

Otis



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2010 brings new hope
*'Coming Home'. The project
from the beginning*



The Great Bustard Group
congratulate Kate Chitty
on her new practice

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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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New Year, New Look

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*We would also like to thank all our volunteers
- without whom we could not manage.*



Welcome to the new 'Otis' magazine, and a warm hello from the new editor.

Great Bustard Group members will notice many changes from our previous newsletters, and an explanation for such a comprehensive re-launch is in order. It takes at least £150,000 a year to fund the GBG, and that sum is rising as our work becomes more complex. Increasing our membership, attracting sponsors, and showcasing our merchandise is essential but - as many of you undoubtedly know - challenging. Refining the way we present the GBG is one way to appeal to the people we need to reach. It also gives existing members (of which I'm one) a full-colour magazine we can all be proud of.

I'm working on the re-design of 'Otis' with Suzy Elkins and Alex Stott of AA1 Media. The three of us are also re-organising the Group's website to make information quicker to find and pages easier to update: again this will help our fundraising efforts. With us handling much of the Group's Communications GBG Director David Waters and Release Site Manager Al Dawes - who

have borne much of the burden of this specialist work to date - will be free to concentrate on what they do better than anyone else: looking after our bustards and steering the GBG into an exciting future. 'Otis' has always had excellent articles, and the new magazine will remain entertaining and informative - something members look forward to receiving and won't want to miss when their annual subscription falls due! In coming issues we'll be talking with other Great Bustard researchers, visiting members to learn how they support the GBG, and looking at conservation issues facing bustards across the globe. And of course we'll be closely watching our own birds here on Salisbury Plain.

In this first issue, remembering that 'If you don't know where you come from, you don't know where you're going', our Feature Article looks both ahead to the new decade and back to the GBG's beginnings and its remarkable successes - a timely refresher for new and longtime members alike.

I'm thrilled that David has entrusted me with this opportunity and I truly hope that GBG members approve of the changes Suzy, Alex, and I are making. Please enjoy the new 'Otis' as much as I enjoyed editing it.

Charlie Moores.

Editor

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Coming Home

How the Great Bustard returned



© Bela Motko

A male Great Bustard in breeding plumage. Copyright Bela Motko

It's been a few years since the Great Bustard Group published an overview, and with so many new members (and new staff!) since then I'm sure many of us would appreciate a look at the history - and the future - of the GBG. As we leave behind the 'noughties' and enter a new decade then it seems very timely to use this re-launch of Otis to look back at all the Group has achieved, from the initial licence to import bustard chicks from Russia right up to the birth in 2009 of the first wild UK Great Bustard chicks for 177 years. We've come a long way in a relatively short time and a celebration of the GBG is

definitely in order - but there's also a great deal of hard work still to do, as this article will prove.

The Great Bustard, amongst the heaviest of the world's flying birds, was once widespread across large areas of England. While populations in the current strongholds of southern Russia appear to be relatively stable and those in Spain perhaps rising, Great Bustards were lost to England by the middle of the nineteenth century. The last breeding is generally accepted now as having taken place in Suffolk in 1832, and by 1845 it was difficult to be certain whether the few bustards still being seen, for example in Norfolk, were native birds or winter migrants from the Continent. By then Wiltshire had already lost its Great Bustards. The flocks on Salisbury Plain

disappeared shortly after the turn of the century, and George Montagu, writing in his Ornithological Dictionary of 1802, described the Great Bustard as 'very scarce' in Wiltshire: in a Supplement dated 1813 he added that the species had decreased rapidly in the previous twenty years. The first full book on the county's avifauna was the Rev A Smith's "Birds of Wiltshire" published in 1887. He devoted twenty-eight of the volume's 588 pages to the history of the Great Bustard, and states that the last positive record he could find was of 'seven seen in the summer of 1812', though he thought they had perhaps lingered on until about 1820. It's not surprising that no definite date can be given. Large-scale unmonitored egg-collecting and hunting had been taking place wherever bustards were found, country estates where isolated groups of bustards may have survived weren't open to inspection of any sort, and there was little communication between local towns in the early nineteenth century let alone anything resembling the central database of bird records that exists today. Organisations like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the British Trust for Ornithology which now oversee the status of the nation's birds weren't inaugurated until 1889 and 1933 respectively. The Wiltshire Ornithological Society, which now collates all bird records for the county, wasn't formed until 1974 – more than 150 years after the county's most iconic bird species was lost.

Whilst we will never know precisely when Wiltshire lost its Great Bustards we can say with certainty that the first serious attempts to re-establish the species in the county took place in 1970, when the Great Bustard Trust (GBT), led by The Hon. Aylmer Tryon, established a four hectare pen on Ministry of Defence land at Porton Down.

The Trust planned to raise birds rescued as chicks in Portugal or hatched from eggs from Hungarian Great Bustards to begin captive breeding on Porton Down. While the intentions of the GBT were undoubtedly good, the breeding biology and ecological requirements of the Great Bustard were still poorly understood. Birds in the pen were regularly handled and the importance of flock structure not properly recognised. Though eggs were laid at Porton Down, hatchings were not successful and in 1989 the surviving birds were transferred to Whipsnade Zoo where the last bird, named Kato, died in 1999.

Sadly Kato outlived the Great Bustard Trust which was wound up in 1998, most of its members disillusioned and no longer convinced that their dream of seeing wild Great Bustards on Salisbury Plain was achievable.

However, one member of the GBT, David Waters, refused to give up. The science of re-introduction projects had been refined during the 1980s, and during its last meeting the GBT had been told of a potential ethical source of Great Bustards from Russia that could be used for captive rear and release



The birds are examined and health-checked in quarantine at the release-site.

rather than captive breeding. With that knowledge strengthening his resolve, David formed the Great Bustard Group straight away - making clear from its inception that the priority of the GBG was to establish a self-sustaining wild population of Great Bustards in the UK.

The GBG set to work immediately. David knew already that nobody had successfully managed to develop a captive breeding project, although many had tried, so he planned to focus his reintroduction project on releasing imported birds – meaning the GBG’s starting point would already be further along the road than earlier projects had been by the time they’d been wound up. He also knew that legislation governing wild birds had tightened considerably since the 1970s and re-establishing Great Bustards – recognised internationally as declining and

vulnerable to the threat of extinction - was now far more complicated.

To counter potential opponents of the project, David and the GBG knew that their release project would have to be scientifically robust. They commissioned a feasibility study in 2001 which investigated all academic and practical research on Great Bustards and on reintroductions in general. The study took several years to complete but conclusively demonstrated that the UK offered suitable environmental and climatic conditions for Great Bustards, and that a release project would not be detrimental to either the Russian donor population or the ecosystem of the planned release-site - the same huge unimproved chalk grasslands and arable fields of Salisbury Plain that the Great Bustard Trust had favoured earlier.



The birds are released on the Plain

With the study completed the GBG made a formal application for a release-licence to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – the UK government department responsible for, amongst other things, ‘setting legislation, policy, regulations and guidance for a number of wildlife and pets issues’. Because it had been missing from the UK for so long the Great Bustard was (and still is) considered an alien species by the UK Government and without Defra’s permission

to import bustards the project would have been halted in its tracks immediately (this legal quirk also meant that the GBG was not eligible to receive funding support through conventional UK and European conservation grants - though the project has since benefited from Land-Fill Tax Credit grants and the EU-funded rural development initiative ‘Sustain the Plain’).

Based on the exemplary work carried out during the feasibility study, though, Defra issued a 10-year trial-licence in 2003 to release ‘up to 40 Great Bustards a year on Ministry of Defence (MoD) land on Salisbury Plain’.

The Defra licence came – as would be expected – with legally binding conditions and was not granted to the GBG alone. In accordance with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 the licence to release Great Bustards in the UK was granted to the Great Bustard Consortium, which at the time consisted of the GBG and the University of Stirling (and which now consists of the GBG, the University of Bath and the RSPB). Defra also required the establishment of a Great Bustard Consultative Committee to review and appraise progress of the reintroduction project. While this set-up has undoubtedly increased the GBG’s paperwork, it has of course been beneficial and the relationships we’ve built up since 2003 have been very important to the GBG, particularly in areas of sharing information and expertise.

With the trial-licence granted, and external oversight put in place, the GBG (which still consisted of just David Waters, his wife

Karen, John Chitty - a consultant vet and a core team of volunteers) could start the work of bringing wild Great Bustards to the UK for release onto Salisbury Plain.

The GBG established a partnership with the A.N. Severstov Institute of Ecology and Evolution, which since 1995 had been running a Biological Station close to the Volga River in Saratov, Oblast in southern Russia. The Institute had been rescuing bustard eggs from nests that were in imminent danger of being destroyed by agricultural activity in the huge cereal fields of Saratov, home to the world’s second largest Great Bustard population, for many years. Chicks successfully hatched from these eggs had been used to stock various breeding projects across Russia, and both the Institute and other Russian authorities were receptive to a GBG proposal to use eggs from what were termed ‘doomed’ nests to raise chicks for release both in the UK and in Saratov.



Great Bustard eggs in grassland



Social grouping begins after release

Key to the survival of UK-released birds, chicks reared in Saratov are kept isolated from human contact as much as possible preventing the young birds bonding with their keepers and associating people with food. The health of the chicks is also supervised at all times, and survival rates are higher than those found in the wild (in fact, with the release of birds back into the wild in Russia, and with additional nest protection measures implemented by the GBG, the impact on the donor population has been positive in many ways). The relationship between the GBG and the scientists in Saratov quickly became very strong and another element of the release-project fell into place. In 2004, just a year after Defra granted the release licence, twenty-two Russian-reared Great Bustard chicks arrived at Heathrow Airport. After being cleared through Customs the birds were taken to the GBG's quarantine facility on Salisbury Plain. Here they underwent a

rigorous health protocol before being ready for release after a minimum of 30 days. By answering possible objections and tackling the scientific questions it was posed head-on, it had taken just six years for the GBG to lay the foundation of a new British population of Great Bustards. Creating a new self-sustaining population of wild bustards – even in an area where they were common less than two hundred years ago – is not simple. Bringing the first chicks to the UK was of course just the start of the hard work and releases of chicks – each fitted with a coloured and numbered wing-tag so their year of release and individual identification can be determined from a distance – have continued annually since 2004. Whilst the release-site on the Plain is similar to Saratov in terms of land-use and latitude, it's not the chicks' natal area. For a truly British population to become established there must be site-fidelity to a breeding area, and male Great Bustards don't usually mature for at least five years and females are thought to need several attempts at rearing chicks before they are successful. Additionally although Great Bustards are loyal to their natal sites they typically disperse widely away from them in the winter. Each year several of our birds have stayed local to the release site after their release and remained through the winter, but none of our released bustards are wing-clipped and they are free to move wherever they want. Many travel around

60km (particularly towards the Somerset Levels and Dorset): however, right from the first year of releases birds dispersing in winter have returned to the release-site the following spring, joining those birds that chose to stay locally.

The formation of the first social units (or 'droves') began soon after the first releases, and in the summers of 2007 and 2008, for the first time in nearly 200 years, male Great Bustards performed their spectacular breeding display in the UK.

The displays obviously impressed the watching females as in 2007 the first Great Bustard eggs for 175 years were laid in the UK: not unexpectedly though they were infertile, the males involved would not have been mature enough. In 2008 a female also nested near the release-site, though again, no chicks were hatched.

The GBG were hugely encouraged of course, but in 2009 the release project took its greatest step forward when in late-May two females successfully hatched three chicks. Wild Great Bustards had bred in England for the first time since 1832!

The news was greeted with euphoria by the team striving to bring back the world's heaviest flying bird to the UK, and a clearly exhilarated David Waters, who founded the GBG eleven years earlier, was quoted on the Group's website saying: *"It has been a hard struggle to get this far. I am exhausted and nearly broke, but to see Great Bustards breeding after an absence of 177 years is brilliant!"*



The first chicks to be born in the UK and survive.

With the arrival of the UK-born chicks, two of which hatched from a clutch laid by G6 (pictured above), the GBG made the breakthrough that many critics of the release-project had thought would never happen. Indeed that breakthrough had come unexpectedly early, as the parent birds were generally considered still not mature enough to breed successfully. Despite the birth of the chicks, the release-project is by no means over. The GBG will continue importing and releasing chicks for the remaining four years of the Defra licence, and as this article goes to press a Mid-term Review Group is undertaking a population viability analysis to try to ascertain what factors are most important to post-release survival. We will also continue to work closely with

our partners of course, and will continue to provide expertise, staff and resources for a spring census and an autumn census of Great Bustards in Saratov Oblast. We're also especially encouraged by our relationship with the RSPB, the UK's Birdlife International partner, which blossomed in 2008 when Leigh Lock and Tracé Williams visited Saratov with the GBG to see the rescuing process for themselves. In 2009 the RSPB's Mark Avery signed a Memorandum of Co-operation with the GBG, and was a welcome guest on a stand at the British Birdwatching Fair which attracted much welcome attention (and congratulations) from UK birders. The support of such a powerful organisation has already brought benefits, and will doubtless be hugely important in coming years.

The priority for David and the rest of the GBG though remains exactly the same as it was in 1998: establish a self-sustaining population of Great Bustards in the UK. How many bustards make up a self-sustaining population? In truth no-one knows for sure, but perhaps a stable population of over fifty birds might be considered self-sustaining – and that figure could be reached by 2014, the year the current Defra release-licence runs out.

Without an increase in breeding birds, though, our group of bustards can't be properly considered self-sustaining. The GBG has already proved that Salisbury Plain has the right habitat for Great Bustards, and the Great Bustard Group will be doing everything possible to increase and protect nesting birds in future years. Plans are in already place for nest monitoring this summer, local land-owners are on alert, and we are looking forward to what we are confident will be another successful breeding season.

The GBG has come a remarkably long way since its inception in 1998, and without our efforts - and your support - the Great Bustard, a British species once common across large areas of England's grasslands, would still be missing entirely from our countryside.

That the Great Bustard is back at all is a great achievement, but not until there are flocks roaming Salisbury Plain will the GBG think that their mission is anything like fulfilled.

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Mike Prior: Vexillologist



Mike Prior and his daughter Helen proudly presenting the finished flag

Otis editor Charlie Moores meets the man who is responsible for more Great Bustards flying over Wiltshire than even GBG Director David Waters...

Vexillologist. No? I admit I had to look it up too, but it describes someone who studies flags. The word is apparently a synthesis of the Latin word *vexillum* and the suffix *-logy*, meaning "study of", but it could just as accurately describe the vexing process that Mike Prior, a Wiltshire printer by trade, had to go through to get a new Wiltshire flag from the design-board to the flagpole. The story starts back in Christmas 2005 when Mike and his wife were on a winter break in Devon and admired County Flags flying in gardens, commercial properties, and on flagpoles on the seafront. A proud Wiltshireman, Mike decided that he'd like to fly a Wiltshire flag in his own garden when he got back home, but discovered that apart

from a rather complex design that periodically flew over County Hall, there was no official Wiltshire flag for him to fly. While most of us would have shrugged and left it at that, Mike, a keen vexillologist, decided instead to make one himself. With his graphic-designer daughter, Helen, and working to the 'golden ratio' principles of Fibonacci and adherence to The Flag Institute's five 'desirable qualities for good flag design', Mike set about creating a county flag that for him represented Wiltshire. The design Mike and Helen came up with was stunning and distinctive. Using green and white bars to represent the green of Wiltshire's rolling downs and their chalk underlay, Mike and Helen placed a roundel of six rocks (which in heraldic symbolism expresses "safety, refuge and protection") in the centre of their new flag. They then overlaid the roundel with the silhouette of a

male Great Bustard (drawn from illustrations provided by the GBG), its head deliberately slightly offset into the upper left quadrant so that it would remain relatively still and the bird appear positively regal while the flag was flying.

Why a Great Bustard rather than, say, a white horse? As Mike says, and I'm not going to disagree with him, the Great Bustard has symbolised Wiltshire for many years, a bustard was already in use on the County Council flag, and though Wiltshire has white horses etched into its hills so do other counties (the County flag of Kent, for example, has been in use for many years and shows a white horse on a red background).

Mike's new flag was only ever intended to be for his personal use, but on trying to run it up the flagpole behind his home he found himself tangled up in red tape instead. In 2006 flying a County Flag was construed as advertising - even if there were no words, slogans, or advertising material on it.

Remarkably Mike needed planning permission from the then West Wilts District Council to fly his own flag in his own garden! Again, less determined individuals might have shaken their heads in disbelief and given up, but in June 2006 Mike submitted a Planning Application and put up Planning Notices in every street adjoining his home. At this point Fate stepped in to lend a hand when a reporter on the Wiltshire Times (whose Trowbridge offices are directly opposite Mike's print business) saw the planning application by chance and decided this was a story worth telling.

With the local press campaigning for the flag and local residents beginning to show an interest the planning application was soon granted. In late September 2006 Mike stood in his garden and proudly raised his new flag in a ceremony attended by the Marquis of Bath (who flies a 10 foot long version of Mike's Wiltshire flag over Longleat), Trowbridge Mayor Tom James, and a host of well-wishers.

The Great Bustard was once again flying over Trowbridge (which is possibly a flight of fancy on my part, but hopefully GBG members will grant me a little poetic licence)!

From then on things went smoothly? Not quite. In April 2007, following a campaign by Mike and members of the Flag Institute, the Government finally changed the rules concerning County Flags allowing anyone to fly one without permission, and in May the same year Wiltshire County Council sent out a press-release saying that the new official Wiltshire County Flag would be raised outside County Hall for the first time. The public in general took to the new design and – unexpectedly as far as Mike was concerned – orders started rolling in. The flag began appearing all over the County. Two years later, at the end of May 2009, Mike released the flag into the public domain and, as he explained to me today, virtually wrote off his development costs. The release coincided both with the momentous birth of our three Great Bustard chicks and with the two-year anniversary of the first raising of the flag outside County



Our Great Bustard Fergus shows his approval of the new flag design

Hall in Trowbridge.

With the flag accepted by the Council and the public, the Great Bustard Group in the news, and articles appearing in magazines across the UK, that should have been that. However, in late 2009 council members of Wiltshire's recently formed Unitary Council received an objection about the flag's design. Legally, the objector argued, because the flag was approved by a now disbanded Council a vote to accept the design as the County Flag must be taken again. Just one vote against could have brought Mike's flag crashing down from flagpoles across the county. He prepared himself for yet another fight, sent a summary of the flag's history to all 98 councillors, and on December 1st - almost exactly four years after the trip to Devon that sparked the whole process – found himself in the uncomfortable position of giving a speech to

the Council Main Meeting in County Hall.

And his opponent? He didn't turn up, all 98 councillors approved the design once again, and that – this time – really should be that! Mike Prior doesn't actually seem the hero-type in real-life. He's amiable, quietly-spoken, and very likeable. But there's evidently steel lying beneath his cardigan. Would he, I ask him, go through it all again? Of course he replies, and as a final thought he adds, "I use the slogan 'Raising the profile of the County' on my publications about the flag, but maybe in the future I'll change that to 'Raising the profile of the Great Bustard' ". Steely and he has a way with words. No wonder his flag, and our Great Bustard, is now flying over so many rooftops.

For more information please visit wiltshireflag.co.uk, or contact Mike Prior on 01225 777767 or 07860 265555

Salisbury - or Siberia?



Otis Editor Charlie Moores and GBG Release Site Manager Al Dawes discuss the weather

UK members of the GBG can't have failed to notice that this winter has been cold. Very, very cold. Temperatures in December and January regularly stayed below freezing as air straight from Siberia swept over us, and one Oxfordshire village recorded an overnight low of minus 17.7°C which was just two degrees warmer than the South Pole.

It has certainly been the coldest winter our bustards have had to face since they first arrived on Salisbury Plain in 2004. Overnight temperatures near the release-site fell to below -10°C on occasions and the wind-chill factor meant that it would have felt considerably colder. How, GBG members have been asking us, have the bustards coped?

Actually, they've coped just fine. Many of the world's Otididae (bustards, koorhaans, and floricans) are adapted to living in

regions which experience large swings in temperature, and Great Bustards from northern and eastern populations have always wintered in areas where temperatures can fall below zero at night. Our release-birds originate from Russian stock, and while even they must have wondered whether they were in Salisbury or Siberia they are well able to survive a British winter due to a number of factors.

Firstly, Great Bustards fly extremely well. If local conditions get too harsh they simply move (or disperse): had conditions on the Plain become too uncomfortable our birds could easily have flown off to look for somewhere more to their liking.

Secondly, they are large. While that might seem a disadvantage in terms of how much food/energy needs to be consumed to keep their core temperature high, larger animals have less surface area in proportion to their volume through which to lose heat than smaller ones: a large bird, in other words, copes with the cold better than a small one because they retain their internal heat better.

Thirdly as well as being large our bustards are naturally well-insulated. Their feathers are dense and thick and they have very little bare skin to lose heat through.

Lastly, Great Bustards are fairly unfussy when it comes to food. In the winter they feed on a wide range of young plants, leaves, and seeds, and with only a few inches of snow falling on the Plain they've been able to locate the shoots of growing crops like oilseed rape without too much difficulty.



Above, the release site in the snow, taken by Al Dawes, and right, one of our birds on site

So, our bustards have stayed warm enough and can feed well. And if it all gets too much they can always fly somewhere else. While you and I might have found standing in the snow on Salisbury Plain for a few weeks rather too much of a challenge, our bustards really didn't seem to have too many problems at all.

Having said that, the chances are they are now looking forward to the spring as much as the rest of us...



Bustardwatch

With Release Site Manager - Al Dawes



The period after the release of this year's new birds, fitted with blue wingtags, was fairly uneventful. However this was the result we had hoped for from our new "soft" release method. Rather than letting birds out of quarantine and straight into the wild this year we put them in an outdoor covered pen so they could acclimatise to their new surroundings and meet birds released in previous years. This softer approach worked well and the 'blue' birds stayed together in a large group at the Bustard Site. They mixed well with the older birds and with B29 and B30, the two male birds confined to the Pen (see Otis 30).

There were still a few dramas. Male B2 managed to break a wing a couple of days after release and spent a month in captivity to recover: unfortunately his injury failed to mend properly which prevents us re-releasing him. He is now in the Bustard Pen with B29 and B30. A few birds also ventured away from the

Bustard Site and inevitably a couple met an early end when confronted with foxes out on the Plain.

By mid October there were still ten 'blue' birds around the Site, joined most days by some older birds and the surviving UK male chick. The impressive sight of up to 16 bustards regularly flocking together in the Pen lasted until gales in mid November. Several of the 'blue' birds were blown to pastures new with the male chick. Although he had stayed close to his parent up until this point it is not too surprising that he went walkabout as young birds are known to undergo juvenile dispersal. It is perhaps relevant that the UK chick moved off at the same time as the Russian origin chicks of the same age. By early December just three 'blue' birds were still being seen regularly around the Site, with sightings of other birds on the Plain near Urchfont and Knook Camp and as far afield as Welford in Berkshire. The remaining three regularly joined the older birds and together paid daily visits to the Pen. Male Y07 had been at the Bustard Site for the 2009 breeding season but made his way to the Somerset Levels for the latter part of the summer, staying through the autumn and into winter: he is still there at the time of writing. Female Y22 turned up at the RSPB

Winterbourne Downs reserve, south-east of Salisbury Plain, and stayed in the area through the autumn. With the onset of winter she made her way to the Somerset Levels for the third consecutive time: James Packer (www.somersetbirder.co.uk) took the superb photograph reproduced below near Brea on January 14th. In previous years Y22 and another female, O15, have been seen together on the Levels, but at the start of 2010 O15 was still on Salisbury Plain.



Yet another Great Bustard found its way to the Somerset Levels, showing just how appealing and important the area is to Great Bustards. Female R28 had been found on Puxton Moor in the north Somerset Levels in the summer of 2009, shortly before undergoing an extraordinary journey, flying south to Chard then to Witney in Oxfordshire calling in briefly at Lyneham. In October she was reported in Somerset again - this time in the heart of the Levels, on Kings Sedgemoor, from where she was still being reported in January.

Mary Walden writes:

I am pleased to report that I am officially now part of the Great Bustard Group thanks to a grant from Plain Action (www.plainaction.org.uk). I have volunteered with the GBG for the past two summers mainly helping on site, conducting visits, logging sightings and in October I went to Russia with David Waters for the Autumn census.

My role is to develop educational links with schools both in the UK and Russia. With the help of volunteers Sally and Geoffrey Churchill and Ann Jordan, I have started to develop educational resources for teachers covering Key Stages 1, 2 and 3; these and children's pages will be available online in the near future when we launch a teacher's web page in February.

We also offer presentations to schools which can be tailored for any stage from primary to university. We have established very successful relationships with local schools, giving presentations which have been met with great enthusiasm from children and teachers. Our educational work in Russia is supported by Anastasia Barsukova, our translator and a qualified school teacher.

If any local schools are interested in establishing links with a Russian school please contact the GBG.

For more information on how to get your school involved with the Great Bustard Group please email me at marywalden@greatbustard.org.



Mary Walden reports:

St Nicholas CofE Primary School, serving Idminton, Porton, Porton Down, Boscombe and Allington, moved into new school buildings in 1972 – and around the same time adopted the Great Bustard as its logo.

Part of our education strategy is to involve local schools and school-children in our work, and in September 2009 Karen Waters and I visited St Nicholas.

We gave a presentation on our bustards to the children - and even managed to get one of the teachers to dress up in a 'dehumanisation suit', the special suits used to ensure minimal contact between us and the bustard chicks if we need to handle them.

The children and the staff were very enthusiastic, and we're delighted that St Nicholas have now decided to sponsor one of our birds, which they intend to call – most fittingly – Nicki!

Suzy Elkins writes:

The Plain Action grant has also enabled Alex and I to join the Great Bustard team. Over the coming months we will work with the GBG to launch a new website and hold a series of fundraising events. We will also commence several appeals this year, beginning with our Business Pledge and Vehicle Funding drives. One of the GBG's requirements is a new Landrover for bringing visitors to see the birds. If anyone would like to help by holding fundraising events, or if you could donate a Landrover we will provide extensive publicity. Contact suzyelkins@greatbustard.org.

The GBG would like to thank local company Tintometer for their support in adopting GBG as their charity of the year 2010. The company is located on Solstice Park in Amesbury and specialises in the manufacture of visual and electronic analytical instrumentation. The staff have offered their support to GBG and we look forward to working with them over the coming months.



Going, going, gone

On December 17th we held our Annual Grand Auction at Kensington's splendid Royal Geographical Society (RGS). With a truly remarkable selection of lots on offer we had our fingers crossed for a decent turn-out despite it quickly turning into a very cold night indeed.

We needn't have been concerned. Hosted by David Bond, Chairman of the Great Bustard Group's trustees, the auction was attended by a coterie of our finest (and finest-dressed!) supporters. Managed by GBG Director David Waters with two bus-loads of GBG staff and volunteers, and helped throughout by Gwyn and Ness Williams of Loosehanger Cheeses who brought along a selection of their 'Bustard with Mustard' Cheese, the event was (to quote David Bond) "a resounding success".

How much of that was to do with the well-stocked bar and highly efficient bar

staff (thanks to Rebecca Waters, Hannah Rose and Mary Walden) we can only make an educated guess, but the evening did go extremely smoothly from start to finish. Short speeches by the two Davids (Messrs Bond and Waters) on the progress of the release-project were well-received, membership forms were handed out and accepted from the get-go, and the reception room we used looked fantastic, thanks in part to new promotional displays created by our colleagues Suzy Elkins and Alex Stott. As the first heavy snowfall of what became a memorably long and cold winter fell outside (quickly turning London into an ice-rink which was all very Christmassy but probably did stop a few supporters making it to the Auction), bidders inside the RGS snapped up remarkable bargains as they were jollied along by our auctioneer - the hard-working David Bond again.

Lots included a Mantis Collection Safari in South Africa, a stay at the fabulous Carlisle Bay Hotel in Antigua, a one night stay at any von Essen UK hotel, fishing packages on some of the UK's most exclusive beats, a bronze hare by sculptor Simon Gudgeon, and a most beautiful china tea set designed by Oxford-based Emma Bridgewater.

After the auction the evening's festivities climaxed with the cutting of a '2009 breeding success' themed Great Bustard Group cake designed by Ruth

Manvell, a virologist who is evidently as skilled with a cranked palette knife as she is with an electron microscope. By about 20:00 most of our guests had departed into a decidedly chilly night, and about an hour later - fuelled by cake and mineral water - the staff and volunteers were packed up and heading back to Wiltshire.

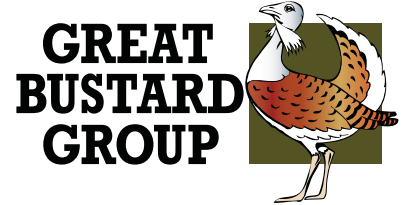
The auction made £10,530 and our most sincere thanks go to everyone who attended and who bid: your donations and contributions are extremely important to the GBG and will help us continue our operations into the future, assuring a future in the UK for the magnificent Great Bustard. We look forward to seeing you all again at this year's event which will be held on 23rd September, further details to be announced.



Join the GBG & help us bring more birds back to the UK!

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



MEMBERSHIP

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

Simply fill out the form, detach and send to the address shown overleaf. Membership includes:

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Instruction to your Bank/Building Society

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.

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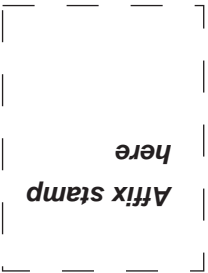
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