

The global Great Bustard conservation publication

# Otis



**GREAT  
BUSTARD  
GROUP**



Summer 2012

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## **New hope**

*GBG set to make history  
once more in the UK*



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# A word from the Director

## 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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Great Bustard chick



David Waters, GBG Founder and Director

I write this at a time when I should be packing. I am off to Moscow early in the morning and have some meetings there before travelling to Saratov. In addition to the usual expectations, hopes and stresses at the start of a new season there is an extra consideration this year. 2012 will be the first time the GBG, or anyone else for that matter, will transport eggs into the UK from Russia. The eggs will come from the destroyed or abandoned nests that provide the birds we rear in Russia with the Severtsov Institute. The eggs will be part way through incubation at the time of transport which brings its own set of problems. The correct incubation temperature and humidity must be maintained throughout the two day journey, but if anything hatches the paperwork will say 'eggs', and if I have a chick the export could be blocked. It will be a case of everything being very carefully planned and then keeping our fingers firmly crossed!



females are showing well on almost all the trips. Our usual Stone-curlews are also showing well and make a great addition to any visit.

The long term aim of the GBG to establish a truly productive captive breeding programme for the Great Bustard is moving forward. A great trip to a private collection in Spain showed that it is possible to breed this species in captivity and provided a wonderful foundation on which to develop even more productive techniques. More details can be found in the news section.

The LIFE+ project continues to make progress although the weight of documentation seemingly required is daunting. The RSPB's Andrew Taylor has changed roles to take up much of the monitoring work as the University of Bath concerns itself with academic matters. With nesting females expected any day the task of monitoring is particularly important at this time.

The GBG is, and always has been, dependent on its members for the operation of the project. Particular thanks must be given to Fred and Rona Andrews and to Charles Hibberd who have undertaken the conversion of a second hand portable building into a bespoke quarantine compliant incubation and rearing facility. The standard of work and the finished facility is first class.

I will now get myself over to Russia to facilitate bringing the eggs back and justifying the efforts of all those who have worked so hard on our behalf.

The site visits are deservedly popular at the moment. Displaying males and curious



# In this issue



GBG supporter donates signed mug for the cause



(Above) GBG's auction winner (Inset) Trip to the German Project



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## Fact-finding in Spain



David, John & Torsten with Alejandro and his colleagues

In February David Waters and John Chitty were invited to a private bird collection in the south west of Spain. David had been in email contact with Project leader Alanjero for some time and had met him at a conference in Portugal in January this year. David and John were accompanied by Jenny Hayes, a veterinary colleague of John's who grew up in Spain and spoke perfect Spanish.

Alanjero and his colleagues have been keeping Great Bustards from the time they were legal hunting quarry in Spain in the 1980s, and have a wealth of experience on the species. David knew his friend and colleague Torsten Langgemach from Brandenburg would be interested in the Spanish trip and mentioned it to him in passing. A quick "where and when" established that Torsten was in the same region of the country at the time investigating Osprey reintroduction. Therefore he was able to join David and John in a visit to the Spanish Bustard Project.

Further details of Alanjero's work are intended to make a full article in a future Otis, but it is safe to say here that the condition of the birds and the success of the project were quite remarkable and an inspiration to all.

## Membership Renewal Time

April is the month when GBG membership is due for renewal. If you have recently joined, your membership will run on until next April, but for longer standing members, if you have not already renewed, now is the time.

Membership is crucial to the GBG and to the running of its activities. The LIFE+ project covers 75% of its activities, leaving a 25% shortfall, and significant part of the GBG's activities are outside the scope of LIFE+ and need their own funding. Your membership is of huge value and each subscription really does make a difference.

## Portugal Trip a great success



Following on from Bill and Ann Jordan's super write up of the landscape and bustards at Castro Verde in Portugal, David Waters and

John Chitty visited Castro Verde in February for a conference on the care of and rehabilitation of two high priority bird species there - the Lesser Kestrel and the Great Bustard.

In addition to an excellent conference, there was a field trip and good opportunities to catch up and discuss bustard news with the other delegates. Tom Bailey, who spent many years as a veterinary consultant in the UAE working on Houbara Bustards and Falcons gave a series of presentations, and Sara Hallagher gave a fascinating presentation on her work with the Kori Bustards in Washington's Smithsonian Zoo. David and John both presented on their work and experience with the Great Bustards. The conference was funded by a LIFE+ project based in Castro Verde.

## Site Power

An intermittent power supply has been an ongoing problem for the GBG and the visiting organisations within the LIFE+ partnership working from our Salisbury Plain site.

What is a minor inconvenience to the staff could be a catastrophe with eggs during incubation or small chicks under heat. Qinetiq, the defence industry company, gave the GBG a large generator for their site on Salisbury Plain some time back. Charles Hibberd has rewired the caravan office, the shop and the new quarantine incubation/rearing unit. Any problems can now be dealt with by the flick of a switch and firing up the generator. A real life saver for incubating eggs.





## Thanks from Mongolia

Mimi Kessler is the lady responsible for a super human effort in conserving the Great Bustard population in Mongolia. Based in Arizona, Mimi spends most of her time undertaking field work in Mongolia. She is leading work on the migration of the Asian sub species and she has shown that the birds cover far greater distances than were previously thought. Mimi is also very active with a schools and childrens education programme - recognising that the future of

the Great Bustard in Mongolia rests with the future inhabitants of the country.

Mimi was in the situation where she had a Great Bustard carrying an expensive satellite transmitter, but the project had no money to pay for the satellite air time to receive the information recorded. The GBG is delighted to have made a contribution to her work to keep the transmitter working.



*Unspoilt Mongolian landscape*

## Egg & Chick Appeal

GBG's Egg and Chick appeal is still heading upwards to its target of £10,000. Donations keep coming in and I am sure we will reach the target before the chicks are ready for release. Even with the LIFE+ support the GBG still needs to raise significant funds to keep the project moving forward. A huge thank you to all of you who used the envelopes supplied with the last issue to send in donations.



## Kevin Hyland

The GBG was recently delighted to have a distinguished guest in the form of Kevin Hyland from the Wildlife Protection Office in Dubai, UAE.

Kevin and David Waters met in Abu Dhabi last year where Kevin was lecturing on his successful captive breeding of Stone-curlews. Kevin is very well known in the Middle East for his expertise on fish, but is also a very accomplished aviculturist. He has successfully bred Houbara Bustards, Kori Bustards, White Bellied and Heuglins Bustards.

Kevin's advice and input on the transport, rearing and keeping of all bustard species is much valued and the GBG looks forward to Kevin's future involvement in the GBG plans.

## Noisy bustards?

Being birds of wide open spaces, Great Bustards are not easy to get close enough to hear. Their display and courtship is largely a visual affair, and impressive it looks too. However they do make noises, and it is likely they would use sound to communicate with each other at close ranges.

There is evidence that the females use a call to warn chicks of danger, and there may be more than one call; one for "run and hide", or "just look out", and another for "get out of here". To help us try and learn what calls are made, and what they mean, the GBG has been fortunate enough to have the help of Brian Harrison. He has spent his career recording various types of wildlife for the BBC. He has fitted up a very sensitive microphone inside one of the plastic Great Bustard decoys inside the release enclosure.

We hope to be able to combine the sound recording with images from the direction camera in the enclosure and the equipment has been set up for **both** to record at the same time.

To record the sound, and the behaviour associated with it, or the stimulus which provoked it may be very interesting indeed.

One potential use of this information is the ability it will give GBG to mimic the sound to teach young chicks certain behavioural responses - what to do if they are confronted with a fox for example..



*Brian at the Project Site*



## UK rearing operation



*Incubation facilities ready to receive the eggs*

The intended shipment of eggs rather than young birds is an exciting one. The hope is to be able to have young birds in the UK which are fitter and in better condition than those which have been transported at a couple of months old.

The UK end of the plan is fairly well in order. The obvious need was for a place to incubate the eggs and rear the chicks.

The work started with the delivery of a portable building to our Salisbury Plain base. The second hand white "anti vandal" unit was swung off the back of the delivery lorry and painted in the GBG corporate colour (landrover green to be precise) within an hour or so. There then began a remarkable transition; Fred and Rona Andrews undertook the modification of the inside from an office with a kitchen unit into a incubation

room, hatching room and a rearing room with divisions for chicks of different ages. Add to this an outside run, a double door porch and finally making the whole set up compliant with strict quarantine regulations. The windows needed to be securely meshed, the outside run double netted and the two layers separated, and a stand off distance on the vertical panels. Fred cut a hole in the side of the unit and made a door through, linking the insides and the outside. The interior was rewired by Charles Hibberd. The number of electrical devices needed seemed to be almost endless: two incubators, two humidity units, two room heaters, three insect zappers, two hatchers, a fridge, six heat lamps and additional lighting. The end result is tremendous. Despite the purchase of much new equipment, the overall cost has been kept remarkably low, and the unit really is a custom build to the GBG's own specification.

The eggs will need to go straight into quarantine the moment they arrive. They must stay in quarantine until the last egg has hatched, and then for another 30 days. Nobody can be sure exactly when they will hatch, and there could well be a week or so between the first or last hatch dates, so the older chicks could be inside the unit for 40 days or so. Then, given the right results of all the

tests and health checks, the young birds may leave the quarantine unit.

Perhaps the greatest challenge will be getting the eggs into the UK in the first place. Previous projects have in the past managed to get special permission to have incubators inside the aircraft cabins. To have chicks inside is strictly prohibited, but eggs in incubators have usually been possible in the past. A combination of ever tighter air security and perhaps even more restrictive, a corporate response from the airlines makes any special arrangements very hard to establish. Answers are found in policies and manuals of "best practice" these days. That said, there is always a way forward in these situations, and there can be no doubt that GBG will find it!



*Quarantine unit in place at the Project Site*

## Auction winner update

One lot from last years auction was a day with David Waters, and a behind the scenes look at the Project. After starting off with tea and a look around the bustard museum which is GBG's David and Karen Waters' house, Jeanette Smith was taken to the Hawk Conservancy for an audience with the irrepressible Fergus and his friends. An excellent lunch was had at the newly opened restaurant at the Hawk Conservancy. This was followed by a trip to GBG's Salisbury Plain Project Site where some good views of the wild birds were had along with the newly arrived Stone-curlews.

Both Jeanette and David enjoyed the day a great deal and David is delighted to report that Jeanette has now volunteered to give some time to the GBG at the Hawk Conservancy - a great day and a great result all round. And thanks to Jeanette for her enthusiasm!



*Jeanette visited the Great Bustard enclosure at the Hawk Conservancy*





### New Birding Book

There is a great new book out about the birds and birdwatching in Brandenburg. Written by Roger White, this book has plenty of maps, directions and advice on how to get the most out of a birding trip to Brandenburg. It is available from the GBG shop and both a trip to Brandenburg and the book are highly recommended.



## LIFE+ German Trip



*GBG's Allan Goddard meets the local farmers*

## News from the HCT



*The Bustard Bothy at the Hawk Conservancy is now open*

The four males at the HCT have been displaying well and are clearly full of spring like hormones. There has been some aggression between one of the younger males and Fergus, who is now 7. Although the oldest bird, Fergus is now outsized by some of the others. He is however the only male likely to be old enough to be fertile and with this in mind he has been taken away from his usual residence at the Hawk Conservancy

to another pen where the GBG has two females. One of these is in her second year and should be old enough to breed. The plan is perhaps a little optimistic, but the opportunity to at least try should, and has been taken. By next year the GBG will have proper facilities for the management of a captive breeding flock. For now we will just trust to a bit of luck and the natural charm and charisma which Fergus has in bucketfuls!



In February, five of the LIFE+ project team visited the Great Bustard project in Brandenburg in Germany. David Waters, Alan Goddard and Austin Weldon from the GBG were joined by Tracé Williams and Andrew Taylor from the RSPB. With an early morning (some suggested 'middle of the night') start, the team were in the Buckow field station by late afternoon, after an easy drive across Germany. The group was hosted by Torsten Langgemach and his colleagues. The project in Brandenburg is the closest to the UK project, although the German birds just escaped extinction despite the population dropping from many thousands down to about 40. Thanks to conservation work, it is now up to around 120 individuals.

The German incubation and rearing methods were compared closely to those used by the GBG, and of particular interest were the different rearing techniques. In broad terms, the GBG has sought to minimise the contact between the young birds and the human staff - indeed the UK authorities made this an express condition of the import licence. The German system seeks to replace the role of the mother by humans, albeit ones in special costumes. The Great Bustard has one of the longest periods of maternal care in the bird world. Chicks will stay with their mother until January or even February. There does seem a good deal of sense in trying to replicate some of that care.

The team met with local farmers to discuss the farming and conservation issues they face, and with local hunting organisations which work closely with the conservationists. As well as the fox, escaped or released raccoons and raccoon dogs cause significant problems for the Great Bustards and many other species. Other predators, which are fully protected, include Goshawks and the White Tailed or Sea Eagle. A diversionary feeding station has been set up for the eagles to attempt to keep them away from the bustard sites.

The trip was a very useful one for the UK team and much was gained from it. Some of the aspects of the German techniques will be incorporated into the rearing of the eggs imported into the UK this year.

Bustards apart, there was a bit of time to see some other birds, including a spectacular Crane roost with thousands of birds flying over our heads as they came into roost. GBG is very grateful to Torsten and his colleagues for taking the time to host the team.



### *What are foxes up to at the moment?*

*Austin Weldon reports*



© Peter Thompson GWCT

*The Red Fox (Vulpes vulpes)*

As I write these words, I can hear a wealth of noise coming from the wildlife outside my office window. Indeed, the long dark days of winter have been shaken off, frolicking lambs and sleeping new born calves can be seen all over the place! This is also the time when Mother Nature's wild creatures make the most of the forthcoming bounty of food. For predators such as the fox, young cubs will now be present across much of the country, enabling them to capitalise on booming prey animal populations.

***Red fox vixens can be prolific breeders and have been recorded producing as many as 12 foetuses, but on average, litters will number around five offspring. Evidence suggests that this number is directly related to food availability.***

As a result of this, the average number of cubs may vary from year to year. Interestingly, a vixen's body has the ability to absorb some, or all of the embryos, if conditions are unfavourable.

Fox cubs are a great drain on the adults and take a lot of feeding, so it is common to see adult foxes actively hunting during the day when raising young. From now until the summer is when you might lose your domestic poultry in the middle of

the day – so keep a watchful eye and reinforce your fencing!

Fox cubs are born blind and remain so for 10 – 14 days, they also have a woolly grey coat and, as a result, they get 10 out of 10 for sweetness! They initially remain below ground and will be nursed on milk for up to five weeks of age. However, few people realise, not only will the cubs have a mother and father bringing food to them; they will also have the assistance of other foxes from the social group, especially once the cubs have emerged from the earth. These helpers are likely to be cubs from the litter of the previous year.

After weaning off milk, the cubs will readily take solid food. This is likely to include small mammals, particularly adult hares and leverets, rabbits and small rodents. Ground nesting birds also feature heavily in the diet at this time.

***Food items which are worthwhile carrying back to the natal earth offer the most energy efficient nutrition for cubs at this time.***

Once the cubs reach a few weeks of age they play and fight to a great extent. This behaviour serves the purpose of organising a hierarchy between the siblings; it may also result in smaller or poorer cubs getting weaker and perishing.

***Often the racket made by the cubs is the give-away of the location of an earth; the noise is likely to be comprised of squabbling, squawking and yapping!***

For nearby residents, especially in urban areas, this has been known to cause some sleepless nights!

Vegetation is now quickly starting to shoot, and crops like oil seed rape provide a haven for fox cubs. Fox mothers are notoriously sensitive to disturbance so once the cubs are old enough they will be moved to a new area, such as a standing agricultural crop. From here, the cubs can play and learn to hunt in a safe environment until the crop is harvested at the end of the summer.

Next issue we will look at the teenage cubs and their path to adulthood.



## A lifelong love of birds

### Lewis Cowen talks to Ashley Smith



Ashley is in great demand as a speaker



(Above left) Ashley with his wife Tracey (Centre) With rehabilitated Honey Buzzard (Right) And with one of the Trust's Barn Owls

**The Great Bustard Group is now involved with a large number of bird conservation organisations all over the world. But few have such fascinating – or eccentric – beginnings as the Hawk Conservancy Trust based at Weyhill, near Andover.**

As many of you will know, the GBG has established strong links with the Trust, founding a Great Bustard house at the centre where Fergus, one of the first intake of chicks from Russia in 2004, holds court.

Ashley Smith started up the Hawk Conservancy in 1980 but its genesis goes back well before this. Ashley's parents, Reg and Hilary Smith, came to what was then Sarsen Farm in 1952. Ashley said: "As a hobby, mum and dad used to look after injured foxes, badgers and so on that people brought in."



With 25 acres to cultivate, Reg and Hilary struggled to make a go of the farm so they developed the animal hospital side of things and, in 1966, founded Weyhill Wildlife Park.

Reg was interested in broadcasting and was a regular guest on local radio programmes. This, in turn, led to TV appearances on children's programmes like How! and Blue Peter.

**Ashley said: "Dad appeared on Blue Peter with an albino badger they were looking after. But the badger bit a researcher so dad just talked about the animals they looked after at the wildlife park."**

The effect was astonishing. The following Saturday 450 people turned up to see the animals for themselves. With no public parking on the site, visitors' cars blocked the narrow lane to the farm and the police threatened Reg with prosecution for obstruction of the highway.

But the die was cast. There was demand for a wildlife park and a wildlife park there would be. Reg and Hilary sold off part of the land to finance the alterations that were

necessary to make the site suitable for a paying public.

Ashley has fond memories of growing up among a menagerie. He said: "There was a bear in the dining room and monkeys in some of the other rooms. You don't realise when you're growing up that your parents are eccentric. You think everyone must have wild animals in their homes."

Being around animals all the time meant that Ashley had no particular feelings towards the wild world until, when he was 11 or 12 years old, he saw a falconer called Paul Bevan fly a Merlin. Ashley said: "There comes a time in every young person's life a defining moment and this was the moment I became interested in wildlife."

"I watched his relationship with the bird and was fascinated by the bond he had developed with what was still a wild creature. I thought, *you can keep your monkeys and bears – birds are it.*"

**Ashley got his first bird, a kestrel called Asterix, after the cartoon Gaulish freedom fighter, in 1976 and his career path was set.**

(Left) Hilary Smith caring for an abandoned badger cub

**By 1980 his parents offered Ashley the option of setting up his own bird of prey centre, which he eagerly did.**

Sadly, Reg died in 1995 and Hilary in 2006 but their names will forever be associated with the Trust.

Seven acres of land were bought to create a wildflower meadow in Reg's name, home to many species of butterfly, bee and moth. A new hospital for the care of injured birds of prey was named in Hilary's memory.

In 2004 the Hawk Conservancy became a registered charity and became the Hawk Conservancy Trust with Ashley as Chief Executive Officer.

He has now stood down from that post, taking on the title of Life President. He said: "We got to the stage where we were so big I thought we should get a grown-up in to run things."

This grown-up is Penny Smout, who has now come in as Chief Executive ready to take the Hawk Conservancy Trust to its next stage.

**But Ashley does not rest on his laurels. He is still fully occupied around the Conservancy and, with his wealth of stories and an easy manner, he is in great demand as an after-dinner speaker.**

The relationship between the Hawk Conservancy and the Great Bustard Group has been a meeting of minds as much as anything else.

Ashley said: "We share a vet – John Chitty. I met GBG's Dave and Karen Waters at a dinner party at John and his wife Kate's and we got on famously. I was really impressed that two people could make such a monumental effort to achieve their goal.

"While we were having a meal at Dave and Karen's one evening, the phone rang. Someone was asking to speak to the Great Bustard Group's marketing department. Dave put his hand over the phone and asked, does anyone

want to be the marketing department?"

It was a natural progression for the Great Bustard Group to have a presence at the Hawk Conservancy Trust and the two groups work hand in glove – both are dedicated to conservation and education, so it is a marriage made in heaven.

**The Trust is involved in conservation schemes for many endangered species of birds, notably the White-Headed Vulture in South Africa and the Oriental White-Backed Vulture in Pakistan.**

Ashley said: "I want to fly the flag for vultures. They are not the most popular birds in the world but I think they are beautiful, and so impressive. They are nature's under-takers."

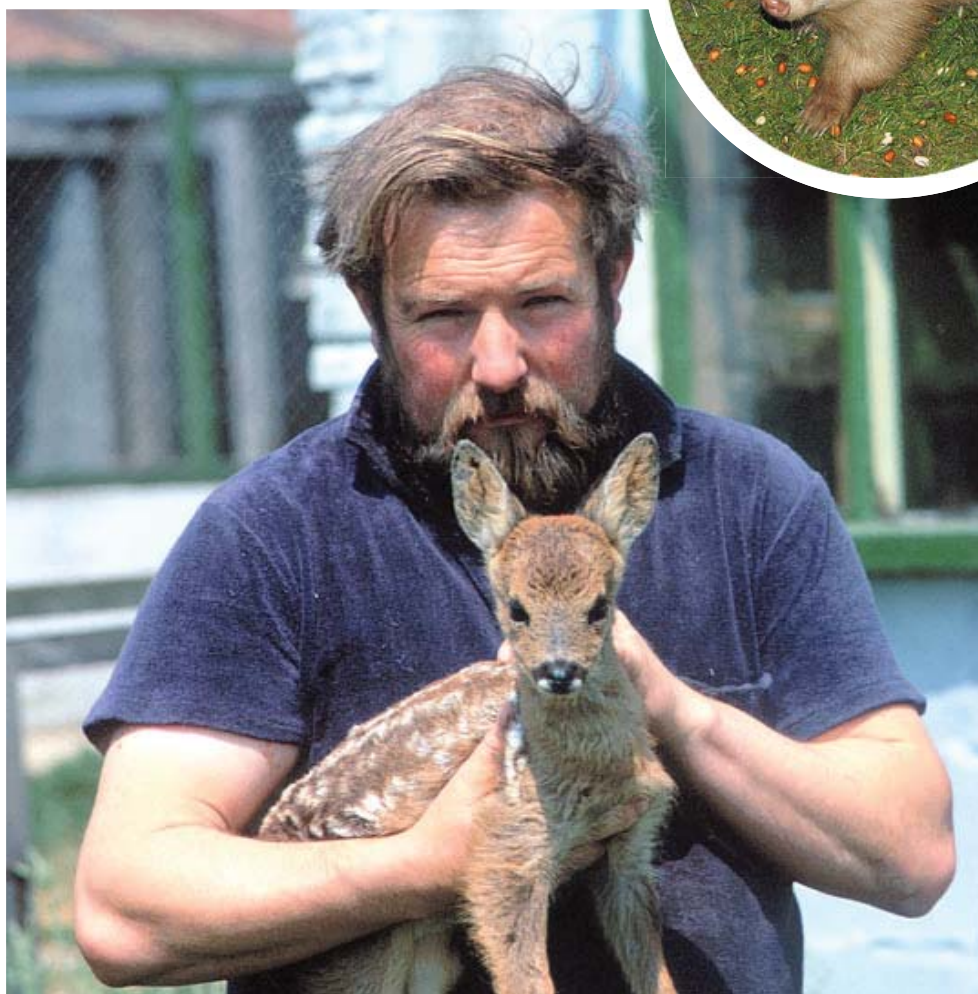
There are huge changes taking place at the Hawk Conservancy. A new restaurant capable

of catering for 150 people and costing £500,000 opened at Easter and last year 60,000 visitors came to see the 150 birds currently being looked after on site.

Over 200 birds are cared for in the hospital every year – coming in from the RSPCA, police and members of the public.

The flying displays continue to be a firm favourite with visitors and the centre is encouraging a love of wildlife among children who do not live in the country, would not know a chaffinch from a vulture and get most of their knowledge of nature from Blue Peter...

Which leads us back to where it all started - with an albino badger biting a researcher's finger.



(Above) Ashley's father in the early days of the centre (Inset) An albino badger



## Spring brings stability Andrew Taylor reports



Map charting the movements of the bird that travelled to France

**After all the movements of bustards around southwest England we saw in the autumn and early winter, the second half of the winter brought some welcome stability.**

A settled group of two mature females and two juveniles spent two months close to the original release site, feeding on oil seed rape. The close association between females and juveniles through the winter can only have been beneficial to the young birds involved.

While the older females appeared to be indulging their maternal instincts, the adult males showed little interest in the young birds. Purple 5 and Pink 2 have been together almost constantly since July 2011, and have not been seen any distance from the release site in that time. However, despite wintering in the same area, the male and female groups were only occasionally seen together.

The lekking season started on leap year day, 29th February, when Purple 5 was seen in full display for the first time. At five years old, he is by far the most impressive individual, with unmistakable white and orange feathering around his neck and the ability to inflate his sizeable throat pouch. He is also bigger than any of the younger males. Nevertheless, Pink 2 and Black 9 are eager to practice their displays. Black 9, approaching one year old, is

Purple 5 in display



far from convincing, but two year old Pink 2 is developing quickly and is sometimes prepared to challenge Purple 5. We have seen them fighting on one occasion,

with necks entwined, but the older bird is clearly stronger. Usually when we see them together, Pink 2 behaves submissively towards Purple 5.

As the displaying males built towards a climax, in mid-March the females disappeared. We spent a couple of weeks following up reports of the group, but only managed to catch up with them once, at our new release site.

**Happily, at the end of the month two of the females returned and were seen with the displaying males once again. At the time of writing we are just a few weeks away from the beginning of the breeding season.**

Orange 15, our oldest female, remains characteristically elusive. Despite her age, she has never been confirmed to breed, and

does not return to her release site in the Spring as the other birds do. We will continue to search for her over the next few months, following up any reports we receive. Hopefully 2012 will prove to be the year in which we finally find her nest site.

**We reported on a number of dispersing young bustards in the last issue.**

Only one of these was seen regularly until March, the individual with a radio transmitter in northern France. This bird spent over three months in the same field feeding on lucerne, a favourite food for Great Bustards. The last sighting was in late March and she has not been seen or detected through the radio transmitter since. This is exactly the time of year when we would expect any wandering birds to return to their breeding site, and this may well be the case with this bird, but we are still waiting to find out if she has made another successful channel crossing.

No further reports have been received of our other young birds, which had reached Devon, Dorset and Berkshire by the end of last year. It would be no surprise if some of them did reappear in the next few weeks, and if you are lucky enough to encounter a Great Bustard, or hear about a sighting, please use the form on our website to report it, or telephone 01980 671466. [www.greatbustard.org/about-us/sightings](http://www.greatbustard.org/about-us/sightings)



T5 near Montchaton in Normandy, February 2012.

## Displaying males & mate choice

### *It's not all about the moustache!*

*In 1859 Darwin proposed that many male sexual characteristics, such as ornamental plumage in birds and breeding displays, evolve through selection by females for these extravagant traits.*

Great Bustards show the most extreme sexual dimorphism among birds, with males being around 2.4 times heavier than females! As chicks, they grow much faster than females and are already heavier at three weeks old, reaching double the weight of females at three months.

At the onset of the breeding season, males increase their body mass by about 30%, which may suggest that increased mass enhances a male's breeding success. The body condition of a male before or during the breeding season can have a significant effect on his breeding success.

For example, males in good condition have more energy to invest in secondary sexual characteristics, such as the moustaches that Great Bustard males develop. These moustaches are thin, 15 – 20 cm long feathers, which grow in tufts every winter in males older than one year. When they display, these feathers are raised up to show off their length and abundance.

*During the non-breeding season, their neck and breast is uniform grey, but starting in December, males undergo a moult for the breeding season, finishing with a colourful pattern of contrasting dark chestnut at the base and ivory white at the throat.*

In addition, males undergo an extraordinary development of the subcutaneous tissue of the neck, gular pouch and breast feathers; this pouch is inflated with the oesophagus during display. In Spain, females have been

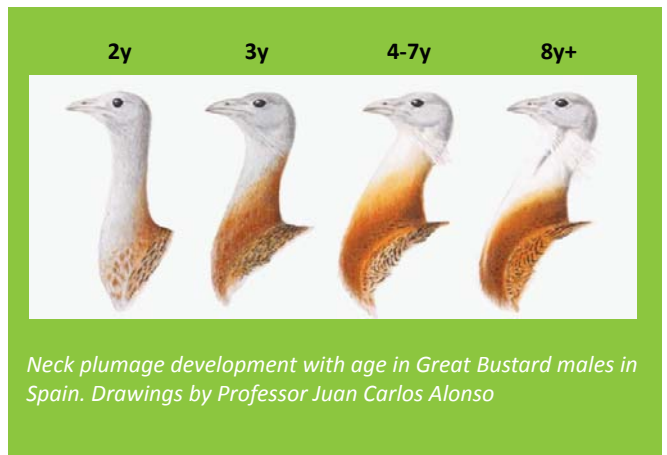
found to prefer males with longer moustaches and thicker necks; development which only takes place if males are of good physiological condition.

*In many species, older males are often more attractive to females as they have lived longer and therefore must carry a greater proportion of 'good genes'.*

Although some of the sexual characteristics of male Great Bustards, such as moustache length and neck development, are linked to age, researchers have suggested that the difference between the success of males in their capacity to display and attract females is mainly dependent on body condition. This isn't surprising in such a long-lived bird, where sexual maturity is not reached until males are 3-5 years old.

Across a wide range of species, females evaluate males largely based on male vigour in performing energetically demanding acts, such as harem defence and male breeding displays. In lekking species, where males fight to establish rank and display to females over an extended period, attracting females can be very energetically-expensive. In Sage-Grouse, the most vigorously displaying males expend twice the energy over the course of a day than non-displaying males! Great Bustard males spend less time feeding and in some cases are unable to fly at the end of the mating season due to exhaustion, suggesting that the displays of this species can be incredibly costly. Gaining body mass as the onset of the breeding season may be necessary to provide energy for such intensive displays. A high frequency of displays is needed to attract females and that is only possible when males are in good condition.

Furthermore, males need to time their display



activity and orient themselves in a way that will attract the most females. During displays, males lift their tails and rotate their wings, exposing their white body feathers.

*Most of this white is on the back side of the male and under good conditions can be seen from more than 1 kilometre away with the naked eye!*

It is most obvious when the sun shines directly onto the white feathers, therefore advantageous for males to orientate themselves towards the sun. Courtship activity at the lek is generally greatest during the early morning; males direct their displays towards the sun at this time, possibly to attract distant females when they leave their roost sites, and towards specific females close to the lek later in the day. So males not only have to look good to attract females, but be vigorous and skilled in their displays to get attention!



**Find out more:** Alonso et al. 2005. Field determination of age in male Great Bustards (*Otis tarda*) in spring. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 52: 43-47

Morales et al. 2003. Male sexual display and attractiveness in the Great Bustard *Otis tarda*: the role of body condition. *Journal of Ethology* 21: 51-56.



## Creative children learn with crafts

Karen Waters reports



*A class of proud artists show us their progress, fine efforts all round!*

**GBG's new recruit made a fine debut at the Great Bustard Group's Creative Science and Technology Day at St. Andrew's VA Primary School, Laverstock. Karen Waters reports on a busy day in the classroom.**

On a cold, but sunny day in early February, the latest recruit to the education team – Li'l O the Great Bustard Chick – made a stunning debut as the inspiration for the Creative Science and Technology Day held at St. Andrew's VA Primary School, Laverstock. Class 3 spent the day gaining insight into the work of the GBG and the life of our Great Bustards.

Li'l O proved an instant hit with the pupils who were inspired to design and make models where he and the eggs were well camouflaged. The models were based on work on ecosystems, habitats and the geography of Salisbury Plain. This complements Class 3's current curriculum. To make the models, pupils had to understand the specific needs of Great Bustards.

A workshop on Comeback Contenders, including beavers, large blue butterflies and wild boar, plus, of course, Great Bustards, helped the pupils gain insight into the

broader picture of wildlife re-introduction, especially their own local species and the work involved by the GBG. Once they had followed Li'l O's journey from an egg in Russia to the Plain, including time in the rearing pen in Saratov, they had good reason to see Li'l O as a Super-bird. They reflected on the ethics of re-introducing species and what would happen to the eggs if they weren't rescued; the birds that are released here; those that are not released; helping both U.K. and Russian wildlife; plus jobs that are created here and in Russia.

**For fun we challenged the pupils to think of Li'l O with an alter ego as a Super Hero. They gave a name, designated special powers and made a super vehicle with gadgets to help Li'l O in the super role.**

Interestingly, the pupils chose bustard-related challenges for Li'l O, mainly rescuing chicks and saving the birds from predators.

After lunch, we studied the attributes of real Great Bustards as Super Birds. This was followed by a workshop on flight and wing structures, involving the science of the flight and wings of aeroplanes, helicopters and birds. We learned about the biology and

structure of birds that enable them to fly – or not - as in the case of penguins and ostriches.

**The culmination of the day was making flying paper bustards and testing them in the school hall with an obstacle course representing threats to real flying bustards such as pylons and electricity cables, water, settlements and marshy areas.**

Other classes came to watch the testing which was great fun. Throughout the day pupils were thinking, making, doing, reflecting and planning. After each activity they were expected to discuss their work and how it could be improved and what they would like to share with others and work on in class. Finally, they analysed the day as a whole and how they had worked as individuals and contributed to their team. They began work on how they will share the day with the rest of the school and decided to make their class assembly a Great Bustard Assembly.

Each pupil received a Li'l O replica, a Fergus badge, a certificate and Great Bustard poster. The class was given a plaque as a memento of the day. It was a huge pleasure spending the day at St. Andrew's. The pupils were excellent ambassadors for St. Andrew's and young people their age. They were polite, helpful and enthusiastic and were focussed and engaged throughout the day working over and above the level required by our high standards of challenging learning. It is clear from the reflection and planning sessions that the pupils learned a lot. We appreciated the commitment of everyone and know that the day has stimulated thought for future work in the school's curriculum. Our thanks to Mrs. Karen Walker, Headteacher, Mrs. Claire Woodward, Class 3 teacher and all the rest of the school for their warm welcome and hospitality.





# Bustard Buddies

GREAT  
BUSTARD  
GROUP



Come  
and visit us  
this  
Summer!

Bustard fun  
for the Brownies



**INSIDE** - Win a t-shirt & Chris Packham meets Fergus



# Beaker speaks to Tom



This month my helper is Tom from Hampshire. Tom is eight years old and his hobbies are tennis, swimming and he is a member of a drama company who are appearing in the West End in July! Tom recently visited the Great Bustard Group to see the wild birds in Wiltshire. He says "We saw Great Bustards flying in the distance and looked through binoculars to get a better view of them. We went in the Landrover which was very exciting!"

**You can visit us too and see the first wild Great Bustards in Britain for almost 200 years! Our birds are free roaming and fly all over the South of England!**



**See bustards through a telescope**



**Great Bustards are good at flying**





# Why not visit my friends at the Hawk Conservancy too?



Chris Packham  
with our star Fergus



Hold an owl!

Visit the  
Bustard  
Bothy

See  
unusual  
birds



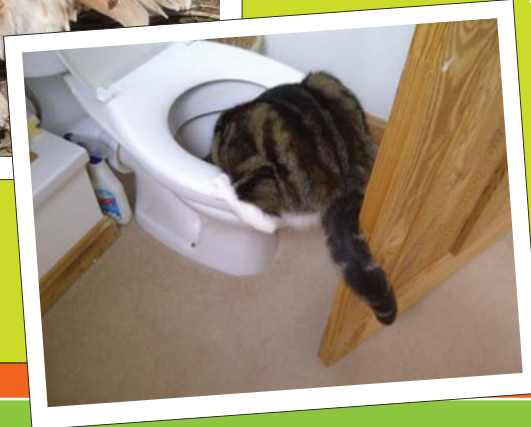
See Eagles & Vultures

Gordon Bucheman  
of Springwatch  
with Fergus

Email [buddies@greatbustard.org](mailto:buddies@greatbustard.org)  
for more information on visiting Fergus and his friends



# Competition Winners!



Thanks to all who entered our 'Funny Pets' competition in the last Bustard Buddies. And congratulations to winners Mike Prior from Wiltshire who sent us 'Headless Hen' and Claire Smithson from Berkshire for her 'Toilet Cat'.

## Win a t-shirt

We have a limited edition 'Fergus' t-shirt to give away this month!

Simply email us your favourite animal joke and your age, and we'll print the best funny in the next 'Bustard Buddies'!

[buddies@greatbustard.org](mailto:buddies@greatbustard.org)



Have you seen a Great Bustard? We'd like to know..  
Email your story to: [buddies@greatbustard.org](mailto:buddies@greatbustard.org)

or post to: Bustard Buddies, 1, Down Barn Close, Winterbourne Gunner, Wiltshire, SP4 6JP

## Threats to Mongolian Biodiversity

*Lenka Panackova reports*

***Mongolia has one of the world's oldest traditions of protected areas dating back to Ghenghis Khan in the early 13th Century.***

The country retains vast areas of relatively unspoiled natural habitats. One quarter of Mongolia's territory falls into one or more categories of what the World Bank defines as "critical natural habitats".

Mongolia's relatively intact ecosystems support a number of species that are now endangered or extinct in other countries around the world, including several species of crane – such as the White-naped and Siberian Cranes and the Great Bustard. In Mongolia, in addition to Otis Tarda, you can find there the Houbara Bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*), Macqueen's Bustard (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*) and the Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*).

Some 2,200 individuals of the Asian subspecies of Great Bustard (*Otis tarda dybowskii*) can be found in Central Asia. This subspecies is included on Red Lists across its range in Siberian Russia, Mongolia and China.

***In the 1990's, the Mongolian government instituted policies that promoted livestock trade and this resulted in a drastic increase in the numbers of herders and their livestock that occupied pasture areas, this remains common to this day.***

Livestock impact on wetlands is severe: they trample nesting habitat for critically endangered birds like the White-naped Crane and often destroy their eggs.

During my recent visit to Mongolia, in August 2011, where I spent two weeks rattling across the vast land in a Russian van, it became very clear that Mongolia had decided to step up their game and place more emphasis on putting an infrastructure

in place in order to attract tourists and foreign investors.

Tourism operations have steadily increased over the last two decades in Mongolia as it proved to be an important source of revenue for conservation and provided local benefits through jobs and souvenir sales, but it has not yet been managed with conservation in mind. As the number of visitors to protected areas increases, adverse impacts on wildlife and natural habitats become more likely. Tourism infrastructure is already too dense and not well planned in some protected areas.

***The contrast of the vast green land, with the odd ger settlement and large tracks, piles of stones and dust is overwhelming.***

The country has commenced their race to catch up with the "advanced" world. I found it somewhat amusing to see a native ger that was occupied by a herder's family, being decorated with a rather contrasting satellite dish on its side.

Do the people, who so much love their culture and traditions, who purposely build their dwellings round, so no ghost finds a corner to hide in, know the impact a motorway running through their "garden" will have on their lives? How will this gentle nation handle the first arrival of McDonalds inside a service station and foreign investors or holiday property hunters buying large amounts of land, in order to build holiday apartments, villas and warehouses?

What will happen to the unspoiled habitat, where an eagle is peacefully perching by the side of a track, to the White-naped Crane and their eggs? Is the Mongolian Great Bustard facing the same grim future as it once faced on Great British land?



*Mongolia is home to many rare species of wildlife*



*Our van traversing unmade roads of Mongolia*



*Is eagle habitat to be threatened by development?*



*Traditional ger complete with satellite dish!*



## **Keep the Nest** *of Hawks and Falcons - part 2*

*Stanislav Khuchraew wrote in the last edition of Otis of his youth in the wilderness of the Russian countryside. Here he continues his enthralling story.*

Next dawn I was already on the way to Diakovka looking for a car to hitchhike. With my luggage consisted of climbing irons, old bed sheets to swaddle the chicks, and a bottle of water, all packed in a rucksack. As I managed to learn from Vladimir's ticket, he was to take a bus at 10:00 am. I was very much concerned with my time advantage and I was crucially losing it. At 15:00 I was standing at the far end of the village looking for another transport chance whereas Vladimir had been right by arriving in Diakovka by bus. Fortunately, a forest duty car picked me up and an hour later I was right under the nest.

The tree was so huge, I found myself climbing and dreaming of revenge on the fellow who forced me up there. Once I reached the crown I had to hang onto the lateral branch and catch it by a leg to skirt around the nest that emerged like a cap. That was the most complicated and dangerous manoeuvre.

*The tree top was swinging two meters there and back, but my weight slowed it down so all the other crowns around were swinging in rhythm, but mine, the tallest one, was a quarter late, making me dizzy and sending me into irresistible panic.*

Yet as I straddled the branch I lost the fear and concentrated on my pursuit. I met the chicks face to face, they had been almost fully fledged, all three in threatening positions, high on their legs, wings unfolded, tousle-necked, wide-eyed, crying at the top of their lungs, squatting on their tails. I caught them one by one, offering my hand in a glove, then I swaddled and packed them in



*The mighty Goshawk on her nest*

shoe boxes I had found at the cordon.

*When the last box was placed into my rucksack I thought of leaving an impudent note to Vladimir in the nest but changed my mind as I feared that the shock may cause him to fall.*

My way down was unexpectedly easy. Fear left me alone and three small Goshawk prisoners sat quietly behind my back.

Having reached the cordon I placed the chicks in the big basket, covered them with light cloth and set them down in a dark shed. Then Uncle Lyosha, the hunter living there and myself served ourselves tea on the cordon's veranda.

And just then I saw Vladimir passing by, accompanied by the cordon's barking dogs.

He had been travelling on foot, and was clearly worn out by the hot and sandy road, in fact he looked deadly tired. I immediately felt sorry for him. My first impulse was to stop him and to cry out what I thought of him, but a moment later I decided to let him climb that tree as a punishment for his poacher deeds so I hid myself behind a door. Uncle Lyosha had been taught how to

answer his questions if any came but Vladimir passed by. When he disappeared behind the curve all of a sudden I fell into panic imagining the tired man risking his life for a goal that had already gone, but I didn't stop him as he had to learn a lesson. I sat on the porch, sweaty and depressed and awaited the outcome.

At last some time later I saw him passing by, he avoided the cordon again and disappeared amongst the old trees of the apple orchard.

*Early morning next day I was again up on the giant poplar setting free the chicks. What a surprise it was when they ran away from me on the branches, quick as squirrels.*

Why yesterday were they so easy to take? Then I figured out their reason for such a change. They had full possession of the nest until yesterday. Even their parents had not come there, instead throwing them meals from above. Obedient to the parents command the chicks were ready either to catch the meal or to make themselves invisible. The chicks had never seen the actual enemy, face to face, they didn't know how to react to intruders.

Yesterday they learned that the huge stranger could cause most unexpected troubles. And if you would seize his long limbs with your talons he could immediately clutch you. So the correct behaviour was to escape.

**Thus my invasion speeded the chicks progress. In a week they had already started their flights from branch to branch and gradually got out of sight.**

Later I met them there and then, as youngsters they stayed long around their nest site and highly depended on their parents.

I have seen plenty of raptors nests since then and a particular story binds me with each of them, but this is outstanding among others. When I was thirty five I brought my younger son there. He was three years old and could easily operate such definitions as 'beautiful,' 'interesting' and 'I like.' I showed him the nest, I also presented him with the nests habitants on my camera screen.

I didn't tell him what I had been told 'Watch the nest but never show it to anybody because..'. My son was still too young but the chance was lost as a year later the half of the giant grove had been cut to firewood. Goshawks abandoned the nesting area and moved to a picturesque place called Big Pine by local people. That was a hundred year old pine forest, spread for a few tens of hectares along the forest lake. Roes used to come there for drinks and boars enjoyed their mud baths.

Goshawks had moved at the right time as wildfire wiped out almost all of what was left of the poplar grove. Sadly the pine forest fared no better as a neighbouring tree, broken by strong winds fell right onto the nest. The tragedy happened in the night and the next morning chicks were no more seen in the nest.

Apparently they had been tossed out by the hit. However, the parents didn't leave the nesting area and I assumed that at least one chick survived the fall and the adults had been feeding it on the ground. As I realised that I ceased to come to this part of the forest so as not to disturb the family. n a few



(Above) Stas & colleague Olga (Right) Goshawk

weeks I needed to visit the place as I had left a climbing rope on a nearby tree. I had fixed it well before the nest had been crushed because I had set a camera on the tree and needed a rope to climb there in the darkness to change accumulators, memory cards and settings.

I had already removed the camera by then but the rope I left until the chicks left the nest. As I climbed the pine I heard familiar sounds. Goshawks! They were coming closer, I could recognise their shadows flashing among trunks, it was clear they were pursuing prey. I pressed myself against the tree, fully reliant on the security rope and from my high position caught sight of a hare. It was charging towards my hide, in short passes, low on its legs, circling above it were two young hawks consistently attacking.

**The hare had burrowed in the thicket under my tree and its aggressors had to sit on the branches. One was just a metre and a half down from me and didn't pay attention to my presence. I could see both birds clearly, its was the chicks of this year.**

My heart sang as I knew there couldn't be any other youngsters in this area, so at least two survivors out of three had made it, now grown-up and even trying to hunt. Relaxing a little I changed my position to get a better view of my neighbours down there and, taking pieces of pine bark, I started throwing it down to their heads. The hawk I hit shook himself in a dog-like manner, rolled his head, but neither looked at me nor flew away.

So seated we were for another half an hour, until the hare regained his courage and the pursuit started again. I didn't have my camera but who could imagine to witness anything like that being high up a pine tree.



**Within a year most of Big Pine grove had gone in further wild fire. Remains of the forest were gradually and consistently cut down. The cordon house was destroyed more than fifteen years ago, its residents disappeared. Nikolaich retired and moved to the city.**

The nest I was to 'watch but never show to anybody because..' doesn't exist any more.

Neither does the Diakovka conservation area, less than ten hectares are left from thirty thousand hectares of Diakovka forest.

At my last tour through the burned Diakovka forest I drove between blackened pine trunks, with unusually yellow needles, passing dead birch groves and charred thicket of white acacia.

The same way Nikolaich and myself had made on the small tractor many years ago, but now my four wheel drive choked with ashy dust when climbing a dune or skidding in the black hollows, covered by caked sand.

I passed by the totally burned orchard and found myself in a familiar place. It was recognisable in no real way, but my inner navigator told me that the cordon once had been here. The charred remnants of a tree thrust up from the ground looking like a half burned hand. My heart ached, cold shivers went up my spine, I got so uncomfortable in this place, I put my car in gear and drove away but could not take my eyes away from the ominous hand looming in the rear-view mirror.

There was nothing to show to my growing son and nothing to watch any more...



## A 'Great' Great Bustard Day in Portugal

Mike Read reports

*Imagine my surprise when, on returning from Portugal, there on my doormat was the Spring 2012 issue of Otis featuring the very area where we had just had a great day of birding. I felt that my experiences may equally be of interest to Otis readers.*

A rather leisurely start to the day saw us driving out on to the Castro Verde plains at about 10.30am. Our aim was to find a few Great and Little Bustards, plus other bird species, and perhaps even try for a few photographs. By the end of the day we had seen 156 Great Bustards without leaving public roads and tracks. Here's how we did it!

Having visited the area before, my wife Liz and I knew the Castro Verde to Mertola road was a good starting point. At various locations along this route there are places where good views can be obtained over surrounding countryside. Our first two stops drew a blank so it was time to pause for a coffee at a more suitable lay-by. Nine kilometres from Castro Verde, a right turn took us towards and then beyond Rolão. On roadside wires there were occasional Southern Grey Shrikes, Red Kites drifted on lazily-flapped long wings and Corn Buntings were dotted along roadside fences. Just beyond a slight rise a suitable 'lay-by' gave views over large tracts of rolling countryside. Whilst Liz got out the thermos, I began scanning. Within minutes, two small groups of Great Bustards were in view in the distance. A dozen males were prominent in a green field while amongst the more typical natural vegetation, there were 16 females. Both groups were close to the tops of higher ground thus giving them the ability to see danger either side of the rise or, alternatively, wandering out of sight of disturbance or danger without having to resort to energetic flight. We celebrated with coffee AND a chocolate biscuit ..or two!

After this, we continued along the road to a T-junction and a left turn took us on smaller roads towards Mertola. White Storks stood sedately beside a couple of ponds where a few Mallard and Coots could also be seen. As we stopped in our car, the storks unfortunately departed. Why are they so nervous of cars and people when they often nest in villages or towns in close proximity to humans?!

Near Guerreiro we located another two groups of Great Bustards. There were 13 males, some now with good breeding plumage developing, feeding fairly close to the road and at a much greater distance 22 birds fed quite unconcerned at our car. Here, as in most cases, we remained in our car whilst we watched. The shape of a car seems to be much less worrying to these enigmatic birds than even a distant person.

Near Penilhos a group of eleven Little

Bustards were in a small field close to the road. Here it was even more important for the human form to remain hidden so after a brief viewing (plus a few photos) we drove onwards leaving the birds to continue feeding. Hoopoes, Calandra and Crested Larks and Azure-winged Magpies all added to our sightings while just after João Serra, White Storks were beginning to add material to their nests. Some were even sitting but I assume they were just resting on this lovely sunny day rather than incubating eggs. It was only mid February after all.

Crossing the Castro Verde to Mertola, N123 road and heading towards Corte Pequena, a passing male Hen Harrier spooked another couple of Little Bustards into revealing themselves and, as they sped off on whirring wings, at the same time a group of 11 Great Bustards flew eastwards on heavy, slow wingbeats.



Great Bustards in natural habitat in Portugal



© Mike Read

(Above) The open lands of Portugal make perfect Great Bustard habitat (Right) Little Owl

Just a few kilometres along this road we turned left on to a gravel track signposted to “No. Sra. Arq. Celli”. This leads to a beautiful hill-top church from which the views are absolutely stunning. We could almost see 360° but being mid afternoon, birds were somewhat quiet. Groups of three, five and eight Great Bustards could just about be made out despite the long range viewing. These birds are really unmistakable once located! After relaxing and finishing the coffee in the shade of some Eucalypts, we eventually dragged ourselves away and headed back to the N123 passing many Lapwings and Golden Plovers as we went. These two wader species had frequently been encountered throughout the day and only once had they been close to pools of water. On that occasion we also had good views of a Spotted Redshank which seemed somewhat out of place.

A right turn on to the N123 soon produced the most unexpected sighting of the day when a juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle circled overhead for a while before moving off south presumably in search of a late afternoon meal. Beyond Sao Marcos da Ataboeira we suddenly became aware of

some more ‘hill-walking’ Great Bustards. Liz counted 29 and I made it 37. How could our counts of fairly close birds be so different? I then realised we were both looking in opposite directions! Some were to the south of the road, others were to the north. Thankfully there was just enough room to squeeze the car into a gateway from where we watched and as we did so, two of those to the north of the road took off and flew over to join the 29. Luckily we were amongst some trees so I was able to stand outside the car and, in ones, twos and small groups, the remaining birds took off and flew right overhead to join the others. My camera was almost warm from the succession of shots I took! It was a fantastic end to a highly successful tour around the beautiful Castro Verde plains where, in just one day, we had encountered a total of 71 species of birds including 13 Little and 156 Great Bustards. Not only that, but the scenery had added greatly to the occasion. Brilliant!!

Let’s hope that people’s dreams will come true, the Great Bustard will make a deserved comeback in Britain and that one day we will be able to see dozens of this wonderful bird during a single day out around Salisbury



Plain.

This was just part of our trip to Southern Portugal in preparation for leading a tour there in April 2013 for Travelling Naturalist. See their web site [www.naturalist.co.uk](http://www.naturalist.co.uk) for full details of this and the many other easy-going tours they organise.

*Mike Read is a freelance photographer and writer and, along with wife Liz, leads tours for Travelling Naturalist. Mike also gives illustrated talks throughout southern England. Visit Mike’s web site ([www.mikeread.co.uk](http://www.mikeread.co.uk)) where you can see his broad range of photographic work. He also sells canvas prints, fine art giclée prints and notelets and is willing to donate 10% of orders to the Great Bustard Group if you mention them when ordering.*



### *Buffon on the Great Bustard*

by Prof. Estlin Waters



*Estlin Waters Prof.*

When Howard Saunders revised and enlarged William Yarrell's best selling *A History of British Birds* in 1882-1884, he began the essay on the Great Bustard as follows –

“Those who are desirous of ascertaining what was known of the Great Bustard in more ancient times, may consult the works of Aelian, Albertus Magnus, Aldrovandus, Aristotle, Athenaeus, Belon, Oppian, Pliny, and Plutarch; but for the purposes of the present work it will suffice to consider more recent authorities...”

I had never thought of consulting these ancients or even reading much about them. However I recently came across volume 2 (out of 9) of *The Natural History of Birds* from the French of the Count de Buffon which has a section on the Great Bustard. It is an English translation of the bird section of Count de Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle, generale et particuliere*. Count de Buffon (Georges-Louis Leclerc) was a wealthy and much traveled French naturalist born in 1707. His *Histoire Naturelle, generale et particuliere* was published in parts and in many editions and various translations. The first edition was published between 1749 and 1804 in 44 large volumes, some published after Buffon's death in 1788. It was a sensation. Volume 2 of *The Natural History of Birds* from the French of the Count de Buffon starts with 34 pages on the Great Bustard and this is followed by 20 more on the Little Bustard and on Foreign Birds that are Analogous to the Bustards. This translation of Buffon's great

work was published in 1793 in London, incidentally the year that Buffon's son was executed by the guillotine. Using his large collection of bird skins, Buffon spent much effort identifying species as at that time the same bird was given different names and different birds were given the same name, sometimes in different languages and some names changed over time. Thus Otis was often confused with Otus (owls) and this is mentioned by Buffon on half a dozen pages. Males and female of the same species were sometimes classified as two species, when their plumage differed. Buffon studied the ancient naturalists, often critically, as he felt their accounts could be connected usefully with those of his own time, which was the only way of making progress in natural history. He made many personal observations though it is not always clear if comments are from his experience or from other writers. At the time many publications were simply repetition of other accounts. Buffon devotes many pages to the writing of others and points out their errors and conflicting views. These detailed comparisons Buffon admits are rather tedious but he is convinced that they are necessary. The reader who carefully follows these written confusions is glad to read, half way through the Great Bustard pages, that Buffon admits that he has dwelt long enough on “words” and says it is time to proceed with “things”. Buffon viewed studies on captive animals as “hardly worth the attention of a philosopher, who admires Nature only when free, independent, or even wild”. Buffon had much correspondence with other European naturalists. He was a member of many learned societies and was a Fellow of the Royal Society of London. The Rue de Buffon is a street in Paris named after him.

So what information did the great Buffon have on the Great Bustard? He knew its size and weight, measured by himself. He correctly describes the slow walk and that it avoided wet places. The 3 toes were all

“anterior”. Buffon knew about the gular sac – a singular reservoir peculiar to the male. The female laid 2 eggs on the ground with no nest and incubated for 30 days (a good estimate, if a little long). He recorded it breeding in growing corn. Buffon records flocks of 50-60 in the U K and knew that the birds were chased by greyhounds. Buffon described its distribution in Great Britain as the open country on the east and south from Dorset to Scotland. He dissected to learn the internal anatomy and had a good idea of the bird's diet. Buffon knew only a small part of the males' display as he writes that in the pairing season, the male struts around the female and spreads his tail into a sort of wheel. Other aspects of the display are not mentioned. The quills of this bird are used in writing and anglers use them on their hooks. The flesh is excellent, that of the young remarkably delicate. Buffon states if some writers have maintained the contrary, this arises from their confounding Otis with Otus. When hunted, Bustards run fast and sometimes proceed for several miles without interruption. Buffon's critical powers are evident in several places. For example he quotes how the anxious hen dreads visits by sportsmen so she takes her eggs under her wing and transports them to a safe place but, says Buffon, “it is not described how”. Bustards are excessively timorous and hate dogs and foxes but have affection for the horse.

Buffon quotes Aelian that, in the kingdom of Pontus, foxes attract Bustards by lying on the ground and raising their tail which moves like the neck of a bird. Bustards mistake the tail as one of their own species, advance towards it without hesitation and become the foxes prey. Buffon concludes this story that it “implies much subtlety in the fox, much stupidity in the Bustard, and perhaps more credulity in the writer”.

## *Morris Dancing for the bustard!* *by Flash of the Great Bustard Morris side*



*The Great Bustard Morris side in Wiltshire report on how they became who they are and how they're helping raise awareness of the British bustard.*

'We are the Great Bustards of Wiltshire!' So the opening announcement is shouted out to the audience, from our Squire Andy Barrington. An experienced Morris dancer from at least two sides, and a very talented musician. He not only plays the melodeon for the dance side, but also keyboards, concertina and many other instruments in his spare time. His wife, Liz is also well experienced in dance, and plays melodeon, flute and woodwind for the side.

When the side that they were with folded due to lack of members, Andy began to think, "wait a minute." I could create a Morris side! Whilst pondering this thought, they visited the Great Bustard Group on Salisbury Plain and were enchanted by the reintroduction programme of these wonderful birds. They bought up lots of the badges and with Andy's knowledge of the bustard being featured on the flag for the county of Wiltshire (as designed by Mike Prior) the name of the side was sealed. The Great Bustards of Wiltshire Morris!

It took three or four attempts to recruit

enough people to begin with; but then it just seemed to 'take off'! The costumes had been carefully designed and made by Liz, and they both wished their side to be the most smartly turned out morris side in Wiltshire, if not further afield. Resplendent green and gold baldricks, colourful flowery hats and shiny black shoes are their kit. They dance not just with the ordinary white hankchiefs, but with additional green hankies too. To contrast with the hanky dances, they chose to do stick dances too. Using hazel sticks for some of the traditional dances, and axe handles, for the bustards home-made dances. The axe handles are sturdy enough not to break easily and give a good loud, clear 'clash'.

Yes, that's right, home-made dances. Andy and Liz invent their own dances, mostly in the style of Cotswold Morris (Wheatley and some from Adderbury). But they are not adverse to including ones from the Border, or hooligan dances such as Tinner's Rabbit.

But getting back to the home-made ones. They try to raise awareness of the bustards every time they dance, explaining how it is featured on the Wiltshire County flag and how it was Wiltshire's native bird.

*Uniquely, the Squire, has created two new dances in honour of the birds.*

One dance called the 'Bustards Nest', features the dancers taking on the role of the chicks, looking left and right for the parents bringing them food. Spinning round in their nest and stomping their feet when none is forthcoming.

Another dance (Flights of Fancy) features new dance figures such as 'Wings' which is unique. It begins with two dancers 'flying' out behind their neighbours. Then all four of those dancers 'flying' out in V shape to form a line with the remaining two dancers. This gives a line up of dancers facing the audience

- totally new in Morris, and then they perform a chorus all in line behind one another. This looks great to see.

And they have adapted a third dance (a traditional one called Bluebells of Scotland - now Bluebells of Salisbury) which begins with the troupe all walking around in a large circle prior to the dance, singing: 'Oh where, Oh where, have all the bustards gone? They've gone down to Salisbury with all their feathers on! And then crack straight into a lively dance.

*Although on one rare occasion the lyrics were changed again to 'O where has all our audience gone?' Sadly on that occasion there were no doors at the event to be able to keep the crowd captive!*



*The dancers perform a variety of dances*



*And the crowds turn out to watch!*





## German Great Bustard Society meeting

By Alex Stott



*The attendees of the Annual General Meeting of the Great Bustard Society outside the Project offices*

***GBG's web designer Alex Stott recently travelled to Germany to meet the German Great Bustard project team in Brandenburg. Here Alex reports on what transpired to be a most educational trip.***

During March this year, David Waters and I had the opportunity to visit the German Great Bustard project in Nennhausen in Brandenburg. The purpose of the trip was to share experience on several fronts and an opportunity for us to meet with the German Great Bustard teams to forge new links.

Upon our arrival in Nennhausen, during the early evening, Torsten Langgemach of the Brandenburg State Office for Bird Conservation immediately took us to the observation tower near the project centre.

***This tower makes brilliant use of the flat landscape that surrounds it, with fantastic 270 degree views.***

The German Great Bustard population is well established, with comparatively large

numbers of birds settled in locations in the countryside - 110 birds were recorded living in the wild in 2009.

As the sun set, we were treated to a view of two males in breeding plumage attempting to woo several groups of females slowly making their way across the fields in the evening light.

***The following day, Torsten gave us a wider view of the ecology of the local area by taking us to see some of the large areas of farmland, many of which were flooded, providing an ideal environment for a vast number of species.***

Despite having missed the few weeks when hundreds of migratory birds wheel around the skies, my companions, all having a sharper avian eye than myself, identified species after species of waterfowl, birds of prey and other winged fauna. We also saw, albeit briefly, several Moor frogs beginning to colour up to their distinctive blue breeding hues.



*Bustard viewing tower and information board*



The challenges that Great Bustards in Germany face are both familiar and decidedly different to those faced by the birds in the UK. Whilst predation is an issue wherever eggs and young animals are involved, the main foe of the bustard in Britain, the common fox, doesn't have the ability to climb tall trees and fences and open locks! Racoons and raccoon dogs most certainly do and are a threat to bustard numbers in Brandenburg. Young bustards are also at risk of attack from above: the diverse bird populations in Germany are a mixed blessing; predation from eagles is not unheard of. On our final full day in Germany we were invited to give a presentation at the annual AGM of the Gross Trappe Schultzon (the Great Bustard Society) on the GBG's successful fundraising and increasing awareness in the UK. The Great Bustard Society is an NGO, which receives no government funding, and so are constantly looking for new fundraising and awareness initiatives. We also got to hear reports on the birds progress in the wild and plans for 2012. The last item on the agenda was the approval of the new website for the group which is now online at <http://grosstrappen.de/>



Raccoon dogs are known predators, often pillaging bustard nests to eat the eggs

The screenshot shows the website interface for 'Grosstrappen'. At the top is a navigation menu with links: 'Start', 'erleben | Besucherinformationen', 'kennen | Grosstrappen', 'erhalten | Aktivitäten', and 'Shop'. Below the menu is a main banner featuring a group of bustards in a field. The banner includes the logo for 'Förderverein Grosstrappenschutz e.V.' and the tagline 'erleben | kennen | erhalten'. Below the banner is a section titled '[ Nachrichten / Neues von den Trappen ]' with five news items:

- News: Exkursionstermine**  
Der FV Grosstrappenschutz organisiert geführte Exkursionen während der Balz und ist Ihr Ansprechpartner in den Schutzgebieten. [Alle Termine](#)
- News: Tag der Grosstrappe**  
Am 01. April findet auf dem Königsroder Hof der Tag der Grosstrappe statt. [Erfahren Sie mehr](#)
- News: Maisanbau**  
Die Schattenseite der Energiewende: der Maisanbau bedroht mehr und mehr die letzten Grosstrappen Deutschlands. [Hintergründe](#)
- News: "königlicher" Besuch**  
Ein Team des englischen "Great Bustards" Projects besuchte uns im Januar. [Erfahren Sie mehr](#)
- News: Bestandszahlen**  
Anfang 2011 wurden in den drei Einstandsgebieten insgesamt nur 95 Grosstrappen registriert, am 12. Februar dieses Jahres waren es 123 Tiere. [Erfahren Sie mehr](#)

The new, informative website

<http://grosstrappen.de/> The new website of the German Great Bustard project



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**Help us continue the work of the GBG. Membership is a lifeline for the Project.**



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

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

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



### MEMBERSHIP

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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 & 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

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

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

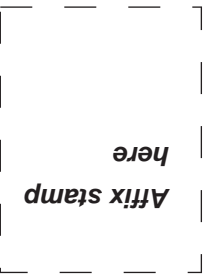
**GBG is a registered charity number 1092515**





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

*Fold here, glue or tape edges closed*



**Membership Secretary,  
The Great Bustard Group,  
1 Down Barn Close,  
Winterbourne Gunner, Salisbury,  
SP4 6JP.**

# We need you!

We need volunteers, all year round, especially weekends, hours are totally flexible but one regular day per week is desirable

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The opportunity to drive a Landrover around Salisbury Plain regularly, seeing a host of other farmland birds and wildlife such as corn bunting, stone-curlew and brown hare. As well as seeing the expanse and grassland of the Plain and its wild flowers. And join in with fun events and membership evenings.

For more information email  
lynnederry@greatbustard.org.

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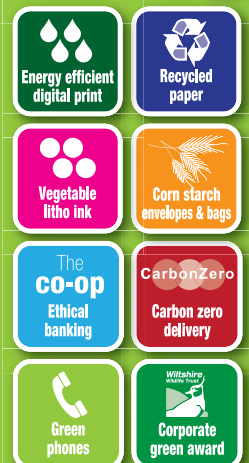


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## Great Bustards in Germany

90% of the Great Bustards in northern Europe are in the east of Germany in the State of Brandenburg. This new Bird Guide (by GBG supporter) includes sections on the two main Bustard reserves.

The book describes:

- How to get there
- Finding the Observation Hides
- The main Visitor Centre
- Where to stay
- Other bird life nearby

Where to see the large gatherings of wintering geese, and the autumn migration of up to 60.000 Common Cranes.

White-tailed Eagles are a common sight and there are directions for finding other species such as Corncrakes, White and Black Storks, Black Woodpeckers, Thrush Nightingales, and Barred Warblers. 110 sites are described and the book is illustrated in colour throughout with photographs and detailed maps.

Obtainable in the reserve shop, from [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org) or direct from the author: [roger.white4@virgin.net](mailto:roger.white4@virgin.net) (mention GBG) price £19.95 40% of proceeds from sales (£8 per copy) goes to GBG





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