife here in Wiltshire to really respond. However as I write I can hear Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs singing in my garden in the north of the county and down on Salisbury Plain the Corn Buntings and Skylarks are pouring their song over the grasslands. By the time this copy of Otis reaches you we'll have seen Stone-curlews, Swallows and Whitethroats back around the Project Site and the emergence of many of the butterfly species that thrive on the wild flowers here.

While we do keep an eye on all the wildlife in the local area, of course what all of us at the GBG will really be concentrating on is what's happening with our bustards. Ten years ago very few people indeed believed that Great Bustards would ever breed in the UK again, but we proved them wrong: in 2007 eggs were laid and in 2009 the first chicks hatched. Both were momentous events but with so much happening at the GBG and so many changes being made (from the award of the LIFE+ grant, to the launch of schools programmes, to the redesign of Otis and the GBG website) both seem somehow to have occurred far longer ago - but, no, it was just two summers back. And two summers, if I may be allowed to paraphrase a well-known aphorism concerning swallows, does not yet a breeding colony ensure! There is still a huge amount of work ahead to ensure that our birds – many of which are in effect teenagers

– come to think of the Plain as home. It's something we at the GBG are constantly aware of, and something we really hope our members understand. While the chicks of 2009/2010 undoubtedly marked a turning-point for the GBG, there is still a long way to go – hence our focus on fundraising (talking of a long way to go, how about cycling all the way to Saratov?), on membership retention and recruitment and strengthening our ties with project partners here in the UK and overseas (particularly with our friends and colleagues in Russia: as articles in this edition of Otis explain, there has been a very welcome flow of visits between the two countries).

We are always keen to hear your bustard-related stories and in this Otis you'll find two articles on seeing bustards outside the UK; one on Houbara Bustards on Fuerteventura, and another on Great Bustards in western Spain. Understandably though much of the focus for the next few months will be on Salisbury Plain and the Great Bustards here. And reading about what's happening is only half the story. How about coming down to see us and getting a deeper understanding of the project and seeing just how much the birds and the re-introduction project means to all of us who work for it? And if you do come, how about bringing along a friend who isn't a member, and allowing us a few minutes to prove to them just how worthy the GBG is of their support. As I said earlier in this note – and as all conservation organisations large and small know only too well – members are what empowers and gives life to a group and in the case of attracting new members to the GBG there can be little more inspiring than seeing tiny bustard chicks following their mother right here on Salisbury Plain. So, please enjoy your copy of Otis, thank you for your support, and hopefully we'll see you - and a friend - down our way in the next few months.

Charlie Moores

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## Summer Garden Party

The Great Bustard Group invites all to join them at their Summer Garden Party, to be held in the glorious gardens of the Wardrobe, The Regimental Museum of the Rifles (Wiltshire and Berkshire), in the Cathedral Close, Salisbury. Tickets for what will be a wonderful evening are available from the GBG, 1 Down Barn Close, Winterbourne Gunner, Salisbury, at a cost of £10 each. To reserve your ticket please email [enquiries@greatbustard.org](mailto:enquiries@greatbustard.org) or see our online page at [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org).



## Go Bustard!

The Warminster Community Trust are now well on the way to their goal of creating a drove of Great Bustard sculptures. These life-size creations can be sponsored and painted by anyone, from local schools to national companies. The swift progress of this project reflects the rising profile of the Great Bustard across the country and the GBG is keen to assist any such enterprise. To find out more about 'Go Bustard' visit [www.visionforwarminster.co.uk](http://www.visionforwarminster.co.uk)



## A wonderful Woodgreen film evening

The first day in April saw the annual Manuel Hinge film show hosted by the GBG at the Woodgreen village hall in the New Forest. Manuel has worked with the GBG for many years now, most notably producing the superb DVD on the project, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, an old colleague of Manuel's.

Our host presented six of his short films including an excellent look at Swifts and a fascinating insight into Woodcock, narrated by the GBG's own David Waters.

The GBG raised over £250 through the raffle and teas and coffees. Thanks to Karen Waters and the team serving refreshments.



*Manuel, usually to be found behind the camera, gave a thoroughly enjoyable and informative talk*

## Great Bustard genetics explored

Dr Paul O'Donoghue joined the bustard Project back in 2004 when he worked at Lackham College in Wiltshire. After a period of travelling and adventure Paul is now a senior lecturer at the University of Cheshire.

The GBG has kept blood samples of all the birds it has reared in the Diakovka Field Station since the first year (2004). Paul has secured the funding to study the genetic make up of these samples at the University. Great Bustard genetics are not well studied and this work will be a new and exciting advance in our understanding of the species. Once the work is completed there will be a detailed write up in Otis explaining the results.



*This study will be of great use to the GBG*

## A big thankyou to The Tintometer Ltd



GBG stalwart Len Tryhorn harrassed and harrangued his colleagues at the Amesbury based precision engineering company The Tintometer Limited in his unrelenting fundraising efforts. Len and the generous staff raised a whopping total of £2,100 which was presented to the GBG when David Waters visited the company. The money raised will be specifically used to assist with the rearing of chicks in Russia. The GBG is extremely grateful to all at The Tintometer Limited for their generosity and enthusiasm.

## Mystery Badge

David Waters found this badge for sale on the internet, attracted by the bustard theme. He has tried to research the "Royal Bustards" and the "William Tell Club", but cannot find anything. The badge, which he presumes to be Masonic, is marked on the back "RI Prov", which he takes to refer to Rhode Island Province, and this is supported by the fact he bought the badge from New York. The symbol of the bustard in America is an unusual one as there are no, and never have been bustards in the American continent.

Can anyone throw some light on the "Royal Bustards"? If so please call 01980 671466 or email enquiries@greatbustard.org



## The Pannonic bustard population



*Rainer Rabb is dedicated to the project*

David Waters, travelling with the film maker Manuel Hinge, was able to visit the Great Bustard Project in Austria in March. The conservation and restoration of this population has been remarkably successful although it does have a unique conservation challenge; the wintering flocks may only move a few hundred metres from one field to the next, and this could take them from Austria into Hungary or into Slovakia.

When spring comes a handful even go into the Czech Republic. All this means conservation and monitoring measures need to be agreed, coordinated and implemented in four countries, each with its own set of legislation, agricultural traditions and policies, and if that were not enough, each has its own language!

Despite all these potential problems the fortunes of the Great Bustard are very much on the up. One very symbolic sign of this is a spot where the borders of Austria, Hungary and Slovakia meet. The freezing weather and biting wind remind that the Iron Curtain that once stood here was a feature of the Cold War. A bit of the coiled barbed wire fence remains, but the prominent feature is a three sided information sign. The titles on each side say respectively " Grosse Trappe, Tuzok and Drop fuzaty. These are the names of the Great Bustard in German/Austrian, Hungarian and Slovak. It is a wonderful symbol of international progress that the wire and machine guns and all that went with them have been replaced by an international Great Bustard Project. The whole population is monitored and its conservation co-ordinated by Rainer Rabb, a towering and vastly energetic man totally committed to the Great Bustard. David and Manuel stayed with Rainer, an old friend of David's, and Manuel was able to get some excellent film footage of the Great Bustards while David and Rainer discussed bustard conservation. The party were also delighted to see Imperial and White Tailed Eagles.

## Cycling Teams 'meet' in Belarus

Our joint efforts to cover the mileage between Salisbury and Saratov twice on bicycles are making good progress. Setting off on his own, GBG Director David Waters is well over half way somewhere in Belarus. The team coming back the other way has accumulated enough miles to be over half way and somewhere in Poland. The team has had its mileage boosted by our great supporters, the children of Krasny Kut School No.1. It was too cold for them to be out on their bikes in the early spring (it was -30 degrees!), so undaunted, they carried

their bikes to school and cycled around the gym. We have now raised over £2, 000 and are still looking for more sponsorship to help us get a new Landrover for running the project visits. You can sponsor David or the team online at [www.justgiving.co.uk/gbg-team](http://www.justgiving.co.uk/gbg-team) or send a cheque to Cycling to Saratov, 1, Down Barn Close, Winterbourne Gunner, Wiltshire, SP4 6JP.





## Bustards, Bishops and Judges

One is compelled to ask, how are these unlikely combinations brought together? The answer is a fascinating church service held earlier in the year in Wiltshire to celebrate the Rule of Law. The service was organised by the High Sheriff of the County and was quite an event with the front pews occupied by senior judges sporting wigs and dressed resplendently in scarlet robes trimmed with ermine. Behind them two more rows of judges sat in their purple and black robes and alongside them were the Lord Lieutenant, High Sheriffs from neighbouring counties complete with plumed hats and swords, the Chief Constable and representatives from the Fire Brigade and Ambulance service. The congregation was addressed by the Bishop of Swindon who, with the GBG's stuffed Bustard 'Hercule' in front of him, declared that wonderful though the assembled splendour was, the "Great Bustard towered above them all". The

High Sheriff of Wiltshire at the time was Dame Elizabeth Neville DBE QPM. She was previously the Chief Constable of Wiltshire, being colleague and friend to GBG Director David Waters, at the time a police officer in the Wiltshire Constabulary. Her ceremonial hat is decorated with Great Bustard feathers (moulted from "Fergus" – one of the birds at the Hawk Conservancy Trust). The order of

service featured a very prominent Great Bustard, and the return of the Great Bustard was a central theme of the service under the banner of hope and regeneration. The Great Bustard has always had a special place in the culture of Wiltshire, and the profile of the bird is rising with the successes of the project.



*Dame Elizabeth Neville DBE QPM with Hercule*

## Continued support from Birdworld

Birdworld, the super bird park in Surrey has kindly presented the Great Bustard Group with a cheque for £860. The GBG has a display case at Birdworld with mounted antique Great Bustard specimens along with project information and a collection box. Birdworld staff run a recycling project and are able to sell the accumulated paper and other materials and share the proceeds with a small number of environment projects. The GBG is delighted to share in the generosity of Birdworld and will be holding a special day there in June. Please keep your eye on our website to find out the details. [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org).



## Project management

The LIFE+ project has brought significant new resources to the GBG. To match these we have developed a new management structure. The Great Bustard Consultative Committee (GBCC), which was set up as a condition of the original DEFRA licence to release the birds, has been disbanded. To replace this, in part at least, a Technical Working Group (TWG) has been set up. This group will look at specific aspects of the project and will consist of experts and those with relevant experience. The varied topics will attract different people, so the composition of the group will change. The first TWG was held in March and considered methods of protecting Great Bustard nests and chicks. The valuable presentations from GBG and project partners RSPB, Bath University and NE were matched by expert experience from delegates from Hungary and Russia. The group was chaired by Paul Goriup. A second TWG on the methods of marking and monitoring Great Bustards will take place in May.



## *With Project Site Manager, Al Dawes*

### *Things are hotting up at the Project Site*



Spring is certainly in the air here at the Project Site, with male Purple 5 displaying all day every day since mid March. Purple 5 will turn four years old this summer which is the age most often quoted for males to become fertile. Purple 5 has always been a big bird with a plumage that defies his young age making it feel like a long time that GBG staff have been waiting for him to grow up, as I'm sure it has for Purple 5 himself! But, is 2011 finally going to be his year? I certainly think he stands a good chance. To our eyes he looks to be in immaculate condition but his regular displays to two females which have been on site recently, Yellow 22 and Red 28, do not appear to have impressed them too much yet. Both of these females nested last year with Red 28, at the age of just two years, managing to hatch two chicks. There is still plenty of time for Purple 5 to impress these two experienced and discerning females and a visit to the Project Site is highly recommended to see his spectacular show.

Regarding our latest recruits, the "Pink" birds, which were released last autumn, we have had a rather disappointing survival. This is perhaps attributable to the prolonged hard winter that the juvenile birds had to cope with in the absence of their mothers. Getting older birds from previous releases to 'adopt' the newly released chicks each year is something that we know benefits

the chicks, principally by teaching them predator awareness, but a task which the old birds seem reluctant to take up. Some youngsters do somehow manage to get themselves in with the old birds and a flock of nine birds was present at the Project Site up until the snow fell in mid December.

Two birds, Yellow 22 and Pink 2 disappeared for a couple of weeks once the snow had fallen, but returned to the site on 8th January with an impressive fly-in, much to the delight of everyone attending the work party that day. A Red Kite that tuned up a few days later and took up residency at the site for a couple of months was fitted with wingtags, coincidentally made by the same person as the bustard wingtags. It was a two year old male which was hatched in mid-Wales. Red Kites are getting more common on Salisbury Plain so it was interesting to find out where some of these birds are coming from.

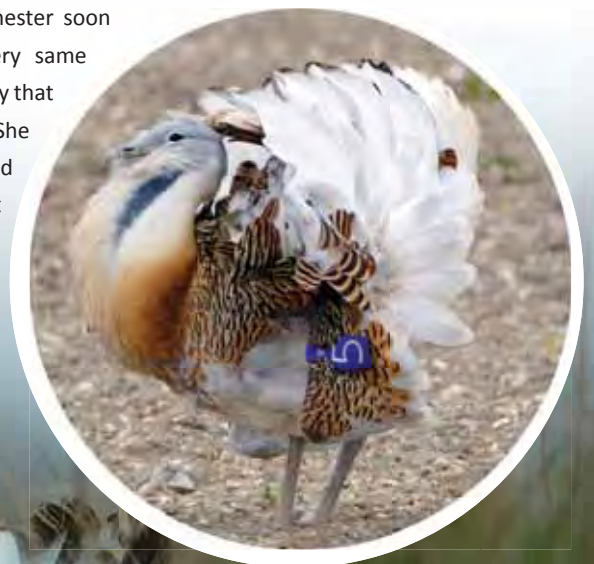
Red 28 and Purple 5 also left the site but were back in time for Christmas. Female Red 28 is by far our widest-ranging bustard having been as far afield as Chard Junction in Dorset and RSPB Otmoor reserve in Oxfordshire. True to form, she did not seem to think too much of making a tour of the south west over the Christmas period and had moved on by New Year to the south coast in Hampshire. She was seen briefly near Dorchester soon after and also revisited the very same fields in the Hampshire Avon valley that she spent the early part of 2010. She disappeared entirely from mid January until she arrived back at

the Project Site on 22nd of March. I wonder where, and just how far she travelled in between?

In early January, Orange 15 turned up on a private estate in the Avon valley, in another amazing coincidence. She was stood in exactly the same spot that male Yellow 07 visited in March 2007. She stayed here until March, although seemed to leave the estate for a couple of weeks in between. By the end of March, Orange 15 had relocated to her familiar spring and summer haunt near the Wylve Valley.

As always there has been a good supporting cast at the Project Site. A cold and foggy morning in February produced the first, and unusual, record of a Jack Snipe inside the bustard Pen. Merlin, Hen Harriers and the Red Kite were observed most days. With the turn to spring the first of the migrants arrived with Wheatears on the 14th March, followed by our faithful pair of Stone-curlews on the 25th making their sixth annual return to the bustard Pen.

To arrange a visit to the Project Site to see displaying male Great Bustards, Stone-curlews or any of the other wonderful birds of Salisbury Plain telephone 07817 971 327 or email [visits@greatbustard.org](mailto:visits@greatbustard.org)





## *The Great Bustards and their winter movements*

*Allan Goddard, GBG Farm Liaison*

### *Allan muses on the behaviour of the UK Great Bustards during the cold winter months.*

I have long wondered why the Great Bustards of the 2005 release, namely the 'yellow birds' as they were known, because of their yellow wingtags, headed in a south south westerly direction during the winter of 2005/2006. Some of them stopped for a period of time on my sister's farm near Puddletown in Dorset. Al Dawes, Project Site Manager said this was probably to do with the birds inbuilt reaction to the prevailing cold weather conditions at the time. The parents of our released birds are known to move in a south south westerly direction during the cold Russian winters.

Zoom forward five years to December 2010 when the temperatures were sub zero for several days in succession. Less than a week before Christmas the snows arrived, and the bird activity began.

I was due to travel to the Project Site from my home near Dorchester on the day that the biggest fall of snow happened. I therefore reconciled myself to the fact that I would not be visiting the Project Site until at least after Christmas, or even into the New Year.

However I need not have worried, as three of the birds decided that if I could not visit them for Christmas, they would come to see me. And so it was that, ever vigilant Visits Manager Lynne Derry emailed me on 24th December to say that she had been alerted to a Great Bustard sighting on 23rd December at Fleet, west of Weymouth in Dorset. This news was quickly followed up by a sighting of a different bird at Portland Bill, right on the very southern tip of Dorset.

I think one of the most significant things about where these two had decided to land is the temperature of south Dorset compared with where they had come from. The temperature was minus 8°C. The Ridgeway

leading down to Weymouth boasted a temperature of plus 6°C.

There would be plenty of food for the birds to eat at these balmy temperatures.

On New Year's Eve I travelled to Moonfleet to see male Pink 1 feeding on the tallest crop of oilseed rape I had seen that winter. But what of Pink 15, the bird from Portland Bill? The data showed that she had flown back from Portland and spent Christmas morning just outside a village near Weymouth called Sutton Poyntz. From there she had travelled in a westerly direction towards a village called Portesham. Still yet to meet up with Pink 1, Pink 15 spent New Years Eve on a hillside just outside the village. The subsequent GPS data shows that some time after midnight on New Years Eve, but before 6.00a.m. on New Years Day Pink 15 flew off and met up with Pink 1 at Moonfleet. How had she managed to seek out Pink 1?

All was well until one day a phone call to GBG alerted us to Pink 1 dead on the water's edge. Our vet John Chitty post mortemed the bird and said that the cause of death was a broken neck. Pink 1 had collided with something. We are not sure what, but there was a dead Mute Swan nearby and I suspect the two had collided. There are large numbers of swans on the Fleet from Abbotsbury Swannery, and I suspect that they are used to everything giving way to them. They had not realised that Great Bustards think the same way! This left female Pink 15 on her own and sadly with only one pair of eyes looking after her she was predated, presumably by a fox, a couple of weeks later. Lessons learnt? Time over again we wish we could uncover a patch of oilseed rape on the birds' favourite field. They may well have then decided to stay put in Wiltshire with their food source reinstated.



## Karen Waters

### GBG Financial Manager & Fergus' 'Mum'



Karen looks after Fergus & his pals at the UK's only Great Bustard aviary



### Lewis Cowen talks to Karen Waters, GBG Financial Manager and 'Mum' to the bustards at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Andover.

Although Karen Waters is the co-founder of the Great Bustard Group and still fulfils many voluntary functions, she has never been employed by the group. She also has another unpaid job, that of Financial Manager for the GBG. This entails running the GBG accounts, preparing full reports and accounts for auditing and then submission to the Charities commission, responsibility for the financial compliance of grants, including the GBG LIFE+ grant, paying invoices and staff wages.

She is always to be found manning the GBG stall at events throughout the county and beyond and is devoted to the birds held in benign captivity at the Hawk Conservancy Trust and in her own back garden in Winterbourne Gunner.

I well remember that balmy July evening in 2004 when we all waited at the Project Site on Salisbury Plain for the arrival of the first consignment of chicks from Saratov.

The small hire van with Karen at the wheel made its way along the rutted track from the farm. We held our breath as the historic moment arrived. But inside the van, Karen was holding her breath for another reason. She said: "The smell of bustard poo was beyond belief. I was so grateful to pull up and be able to open the door". My overwhelming memory, though, is the noise. The bustards made a high-pitched cooing sound and Karen told us that they had kept it up all the way from Heathrow Airport to Wiltshire.

Karen had a most unlikely life for a conservationist up to that point. Born in Hong Kong where her father was an accounts executive for a shipbuilding company, she came to the UK at the age of two and a half and spent most of her growing up at Bramley, near Guildford, Surrey.

She was educated at Guildford County School for Girls and was one of only two sixth formers not to go on to university. Instead, she worked as an accounts clerk for her father for two years until she was eligible to enter the Royal Navy, which she did on March 17th 1980.

As a meteorological observer she was posted to RAF Culdrose in Cornwall before transferring to Northwood in Middlesex. But by 1986 she had had enough of the landlocked naval life and left the navy to search for another career.

By this time her parents, Derek and Hilary Scott, had moved to Shrewton and Karen found herself a job as tourist administrator at the Wilton carpet factory. When the factory was taken over by Coates Viyella in 1990 the tours were wound up and Karen applied for a post on the enquiry desk at Salisbury police station.

This brought her into contact with one PC David Waters. The two got on like a house on fire, although Karen was a little puzzled by Dave's interest in an extinct bird with a somewhat rude name.

She said: "I knew he was interested in nature and as I was an outdoors person that was fine. I knew absolutely nothing about the Great Bustard but Dave educated me."

Dave told her of his plans to reintroduce the bird, hunted to extinction in Britain in the early 19th century.

Karen said: "I was worried about how we could do it with all our work commitments."



That was solved when Karen, tired of the "politics" of station life, left and Dave went part-time in the police force.

The huge effort in getting the Great Bustard Group off the ground and the tortuous progress through the labyrinth of official bureaucracy, both here and in Russia, is well documented elsewhere.

Karen puts the group's success down to Dave's determination and the selflessness of all those who have given their time and effort freely over the years.

Of Dave, whom she married on August 26 2004, she said: "He is always determined to do what he thinks is right. He hates bureaucracy and doesn't suffer fools gladly."

There were many hard times between the

euphoria of the first birds being released and last year's glad tidings of the LIFE+ grant award. When Dave finally resigned from the police force in 2004 Karen supported them, as well as raising the profile of the project with schools visits.

She said: "Hard work has never bothered me and I love the school visits. The kids are so full of enthusiasm for the bustard. Chirton School was amazing. The teacher had made a salt bustard on the floor and the children made feathers for it.

Karen currently manages sculptor Simon Gudgeon's accounts. She also does the same for vets Kate and John Chitty and teaches at St Edmund's Girls School in Laverstock.

As if that were not enough, a day would not be complete without a visit to Fergus, now

happily ensconced in the Great Bustard aviary at the Hawk Conservancy, near Andover.

Fergus was one of the original intake of birds in 2004, but sustained what the police would call a life-changing injury in the release pen. He would never fly again but instead has been the pin-up boy of the Great Bustard project.

He initially lived in Dave and Karen's back garden with the late lamented Jean Claude but is now star of the show at the Hawk Conservancy. He has made more TV appearances than Dame Edna Everage.

Karen is smitten with him. She said: "Whenever I have a bad day I visit Fergus and everything's OK again. He's my baby and he really is absolutely brilliant."



*Would you like to meet Karen?*

*If you'd like to book a school visit from Karen or one of the team please contact [schools@greatbustard.org](mailto:schools@greatbustard.org)*

## *We welcome staff from the Severtsov Institute*

*A visit report by David Waters*

**David Waters writes about a most interesting week spent with new Russian Director Mikhail Oparin.**

I am not sure that I have a normal routine, but if I do, I had a break from it for a week in March. I was hosting Mikhail and Olga Oparin. Mikhail has recently taken over as the Director of the Saratov Branch of the A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Olga is the Head of Research at the Institute. Both Mikhail and Olga are experienced researchers and have worked with Great Bustards in Saratov for many years.

Mikhail and Olga visited the GBG for a week. I was anxious to show them both as much of the work of the GBG as possible, from the habitat we have, to the way the GBG works with its largely volunteer work force, how we raise funds and of course, the

UK Great Bustards. The way the private and voluntary sector support conservation work in the UK was of interest to the Oparins. Spending a day at the Hawk Conservancy Trust was a great way of showing the imaginative way conservation work can be funded and carried out. The recruitment and retention of volunteers and how they are employed was of great interest to our guests; the voluntary sector is undeveloped and in places, unknown in Russia.

A productive day was spent with our project partners at Bath University. We met with Prof. Tamas Szekley and with John Burnside, who is in the final year of his PhD, centred on the UK project. Olga gave a presentation about her and Mikhail's work on Great Bustards to the Department of Biology. After a quick look at Bath's wonderful architecture we then joined some University staff for dinner.



© GBG library

Mikhail experiences the birds of the Hawk Conservancy



© GBG library



Plenty of time was set aside for showing our Project Site and talking through our ideas and plans. Being able to show them Great Bustards from Saratov on Salisbury Plain was a great thrill, and the best way to show off the success of the project. We were able to share a visit run by Lynne and the enthusiasm of the visitors she was hosting was both apparent and very impressive to Mikhail and Olga.

On their last day the project held its first Technical Working Group (TWG). The TWGs have been set up through the LIFE+ project and will consider various aspects of the reintroduction project. This first meeting was set up to consider ways of protecting nests and young chicks. The meeting was chaired by Paul Goriup and there were presentations by Solt Veegvari from the Hungarian Bustard project as well as from Al Dawes for the GBG. Both Mikhail and Olga joined in the interesting and productive discussions with the help of Anastasia Barsukova, the GBG translator and the event was considered to be extremely worthwhile.

Over the last 7 years the GBG has established a close working relationship with Dr Anatoli Khrustov, the previous Director of the Institute. Being able to spend a week with Mikhail and Olga in and around the heart of the Great Bustard Group was an excellent way to start building a new partnership, and a very enjoyable week as well.



## Our thanks to Lord Salt and Major John Holt

A highlight of the trip was organised by GBG supporters Lord Sebastian Salt and Major John Holt. We were met outside the Houses of Parliament by Salisbury MP John Glenn. I thought this would give me a chance to raise the issue of getting Great Bustards on schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, but I was beaten to it by John Glenn who promised me he was actively working on the issue. We were then treated to a private tour of the Lords and the Commons which was as interesting to me as it evidently was to our Russian guests. Having been wonderfully hosted inside the Kremlin, it was a pleasure to show our way of doing things in the UK.



Mikhail in London with Major John Holt & Lord Salt



The party with MP John Glenn outside Parliament



Olga meets one of the Vultures at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Andover

## Introducing Andrew Taylor

### LIFE+ Project Advisor



© Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Andrew setting up a camera on a Stone-curlew nest on Salisbury Plain

Andrew has worked for the RSPB in south west England since shortly after graduating, starting as a full time volunteer at Radipole Lake in Weymouth in November 2005. This involved such glamorous jobs as reed cutting and ditch clearing. Over the course of two winters he spent over a year as a voluntary warden, which he says was a fantastic chance to learn about bird monitoring and habitat management, if a little hard on the wallet!

For another 18 months at Radipole he worked in the visitor centre, a completely different proposition but equally enjoyable. As one of the public faces of the RSPB reserve, he had the opportunity to meet and talk to a huge variety of people, while watching birds on the lake from the window. Not only this, but there was still time to fit in monitoring of birds and moths on the reserve in the mornings and evenings, which helped him work towards his ultimate ambition.

In April 2008 he started his first paid conservation job with the RSPB, a really exciting moment. By a stroke of luck he was offered

the chance to stay in the region, moving to Wiltshire to work on the Stone-curlew project. Three years and six contracts later, he's still here! He has enjoyed three summers of fieldwork on Stone-curlews, exploring every corner of Wessex and helping to ensure breeding success for this enigmatic bird. In the winters, knowledge of the needs of stone-curlews and a wide range of other farmland birds became important, as he worked with farmers to improve habitat provision in the region.

It was undoubtedly the highlight of his career so far when he found out that he would be working as Project Adviser on the new LIFE+ project. The crossover in habitat requirements of Stone-curlews and Great Bustards means he has seen bustards regularly over the last few years, but it is wonderful to have the chance to work with them. To be involved in a ground-breaking project, with a motivated, successful team, in a beautiful

part of the country would have been no more than a distant dream to Andrew five years ago. The focus of his new role is to improve habitat provision for Great Bustards in key areas. This will be achieved by working closely with Natural England to identify target areas and develop agri-environment options for bustards. He will produce a new advisory leaflet, which he will update over time using the information provided by an expanded monitoring program. This will help promote options suitable for bustards to landowners and other farmland bird advisers. His priority will be to ensure that the agri-environment schemes can provide for the needs of bustards throughout the year, everywhere they occur. This is a vitally important part of the new LIFE+ project, as it will facilitate the growth of the Great Bustard population in the long term, ensuring the species has a sustainable future in the UK.



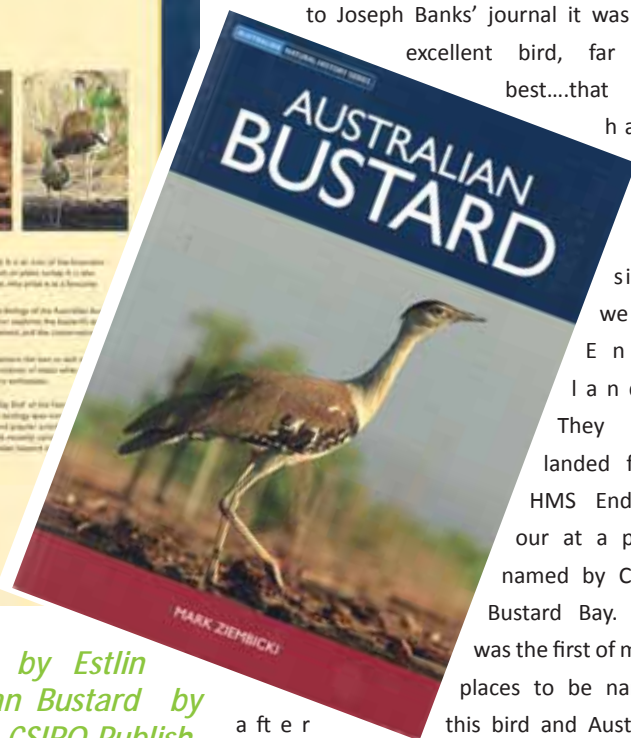
© Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Typical Stone-curlew habitat



**Book review**

*Estlin Waters reviews 'Australian Bustard' by Mark Ziembecki*



*A Book Review by Estlin Waters. Australian Bustard by Mark Ziembecki – CSIRO Publishing Collingwood, Australia, 2010.*

This book was written to convey some of the charm and mystery of this cryptic and lordly icon of the Australian outback. Except for the south-east, it is found in most of Australia and in southern New Guinea. It is the heaviest flying bird in Australia but, with a greatest weight of 14.5 kg for a male, it is only some two-thirds of the weight of the heaviest recorded Great Bustard. This is a well written and easily read softback of just over 100 pages with some good photographs. Mark Ziembecki recently completed his PhD on this bird's ecology and movements in northern Australia. The book doesn't read like a thesis except perhaps for three pages which list items of food recorded in the birds' diet and a 9 page bibliography. This itself is surprising as there are no references in the text. Movements were recorded by satellite tracking which show an individual can wander a total distance of nearly 500 km.

The bird was first sighted by Europeans in 1770 when Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks saw, shot, and then ate one. According

to Joseph Banks' journal it was "an excellent bird, far the best....that we have eat since we left England". They had landed from HMS Endeavour at a place named by Cook, Bustard Bay. This was the first of many

places to be named this bird and Australia now also has Bustard Head, Creek, Beach, Lagoon, Spring, Gully, Boves and Islands. In the original description, this bustard was given the scientific name of Otis and, in 1829, Otis australis by Gray. It was later put in the genus Ardeotis along with the Kori Bustard (Africa), Great Indian Bustard (India) and Arabian Bustard (Mauritania to Saudi Arabia). It has a prominent place in Australian culture and folklore for both the aboriginal people and later settlers. It was hunted by aboriginals, for bush food and ceremonial feathers, with sticks, boomerangs, spears and the noose. There has been some limited legal protection for nearly 150 years and it is formally protected since 1940. Illegal hunting continues; it is easily hunted from vehicles. One normally law-abiding citizen said "It's the open season whenever I see one". Some aboriginal hunting is still permitted.

One of the threats is due to the introduction into Australia of the Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* as the areas where it has declined most, correspond closely to the present distribution of Red Foxes in Australia. Though this

bustard is in general decline it may be increasing in some areas. No estimate of numbers is attempted in this book. Like the Great Bustard, birds are difficult to count and Australia is huge with many areas sparsely inhabited. Little is known about the age structure of the wild population but birds live up to 30 years in captivity. Captive breeding has sometimes been successful. The males have a spectacular display at leks. Pointing their bills skyward, they inflate their throat sac which enlarges to reach the ground. One or two eggs are laid and three are recorded. In this first major study of the Australian Bustard, comparisons are given with other large species of bustard which make for an interesting and instructive read.

**Australian bustard**



A bird of grassland, woodland and open agricultural country across northern Australia and southern New Guinea.



Populations are highly nomadic following rain and feed, which includes seeds, fruit, centipedes, insects, molluscs, lizards, young birds and small rodents.

## Balancing birds, beagles, archaeologists and the army

We talk to Lt. Colonel Mark Hiskett



Lt. Colonel Mark Hiskett, Commandant of the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA)

### Lewis Cowen talks to Colonel Mark Hiskett, Commandant of the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA)

Considering how much high explosive is unleashed on it in a given year, Salisbury Plain military training area remains one of the most valuable wildlife sites in Britain.

The British Army has been using the Plain to train their troops for battle since Victorian times and whether their destination is South Africa or Afghanistan, the basic situation there has changed very little. Except, of course, that the training area is now larger than it was in the 1890s. It now stretches 40km in one direction and 15km in another, covering a total of 96,000 acres, making it the

most significant military training area in the UK.

And the man whose job it is to reconcile the needs of military training and wildlife conservation is the Commandant of the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA), Colonel Mark Hiskett. Mind you, it helps that Col Hiskett, who has been in post since April last year, is a wildlife enthusiast and knows the difference between a Stone-curlew and a Corn Bunting.

He said: "The Plain is of huge strategic importance and its principal purpose must be for military training. But within that there is a lot of proactive conservation management." The key drivers of this conservation are European Union wildlife designations and the demands of the Wildlife and Countryside Act which

hold sway over the Army's conservation management plan for the Plain.

Although the Great Bustard is not yet recognised as a native British species, Col Hiskett assured me that it is very much part of the conservation plan.

He said: "I am very excited about the LIFE+ funding that the Great Bustard Group has managed to secure and I am happy to support the work of the group. The Great Bustard is an iconic species and it features on the county's flag and coat of arms. I was intrigued and fascinated to see the birds in the release pen and Dave Waters and I had a very fruitful discussion on fox control.

Bringing the Great Bustard back to its former home in the UK is a very worthwhile project and I am pleased to be working with the group to help make it happen."

It takes only a short walk on the Plain to see that it is a wildlife haven, despite the ground shaking from the impact of shells and the regular grass fires that take place during the summer sending plumes of smoke into the sky. But, in fact, wildlife has more chance of thriving here than in the nearby fertile fields that stretch off to the horizon, which are under intense cultivation.

Col Hiskett said: "The constant theme in my work is balancing the needs of the multifarious users of the Plain and establishing a harmonious balance between them all."

So tenant farmers, hikers, dog walkers, beagle packs, 4x4 drivers, archaeologists, and, of course, birdwatchers, will be able to take advantage of this 11 per cent of Wiltshire thanks to the continuing work of Col Hiskett and his staff.





## **Dame Elizabeth Neville DBE QPM**

### *Wiltshire's High Sheriff says goodbye*



#### **Lewis Cowen talks to Dame Elizabeth Neville, High Sheriff of Wiltshire for 2010.**

Dame Elizabeth, previously Chief Constable of Wiltshire Constabulary and one-time colleague of David Waters, has recently retired as High Sheriff of Wiltshire, after an exciting year in office. She is a convert to the enthusiasm surrounding the reintroduction of Wiltshire's official bird.

At her service to celebrate the rule of law in Wiltshire at St John's Church in Devizes recently the Great Bustard was very much to the fore, with our old friend Hercule taking pride of place in front of the pulpit in place of the customary floral creation.

The Bishop of Swindon, the Rt Rev Lee Rayfield included the Great Bustard in his three-part sermon on faith, hope and charity.

Dame Elizabeth smiled: "He said that the Great Bustard was the symbol of hope as you wouldn't think a bird as heavy as that would

ever get off the ground!"

Dame Elizabeth, who was Chief Constable of Wiltshire between 1997 and 2004, took up the baton from Madeleine Wilkes when she was High Sheriff a couple of years ago and chose the Great Bustard Group as one of her good causes.

Dame Elizabeth said: "Madeleine had a white bustard feather in her hat instead of the usual ostrich feather and I asked her if she would mind if I did the same. The Great Bustard is unique to Wiltshire and I felt we should celebrate it. So I contacted Dave and Karen Waters and they supplied me some moulted feathers. I took them to Joan Pressley, a hatmaker in Devizes, and she made a wonderful job of it, using the brown feathers as well as the white ones. It looked stunning.

Wherever I went and met High Sheriffs from other counties, they were so jealous of the feathers from our Wiltshire bustard."

As a now stalwart supporter of the Great Bustard Group, Dame Elizabeth had to meet the bustards on their home turf and was delighted to attend the Project Site and see one of the females sitting on eggs on a nest.

She said: "The group has been really friendly, welcoming and helpful. Visiting the site and seeing the birds was thrilling, especially as they are now breeding on the Plain."

Although she has had what she describes as a fantastic year in office, she will be grateful to hand over to Robert Hiscox at the end of March.

She said: "I thought I knew quite a bit about what happens in the county but I had no idea there were so many people quietly doing good work. I was amazed and humbled by the sheer quantity of work carried out by people who are never recognised for their time and dedication."

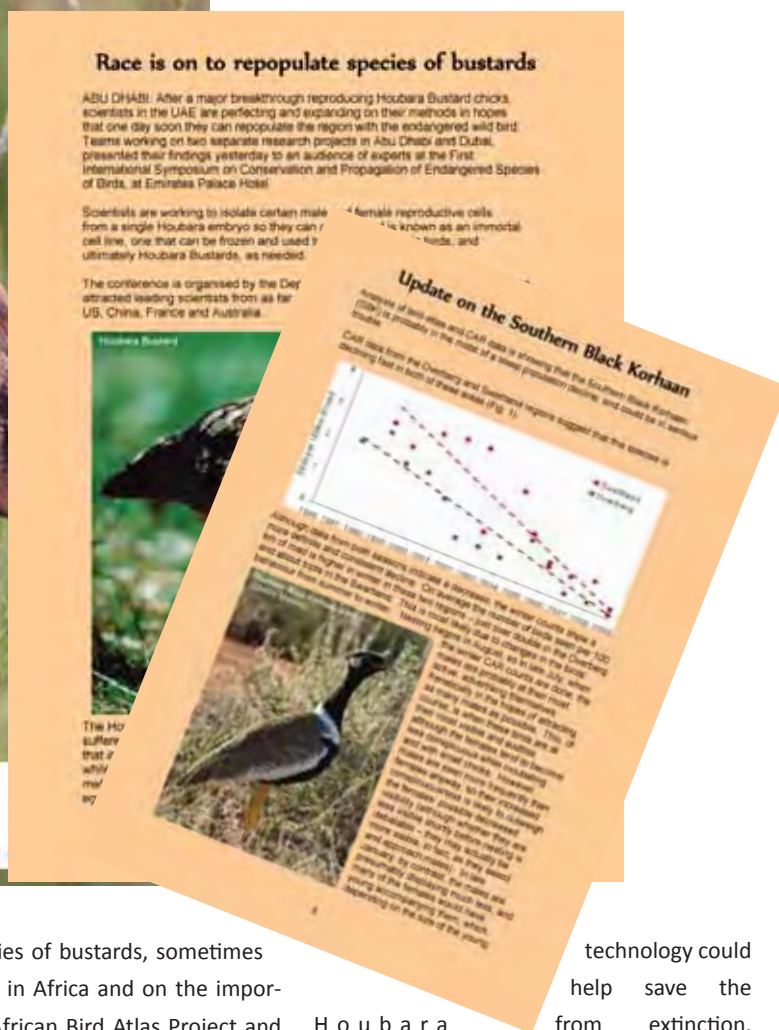
So at the Devizes service she took the opportunity to put that right. She asked for nominations for awards and selected ten of them to receive their "gongs" at the church.

But sloughing off the mantle of High Sheriff does not mean that Dame Elizabeth will be taking it easy. She remains highly involved in many good causes in the county. She is a trustee of the Bobby Van, which helps the elderly victims of crime, and is a governor of Stonar School.

Her long service in the police force means that she remains in demand for a variety of investigative roles and she plans to continue her support of the Great Bustard Project with great enthusiasm.

## A new on-line publication

*'Bustard Beat' highlights bustard issues in South Africa*



A new on-line journal has recently been published. It is the work of the Bustard Working Group operated by Birdlife South Africa. The Director of Birdlife South Africa, Mark Anderson, is a close friend of the Hawk Conservancy Trust, principally through the Vulture research project. You can learn more about the vulture project by reading Hannah Rose's article in this edition of Otis.

The photography is second to none and the articles interesting, but the overall message is concerning; six species of bustards are threatened in South Africa. There are articles

on several species of bustards, sometimes called Korhaans in Africa and on the important Southern African Bird Atlas Project and the Important Bird Areas (IBA) network.

The second issue of Bustard Beat ends with the news that laboratories in Abu Dhabi have created a bizarre bird that has a mixture of genetic features from Houbara Bustards and chickens. Sex cells from the Houbara are injected into chicken eggs and the resultant birds look like chickens but produce Houbara sperm. A Dr Thiyagasundaram, Head of the Poultry Division in Abu Dhabi reported the

H o u b a r a technology could help save the from extinction. This claim is questioned by others who observe that Houbara are already produced in huge numbers by the captive breeding programmes.

Have a look at Bustard Beat yourself by visiting

[http://www.birdlife.org.za/page/5561/bustard\\_working\\_group](http://www.birdlife.org.za/page/5561/bustard_working_group)



## Volunteer pitches in for the GBG

### Charles Hibberd tells us how he set up our CCTV



Charles set up the CCTV cameras at the Project Site after quite a learning curve!

#### Some times you find yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time saying the wrong thing.

Last November I visited Project Site Manager Al Dawes to view some video that he had taken of displaying Great Bustards earlier in the season. The hi-tech recording method comprised a digital camera balanced on a telescope, the results added to our understanding but were not quite to the Sir David Attenborough standard. "What we need is a camera in the release pen that we can view from the site office" I observed. The response was instant from Al, "excellent idea, can you have it in position before spring?" Not one to turn down a challenge my immediate response was "err, possibly, do you know any one who knows about CCTV?"

If you need to research a subject that you know nothing about, don't go to the internet! After two hours I was confused and bemused by the quantity of information available, some contradictory but none relevant to my task. To me the questions were simple, what camera do I need and how do I transmit the video over about 600 metres (1/3 mile)? The more I researched the more I realised I was

asking the wrong questions and that I needed help. So I turned to Manuel Hinge of Carnyx Wild Productions and producer of our excellent video "The Great Bustard Return" (yours for only £10 from the GBG). Manuel suggested I contact Peter Dobson of Carnyx TV who works with various groups to stream live Goshawk pictures from the New Forest.

A meeting was arranged for an evening in December at a New Forest public house. Al and I explained the site layout and requirement. We then worked through camera resolution, zoom distance, remote control, wired & wireless transmission, recording methods plus a host of other issues I had not considered. By the end of the evening I knew what was required, where to get it and roughly how much it would cost. My only input was the beer which is a subject I have extensively researched! Without Peter's assistance and advice I would not have succeeded, thank you Peter.

Our time schedule was now starting to get a little tight, it was Christmas and I had only just presented my proposal for consideration by the Trustees. Any work in the pen needed to be completed by the time the birds

normally return to display which gave me two months at best to purchase, install and commission the system. Early January and the camera was on order, until it arrived the cables could be laid, mounting post positioned and recorder set up. When the camera arrived it should only take a couple of hours to fix to the post and terminate the cable as all the infrastructure would be in place. How wrong could I be? January arrived with warmer weather (it wasn't snowing) and a band of volunteers turned up on Saturday morning to lay in the cables. A short discussion followed as where to site the camera, close to the expected lek site or far away, we didn't know because we didn't have the camera so couldn't see what the zoom looked like. Eventually a decision was made and the tractor was used to cut a 65 metre long furrow from the fence to the post. Data and power cables were laid to a battery box with the data cable being taken along the fence line to a second trench and onto our caravan, almost 600 metres in total.

Almost all CCTV cameras run on 12 Volts DC and I had installed a car type battery to provide this. However the camera I purchased was far from the average and required a different power source. The only answer was to run an additional cable from caravan to camera, and so it was a couple of weeks later at 7.30am I was back on site in sub zero temperatures trying to complete the project prior to an expected visitor arrival at 11.30 that morning.

By mid morning the sun had cleared the frost and raised my spirits, the final terminations had been made, the kettle was on and I was ready to throw the switch.

Did it work? Yes, brilliantly! Full 360° horizontal and vertical remote control, 27 x optical zoom with auto focus produces a bustard in full frame from 1 metre to 50 metres, all recorded in TV quality.

The bustards turned up only a few days later, have you see the footage on our web site? See what you think at [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org). Wouldn't it be better with sound? Well that's another story.

## *A chance to see another big bustard!*

*A visit report by Bill and Ann Jordan*

*Group members and long term bustard enthusiasts Bill and Ann Jordan report on their recent trip to Fuerteventura.*

Houbara Bustards are large, shy birds, which are about the same size as a female Great Bustard. They occur on arid plains on the fringes of Europe from the Canary Islands, through North Africa, Arabia, and central Asia to Mongolia and China.

The Houbara Bustard was recently split into two new distinct species. The Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii* (commonly referred to as MacQueen's Bustard) is now considered a separate species, based on lighter plumage, greater size and genetics, occurring from Arabia eastwards to Mongolia and China. Asian Houbara are resident in some areas (Iran, Pakistan) and migratory between breeding areas in China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan and wintering grounds in Arabia and Pakistan.

The other species, *Chlamydotis undulata*, is further divided into two sub-species:-

The African Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata undulata*, which inhabits North Africa from Morocco to Egypt and:-

The Canary Island Houbara *Chlamydotis undulata fuertaventurae* which occurs only on Fuerteventura and Lanzarote (Spain) as a sedentary species. It is slightly smaller and darker plumaged than the other two Houbara varieties. The upperparts and tail are light orange brown, vermiculated with darker brown. The grey neck bears long white feathers, which shade to a white belly. The darker plumage colour of this species may be due to natural selection for camouflage against the blackish volcanic soils.

The African and Asian Houbaras occur in

remote desert terrain and have recently suffered severe declines in population due to hunting pressure.

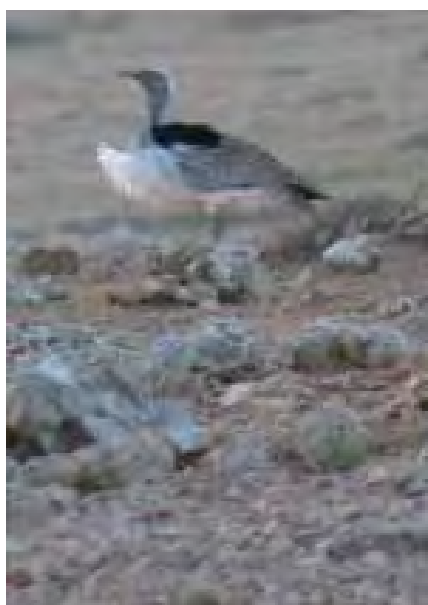
As a result, the opportunity for GBG members to see a second large bustard species within easy reach of the UK is arguably provided now only by the Houbara on the island of Fuerteventura, where no hunting is permitted. The island has also developed into an inexpensive holiday destination.

Fuerteventura is approximately 120 km. long by 25 km., much of the island consists of extinct volcanoes separated by sandy, rocky plains used mainly by goat herds. Urbanisation is restricted to a few tourist sites on the coast.

The vegetation is drought-resistant bushy shrubs (*Launaea arborescens* and *Lycium afrum*) and, after rain, flowering plants, which all provide leaves, berries or insects for Houbaras and other dry-plain birds.

## Bustard in Mustard

Since 1898, the only Houbara bustard migrant to reach the UK was a single bird in a mustard field in Suffolk in November and December 1962, watched daily by coach loads of bird watchers. This is probably the first recorded 'twitch' in England.)



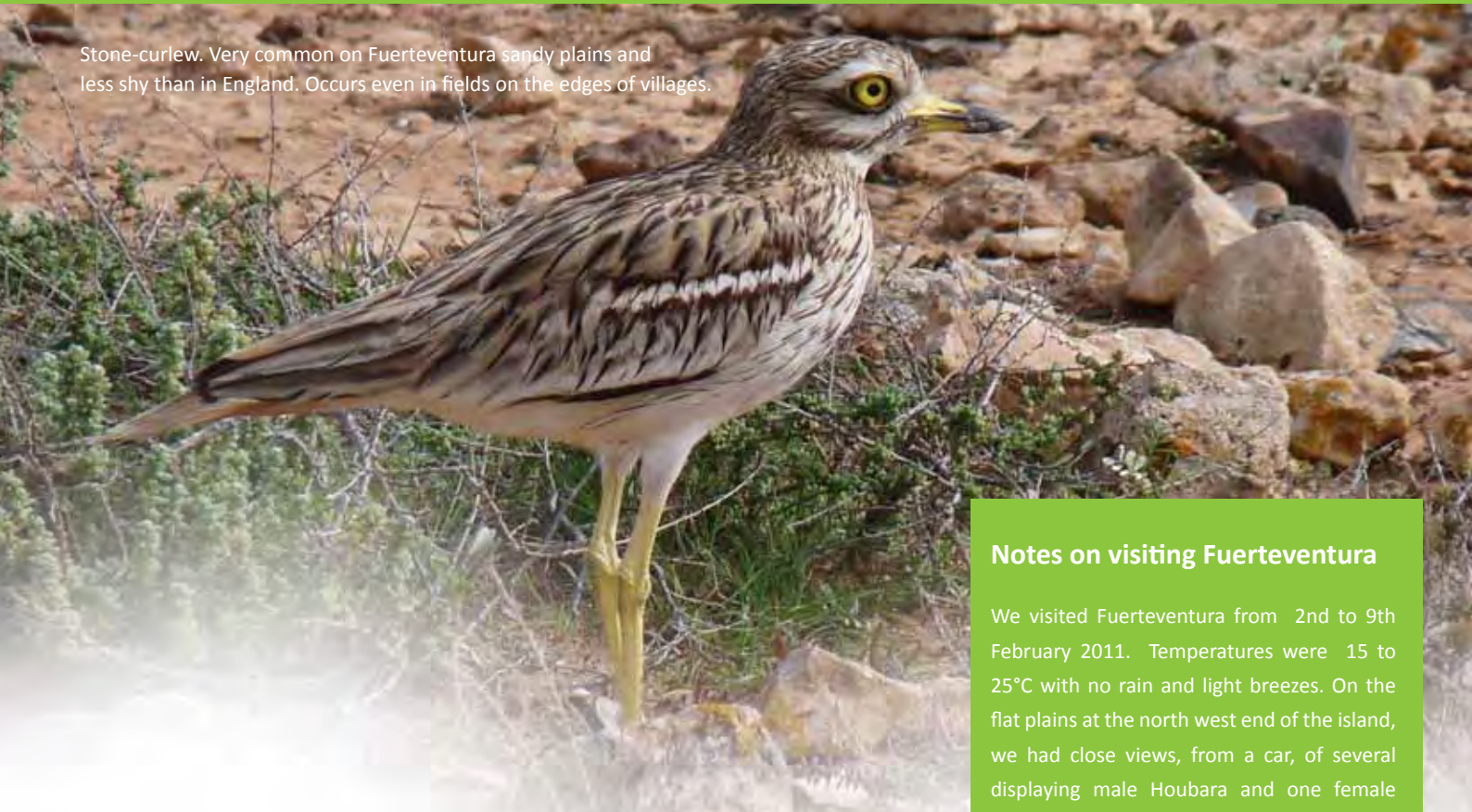
*Houbara bustard at the beginning of display, neck feathers starting to fan out*



*Houbara bustard in full display with head drawn flat against its back. This is followed by a rapid 'clockwork mouse' run.*



Stone-curlew. Very common on Fuerteventura sandy plains and less shy than in England. Occurs even in fields on the edges of villages.



These include Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*, Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*, Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* and the endemic Fuerteventura Stonechat *Saxicola dacotiae*.

Houbara also eat peas, beans, trefoil and lizards. Houbara weigh on average 3.2 kg (males) and 2.5 kg (females) but they are strong fliers (65 km./hour), sometimes twisting in flight to avoid falcons. They do, however, like Great Bustards, prefer to walk, often for several kilometres.

In the breeding season, the silent males are spaced out at traditional display sites, 500-1,000 m. apart. During the display, the crown and neck plumes are initially raised up and the head laid onto the back. The male then performs a high-stepping trot and eventually runs erratically for several seconds. This is repeated a number of times, mainly in early morning. The display may attract around 2 to 3 females to mate.

Houbara mature from 2 years of age. Between January and April, mature females lay and incubate 2 to 3 eggs, and care for the chicks alone.

On Fuerteventura, predators probably include Ravens *Corvus corax*, Barbary Falcons *Falco pelegrinoides* and feral dogs, but foxes are not present. The current population appears to be fairly stable with 380 birds on Fuerteventura and 220 on Lanzarote. Bustards were known from Fuerteventura as early as the year 1402. The climate was then less dry and a slow increase in population may have since occurred. Currently their habitat is being eroded by overgrazing, new roads, tourist developments, off-road driving and wind farms.

Conservation measures include EU legislation, and LIFE Projects to grow more Lucerne *Medicago sativa* and other crops (1996 to 2003, which provided more food for half the bustard population), as well as fencing off breeding locations and designating protected areas.



Cream coloured Courser with chick, showing superb camouflage against sandy soil.

## Notes on visiting Fuerteventura

We visited Fuerteventura from 2nd to 9th February 2011. Temperatures were 15 to 25°C with no rain and light breezes. On the flat plains at the north west end of the island, we had close views, from a car, of several displaying male Houbara and one female with two chicks about one week old. In the same areas we found groups of Cream-coloured Courser with half-grown chicks, pairs of Stone curlew, flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and single Barbary Falcons. Most of these were seen from the hire car (collected at the airport). It is essential to keep to roads and tracks and watch from a vehicle to avoid disturbance and obtain good views. We rented a villa in a small village, Lajares, close to several good bird sites through [www.ownersdirect.co.uk](http://www.ownersdirect.co.uk). Many sites were accessible only by 4 wheel drive vehicles and required an early, before dawn, start. On the first day, we hired a conducted trip with Derek Bradbury who has been leading trips here for many years, which allowed us to reach remote sites, combined with his local knowledge.

Telephone 00 34 (0) 66 44 9 40 44 E-mail [derekbradbury@derekbradbury.free-online.co.uk](mailto:derekbradbury@derekbradbury.free-online.co.uk)

Flights to Fuerteventura leave from Bournemouth, Bristol, etc.

**Bill and Ann Jordan**  
([ann.31jordan@btinternet.com](mailto:ann.31jordan@btinternet.com))

## GBG in Africa

### *Vultures and bustards*



***Hannah Rose joins a Hawk Conservancy Trust trip to South Africa for vulture conservation, and looks at bustards in South Africa.***

Before working for the Great Bustard Group, I did volunteer work and work experience from Sparsholt College at the Hawk Conservancy Trust. As some of you may know the Hawk Conservancy Trust conducts many different conservation and research projects, both in the UK and overseas; in Africa and India. Having previously been to the nature reserve in South Africa where the Hawk Conservancy Trust conduct their help and support for the African White-backed Vulture project, again for work experience from college in 2008, I had the 'Africa bug'. And so when lucky enough to be offered the opportunity to be a part of the team of 14 (the biggest group to go out there yet) I took it.

The African White-backed Vulture Research and Monitoring project is run in partnership with Birdlife South Africa, the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Programme and

Gauntlet Birds of Prey, Eagle and Vulture Park. The key partner is Mark Anderson (Executive Director, Birdlife South Africa), and great support has been provided by the De Beers Group. The project is based in the Kimberley area, which is in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa.

The project began in 2001 on a fairly new reserve; Dronfield Game Farm, owned by De Beers, which had formerly been a cattle ranch. In 2006 a 'Vulture Restaurant' and hide was constructed, from which to watch and monitor the vultures from. Each year, in October (spring in South Africa), the Hawk Conservancy Trust head out to Dronfield to help with the ringing and tagging of that years White-backed Vulture chicks.

Some brave souls are needed to climb the Camel-thorn trees in order to reach the nest at the top; the chick is then put in a canvas bag and lowered to the team on the ground. Wing measurements and blood samples are taken, the chick is weighed, and then fitted with wing tags and a leg ring. The wing tags fitted are a little sturdier than those fitted to



our bustards and are made of plastic (very similar to cattle ear tags) to withstand the birds crashing about in trees, and of course in true vulture fashion; fighting with each other at a carcass. These wing tags were nearly given up, as it was thought that they were not doing their job; birds were losing them, and some were becoming brittle after a few years under the strong African sun, however the decision has been made to continue using them, at least for the time being, as there is really no other way of easily identifying individual birds. Trees that hold nests are given a small metal tag with a number, this is then matched up with a GPS, as vultures will often use the same nest site year after year, which makes finding nests with chicks in a lot easier! Any unused nests are inspected to find out why.



Like our bustards, some chicks are fitted with PTT transmitters, so that their movements can be tracked and monitored. The current plan is to try and capture an adult vulture with a specially built trap, as young birds tend to stay around the area close to their nest site for a couple of years; by which time the PTT has died. And so the researchers would be able to build up a better picture of the travelling distances and whereabouts of the mature vultures when it is not the breeding season. The young vultures can differ dramatically in age, with the smallest sometimes being only 2-3 weeks old and the larger ones near to fledging, but if startled, no matter what age, they will vomit – once smelt, never forgotten!

There are at least 140 different bird species in the area of Kimberley, 4 of which are species from the Otididae (bustard) family (in total in South Africa there are 10 different species of bustard). The species which almost matches the Great Bustard in size and weight is the Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori*, which I saw for the first time on the trip in 2010 on an adjoining 'rare game' part of the Dronfield farm called Inglewood. Out for a quiet drive in the early evening with my Dad we suddenly spotted the Koria short distance away, we had taken him by surprise and he was just taking off, but I instantly knew the characteristic bustard shape. Along with the Kori, we also saw lots of Ludwig's Bustards (*Neotisludwigii*), Karoo

Korhaan *Eupodotisvigorsii* and Northern Black Korhaan *Eupodotisafraoides*.

All 10 species of bustard in South Africa are currently suffering population declines, with many different factors contributing to this; and all but four of the Korhaans are listed as either vulnerable or near-threatened, this includes the Kori and the Ludwigs. Some of the factors currently affecting bustards in South Africa are: afforestation, road kills and power line collisions, over grazing, crop management and general disturbance. To find out more about bustards in South Africa, visit: [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za).





## GBG Visit Russian Schools

*We join David Waters and Suzy Elkins in the Russian Classroom*



*David and Suzy with teachers and pupils of School No 1 in Krasny Kut, School No 75 in Saratov & School No 89 in Saratov*

### **Suzy Elkins reports on the GBG's recent trip to Russia to visit schools across Saratov region.**

It's quite a journey the new bustards make every year from Russia to the UK. I say this with confidence having made it twice myself over the past year. In reverse to the birds journey the traveller arrives in Moscow, takes the metro to the train station, catches the 16 hour sleeper train to Saratov, drives for a further two hours before finally arriving at the field station in Diakovka where the birds are reared.

Surrounded by miles of agricultural land Diakovka snuggles into a homely cluster of houses, each one built to the distinctive style of the region with white-washed walls and charming, carved shutters. I've had the pleasure of visiting this tiny village twice in its most extreme guises, those of midsummer and midwinter. The first was a lesson in extreme heat, dust and baby bustards, the second boasted frozen rivers topped with excited children slipping and sliding from bank to bank, snow covered fields and a dining table groaning with hot soup, boiled potatoes and sliced sausage.

Both were equally wonderful experiences, made more so by the warm hospitality of our hosts and the staff of the field station, but each had a common reason for our presence, the Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*. This magnificent bird breeds in the Saratov-Oblast region of Russia and it is from these breeding groups that the GBG rescues eggs from nests threatened by agriculture, rears the resulting chicks

and brings them to the UK for release on Salisbury Plain.

Whilst in Russia last summer I became aware of the strength of the local support and dedication to the project and realised that initiatives to educate the next generation on conservation could be strengthened between the two countries to the benefit of both. This is no new realisation of course, David Waters is committed to further promoting the message of conservation through education both in the UK and Russia. Assisted by the Badger School, a multi-lingual teaching agency owned by GBG's representative in Russia Anastasia Barsukova the students of several schools in the region have embraced the plight of the Great Bustard with enthusiasm.

Before the end of each talk in the various schools we handed out leaflets about the Great Bustard group and set nature based projects for the pupils. Each school is keen to participate in the future conservation of the Great Bustard and we have pledged to send updates on the birds to them all.

Some 40 km from the field station at Diakovka lies the small town of Krasny Kut, home to School number 1, an establishment housing approximately 300 pupils, aged between 11 and 16. The students of this school have helped the Great Bustard Group



in Russia in numerous ways, from assisting on the field station to joining our sponsored cycle ride. Supporters of the schools work by the GBG have managed to secure enough funding to bring a small party from this school to the UK later in the year - a once in a life time opportunity for the school. The pupils and teachers alike wish to see where the birds are released. They will work for the Great Bustard Group for a few days and bring their findings back to the school for future projects.

***All the pupils can communicate well in English so if you would like a Russian penfriend please contact Suzy on [schools@greatbustard.org](mailto:schools@greatbustard.org) for more information.***



*The children have pledged to help the GBG*



## *GBG's Representative in Russia visits UK school*

### *Anastasia Barsukova pitches in with crafty kids*



*The children welcome Anastasia Barsukova to their Crafty Ideas after-school workshop which is run by the GBG's own Karen Waters*

Anastasia Barsukova, the Great Bustard Group's representative in Russia recently visited St Edmunds School in Salisbury to experience the British classroom and learn how our enrichment classes run. She joined Karen Waters for her after-school craft class and helped the pupils make a variety of sparkly things, from necklaces and bracelets to tiaras!

A great afternoon was had by all and Anastasia takes her experiences back to Russia where she works with schools in the Saratov region, teaching English and conservation

subjects to students. The Great Bustard Group works with schools across the UK, and with Anastasia in Russia, to educate pupils on the Reintroduction Project, introduce the Great Bustard to children, and highlight how important conservation of all species is across the globe. We receive regular enquiries from schools, groups and clubs ranging from making the bustard the topic of classroom projects to hosting group visits to the UK's only Great Bustard aviary at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Andover.

Continuing the educational theme the GBG is currently producing a children's website, new school Key Stage based literature and teaming with local educational units to further structure their learning programme.



**Would you like the GBG to visit your school?**

*The Great Bustard Group will be happy to visit your school, college or group wherever possible and give a talk about this incredible bird, its habitat and the Reintroduction Project. We can provide learning materials, children's activities and assistance with fundraising if you would like to support us. We are always keen to hear new ideas and have many schools across the world interested in talking to other foreign education units. Contact us for information on [schools@greatbustard.org](mailto:schools@greatbustard.org).*

## *Great Bustards in Extremadura*

*Charlie Moores takes us on a birdwatching trip*



### *Charlie Moores reports on his recent trip to Extremadura in Spain*

Imagine birdwatching with the warm sun on your back, a fragrant breeze tickling the back of your neck, and a view of more than forty Great Bustards picking their way across a wide, open expanse of a rocky plain. There are few people around, larksong is spilling across the cloudless sky, and off to your left a *Sylvia* warbler is giving a scratchy song from a patch of shrub.

Sounds a little like a day on Salisbury Plain, with its Skylarks, Whitethroats, and bustards? Well, perhaps, one day, but even the most optimistic of GBG staff or members surely can't envisage a flock of forty Great Bustards on the Plain just yet. In time we'll

get there, but in the meantime if you'd like to easily see that many Great Bustards how about making a quick trip out to Extremadura, a relatively remote region bordering Portugal in south-western Spain?

I'm only asking because I was fortunate enough to do just that in February this year (courtesy of Swarovski Optik – ask me about their new binoculars if you really want some overblown prose) and the trip has really put into perspective what can be achieved here in Wiltshire. Though I doubt that even with extreme climate change the songsters here on the Plain will ever include Calandra and Thekla Larks, and the *Sylvia* warblers are unlikely to ever be Sardinians, much of the habitat and the way the countryside looked was surprisingly comparable.

Part of the great Iberian plateau or meseta, Extremadura is a large region roughly the size of Switzerland with little more than one million inhabitants (about one and half times the population of Wiltshire). Most residents live in compact towns and villages, leaving huge areas of empty steppes, vast oak orchards and undisturbed mountain ranges patrolled by squadrons of Griffon Vultures. Whilst Salisbury Plain isn't renowned for its mountains or its acreages of Cork and Holm Oaks, we do have large areas of uncultivated grasslands and farmland – and it's of course these areas that, like their Russian/Wiltshire cousins, the Spanish bustards in Extremadura favour.





I was only in the region for three days, but the group I was with saw Great Bustards on two of those days (and Little Bustards on one of them). With an avifauna that in winter includes such sought-after species as Spanish Imperial Eagle, Cinereous Vulture, Black Stork, and both Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, it's fair to say that while everyone wanted to see a bustard they weren't the only avian stars to be looked for.

However, it's also true to say (because I was checking!) that every one of us was absolutely wowed by the bustards we did see. Most of the sightings were distant (it's not just a myth we propagate to visitors to the Project Site these are very wary birds wherever they are found), but there was something very special in seeing lines of bustards picking carefully along ridges in the heat haze, or taking their slow and measured steps through still short grass. As a passionate GBG supporter it really wasn't too hard to picture the same scene on Salisbury Plain - as I constantly reminded the rest of the group!

One sighting, though, really did inspire and excite all of us, and perhaps demonstrated why the Great Bustard is surviving so well in Extremadura. All twenty of us birders were sauntering along a winding, tarmac road in the rolling hills of the Plains of Caceres.

We'd previously seen a small group of Greats way off on a hillside, disappearing in and out of view as the land dipped and fell away. Suddenly one of the more sharper-eyed members of our team shouted that a Great Bustard was flying towards us. Still a long way off, it was immediately identifiable, powering towards us on broad wings, its neck extended like it was charging. I – and no doubt the others – expected this most easily spooked of birds to veer off as soon as it spotted us, but on it came, framed against an absolutely cloudless sky, surging ahead and growing larger with every wingbeat.

Every one of us had a camera to hand, and as this most beautiful bird arrowed right at us we all raised our arms to focus. I have no doubt at all that a goose or a raptor would have swerved away from what it would surely

have decided was a line of hunters, their 'guns' raised, but instead this magnificent bird, this powerful symbol of remote grasslands and (here in the UK) a lost era, flew straight over our heads and high over the fields behind us.

It was a magical moment that will live with all of us, a chance occurrence of course but one that found us catching our breath, trying to hang on to every feature and remember every feather as the world's heaviest flying bird swept overhead. Why didn't it swerve away though? Because unlike the uncontrolled hunting that more than a century ago removed the Great Bustard from British skies, birds here are protected and cherished, their nests are left alone, and while they evidently won't become completely trusting of humans any day soon, they and the people that live here have long learnt to co-exist in harmony.

That thought, and the image of 'our' Great Bustard racing overhead, is something I now carry around with me whenever I think of the work the GBG are doing. One day, I'm certain, we'll be seeing lines of Great Bustards on Salisbury Plain, and perhaps even have one lift off and fly straight over our heads as we gasp at its beauty and its strength.

One day. But if you can't wait, then as I said why not try the superb Spanish region of Extremadura. It's just a short flight away, the countryside is stunning and the people friendly - and the birds are nothing short of totally unforgettable.



*The beautiful region of Extremadura in Spain*

## Full of the joys of Summer

A displaying male Great Bustard is one of the most spectacular sights in the bird world. A trip to the Project Site early in the summer gives an excellent chance of seeing this spectacular highlight of nature. The Project Site has much else to offer over the rest of the summer too. The bustards themselves are still very much in evidence and there is always the chance of seeing the elusive but magical sight of a female with a chick or two. We have been blessed with Stone-curlews breeding at the Project Site each year, and they are already in residence at the time of writing; the chance to get good views of breeding Stone-curlews without any risk of disturbing them is a rare one and not to be missed.

Other Salisbury Plain specials have a high profile over the summer with Corn Buntings and Yellow Hammers always showing well and there is chance of hearing the distinctive call of the Quail.

We have had a Red Kite around the site on a regular basis this year, the wing tags telling us that the bird was ringed as chick in west



*The wonderful sight of a bustard female with her chicks*

Wales. Montagu's Harriers make an occasional treat over the summer months as do the Hobbies which zoom overhead from time to time.

Birds apart, on a warm and bright summer's day there can be fewer more pleasant places to spend an hour or two than on Salisbury Plain. The trips do tend to get booked up well in advance over the summer months, particularly over weekends. Whilst finding a

space or two is normally possible at short notice, it would be wise to book as far in advance as possible.

As the evenings draw out we shall be offering evening trips on a trial basis, to explore the level of interest. Talk to Lynne at [visits@greatbustard.org](mailto:visits@greatbustard.org) or on 07817 971 327 to make a booking.



## Bring a guest along - FREE

This voucher entitles a guest to one free visit to the GBG Project Site when accompanying a paying visitor.

*Simply present this voucher to GBG staff when you visit the site and your guest will not be charged. Valid until 1st August 2011*





Enclose payment, glue here, seal and post to the address overleaf

## Join the GBG & help us to bring the bustard back

[www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org) • [membership@greatbustard.org](mailto:membership@greatbustard.org)

Postal address: 1 Down Barn Close, Winterbourne Gunner, Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP4 6JP



### MEMBERSHIP

Pay monthly from just £1.66 a month

**Become a member of the Great Bustard Group to help secure the future of this amazing bird.**

Simply fill out the form & send to the address shown above or give to a GBG staff member. Membership includes:

Quarterly magazine OTIS • Booklet about the Great Bustard • Free guided visits of the release site • Invitations to all Fundraising and Social Events • Membership badge • Car sticker

#### Annual Membership (tick box)

Ordinary £20  Family £25  Fellow £75  Life Member (Single payment of min £500)

#### Your details

Organisation (if applicable) .....		
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Address .....		Phone .....
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#### Payment method (please tick)

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#### Instruction to your Bank/Building Society to pay Monthly Standing Order

To the Manager Bank/Building Society
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Account Name .....
Sort Code .....
Account Number .....

Please pay the Great Bustard Group (Nat West, 48, Blue Boar Row, Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP1 1DF, Account Number 29562325, Sort Code 54 - 41 - 19) the sum of (**minimum £1.66**) £ ..... on 1st day of each month until further notice.

#### Donation

I would like to make a donation to the Great Bustard Group of £ .....

#### Gift Aid.

If you are a UK taxpayer, the Inland Revenue will give us an extra 25p for every pound you give.

Please tick the box and sign. It's that simple!

*I am a UK taxpayer and request that my membership and all gifts of money that I have made in the past four years and all future gifts of money that I make to the Great Bustard Group from the date of this declaration be Gift Aid donations. I understand that I must pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6th April one year to 5 April the next) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that the charity will reclaim on my gifts for that tax year.*

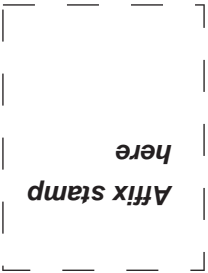
Signature ..... Date .....

GBG is a registered charity number 1092515



[www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org)

*Fold here, glue or tape edges closed*



**Membership Secretary,  
The Great Bustard Group,  
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# GBG is still Cycling to Saratov ..

We're cycling over 4,000 miles to raise money for Great Bustards and finish with a grand ride-out and barbecue starting from Cholderton Farm Shop in Wiltshire on Friday 19th August at 6pm

Why not join us? All welcome

Or you can Sponsor the GBG team on JustGiving  
[www.justgiving.com/gbg-team](http://www.justgiving.com/gbg-team)



See [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org)

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This project is part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for European Development 2007-2013: Europe investing in rural areas. It is being delivered through Plain Action, the Local Action Group on Salisbury Plain, and the South West of England Regional Development Agency with Defra as