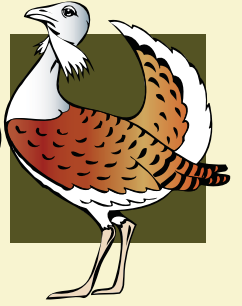


The global Great Bustard conservation publication

Otis



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GROUP**



Winter 2010

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The magazine of the Great Bustard Group

Issue 34

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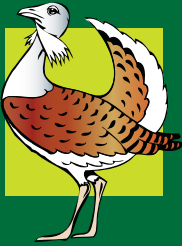
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GREAT BUSTARD GROUP



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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These are exciting times at the GBG. As most people connected with us will know that we are in a period of enormous change. The confirmation of the award of a LIFE grant from the EU will (potentially) alter the structure and the operations of the GBG for at least the next five years, but we will still have to manage our spending and fundraising very carefully. In this issue of *Otis* we'll be looking more closely at the LIFE grant and what it will mean to the GBG.

Change may be on the agenda, but one thing that we won't be altering any time soon is the annual summer veterinary trip to Russia by GBG Director David Waters. Arranging air travel for CITES-listed birds is just one element of bringing our precious chicks back to Salisbury Plain and in our feature article David explains what is involved in making such a long and complex trip, the working partnerships the GBG has been able to put in place over the years, and how unexpected forest fires in Moscow can test even his legendary organisational skills.

The work that takes place in Russia doesn't stop when the birds reach us here in the UK. This year twenty-five chicks were brought back to the Project Site and a new release strategy implemented under the stewardship of Al Dawes and John Burnside. In our regular 'Bustardwatch' feature Al explains how the young birds are doing and what the new strategy was designed to achieve.

Editor's note

While the LIFE grant is immensely important to the GBG, so is our own internal fundraising. We've instigated a Just Giving account to make donating to the GBG far easier, and in a short article we talk to one of our volunteers, Len Tryhorn, about why he gives so much of his time to the GBG as a 'Friend of the Bustard'. Mid-September saw our annual Grand Auction, which was held this year in London and organised with 'wedding planner' precision by Suzy Elkins, the GBG's effervescent Marketing Manager. Suzy mapped the event down to the last detail, and we had a marvellous evening – and raised a substantial amount too. How much? Turn to Page 14 for the answer and photos!

Talking of photos, regular readers of 'Otis' will have noticed that one name in particular appears by many of the superb photographs that appear in our magazine. In our regular interview spot we're talking with Dave Kjaer, a professional photographer and passionate GBG supporter, about his work and what motivates him to donate his wonderful images to us.

Throughout the summer the GBG hosted a procession of visitors and overseas guests, with delegates and conservationists arriving from Russia, Ukraine, Germany and China amongst other countries (what we really need is our very own parking-spot right outside the terminal doors at Heathrow). We also welcomed new volunteers, temporary staff and said goodbye to one old friend, the Bustard Inn, and hello to a new one, Shrewton's Manor Hotel. All will be explained in our News section.

Finally we round off this edition of 'Otis' with a shortened version of an article by Estlin Waters looking at Great Bustards in Morocco (the full text can be found online on the GBG website; www.greatbustard.org).

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A new German project

Regular readers of Otis will be aware of the strong links the GBG enjoys with the Great Bustard Project in Brandenburg, Germany. There is now a possibility of a second Great Bustard project in the country.

Kai-Olaf Kruger, who works for NABU, BirdLife International's German partner, has been contracted to undertake a feasibility study looking at the reintroduction of Great Bustards to Lower Saxony, a large state in the north-west of the country. A population of bustards here would be much closer to our UK birds than the existing one in Brandenburg, some 250 km to the east.

As the only organisation to have undertaken a Great Bustard reintroduction into the wild, the experiences of the GBG are of interest to many. As part of his study Kai stayed with the GBG for a week, studying everything from rearing the chicks to fundraising, and maintaining good relationships with farmers to post-release monitoring. Will he conclude a reintroduction should take place? Kai has to look at the habitat available in Lower



Kai-Olaf Kruger befriends Bustard Fergus

Saxony and take into account the local factors that may be present. When he left us he was keeping his cards close to his chest, and in fairness to him he must consider all aspects before giving a public opinion. However, when a decision is reached Otis will certainly report on the conclusions.

Ukrainian colleagues visit the GBG site



The Great Bustard Group team welcome Ukrainian visitors to the Project Site

In mid-September David Waters, GBG Director, was delighted to lead a visit to the Project Site by a large delegation of Ukrainian Government officials. The GBG has helped survey Great Bustards in Ukraine and it was a pleasure to host a reciprocal visit.

On a beautiful autumn day the delegates had excellent views of the newly-released birds and several adult Great Bustards - and some were enthralled to learn (which they hadn't previously realised) that

Great Bustards occur in Ukraine in such large numbers.

As always we look forward to developing our overseas relationships and are confident that this visit will have future benefits for Great Bustard conservation. The full delegation was as follows: *Martynenko Svitlana, Netesa Maryna, Gavrylenko, Kravchenko Andriy, Pechenoga Oleksandr, Prokopenko Valerii, Okopnyi Oleksii, Gyske Svitlana, Kapustinskyi Oleksandr, Prokopenko Svitlana, Kinschak Andrii, Luldashev Rustam, Kutepov Sviatoslav, Bychuk Olena, Chernysh Sergiy, Bohdan Drozdowskij.*

A warm welcome to Allan

The GBG is pleased to announce that Allan Goddard, a retired arable farmer who jointly owns 1,100 acres near Dorchester and has been volunteering with the GBG for the last nine months, has accepted a position as Farm Liaison.

Allan's job will be to talk to other farmers and act as a bridge between the GBG and the wider farming community, a role that will become increasingly important as our young PTT-wearing birds disperse from the release-site. As a fellow farmer Allan will be able to talk to other landowners and reassure them that having a bustard on their land will not impact on their everyday activities. This will undoubtedly increase the chances that valuable data on where the birds are spending their time when they leave the Project Site will be made available to us.

We would like to thank Allan for his input during his recent trip to Russia and look forward to working with him in the future.



Allan surveys the soil in the Russian fields

National Zoo receives award

The Smithsonian's National Zoo's Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori* team received the prestigious Edward H. Bean Award in September. Led by Sarah Hallagher a keen GBG supporter, the team received the award from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for its work on the long-term propagation, breeding and management of Kori Bustards, a declining species native to Africa. This award recognises institutions that contribute to the reproductive success of one or more species and/or subspecies.

"Wildlife conservation requires leadership, collaboration, expertise and patience," said Dennis Kelly, director of the National Zoo. "We are one of the world's leaders in breeding and caring for Kori Bustards. I am proud that our dedication to science and public education is making such a significant contribution to the local and international conservation of these birds."



© Smithsonian National Zoo library

Wildlife conservation award for the *Ardeotis* team. Pictured above the Kori Bustard

GBG completes Autumn Census in Russia



Allan hitches a ride!

David Waters and Allan Goddard travelled to Saratov in October to assist with the autumn census. This was conducted slightly later than usual due to other commitments. The main concern was that the weather may have turned, and a bit of rain can make most of the tracks impassable. Good fortune shined on the census however and the weather remained excellent right up until the last day when the warm, sunny days were replaced by a grey sky, steady rain and the odd snowflake.

The aftermath of the summer's fires was also obvious – huge areas of farmland were charred and blackened. When the chicks were exported in early August there were few fire problems east of the Volga. Later that month the village of Diakovka was put on evacuation alert. Documents were buried and coaches lined up on standby to take the villagers away. Thankfully, the hastily made 'firebreaks' were up to the job and the danger passed.

The census will be written up fully in due course, but the numbers appear to be consistent with previous years on casual inspection. There were a very few areas where Great Bustards were absent, and the largest flock seen by Allan and David was 48. Several flocks of Little Bustards were seen and other birds of note included a Greater Spotted Eagle, Merlin, Hen Harriers and Long-legged Buzzards. Allan's observations about the agriculture are recorded on pages 24 and 25 of this issue of *Otis*.



Allan setting up for a day in the field

Say hello...

Say hello to Cathy Shaw, an undergraduate at Cornwall College, University of Exeter, who worked throughout September with the GBG studying the behaviour of the birds as part of her third-year course.

Say goodbye...

...and say goodbye to one of our oldest and longest-serving Land Rovers which has now shuffled off its suspension coils and gone to the great scrap-heap in the sky. Should any GBG members happen to have a roadworthy LR lying around, please let us know as the gap in the carpark needs filling...

LIFE Members day

On 9th October the GBG was delighted to hold its annual Life Members and Fellows Day. Life Members and Fellows support the project at a higher level and it is always a pleasure to recognise this support in some way.

Despite a cheery weather forecast a dull overcast sky and a chilly wind greeted the party. The guests however remained undaunted as they were updated on the project progress and given a presentation with slides of this year's work, events and developments.

The highlight of the day of course was seeing the birds. A flock of 13 Great Bustards performed on cue and the special group were treated to a fly past by one of the new releases. Great Bustards fly very well but do not spend a great deal of time in the air. It is always a treat to see them flying and this bird joined a mixed flock of new birds and ones

Sad news from the Hawk Conservancy Trust



© GBG library

Jean Claude will be sadly missed by visitors to HCT

On October 8th we were contacted by the Hawk Conservancy and given the sad news that Jean-Claude, one of two captive Great Bustards (neither of whom were able to survive in the wild), had passed away after a very short illness. Jean-Claude was over 20 years old and had been ill for only a day. He will undoubtedly be missed by visitors to the Hawk Conservancy as well as by GBG staff and volunteers.

from previous years. One of the most rewarding sights in that flock was that of Orange 15. This female is from the first release in 2004. She had not been seen since July and although she often goes for long periods without any sightings it is always a relief to see her again.

Holding the Life Members and Fellows Day at this time of year always leads to an element of risk with the weather. However the autumn months give the greatest chance to see a large flock of birds and the best chance of seeing a flying Great Bustard. The spectacular sights were more than compensation for the chill wind and after a 'warm up' in the caravan, helped along with tea, coffee, biscuits and cake our guests went home happy, all looking forward to another visit.

Life Membership is available from £500, and a subscription as a Fellow is from £75 a year.

Visit from China



David Waters, Director of the GBG, hosted John Corder (Vice President of the World Pheasant Association, the organisation which has responsibility for the *in-situ* and *ex-situ* conservation of all the world's galliformes) and Zhang Jing, Curator of the Pheasants Breeding Centre (PBC) at Beijing Zoo on a visit to the Project Site.

David and Al Dawes, Project Site Manager, were shown around the PBC while attending the first ever Great Bustard Symposium in China earlier this year. The zoo has a collection of six Great Bustards, all belonging to the eastern sub-species *Otis tarda dybowskii*, which have been in the Zoo for at least 15 years.

While in Beijing the GBG and the Zoo Director expressed a mutual interest in exchanging ideas on bustard conservation, and this reciprocal visit was warmly welcomed as affirmation of our developing relationship.

With Release Site Manager, Al Dawes New life in the skies of Wiltshire



The newly released Great Bustards are taking to the skies

Late summer and early autumn is always a busy time at the Bustard Site, preparing for the new arrivals, caring for them in quarantine and monitoring their progress once released. Preparations started in earnest in July, getting conditions suitable in the bustard pen for the birds to be released.

Our activities in the bustard pen throughout the year are kept to a minimum to reduce disturbance to any birds that happen to be around the site. Of course, a particularly sensitive time is just after the release each year, when the birds are settling into their new surroundings and learning to fly. This means that we need to prepare the ground and sow our over-wintering fodder crops in the pen before the birds are released and much earlier than farmers do. Not being particularly green fingered, this has been something of a challenge in previous years.

Thankfully this year the GBG have been able to call on the farming experience of volunteer Allan Goddard and, with his farmer's touch, have been able to get plenty of Oil Seed Rape established for the birds this autumn with enough to even last them over the winter.

With the cultivation activities inside the pen,

the older birds from previous years' releases had been spending time away from the site. Once the pen was ready, we encouraged the birds back by putting the plastic decoys out, which have proved so successful in attracting the attentions of the males in the breeding season. After some discussion with the Great Crane Project in Somerset GBG also decided to trial the use of decoys with feeding stations for Great Bustards. The idea is that the decoys attract the birds whilst the supplementary feed helps to anchor them to their new environment.

The decoys and feeders are positioned in naturally good foraging areas so the birds aren't totally reliant on the food. Once the birds are familiar with the decoys and feeder, these can be relocated to places which we want the birds to use – such as areas that are being managed for Great Bustards or areas where we might want the birds to be undisturbed for a period of time. Within hours of putting the decoys and feeder inside the pen, and just one day before the release of this year's birds, three Great Bustards flew in to investigate.

All released birds were fitted with wingtags (this year's colour is pink) and 15 were fitted

with GPS enabled PTT transmitters that will allow staff to track their movements with pin-point accuracy.

GBG was joined by our good friend and colleague Prof. Juan Carlos Alonso from Spain's Museum of Natural Science, in Madrid. Juan Carlos has been working with GBG since 2007, helping to fit the GPS satellite transmitters to the UK-released Great Bustards.

The release of 22 Great Bustards this autumn marks the start of year seven for the trial-reintroduction project. Bath PhD. student John Burnside has been working closely with the project for two years and has helped devise the release method this year. Regular followers of Otis may remember that last year the release method included a period of captivity in a 'soft pen', after quarantine and before final release into the main bustard pen. The idea of this soft pen stage is to let the birds acclimatise to conditions in the wild and familiarise themselves with the landscape in the hope of anchoring them to the site for long enough to meet older birds from previous releases.

This year we have used the soft pens again but have trialled different release techniques to study whether there is a relationship between release method and post-release survival. John was joined for a month by Cathy Shaw, an undergraduate student from Exeter University, studying the behaviour of the birds in quarantine. They discovered that male and female birds did not mix socially as much as single sexes did.

For this reason the birds were grouped into males and females in the hope that stronger social bonds would form, making them more likely to remain as a group after release which in turn is more likely to increase survival.

The birds were split into four groups and released in four separate events. The first release saw five males released straight into the bustard pen and two weeks later these were joined by six females: hard released.

On the same day as the females went out, a group of six males and a group of five females were put into soft pens, within the bustard pen. Ten days later the group of males was let out of the soft pen followed a week later by the females. One idea in this approach to release is that gradually introducing juvenile birds into the wild may be less daunting to the older birds (released in previous years) than suddenly flooding the area with youngsters, thus encouraging more interaction between old and young birds.

The whole event was filmed by wildlife cameraman Manuel Hinge for a forthcoming documentary and also recorded by wildlife photographer David Kjaer.

GBG was also delighted to be joined on the day by wildlife photographer David Tipling. GBG members, visitors to the project and followers of this website will be familiar with

the photos of both David Kjaer and David Tipling as they have both kindly granted us permission to use their images of Great Bustards for our website and printed literature for many years.

Now is the time to visit

Autumn is an excellent time to visit the project, to see the flocks of newly released birds and also catch a glimpse of migrant species such as Hen Harrier, Merlin and flocks of Golden Plover. To book a guided tour of the Project Site telephone 07817 971 327 or email [us](mailto:us@greatbustard.org) on visit@greatbustard.org



© John Burnside

From Russia with Love..

David Waters, GBG Director, reports on this year's trip to Saratov

The chick rearing operation went very successfully this year. The GBG provided funds for the rearing pens at Diakovka to be rebuilt by the staff of the Severtsov Institute. In rearing any number of birds there will always be the odd case of sickness or injury. Wing and leg injuries often occur when the young birds are testing their wings and so on – all natural behaviour but it can be dangerous in confinement.

The time of highest risk is just before the chicks are exported to the UK. They are quite large, have feathers that allow good lift and the muscles are getting very strong. The new pens were designed and constructed to reduce the density of the birds, without giving them too much space. If they are given a single big pen they can get up to injury inducing speeds before they reach the other end. Several small pens are a better option – keeping density low but not giving long runs.

Changes in the diet this year saw a decrease in the proteins the chicks were receiving, combined with an increase in calcium. The

results were very gratifying. Soft bones and a condition known as angel wing – where the weight of rapidly growing feathers pulls the small wing down and twists it outwards – are always associated with captive reared birds. John Chitty, GBG's Consultant Vet was pleased to declare this year's birds as the best annual group he had seen.

The paperwork also went very smoothly, and after some very painful years it is only proper to acknowledge the competent service from both the UK and the Russian authorities in the export/import of the birds.

After a very successful veterinary trip in the last week of July, when Ruth Manvell, Virologist, John Chitty and I were joined by Suzy Elkins, GBG's Marketing Manager, I returned after a few days to undertake the shipment of the birds. The heatwave and fires in the western regions of Russia made the news here in the UK. On the eastern side of the River Volga things seemed fine. Once we were over the river though the smell of burning was with us all the time. The smoke

varied from a haze to a thick fog. We took a more westerly route than usual via Tula to avoid the worst areas and fortunately had no problems other than a lack of visibility.

The temperature did not drop below 30 degrees all night and had climbed up to 45 degrees by the time we arrived in Moscow in the morning. The airport was covered in a shroud of smoke – Jumbos on the runway were hidden and we could not see the far side of the customs building.



Anastasia protects her lungs from the smoke



It was touch and go as to whether the smoke would prevent planes from taking off on time - if at all!

All the paperwork went smoothly and the birds were fed and watered before passing through the customs zone. I had a few worries as I headed towards the passenger terminal as nearly all flights were cancelled, and to add to the overcrowded atmosphere inside, the air-conditioning was not working. Staff wore masks and goggles because of the smoke and everywhere the air was thick with the acrid smell of burning.

I hurried back to the cargo terminal, as no information was available from the passenger side. The British Airways Cargo staff were wonderful and by various means they were able to find out and tell me that the London flight had left on time and was expected to land in Moscow on schedule. I was much relieved to be on one of the few flights that left on time (or indeed left Moscow at all that day), and watched the birds being loaded in the special crates.

All the birds were fine on arrival in Heathrow, and as usual, they seemed to cope with the journey rather more comfortably than I did!



The smog made all travel difficult and there was a real risk that we wouldn't fly to the UK



The birds being loaded onto the aircraft - at last we were off!



The train from Moscow to Saratov

A week or so after my departure from Diakovka Field Station fires broke out in the area. The station and the rest of the village were not damaged by fire, although the villagers were warned to pack or bury valuables and evacuation coaches were parked on standby in the village. The nearby Diakovka Forest was burnt, but this was held in check by a firebreak hastily made a few kilometres from the houses.

At the time of writing I am back in Diakovka with GBG volunteer and agricultural specialist Allan Goddard, working with our Russian colleagues on the autumn census. The summer heatwave and drought is taking its toll on the agriculture. Much of the winter wheat has not been sown due to a lack of moisture and the fields that were sown are

very patchy indeed. The weather is very kind for census work – bright and sunny and quite warm during the day, but cold at night. The locals are all talking about a very cold winter with – 45 degrees being mentioned.



Tasya at BA Cargo, our thanks for her help



Allan Goddard in Saratov after the fires cleared

A few words from Russia

Dr Anatoli Khrustov writes



The Head of the Severtsov Institute reports on the current condition of the Saratov Great Bustard population and thoughts on its conservation.

At the current time, when the Russian steppes are so under the influence of agricultural cultivation that they would be unrecognisable to past generations of Russians, there is practically nowhere that has been left untouched by one or another area of human activity. This is significantly affecting the populations of specific large birds and animals and this is especially true of the Great Bustard *Otis tarda Linnaeus, 1758*, a typical and historic inhabitant of the Palearctic steppes.

Following huge declines across its range the Great Bustard is now considered a globally endangered species. It is included in the IUCN Red Book, the Red Book of Russia and Saratov Region and in similar documents of many of the countries where it is still found. The largest and most viable population of the species in Russia is in the Saratov Region, mainly in Zavolzhye (Volga Region); there are between 4 and 5.5 thousand Great Bustards, making up about 50% of the overall number of the species in Eastern Europe.

The stability of the Saratov population to a high degree will therefore determine the existence of other smaller populations of the

species and of the Eastern European population as a whole. That is why the conservation of the Saratov Great Bustard population is a major issue - not only regionally, but nationally and at an international level.

Our research in Saratov Zavolzhye has shown the strong connection between Great Bustard nest sites and agricultural fields growing grain and beans (51.1% of the total), and also previous year crops (33.4%) or fallow (17.5%). To date no nests have been registered on virgin land. The Great Bustard therefore breeds in agricultural areas and must adapt to all sorts of limiting factors to survive. Of these, the most important is the timing of crop cultivation, which typically takes place during the reproduction period. The use of various heavy agricultural machinery leads to a massive destruction of nests and chick injuries. Cultivation also has a serious negative influence on the reproduction of different carnivores, as well as leading to an increase in the transient population of crows which destroy many nests.

Considering the listed factors which are now impacting on the Saratov Great Bustard population, our main target is to develop a set of measures aimed at increasing successful breeding by means of supervision over cultivation and other elements of agriculture, whilst being aware of the need to preserve

farming profitability. It's also important to create a net of strictly controlled natural territories and lekking areas, nesting sites, and locations that hold the densest concentration of Great Bustards in the periods before emigration. It would also be productive to introduce measures reducing the numbers of carnivores and crows, and to educate people about Great Bustard conservation.

That is why at present, both a regional programme and joint Russian-British "Great Bustard Conservation" studies are being carried out to develop and introduce optimal agricultural programmes, which with regulation of planting schedules and agricultural technologies will help achieve the maximum success of future Great Bustard reintroductions into agricultural areas. Alongside biotechnological measures taking place in the wild, work is also being done to artificially incubate eggs from nests destroyed during cultivation, rear the chicks and release them into the field.

The realisation of the targets and aims of the project will be a large contribution towards the retention of small populations of Russian Great Bustards, the reintroduction of bustards into areas where they have become extinct, and the creation of entirely new populations.



Conservation signs are erected in Saratov to raise awareness of the bustard's plight

Fundraising auction is a huge success

Where every Lot means an awful lot! Otis Editor, Charlie Moores, reports on this year's Grand Auction.

For the third year in a row the GBG held a Gala Event and Grand Auction at London's prestigious Royal Geographic Society. Organised with 'wedding planner' precision (and no small effort) by Suzy Elkins, our ever-effervescent Marketing Manager, the evening was extremely memorable and a great chance for GBG staff and members to get together and discuss the successes of 2010 and the opportunities still to come.

We were delighted to be joined on the night by three of our Russian colleagues, Anastasia Barsukova, Dr Anatoli Khrustov (Head of the Severtsov Institute) and Tatiana Scripnik (CITES Office), who had only flown in a few days before. Dr Khrustov gave an inspired talk

(translated ably by Anastasia) on the relationship between the Saratov Institute and the GBG which was extremely well-received.

As was a typically enthusiastic presentation by our guest speaker, the TV presenter, renowned naturalist and GBG supporter, Mike Dilger.

Mike gave his time to us most generously, obligingly fitting us in between filming assignments with the BBC's 'The One Show'. He delivered an ebullient talk about his life as a presenter and natural historian (which included an impressive list of illnesses he's picked up on his travels - not for nothing is he nicknamed 'Britain's most-diseased man') and his passion for the Great Bustard and the work that the GBG is doing. Mike did a fantastic job and we thank him wholeheartedly for his support.



Iain Green's beautiful 'Sleeping Kingfisher'



The Royal Geographic Society Map Room was the perfect location for the event

The main purpose of the evening was of course fundraising and the Grand Auction was wonderfully presided over by professional auctioneer Chris Linney. Forty-two Lots were on offer, all donated by local businesses, GBG Trustees and GBG staff, and included an unforgettable holiday in South Africa, a hand-carved oak table made by craftsman Adam Rose, silver jewellery donated by Sebastian Salt of Salisbury's Sarum Jewellers, a beautiful limited edition photograph of a sleeping Kingfisher by Iain Green (who was also present on the evening signing copies of his latest book *Wild London*), a decoy carving of a Pintail and a whole lot more (no pun intended).

For the first time a selection of the Lots were offered prior to the event through the GBG website, an initiative that worked extremely well. With bidding in the room added to the bids entered online the amount raised has (at the time of writing) already topped £13,000 – a magnificent sum which will as ever be used by the GBG to support our reintroduction project.

A huge thanks to all the staff and volunteers who worked so hard to make the evening such a success. Next year we're looking at a change of venue a little closer to the project, so hopefully even more of our members and supporters can join us for what is now firmly established as the fund-raising event of the year!



Tatiana Scripnik & Dr Khrustov cut the cake



GBG Retail & Visits Manager Lynne Derry with her husband Andy greet guests with a smile



Suzy joins Mike Dilger after his talk to thank guests for their bids

We will be running an auction of unusual Christmas gifts from mid-November so keep your eye on our website: www.greatbustard.org

Breathing new LIFE



Life team, from left to right Leigh Lock (RSPB), Adrian Oates & Nick Folkard (RSPB International Funding Unit) Professor Tamas Szekely (Bath University), Karen & David Waters (Great Bustard Group).

In the summer of 2009 the RSPB joined the Great Bustard Consortium (GBC), joining the GBG and the University of Bath. Now the latest chapter in the project unfurls. David Waters reports on this momentous development.

Having such a large and powerful project partner brings many advantages and opportunities. The first big task tackled by the new GBC was that of funding – the key to most things.

Working closely with, but undoubtedly leading, its partners the RSPB set about compiling an application for EU LIFE funding. LIFE projects are typically 5-year undertakings, and are by GBG standards very big. The mechanics of completing the predictably long and complex application process were beyond the capabilities of the GBG and

indeed most organisations many times the size of the GBG. The RSPB have a dedicated unit to tackle these processes and they are recognised as masters in the field.

After nearly a year of meetings, planning, number crunching and redrafting, the application was submitted by the RSPB International Funding Unit in August 2009. The approval process goes through several stages and although confidence grows with each stage, it was with great relief that the final approval was given by the European Parliament in late July this year.

The Great Bustard LIFE project is controlled by four organisations – the three members of the GBC and Natural England. LIFE will operate as a distinct project, within the wider Great Bustard Reintroduction Project and must provide for new work, as opposed to

supporting existing, ongoing tasks. LIFE proposals must also be clearly defined and those definitions must be adhered to – if the applicant states that £1,000 is needed for the purchase of seeds, there is no option of spending it on a new Land Rover, however acute the need.

The total LIFE project has a budget of approximately £1.6 million, of which just over £1.2 million is LIFE funding. The Great Bustard LIFE Project fund will cover a maximum of 75% of the project costs – more than the usual LIFE limit of 50%, as the Great Bustard is a priority species for the EU. The balance of the remaining 25% comes from the project partners. The project will run for 5 years.

The funds will, amongst other things, provide for four new full time posts: a LIFE Project Manager, a Project Officer and two posts dedicated to monitoring the birds after their release. These new posts will be jointly managed by the LIFE Project partners. Other significant areas include huge increases in the capabilities of monitoring, through satellite transmitters for example, wider scale landscape management and a second release site. This second release site is intended to be close to the current project core – somewhere in south Wiltshire, to support the existing small population rather than start a second project in a new area.

Leigh Lock (RSPB) says "We are delighted to have secured this funding, which gives the project the best possible chance of being successful in its goal of re-establishing a

secure population of Great Bustards in England'.

Ian Carter of Natural England welcomed the new partnership: 'The LIFE funding will clearly put the project on a much firmer footing and ensure that key areas such as monitoring of the released birds are adequately resourced. We are set to learn a great deal more about this species over the coming five years!'

Funding on this scale will transform the wider project – allowing us to get what we need, rather than what we can just get by on. Having this support does not mean that the GBG funding demands are all met- far from it. The GBG must, to a significant degree, continue to fund its ongoing work – LIFE is aimed at new work, not supporting ongoing

activities. For all the new work the partners must find the 25% matched funding LIFE requires and this is in addition to the ongoing work. Russia is outside the EU and therefore LIFE funds cannot be spent there. There is no question that the project has received a huge boost, but it is important to recognise that GBG must keep hard at its fundraising to ensure that all the project commitments are met.

At the time of writing only one post, that of LIFE Project Manager, has been filled. The successful applicant was Tracé Williams, a long time friend of the GBG and widely known in her previous post of RSPB Chalk Grassland Officer. A more detailed account of LIFE and introductions to the new staff will appear in the next issue of Otis.



Dave Kjaer - the man behind the lens



Dave Kjaer donates photographs to GBG

Charlie Moores talks to professional photographer Dave Kjaer

Anyone visiting the GBG website or reading Otis can't fail to notice the large number of high-quality photographs credited to one Dave Kjaer. A life-long birdwatcher and a professional photographer since 1996, Dave has been recording the development of the GBG almost since the start of the project. From the first Russian bustards released from quarantine in 2004, right the way up to the wild-born chicks in 2009 and 2010, Dave and his cameras have been on hand. And every photo he takes whilst on 'GBG duty' is provided freely and without copyright restriction. Over the years that has added up to an extremely valuable donation to the GBG, enabling us to provide our supporters with the very best images possible and to produce top-grade promotional material without the high costs that usually come with using original photographs.

Dave goes about his business quietly and without fuss, so I suspect few GBG members know very much about him. I went to meet Dave at his home in Warminster to talk cameras, birding and bustards – and why he

has a special affection for one particular four-year-old bird...

Settling down over a cup of tea in Dave's quiet garden, I began by asking him about his route from amateur point-and-shooter to renowned professional with photos regularly making the covers of national wildlife magazines.

His answer should perhaps be encouragement for all of us who never quite manage to capture the image they see through the viewfinder, as it turns out that Dave's first attempts at photography were not a qualified success. Pointing an old compact Olympus 35mm at Dotterels on a birding holiday to the Cairngorms he was dismayed to find that although he'd been able to get quite close (typically Dotterels do allow a close approach) he'd only captured "tiny images" of birds hardly distinguishable from the surrounding rocks.

Setting his standards high from the outset, Dave realised that if he wanted to get anything like acceptable photographs he would have to upgrade his equipment. Out went the Olympus and in came a Pentax K1000 – 'a basic but sturdy workhorse, particularly suited to educating inexperi-

enced photographers' according to Wikipedia. Adding a Hoya 300mm lens for closer shots he then rebooked a visit to Scotland for the following year and tried again.

The results were a huge improvement and he's never looked back since. Dave now uses two digital camera bodies, the Canon 1D MarkIV and 5D MarkII, with "a full set" of Canon lenses, including the mighty 500mm f.4 L which retails at around £5,000. Serious kit for a serious photographer.

I ask him whether as a photographer who developed his skills with film he is happy to use digital or regrets the passing of acetates and silver halides. "Digital is undoubtedly easier," he says, "and the image quality is superb." I broach the awkward subject of whether because digital has made it easier to take photos professionals like him are struggling to place images, and whether there's even a good living to still be made from bird photography. "You still need to know what you're doing and have the patience and fieldcraft to get a good photograph, but it's true that competition is so fierce that it's far harder for people to turn professional and make enough money to live on.





Male Y07 threatens the chick of female G6. Hiding her chick in the grass she gives chase & scares off the male, who is over twice her weight

Do I make a living?" he muses after a pause for thought. "I've been lucky so far. I still get commissions. I think once you're well-known and have a good library of shots you can get by. Mind you," he adds, "my police pension certainly helps!"

Sharp-eyed readers familiar with the GBG will have focussed on the word 'police' in that last sentence. GBG Director, David Waters, is of course an ex-policeman and Dave Kjaer, who had a thirty-year career in the police force, first met David at Winchester Crown Court during a case which David Waters still recalls vividly (but whose description of the villains involved is not suitable for a publication such as this). They hit it off immediately and when he was approached to take photographs at the nascent release-site he readily agreed.

"I admire David's passion. He's turned the project into a reality and everyone at the GBG believes in what they're doing," Dave answers when I ask him what it is about the GBG that has kept him supporting the project for so long. "And as a birder I always enjoy visiting the project site. The bustards are very special."

While squashed into the small hides inside the release-pen he has built up a wonderful collection of other Salisbury Plain 'specials' like Stone Curlews and Corn Buntings, but it's the bustards that draw him back time and again. "The bustards are such incredible birds," he says, "I can't believe there's anybody who wouldn't want to see them back on the Plain."

It's a sentiment that any GBG supporter would agree with and as our conversation draws towards a close I'm left in no doubt that Dave Kjaer, a man who has repeatedly travelled the length and breadth of Britain and Europe looking at spectacular and beautiful wildlife, has a very soft spot indeed for the Great Bustard: and, it appears, for one Great Bustard in particular.

"Green 6, the female that managed to raise chicks this year," he replies immediately when I ask him if he has a favourite. "She's only a young bird herself but she's a fantastic mother. I remember watching them in the summer, when the chick was no more than two weeks old. A male bustard came over, noticed the chick and began staring at it.

Green 6 wasn't taking any chances. She went charging in and ran straight for him. She's only about a third of the size of him, but she drove him off. That moment alone made all the hours waiting for the right image worthwhile."

Photography is very much about waiting and seeing what develops. I ask Dave if he still enjoys lugging his equipment around or folding himself into hides and spending endless hours waiting for 'something to happen'. He gives a rueful smile. "My back's not as strong as it was and I don't quite handle the winter like I did, but I can't see myself stopping anytime soon. I can honestly say I love it and I'm really privileged to be taking photographs professionally."

Not perhaps as privileged as we at the GBG are to have the free use of so many wonderful images and to have such a passionate and skilled supporter willing the project on.

You can see Dave's photographs online or contact him via his website www.davidkjaer.com



© Dave Kjaer

© Dave Kjaer

Len Tryhorn - a Good Friend



Len gives his weekends whenever he can to join GBG work parties, helping with everything from building paths to fundraising

Why would someone want to become a Friend of the Bustard, volunteering their valuable time to support the GBG? Everyone at the GBG thinks they know why, but the best thing to do is to ask a Friend and find out!

Enter Len Tryhorn, Production Manager for thirty years at The Tintometer Ltd, a local firm that has itself often supported the GBG. Len, a self-professed 'countryperson who hates towns' is already a radio ham and River Warden, but somehow finds the time to organise sponsored walks, bake-offs and a lottery syndicate for the GBG, he even persuaded his colleagues to make GBG The Tintometer's 'Charity of the Year' for 2010. Thankyou Tintometer!

He does it, he says because of the bustards, and because unlike some other charities he's donated his time to in the past he can see with the GBG where the money goes. He is also able to visit the site, get stuck in and is

always made to feel very welcome. He says too that every moment given to the GBG visibly helps.

So what does he need in return? He thinks that 'Just Giving' will make it easier in the future to donate and suggests that we offer more help to volunteers who wish to organise fundraising events. Another great suggestion from Len is a more lively information network between GBG and volunteers. All good points and ones we will incorporate as we develop Friends of the Bustard in the future. Once again, Len, thanks for your help!



Thankyou to all our dedicated volunteers

You can help too!

The 'Friends of the Bustard' are volunteers who help the GBG to raise money, maintain the Project Site and ensure that things run smoothly both locally and nationally. Joining is completely free and you only help when you can!



A great new way to help the GBG

Each year the Great Bustard Group must raise enough to fund the continuation of the project to reintroduce this magnificent bird to the UK. Everything from rearing bustard chicks in Russia, veterinary checks, transport, quarantine costs and the ongoing cost of maintaining the extensive Great Bustard Project Site must be paid for. Fundraising is not only time consuming but actually costly, and effort must continually be put into it. The GBG has a dedicated and enthusiastic fundraising team - but they need your help.

Even with our newly-awarded LIFE grant every donation - no matter how small or large - is essential. The efforts of supporters all across the UK make a huge difference to the running of the GBG, with the Grand Auction each autumn and appearances and events proving invaluable to the group.

We want to make supporting us as easy as possible so we've now set up a JustGiving page. One of the most respected online fundraising tools in the world, JustGiving is used by organisations, charities and individuals around the world. So far over 700 million pounds has been raised by its users, and it is a fun, easy and most importantly, a completely secure way to make a difference. We're now one of over 7,000 UK charities that trust JustGiving to help organise and support their fundraising efforts.

To see how easy JustGiving is to use visit our JustGiving page at www.justgiving.com/greatbustardgroup. Once there you can make a donation, sponsor someone else who is raising funds for us, or even become a fundraiser yourself.

Why not join us for our Great New Year Challenge? We're 'Cycling to Saratov' to raise funds for a new visitor Land Rover. Not literally of course, but every mile counts as we battle it out in the gym & on bikes across the country. Shift the excess Christmas weight and get pedalling with us! See our JustGiving page for details.



JustGiving™

Get your bike out in January to help us 'Cycle to Saratov!'



Back to the school desk!



The Great Bustard Group's representative in Russia, Anastasia Barsukova, writes on her work in this incredible country, and reflects on her recent visit to Britain

This autumn has been rich in experiences. In September we visited a Krasny Kut school, and one of the students gave a presentation about Russia and the UK, their similarities and differences. He must have done a long and meticulous job, comparing every aspect from flags and geography to cuisines and pastimes. English culture has been part of my job and life for years, as I'm a teacher of English and an interpreter and I know from my personal experience that Russians and the British really are different in many ways but, surprisingly, have a lot in common as well.

Cultural exploration is particularly important for those learning a foreign language because it tells about countries just as much as maps and textbooks.

That is why I was so pleased to see this much interest in such a young boy who enthusiastically showed us a selection of pictures of traditional Russian and British symbols and explained the differences in political systems.

After the meeting we spoke to Allan and he corrected a couple of things, saying that some facts are no longer this way. I remembering thinking just the same when I visited Marlborough College and stood in the Russian classroom amidst books and posters of the old days alongside modern calendars. And I thought that as always the best way to learn is to ask someone who knows.

Asking questions is my invariable pastime and this autumn gave me an invaluable chance to indulge myself in it because I returned to school.

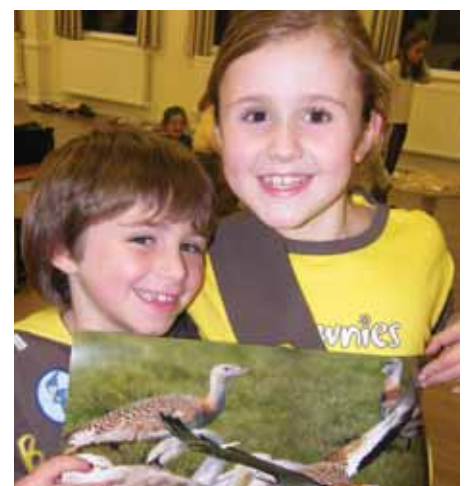
But this time it was in Salisbury, not in Saratov, my native town in Russia and I wasn't a pupil anymore. I was very privileged to spend a whole day with a class at St. Edmund's School for girls, following them from classroom to classroom, waiting for the teacher, peering into books and turning my head in curiosity. And indeed, the choice of things to ask and compare was infinite. Why are the students streamed for a Maths class but not for IT? Is learning in a single-sex school more effective? Why are the corridor walls painted pink? What is the green room for? And who made that straw horse at the door?

I bombarded Karen Waters and everyone I met with questions, eager to relay the answers to my students back in Russia, as I knew a lot would be a surprise for them. There was so much to learn and compare, from the teaching style to clubs where you can have a Halloween party every week, happily faking black eyes and fractures with

artificial blood and chicken bones. I'd like to thank Karen and the girls who made a performance of their achievements for me. Thank you very much, I've never been more frightened in my life!

All of this might be very common for English children but not for Russian. Similarly, I have no doubt that there is a lot to surprise an English visitor in a Russian school too. Nonetheless, children are still children in all the world, with their hopes, interests and hobbies being as big a part of life education as reading and doing exercises, and meeting people enriches them and teaches tolerance much more than lectures or articles.

Communication is key to cultural understanding and therefore it's a vital investment in the world's future which should begin as early as the school desk. That is why in Badger School we support the GBG in their efforts to link Russian and English schools and encourage students to exchange emails and share their experience of wildlife among everything else, as nature is what we all have in common. We're always happy to tell more and answer whatever questions via email: russia@greatbustard.org



GBG often visits Schools and Brownie groups

If you would like to discuss linking your school, club or organisation with a Russian school contact Suzy Elkins on schools@greatbustard.org. Or speak directly to Anastasia on badgerschool@inbox.ru.

More news from our Russian schools



The pupils from Krasny Kut visit Diakovka

David Waters reports on a visit made by children from a Russian school to the field station in Saratov.

On Monday 11th October the members of the International Children's Organisation from Karasny Kut School Number 1 came to the Great Bustard Field Station in Diakovka. Diakovka is a small village, which is about 45 minutes drive from the town of Krasny Kut. The Students came out to the Field Station on a school bus after their lessons had finished for the day.

I was able to greet them and then to hand over to Tatiana, who is responsible for the incubation and chick rearing at the station. There were six Great Bustards for the children to see. Some of these are birds are destined for zoo collections in Russia so did not need to be sheltered from human contact.

The rearing of the chicks for the UK involved keeping human contact to a minimum, which was something of a disappointment to some of the children, who had hoped to get more involved in the project. However, they are keen to come back in the spring and form a

work party to clear the whole area of the pens, dig it over and then plant it with crops for the growing chicks to feed on next year.

There was an additional bonus of two hand reared Saiga Antelope at the Field Station. Saiga are kept as a part of a research programme into the grazing habitat of these peculiar looking steppe inhabitants. Once present in vast numbers, excessive hunting and habitat changes have drastically reduced their population.

The students took the opportunity of reminding David of his promise to get each of their letters answered by a British student. He brought back a pile of letters, all well written in English from the Russian students (aged 11

– 16) and would like to hear from anyone who would like to take up the chance of a Russian pen (or email) friend. All the students are capable of corresponding in English and there are still a number of penfriends available. Contact schools@greatbustard.org and we will put you in touch with a suitable Russian student.



(Above) The children from School No 1 at Diakovka Field Station (Above Circle) David with a Saiga

Would you like the GBG to visit your school? Or how about bringing a class to meet our captive bird in the UK's only Great Bustard aviary at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Hampshire? Contact schools@greatbustard.org for more information, or see the schools section on our website.

A Farmer's View



Allan Goddard, GBG's Farm Liaison reports on his recent trip to Russia

As a recently retired farmer from Dorset I have gained huge enjoyment volunteering at the GBG project on Salisbury Plain over the last nine months. The mix of elements I find enjoyable are all there; working with some of the most impressive birds on the planet, driving Land Rovers off road, hosting all ages of lovely people from different areas of the country and of course helping to liaise with Bruce Waight and family, our host farmers at the site.

So when David Waters offered me the chance to accompany him on the autumn census of the Great Bustards in Saratov I jumped at the chance. The Autumn census is a part of the memorandum of cooperation between the GBG and the Russian partners, the Severtsov Institute of Ecology, that we will assist them in counting the Great Bustards present there at two periods of the year.

I could tell you about the relatively incident free flight to Moscow, a fun day in the capital seeing Red Square, the Kremlin, or indeed the zoo. Or I could tell you about the 16-hour sleeper train to Saratov, complete with the coal-fired boiler on each sleeper car. But instead I will concentrate on telling you how, in my opinion, the Great Bustards integrate with agriculture in the region.

Having spent most of my adult life looking at other farmers' shop windows I have always been able to work out "what went wrong there then?". So on the long journey to Diakovka Field Station with Dr Anatoli Khrustov and interpreter Anastasia I had no problem in looking at everyone's "shop window".

However I quickly found myself saying, "Goodness, what happened there? Or he needs to Roundup that before it gets out of hand, or he could have ploughed a bit closer up to the edge and so grown more". After an hour or so of this, admittedly interspersed with three way conversations with Anastasia and Anatoli about life in Russia, I realised that arable farming in Saratov was different and I needed to understand why.

On day one of the census I was intrigued as to what was cultivated field and what was not. There are areas that look like they may well not have had a crop perhaps last year or even the year before. Other areas had recently been burnt. It became apparent that the limiting factors of crop production here were not related to one of the limiting factors in the UK, namely how much ground you have.

The limiting factors would appear to fall into three brackets: one is the extremes of the weather – very hot summers (over 40 degrees) and winter temperatures below -35 degrees; the second was obviously the input costs looked as if they must have been out of reach of the farmers whose fields these were; additionally the area is prone to drought and this year saw a notable lack of rain.

During day one of the census I had the feeling that we were in ideal wheat planting conditions: the soil was obviously fertile, deep and in a lovely friable condition. However, after having had the opportunity to talk to the man working the field he told me that this was far too late in the year for planting winter wheat because it would not withstand the rigors of winter unless it had

been established a month earlier. As the census days went on I lost count of the number of fields of winter wheat that looked as though only 10% had emerged, albeit what had emerged was well tillered and looking good. On closer inspection (and some judicious digging) I could see that during the still-dry planting period farmers had said to themselves "the planting window is closing, if we are going to do it we have got to drill it into the moisture" – in this case that was over 4 inches deep, twice the norm for a wheat plant.



Unfortunately the depth of moisture was far from uniform, resulting in the poor plant populations I was seeing. As the days progressed I was more resigned to this and thanking my lucky stars I farmed in Dorset. I observed several crops of spring barley that had been left unharvested because the dry summer had only permitted a small crop which was just not worth harvesting. In the UK such a poor harvest would have been brought in, almost regardless, but perhaps here the cost of fuel and the selling price of the grain did not add up to an economic proposition.

Having now been bludgeoned into recognising the status quo I was enjoying the spotting of the Great Bustards, but was increasingly surprised at their wariness. My horizons had had to be increased to observe bustards who had already decided we were too close. They

would flush at distances (that I thought were nothing to do with us) up to a mile away. My mind then turned to Salisbury Plain and I wondered how a bustard could ever relax.

On day five we happened across some “proper” agriculture. Four combine harvesters in three fields polishing off a fine, albeit small due to the drought, crop of sunflowers. Initially I thought I would just squeeze a look at that shiny new Claas Combine but then thought I ought to do the observation that was required for bustards first. I could not believe my luck when I saw a flash of grey and thought “bustard”.

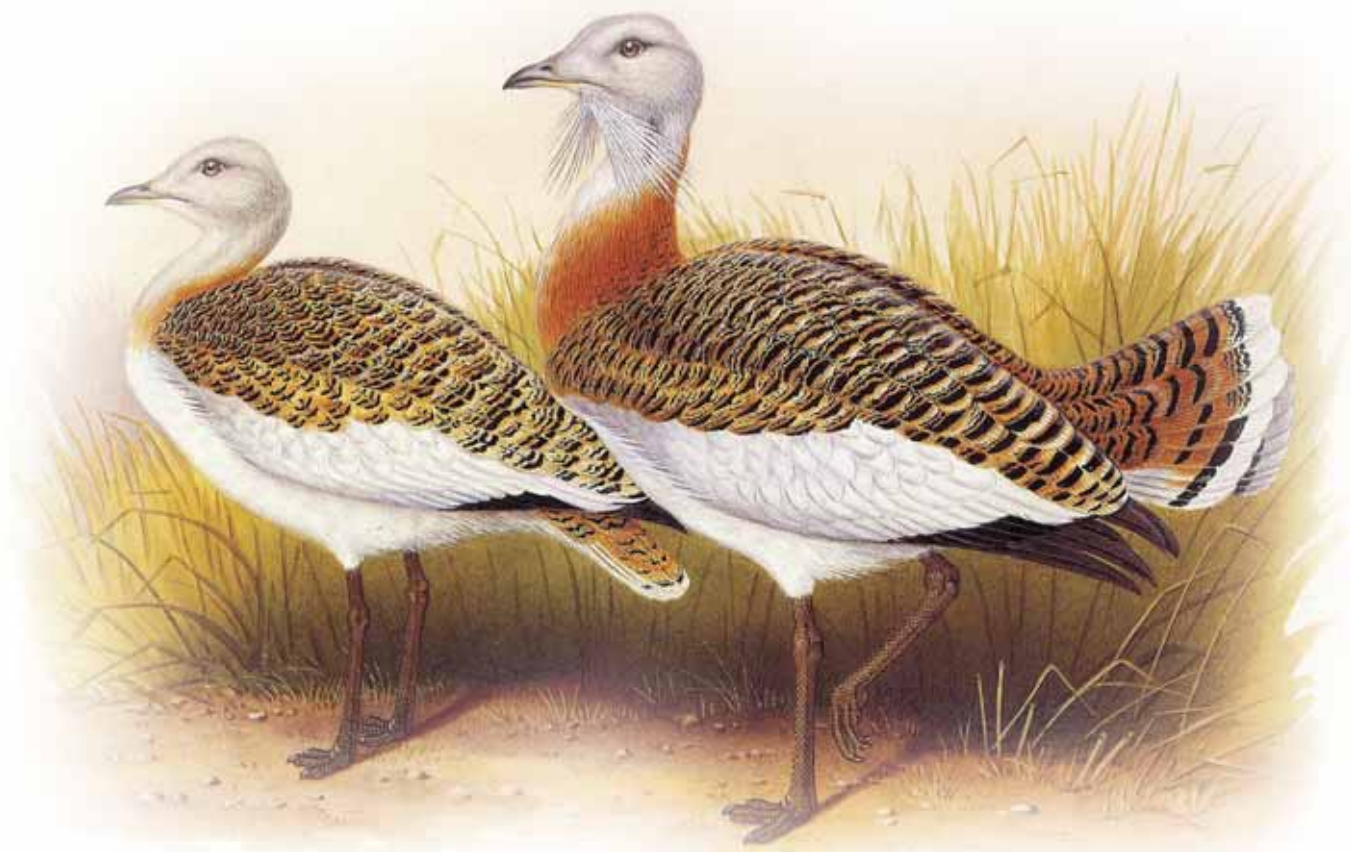
The binoculars were put down, the telescope deployed and in front of me, on a field of winter wheat where the farmer had got his drilling depth just right, we were looking at a full crop on which were 47 Great Bustards.

Remembering the flightiness of the bustards from the previous four days I thought I’d better count these immediately as they would be gone in a minute. As the farmer’s truck came into view I was certain they would scatter but surprisingly they stayed put, grazing and seemingly oblivious to all around. All of this was in earshot of the harvesting team. At that point I realised that bustard temperament was a complicated issue and was heartened how similar the scene could be to Salisbury Plain.

Over the 500,000 acres that we had censused in the week this had been the most busy farming scene but had also been the most fruitful for bustard sightings. This surely must augur well for their future in Wiltshire.



The Enigmatic History of the Great Bustard in Morocco



Estlin Waters looks at the somewhat mysterious status of the Great Bustard in Morocco.

Africa is home to the majority of the world's bustards but the Great Bustard has a precarious foothold there. Though there are records from Algeria and Tunisia, it has only been proved to breed in the north-west of Morocco. Most accounts of the distribution of the Great Bustard give but a brief mention of its existence in Africa and usually conclude that it is in terminal decline.

At the beginning of the 20th century a standard book on Palaearctic birds records the Great Bustard as "rare in North Africa" (Dresser 1903). In his *My Life Among the Wild Birds in Spain* (1909), Colonel Willoughby Verner wrote that he had visited Morocco, seeing small parties south of the Kus River. He notes that in Spain Bustards were seldom seen in winter. He saw no sign of Great Bustard migration to Morocco but did not rule it out entirely. Reports in the first quarter of the 20th century gave occasional

breeding and wintering records but as Collar (1985) points out there then appears to be no first-hand account of this bird anywhere in Morocco for some 50 years.

In the last quarter of the 20th century attempts to survey the population were made by several groups. Reading their reports becomes rather confusing as, over time, more birds were counted, or estimated, yet concern for their future continued to grow. In 1977 only two sites with a maximum of 30 and 20 were known and the species was declared to be in constant decline. On 28 February 1982, 57 birds were seen near Tangier (Goriup 1983) and a total of 100 were estimated for Morocco.

The *Birds of Africa* (Urban *et al.* 1986) said that the species was likely to become extinct in Africa in a few decades due to continuous disturbance and hunting, but in 1998 surveys found 66 birds in March, 28 in July and 90 in December. An estimate for all of Morocco in December 1998 was 90 to 133. Alonso *et al.* (2000) found 64 birds in March 1999. This

was only two less than the March count of the previous year but the population was now described as critically endangered!

In reviewing these scattered sources of information there are several problems. Great Bustards are wary and often surprisingly difficult to find and count. Many of the authors are very experienced but some of the surveys took only one to three days and in a large area it would not be difficult to miss flocks of these birds. Until recently, even in countries where the bird has been carefully studied, there is little information on seasonal movements and reports are often kept vague to discourage persecution by humans.

Though most authors state that the Great Bustard is protected in Morocco this was questioned by Collar (1985), and protection and enforcement are obviously essential as Bustards are still being disturbed. The wonder is that this small population of Great Bustards has survived as long as it has.

A fond farewell to old favourite Jean-Claude



Karen Waters of the GBG remembers a very special bird, who passed away last month at the Hawk Conservancy Trust.

Jean Claude arrived in the UK on 2nd November 2005. He was given to the Great Bustard Group by the Belgian Customs Department as he had been seized in an illegal bird collection and was in desperate need of a new home. David and John Chitty travelled to Belgium by car and completed the necessary paperwork and were then able to load Jean Claude into a sky kennel and drive him back to Wiltshire.

At the time, I had Fergus living in a pen in the front garden of our house so Jean Claude went to join him. To begin with Fergus was definitely in charge but once Jean Claude had become used to his new surroundings the pair lived together in relative peace! Jean Claude had not been used to much human contact and so took some time to get used to our visitors. However, within a couple of weeks he would no longer flee as soon as I approached the pen and was soon challenging me as I opened the gate.

Jean Claude was thought to be in the region of 15 years old when he arrived here and was a mature and very beautiful Great Bustard. In the spring of 2006 we were treated to the first of many displays by him, which were very impressive. Poor Fergus was chased around the pen by Jean Claude in display and wasn't sure what to make of it all. He did try a display of his own but was definitely

outshone by Jean Claude! In April 2009, both Fergus and Jean Claude moved to their new home at the Hawk Conservancy. They lived together in their wonderful aviary but due to the fact that Fergus was becoming older and the hormones started to 'kick in' the two of them began to fight during the breeding season. So it was decided to separate them in order to prevent injury.

Jean Claude managed to injure one of his toes this year whilst attempting to find a way through the dividing fence, which meant a prolonged spell on antibiotics and pain killers. However, with the help of the Hawk Conservancy staff, especially Mike and Ryan who, like me injected mealworms with medication and the never ending work of John Chitty our vet, he made a full recovery.

Jean Claude died on Friday 8th October after a short illness. He will be missed by a great many people who admired his beauty and elegance and especially by Rona Andrews who definitely had an affinity with him. She would stand and talk to him and he would talk back to her in his own distinctive way.

The view from the Bustard Bothy

Hannah Rose, GBG staff member and administrator of the Bustard Bothy at the Hawk Conservancy Trust gives us the lowdown on the past season.

It's been a busy year in the Bustard Bothy at the Hawk Conservancy Trust, with some days seeing 500/600 people through its doors. It was surprising to find that a fair few people still didn't know about the GBG, or indeed what a Great Bustard even looks like.

However there were many people commenting upon Fergus and Jean-Claude; how impressive and handsome they are; how unusual the Bustard is; and of course asking about the progress of the project.

Throughout the spring, Dave Kjaer, the GBG's photographer, was holding photographic sessions with Fergus and Jean-Claude, with Fergus forever making victims of those who

were trying to take pictures of him! On the Easter weekend Suzy Elkins, Al Dawes and I held an Easter Egg Rescue for children visiting the Bothy, taking the opportunity to combine educating the children on the egg rescue that goes on in Russia, with prizes of chocolate for those succeeding.

Fergus was also visited by Romaine Dennistoun, a very talented artist who donated an extremely characterful painting of Fergus displaying, which was auctioned at our fundraising event at the Royal Geographic Society in September.

Romaine created a total of about twelve paintings which she has entered into exhibitions and has sent out word of the GBG project among fellow artists, for which we are incredibly grateful.

Things are starting to quieten down in the Bothy now that autumn is here, and if you don't fancy braving the winter weather on the weekend days that the Hawk Conservancy Trust is open, you can now add Fergus as a friend on Facebook (Fergus Bustard) and follow what he's getting up to online.

And finally, a big thanks goes out to the volunteers that helped out and continue to help with manning the Bothy.



Artist Romaine Dennistoun sketches Fergus

Autumn is a great time to visit

We often get asked, when is the best time to visit the GBG? While we would say 'anytime' (every season has its interest of course and we're not about to dissuade any potential visitor from coming to see us), surprisingly perhaps the late-autumn/early-winter is a great time to come down to the Plain.

For one thing, while the weather is not quite as reliable as the summer, when the sun does shine in November or December the light is perfect for viewing or photographing the bustards. Free of haze with little glare, the flat light allows every colour and tone of our birds to be seen to their glorious best.

Secondly, our bustards are far easier to see when the vegetation they feed in is lower and less lush than in the spring and summer. Great Bustards, for all their size, can be very hard to see 'in the field' and are either surprisingly adept at hiding behind a clump of grass or routinely squeeze into rabbit burrows (no, we've never actually seen this happen, but how else does a five-foot bird disappear right in front of your eyes?). In the early winter, though, they tower above the dried grasses and are far more visible.



Thirdly, and more importantly perhaps, it's at this time of year that visitors get the chance to see the largest groups (or 'droves') of bustards. Not only will the majority of this year's newly-released birds still be in the local area, but they will usually have been joined by a small number of returning adults. As I write (at the end of October) there are twenty birds on view – perhaps the largest

flock of Great Bustards seen in the UK for nearly two hundred years!

Yes the ground can be a little soggy and the wind a touch nippy, but, while nothing in life is guaranteed except death and taxes, the sight of Great Bustards striding purposefully through knee-deep, golden-brown grass will bring a warm glow to the coldest of visitors.



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



Join the GBG & help us to bring the Bustard back

www.greatbustard.org • 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)

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Payment method (please tick)

Cheque (payable to the Great Bustard Group) Monthly Standing Order

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

To the Manager Bank/Building Society
Branch Address
Post Code

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.

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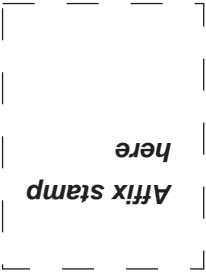
GBG is a registered charity number 1092515





www.greatbustard.org

Fold here, glue or tape edges closed



Membership Secretary,

The Great Bustard Group,

1 Down Barn Close,

Winterbourne Gunner, Salisbury,

SP4 6JP.

Meeting Fergus ..

When artist Romaine Dennistoun met our rescued bustard at the Hawk Conservancy Trust in Andover she found a special interest in this big bird with the even bigger personality. Here she tells us how it all began..



Romaine laughs when she recalls Fergus' antics



Fergus poses obligingly for Romaine

He was settled at the far end of the pen. A sleek ovoid shape, mottled back of russet and black, his sleek, pearl grey elongated neck rising above the summer stalks of ochre and pale green.

But the distinctive shape which had impelled me to drive two hours from London to see, was too far away. Where was that sail-like tail, or even a hint of the white puff-ball of the mating season? Fergus, the Great Bustard, was keeping himself to himself.

Drawing wildlife from life requires patience and perseverance. Admittedly I don't always have either but I had been utterly beguiled by the image of this Great Bustard on the Andover Hawk Conservancy Trust website. It was the tail that did it. Was it a sail, or an ice cream wafer emerging from his back? I had to go and see. And now my subject was too far away for me to really understand what bit attached to where, and what about those whiskers? A bird with whiskers? Fergus had it all.

Other visitors to the Hawk Conservancy Trust paused and passed on. Fergus slowly swivelled his head around and something caught his interest. I'd like to say it was me, but it was more likely to be a little blonde girl swirling around in a bright red dress behind me. Bustards are huge birds and I long to see one air-borne as after the Andean Condor and the Kori Bustard (a near relative) they are the largest birds to fly. He lurched to his feet and stepped carefully over to the perimeter fence, head thrust forward and wary eye gleaming. He came over to the corner where I stood, aligned himself with the security of the fence, and yes, then he did, he looked straight at me.

Dilemma: to scratch his form onto my sketch pad as fast as I could, or to try and engage his eye. The connection might last only for a few seconds, but it somehow leaves its imprint on at least one of us.

So what did I do? What every woman does, I tried to do both. I gazed at him, seeing for the first time the perfect line of his head, the indentations around his eye, the slight curve of his beak and those delicious whiskers and I was hooked. I scuffled to open my sketch book and line up my pen for those first impressions, so often more accurate than later over-worked endeavours, and, broke the link. And at that point he ruffled his feathers.. and with high steps walked away.

**Romaine
Dennis-
toun**



Cycle to Saratov

We're cycling over 2,000 miles to raise money for a new Land Rover to enable more visitors to enjoy Great Bustard sightings

Why not join us from 1st January 2011?

Sponsor the GBG team on JustGiving
www.justgiving.com/greatbustardgroup

or help us make up the miles - at home or in your local gym

See www.greatbustard.org for more details



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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 the Managing Authority