

The global Great Bustard conservation publication

# Otis

**GREAT  
BUSTARD  
GROUP**



Autumn 2011

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**A packed issue reviews Summer success**

*As more UK chicks are hatched in the wild we look to growth initiatives and examine new research*

The magazine of the Great Bustard Group

Issue 37

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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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David Waters, GBG Founder and Director

I write this first front page to Otis from a very hot flat in Moscow. I have just been to the airport to collect Prof. Jill Heatly, a veterinary specialist from Texas University, and she will join John Chitty, Ruth Manvell and I when we carry out the pre export/import checks and tests on the birds. One of the great joys of working within the GBG is the diverse range of people I am able to call colleagues. Diverse in skill and background that is, but with a common generosity of spirit and an enthusiasm for that wonderful bird, the Great Bustard.

A difficult breeding season is now behind us and we have learned invaluable from it. We are in the final stages of a very successful year from the Russian end of the project, and we have much to look forward to: changes in the rearing regime in Russia will give us fitter, better quality birds, changes in quarantine should keep the birds in this better condition and a second and even third release site will be used in the autumn. There never was a smooth road to success, but with the muscle of the LIFE project now beginning to make itself felt the prospects for the UK Great

Bustard have never been better. These new developments are largely possible through the extra resources of the LIFE project and the involvement of our project partners. That said, the GBG is the core and it was a delight to see so many members and supporters at the Garden Party in July. For those of you who did not make it this time, I hope you will come along for the next one.

Please enjoy this issue of Otis and don't hesitate to contact us on [office@greatbustard.org](mailto:office@greatbustard.org) with any comments you may have.



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*GBG staff and supporters join in with the dancing*

## Veterinary expert visits Diakovka

In June Chris Davis visited the Field station at Diakovka. Chris is the head of the Veterinary Department at the GWCT (Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust) and old friend of the Great Bustard Project. Chris was met at Moscow Domodedovo airport by David Waters, who was already out in Russia. They then travelled down to Saratov, and on to the Field Station at Diakovka.

Of particular interest to the GBG were Chris' observations on the incubation and rearing techniques used at the Field Station.

Chris scrutinised the whole process closely with Tatiana, who is responsible for the chick rearing,

and following a meeting with Mikhail Oparin, the Institute Director, a number of recommendations relating to diet, and incubation were made and some of them implemented straight away. Tatiana achieves a very good hatch rate, but there are always ways to increase it further and improvements in the diet of the chicks may also improve their feather condition.

The trip was a great success and a very useful one for the project. It was also fitting that Chris, who has so regularly helped at the UK quarantine end, was able to see the Russian side of the project.



Chris talks to GBG's Representative in Russia

## An exciting season for Great Bustards

The work over the spring and early summer at the Diakovka Field Station has been very productive. The maximum legal quota of 60 eggs were incubated - all from nests destroyed by cultivation. This operation takes place over an area the size of 2 English counties and is a considerable logistical undertaking. The hatch rate has been good and we are all expecting a high number of chicks to be reared.

Chris Davis the head of the Veterinary Department at the GWCT (Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust) visited the Field Station with David Waters and has made a very useful report on how the incubation and rearing methods may be further improved. His trip was preceded by some changes to the rearing facilities funded by the GBG and implemented by the new Director of the A.N. Severtsov Institute, Mikhail Oparin. New pens have been built, with a softer, low friction net, and a new design should reduce feather abrasion. A more modest addition was the purchase by the GBG of a freezer and fridge for the laboratory. The old unit had given up, and something is needed to keep any unhatched eggs in a condition that allows a meaningful post mortem by GBG consultant Vet John Chitty at the end of the hatching season.

One bit of sad news was the loss of one of the UK females and her chick. Red 28 had

successfully incubated and hatched out a chick and managed to rear the chick to an age of around 6 weeks. This is the time where the survival rate of the chicks, a female (one can tell from the size), should begin to increase dramatically as the chick is more mobile and not far from being able to fly. The loss of some chicks is very much a part of the Great Bustard life cycle and is expected and indeed to some degree inevitable. However, it was a great shame to have discovered the remains of the adult female who was apparently predated along with her chick. It is always difficult to distinguish between remains which were killed by a fox and those where a fox has scavenged the already dead body, and in this case we cannot be sure of the cause of death.

***"Selection of the second release site, an objective of the LIFE project, is well underway and nearly complete."***

This strategic development will combine very well with a good number of birds being raised at Diakovka this year. Birds will be released at the existing release site and the new one. The exact split will be dependent on the number of birds imported and their sex ratio. The selection of the second site has been made following assessment of many factors. All the experience of the project at the first release site has been used, along

with data from the movements of the birds as recorded by the satellite transmitters and reports from birdwatchers, Game Keepers and land owners; where the older birds choose to go is a very useful pointer for us.

The Great Bustards are showing well at the project site on Salisbury Plain and the Stone Curlews have just started to incubate their second clutch of eggs. The first 2 chicks now having grown up and gone on their way.



## DEFRA Minister visits GBG

The Great Bustard Group was delighted to host DEFRA Minister for the Environment Richard Benyon MP at the project site. The main topics of discussion were the fact that the Great Bustard still does not have the higher level of protection which may be given under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the way that, under the LIFE project, the Great Bustard may be added to the list of recipient species under the current agri-environment schemes.

The Minister stated he would explore the concerns we have and agreed that we would be in touch again in the near future.

He also declared himself to be very impressed with the project, and was delighted that we were able to show him some of the UK's Great Bustards.



*Al Dawes, David Bond, Richard Benyon MP, David Waters and Tracé Williams*

## Badge Information - a Retreat for Good Fellows

Thanks to all those GBG members who contacted David Waters about the mystery Bustard badge featured in the last edition of Otis.

It seems that the William Tell Club was incorporated as a social club in 1903 by ten men, eight from Maine, one from New York and one from Rhode Island. It claimed to be the oldest incorporated hunting club in the country. The club was originally intended as a home for the over-worked toiler but became a “retreat for good fellows” ... it is the ideal spot to rest and is beautiful beyond compare. Business is forgotten in the contemplation of nature and the sportsman reigns supreme.” The original bylaws limited the Club’s membership to eleven, later expanded to include more members. The membership fee was \$100; annual dues were \$10.00. This must have made a fairly exclusive club in 1903.

Members made trips every fall to Moosehead Lake. In the early days the trip was made to Kineo Station by train, using a special car attached to the regular train.

The trip continued by boat, often the steamer Katahdin, to the opposite shore of the lake at Spencer, then a hike through the woods to the lodge on Spencer Pond. Guides and cooks were engaged to provide services to the members during their two-week stays at the lodge.

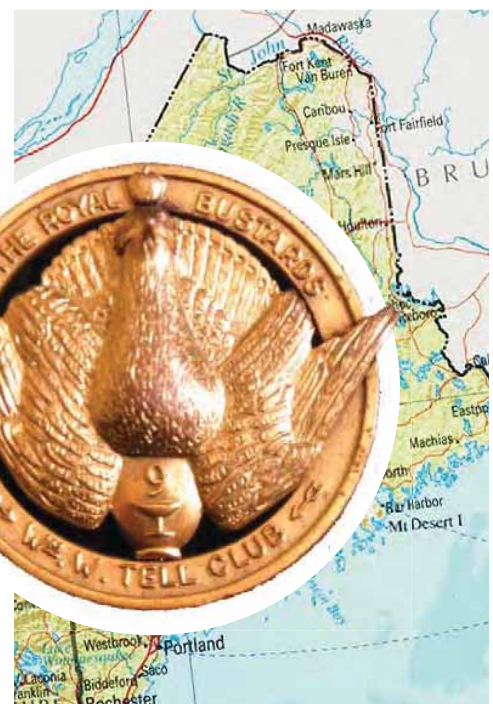
Club membership grew through the years, reaching a peak of 40 members in the 1930’s.

World War II made it difficult to maintain the property for its limited use; the last trip was made in 1941. After the war the few remaining members were unable to generate sufficient interest to revive the club and it was dissolved. The buildings were torn down and the lease agreement ended in 1950.

The association with the Great Bustard remains mysterious. There are no bustards in North America, nor have there ever been any. The number nine on the badge may mean it belonged to the ninth of the original

10 members, one of whom came from Rhode Island, where the badge was made.

The historical societies in Maine have been contacted and are still investigating the Bustard link.



*The story of this fascinating badge is unfolding*

## An exciting event at the Smithsonian



*The zoo welcomes its 50th Kori chick*

On June 15, history was made at the Smithsonian's National Zoo's Bird House when its 50th kori bustard chick (*Ardeotis kori*) emerged from its shell. The Zoo has bred kori bustards consistently since 1997, when it became the fourth zoo in the world to hatch them.

Many offspring have subsequently bred at other North American zoos.

While each hatching is special and rewarding, this chick is a little more special than the others, said Sara Hallager, Zoo biologist and head of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Species Survival Plan for kori bustards. The SSP matches animals across the country to ensure genetic diversity in the population. We've reached an important milestone, and we're thrilled that the National Zoo continues to play a significant role in ensuring this species survival in zoos and in the wild.

In addition to the propagation, breeding and management that take place at the National Zoo, the kori bustard team, led by Hallager, is actively involved in in situ assessments of the species. In 2009, Zoo staff conducted a study of the health, nutrition, and feeding ecology of wild kori bustards in Kenya by capturing birds and collecting blood samples. They also trained Kenyan ornithologists in capture-

and-sample-collection techniques.

Although the International Union for Conservation of Nature lists kori bustards as a species of least concern, conservationists believe that populations are declining in their native habitat in eastern and southern Africa due to habitat destruction, illegal hunting and their inherent slow reproduction rate. Weighing in at 40 pounds, male kori bustards are the world's heaviest flying birds. Bird House staff are hand-rearing the 50th kori chick, just as they did with its predecessors. This increases the likelihood that the chick will breed successfully once it reaches sexual maturity. Hand-rearing has another benefit; several wild birds of prey reside on Zoo grounds, and raising the chicks in human care eliminates the chance of conflict. Although the chick will not be on exhibit until mid-August, Zoo visitors can see its parents at the kori bustard exhibit, located outside of the Bird House.

## Experts focus on Captive Breeding

The GBG is delighted to announce that David Waters has been working closely with Prof Vladimir Ostapenko of Moscow Zoo to help bring together experts from the International Bustard community. An international conference will be held in Moscow in the autumn of 2012. It will focus on the problems experienced in trying to get Great Bustards to breed in captivity. Moscow Zoo and the GBG have worked together on the keeping of Great Bustards for many years and the birds they have at the large out of city Breeding Centre came from the Diakovka Field Station.

Experts who have experience of breeding other bustard species (Houbara, Little and Kori Bustards) will be invited and delegates from China in the east, and USA in the west are expected.

There will be a limited number of places

for other parties to attend the conference; please contact David Waters ([davidwaters@greatbustard.org](mailto:davidwaters@greatbustard.org)) if you are interested.



*Vladimir Ostapenko*

## 'Great' Bustard offer from Birdworld

The fabulous folks at Birdworld in Surrey are offering 2-4-1 tickets to all GBG members throughout the Summer holidays! A day out at Birdworld includes a busy schedule of daily events and is the perfect place to take the family over the school break. The Penguins are always hungry and are fed twice a day by their keepers, always great for the children to participate in, then the birds entertain guests as they swoop, soar and hop in the Outdoor Flying Display and the Heron Theatre Show. Younger visitors in particular will certainly enjoy meeting some of Birdworld's smaller cuddly residents in the farm Animal Handling and no day is complete without joining the bird Keepers for the daily 'Owl Prowl' feeding tour. To

claim your 2 for the price of 1 ticket simply email '2-4-1 Birdworld' to

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

### Bleeps in the night

Despite its hard working staff the GBG is very much reliant on members of the public to help track down its bustards. Many excellent and detailed reports are received and a smaller number of well intentioned, but erroneous reports accompany them. Some of the accurate sightings record the wing tag colour and number, the behaviour of the bird and the habitat and crop type and structure. The other category has included geese, a turkey, dead pheasants and even a white chicken on the A303 by Stonehenge.

We do try very hard to make sure every report is followed up as some unpromising reports have proved to be good ones.

Usually the high tech tracking devices are more clear-cut. However over the summer the GBG received an enquiry about the likelihood of one of our birds being close to a



village on Salisbury Plain. It was a likely event and more details were requested. The correspondent had located a 433.9MHz transmission and thought it may come from one of our radio tracked birds. As it happens we had no bustards with transmitters in operation at the time, so further investigation was needed. A search was undertaken for the transmitter and in the end it was not found on the expected secretive Great Bustard, but in a white van. This van had been purchased second hand and the new owner had no idea he was driving a mobile radio station. The transmitter seems to be very well hidden, but the reason for its fitting remains mysterious.



### Goodbye old friend

In the latter part of 2009 one of the visitors to the GBG was struck by the less than impressive condition of our second Landrover. The observation was nothing if not accurate as this vehicle was one that David Waters used to drive to work and back all those years ago as a policeman. He had given it to the project but the years, the mud and the hard use had all taken its toll. It was at the time of the observation, restricted to running around the farm on Red Diesel as its MoT days were well behind it. The visitor, a Mr. Raven, asked, "would we have good use for a replacement". Having nearly lost his hand in making the offer he very generously gave the GBG his old Range Rover. The 3.9 litre V8 engine was both a delight and a worry as it was combined effortless power with a great thirst. It was very reliable, very comfortable and with all the trimmings one would expect from a once top of the range luxury car.

It was very much a second or back up vehicle and could not be used if the diesel Landrover was available due to its thirst, but it did great service for over a year until rust underneath denied us another MoT. It was sold on eBay for a tidy sum – as a rare factory specification with a manual gearbox – it was quite a collectors item, and has gone to a new owner who will restore it to its former glory.

Since its departure the project has been joined by new vehicles from RSPB and the University of Bath – all straight from the show room and smelling new. All progress, but who else there remembers the early days with one short wheelbase Landrover where the driver used one hand to hold the door shut, and the other to hold the thing in gear? Steering was accomplished with the knees! It does seem a long time ago.



### Job Vacancy

A new full time post is being advertised to help with rearing the chicks and controlling foxes at release sites, further details are available from;

**Great Bustard Group**  
**1 Down Barn Close**  
**Winterbourne Gunner**  
**Salisbury, Wiltshire**  
**SP4 6JP**  
**or davidwaters@greatbustard.org**



### New Studies on the Plain

To help inform the selection and management of further release sites, Chris Clarke, a Masters student at Imperial College London has been undertaking a project around Salisbury Plain this summer under the supervision of the University of Bath. His project aims to investigate variation in invertebrate communities in arable crops and predation levels around the Plain.

### Buy a duck for bustards!

The Great Bustard Group is taking part in the Great Amesbury Duck Race on Monday 29th August at 3pm on the River Avon at Lords Walk Amesbury. Costs are only £2 per duck and can be purchased by contacting lynnederry@greatbustard.org or 07817 971 327.





## University of Chester look into genetic variation

Paul O'Donahue reports

**In March 2011, a collaboration was established between the Great Bustard Group and the University of Chester, with the aim of carrying out a comprehensive genetic assessment of the UK's, reintroduced population of Great bustards.**

The aim of this research is driven primarily by the goal of contributing to bustard conservation management rather than a purely academic exercise.

As part of the procedures involved in importing bustards into the UK, blood samples have been taken and stored from every bustard. This is an incredibly valuable resource that could yield key findings and assist with future conservation efforts for the Great Bustard, both in the UK and overseas. Genetic research is vital for informing future management plans, to ensure the long-term persistence of repatriated populations. Our genetic research aims to answer two main questions

### **1. What is the relatedness of the individuals that form the reintroduced, UK population?**

Inbreeding is seen as a major threat to reintroduced populations and can lead to both reduced survivorship and breeding success. Given the breeding system of the Great Bustard and the possibility of a few males dominating breeding success, it is possible that a high degree of relatedness could occur within the egg collection area in Saratov. This could lead to the possibility of a greater chance of inbreeding in the reintroduced population, which should be avoided.

### **2. Is the variation in the reintroduced population representative and comparable to the Russian source population?**

It is beneficial to capture as much variation from the Russian population as possible and so by comparing the source and reintroduced populations, an

assessment of the capture of genetic material can be made.

The answers to these two questions will inform future egg collection in Saratov, to maximise the genetic diversity of the future reintroduced stock and ensure inbreeding issues are reduced. It is very reassuring that the Great Bustard Group is proactive enough to investigate these issues at this early stage, in order to maximise future successes.

I received the bustard samples in March this year and progress has been very encouraging so far. All of the samples have now undergone the DNA extraction process and we are currently in the final stages of optimising the markers that will be used to measure the genetic variation.

***"It is hoped that full scale genotyping will be carried out during July and August and that results will be analysed shortly afterwards."***

This will mean that the findings could potentially be implemented the following year.

There has been a great deal of interest in the genetic research and it is anticipated that this will be the start of an international collaboration on Great Bustard genetics. Researchers in Spain and Hungary are also planning to carry out genetic work on their populations and we are putting measures in place to ensure that comparable methods are used in all countries. This will enable data to be shared and compared, therefore assisting



bustard conservation on an international scale.

On a personal note, this project has been very enjoyable and has allowed me to get involved with the work of the Great Bustard Group once more and work with some old friends. My involvement started in 2006 when I was a lecturer at Wiltshire College and I assisted with arranging student work parties to build the quarantine pens. I was also lucky enough to visit Saratov and participate in the autumn counts, which was a fantastic experience. After moving back up north, the bustard project was never far from my mind and it is great to be involved once again. My employers, Chester University, have been extremely supportive and funds have been made available so that the genetic analysis can be carried out without cost to the Great Bustard Group. In addition, it is hoped that further links can be developed in terms of supporting future bustard research, both in the UK and Russia and indeed a letter of intent between the A.N. Severtsov Institute in Russia and Chester University has already been signed off.

***I look forward to updating you on the progress of this work.***

## Paul Goriup

### GBG's new Vice President



Paul Goriup

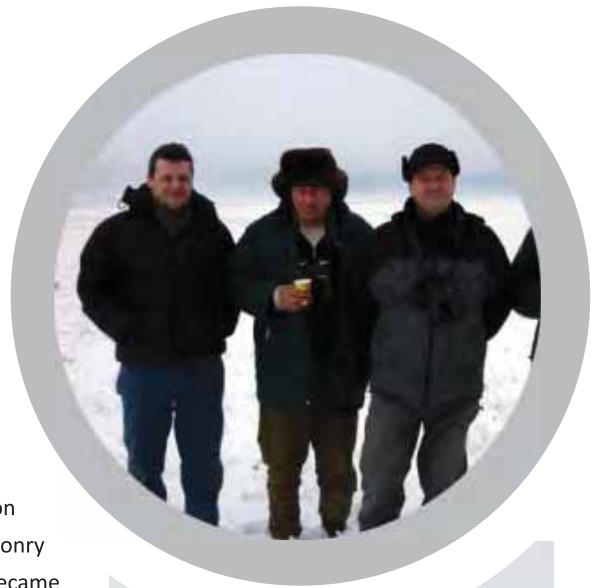
***It is with great pleasure that the GBG introduces Paul Goriup, who has recently accepted a Vice Presidency of the GBG.***

Paul has been working on bustards directly and indirectly for many years, and is regarded by many as the 'International Mr Bustard'. It was Paul's comments at the final meeting of the old Great Bustard Trust that led David Waters to form the GBG, and then Paul's contacts and advice which led in turn to the first GBG trip to Russia. Since then Paul has been a continual source of advice to the GBG and has, through his superb chairmanship of the Great Bustard Consultative Committee (2004 to 2010) secured a path for the project to follow through many challenges, both political and scientific.

***Paul writes:*** When I first met the Great Bustards at Porton Down in 1978, just after graduating, I had no inkling that these birds and their relatives would become a permanent thread in my future career. I was there on behalf of the then Nature Conservancy Council to prepare a management plan for the SSSI and provide advice on how military training on the ranges could be made as nature friendly as possible. As a keen birdwatcher, however, I was delighted when Nigel Collar and Aylmer Tryon of the former

Great Bustard Trust invited me to help care for the birds. I spent many happy hours in the early morning and evenings recording their behaviour and ensuring they had adequate food.

One thing led to another. In 1979, the Trust employed me to manage the bustards and help them to breed. I was then invited by WWF to work on Houbara bustard conservation and falconry in Pakistan and the Middle East. I became chairman of the IUCN Bustard Specialist Group and its successor the Steppe and Grassland Birds Specialist Group. I worked on various bustard conservation projects from the Canary Islands, across Africa, central Europe to Asia. This included a period in the mid-1980s when I was focused on the problem of Arab falconers hunting Houbara bustards. Among other initiatives, I helped to establish the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development in Saudi Arabia, and the National Avian Research Centre in Abu Dhabi, UAE.



*Paul is keen to put his extensive experience to good use for the Great Bustard Group*

In my opinion, few if any birds typify the Eurasian grassland biome as well as bustards do. Anyone trying to conserve bustards soon realises that they will have to deal with landscape scale issues, especially agriculture (whether intensive cereal production or overgrazing by livestock). This fact only arose to prominence during a seminal international conference organised at Reading University by the Steppe and Grassland Birds Specialist Group and JNCC in 1991. I can still recall the shock when it became apparent to an astonished audience that Salisbury Plain was actually one of the largest, intact expanses of lowland dry grassland remaining west of the Volga and north of Iberia! Later work by Birdlife International confirmed that steppes and steppe birds are among the most threatened habitats and species groups in Europe.

***“Reintroducing the Great Bustard to England involves integrated, landscape scale conservation.”***

To remove it from the Red Data List will mean spreading our experience and replicating our work in England across Europe, linking up disparate Great Bustard populations in the centre, until a belt of grassland sites has been established from Salisbury to Saratov. Fortunately, since 1991, such a dream has become more realistic with the establishment of (among other measures) the Natura 2000 network, and funding from agri-environment schemes and the EU Life programme. The Great Bustard release scheme in England is already inspiring other European countries to think about similar initiatives. In all cases, this will mean promoting high nature value farming and restoring lowland dry grasslands and their associated biodiversity, representing a major contribution to the new 2020 Biodiversity Target recently adopted by the EU.

Paul Goriup has considerable career experience spanning over 30 years of working worldwide on biodiversity issues, including much of Europe, North and East Africa, Central and Southern Asia, and the Middle East. He holds a joint honours degree (BSc) in Botany and Zoology, and an MSc in Conservation Science (University College London). He was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management in 1999 and became a Chartered Environmentalist in 2005. He is an invited member of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (serving as Editor of the technical journal, PARKS, between 1991 and 2009) as well as the IUCN Species Survival Commission.

From 1982-1986, Paul Goriup worked at the International Council for Bird Preservation (now BirdLife International), where he managed over 300 conservation projects around the world. In 1986, Paul Goriup established (and is now Chairman of) the Nature Conservation Bureau Ltd, which is now one of the largest private biodiversity management consulting companies in Britain. In addition, from 1991 he served, on a part-time basis, as the first Executive Director of the newly formed Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management until a full-time Executive Director was appointed in 1996.

***“As well as being a GBG Vice President Paul represents the GBG as an international consultant and chairs the Technical Working Group (TWG) set up under LIFE+.”***

Paul’s work has often been done in the context of supporting and implementing major conventions relating to international wildlife conservation (Biological Diversity, Bonn, Bern, Ramsar, CITES, and World

Heritage) as well as EU Directives (Birds, Habitats, Water Framework, Environmental Liability, Marine Conservation Strategy, etc.). Since 1997 Paul has gained extensive experience of conservation planning and management related to the Natura 2000 network in the new EU members in the Balkans.

He has been involved in projects relating to Natura 2000 in Romania (designing a GEF grant for management plans in four national parks; setting up a national database of Natura 2000 pSCI areas and species of European interest; and preparation of multi-million Euro nature conservation investment projects for EU Structure Funds) as well as Bulgaria (designing a GEF grant for management of forest nature parks; preparation of management plans for two Danube pSCI wetland sites). This work included extensive public consultation, stakeholder workshops, training courses and production of information materials.

In 1996, Paul Goriup became involved with private ethical investment in ecologically sustainable businesses, and founded one of Britain’s first positively ecological public shareholding companies, FIELDFARE International Ecological Development. Between 2008 and 2009, Fieldfare, in consortium with the RSPB, worked for the EBRD on a project to assess the potential for Pro-Biodiversity Businesses in the Steppe Zone of Eurasia.

In the last year or so, Paul has been involved with setting up a biomass pelleting plant in Ukraine; securing a four-year research project on establishing marine protected areas in the Mediterranean and Black Seas; and assisting environmental authorities in Moldova, Romania and Ukraine to obtain funding for cross-border project for waste water treatment and removing toxic chemicals in the lower Danube region.



## *With Project Director - David Waters*

### *All the latest news from the Project Site*



*You may notice a different style to the Bustard Watch feature this edition.*

This is the first report I have written for Otis for many years, and the first I have penned for the new glossy Otis. Following Al Dawes departure I will be taking over Bustardwatch and keeping readers informed of the activity at the Project Site, not only in Otis but regularly on our website.

The real news of the summer season is that of breeding birds and their results. Two Great Bustard nests were found in the area of the Project Site this year. Again, this confirms the acceptance of the area as a substitute for the natal site, as the females return to the first cereal habitat they see to breed. Red 28 was the first to settle on eggs on the 19th April and an intensive monitoring programme was implemented. The new LIFE+ resources being deployed to good effect. Close liaison with both the local farmer and the MoD ensured a minimum of disturbance for the nest and effective monitoring.

A week or so later, on the 26th April, a second nest, Yellow 22, was found. Conveniently the nests were fairly close together and this made monitoring the two nests from one vantage point feasible. Even with the nests

pin pointed, and with a good telescope monitoring them was a challenge. It often took several hours just to get a glimpse of a grey neck momentarily sticking up. Yellow 22 in particular went several days without being seen. Our oldest bird, Orange 15, from the first release in 2004, was typically elusive. Occasional reports from game keepers and farmers kept us aware that she was still about, and the gaps of several weeks between some sightings kept us all wondering about what she was up to, but we never did manage to catch up with her properly.

Red 28 successfully hatched at least one chick on 12th May and to our delight Yellow 22 followed suit a week or so later.

*“I use the term ‘at least one chick’ because the height of the vegetation made it impossible to see what the females were feeding.”*

It was possible to see they were feeding something from the start, moving slowly through the vegetation regularly turning round and bending down to feed their offspring. As the chicks grew they were led slightly further afield by the females and this, combined with their size made it possible to confirm that each female had one chick. Whether or not either of them hatched two will be unknown, but it would take an experienced mother to successfully rear two chicks. Indeed several years experience is held to be necessary for a female to bring one chick to independence.



One the

7th June

Yellow 22 was seen acting in a different manner than usual. Notably she was not feeding anything and after a few days she left the immediate area of the nest and joined up with the male birds around the Project Site. What happened to her chick remains unknown. There is always a conflict of interests when monitoring nests. We do want and need to find out what happens, but not at the expense of disturbing or compromising the process we are trying to study.



*“Red 28 kept feeding her offspring and the glimpses of the chick became more frequent. The size of the chick made us sure it was female and it was also apparent that it was now feeding itself as well as receiving food from its mother.”*

A mouse or vole was identified on at least one occasion, but it was usually impossible to say what was being fed. The older a chick gets the greater its chances of ultimate survival and a female chick will have better survival odds than a male as they require less food and become flighted more quickly than the larger males. It was with growing confidence that I headed off to Russia (again). Kate Ashbrook lead the monitoring effort, but it was a text message from Al which caused my heart to sink as I was about to attend a meeting in Saratov. It simply said ‘Red 28 dead and chick missing’. Kate had been doing the morning stint of observations on 8th June, had observed a pile of feathers and could not see either Red 28 or her chick. She examined the scene and found remains of

Red 28 (her identity was confirmed by a wing tag) and no sign of the chick. The conclusion was that both had been killed by a fox. There were signs of quite a struggle between the female and her killer and it will remain conjecture as to whether or not Red 28 engaged a fox in defence of her chick, but she would certainly know how to avoid and escape a fox on her own. To lose a chick is naturally disappointing, but to a degree tolerable and even expected with inexperienced mothers, but to lose a breeding age female is undoubtedly a blow. Yes we can find a positive spin in that she was in good enough condition to mate and was able to produce eggs, she successfully incubated those eggs and found enough food to get the chicks through its most difficult and demanding stage, but the obvious goal is to successfully rear the next generation, and in that there was failure. Looking forward, as one must, we have always been aware of the difficulties of fox control on the military estate and recognise that a small population (as all new ones must be) are particularly vulnerable to the effects of predation. Through the actions of the LIFE+ project second and even third

release sites have been identified, and fox control, and the ability to implement a plan, will be a significant priority. Negotiations and discussions are underway as I write, so more on this in the next Otis.

In the meantime Purple 5 and Pink 2 (after a period of absence) have both been frequenting the release enclosure and keeping visitors entertained. It great to see a young male take up company with an older male now the hormonal levels have subsided. They are joined by an active supporting cast of our usual pair of Stone Curlews nesting inside the enclosure. At the time of writing they are well through the incubation of their second clutch of eggs, the first having produced two chicks, both of which successfully fledged. We have had the occasional Hobby grace us as it hunts the Martins over the valley, but only the very occasional Montagu’s Harrier this year. Quail have been heard all through the summer, but no young have been glimpsed.

## Introducing Kate Ashbrook

### LIFE+ Project Team



*Kate Ashbrook of the LIFE+ Project Team*

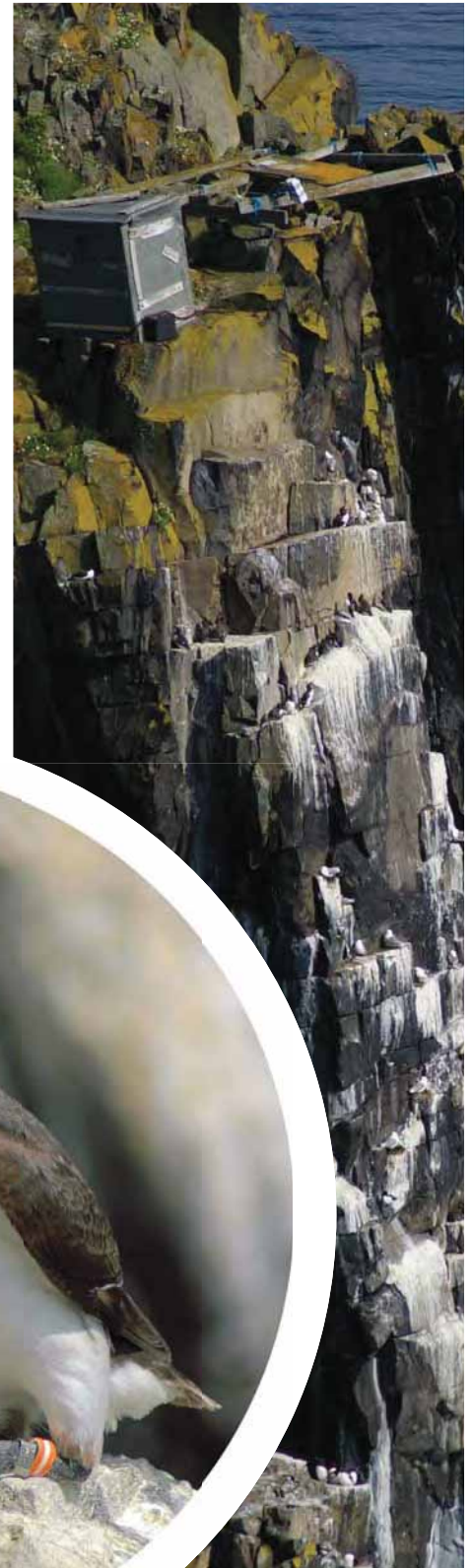
***We are delighted to introduce another new team member, Kate Ashbrook of the LIFE+ team.***

The majority of Kate's working life has involved seabirds, starting with working as an assistant warden at the North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory where she spent her days ringing and collecting data on black guillemots, fulmars, terns and storm petrels. She then undertook a project for her final-year undergraduate dissertation on the success of Arctic tern chicks in the Farne Islands. After graduating she worked as a research assistant investigating predator avoidance learning in Starlings. A most horrible job! It involved working in an underground lab at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, injecting mealworms with chemicals creating good or bad tastes and then measuring how long it took for Starlings to associate these tastes with colours. After this she started a PhD at the University of Leeds where she

investigated changes in the social dynamics of a colonially-breeding seabird in response to poor food supply.

Kate's role in the LIFE project is not only to keep tabs on the birds on the ground, but also to provide information on the behaviour and ecology of our UK birds. At the moment, she is preparing an analysis of where the bustards have been going and the habitat they have selected in different parts of the year using all the data collected from satellite transmitters and re-sightings. This will help us to design more effective habitat management strategies and may identify areas that would be more suitable for future release sites. Over the summer, Kate and her colleagues have collected about 150 hours of behavioural observations on the nesting females and displaying males. These will provide information for future management plans. For example, providing information for farmers should bustards nest elsewhere, such as how far chick-

rearing females travel from their nest, so if an area needs to be protected and when, once nests are identified.



### *Al Dawes heads north*

*We say goodbye to one of our oldest project members*



*At the annual bird release*

***Back in 2005 a locally based volunteer joined the GBG. Al Dawes immediately made a big difference to the project.***

Prior to his arrival GBG had only David Waters as core staff, with David's wife Karen completing the administrative and accountancy tasks. The University of Southampton had a studentship with the project but that University was soon to leave the project. On one memorable occasion Al asked if he could visit our modest little hide (a converted shed in those days) with a "friend". The visit duly took place and must have been a success as we later learnt this was the first time Al had asked the now Mrs Dawes out.

Al left the project for a month or two to work in Malawi before returning and successfully



*Al with sons Parker and Roscoe as he says goodbye at the Project Site*

applying for new paid post within the GBG. David, as now, spent a lot of time in Russia and Al rapidly became the project "number 2", and very much the 'chap who knew' in relation to what was happening in and around the release area. Al also undertook several stints in Russia.

***"Al's combination of practical ability and his scientific training meant he was able to swap from changing a Landrover axle in the morning, to devising habitat use data bases in the afternoon."***

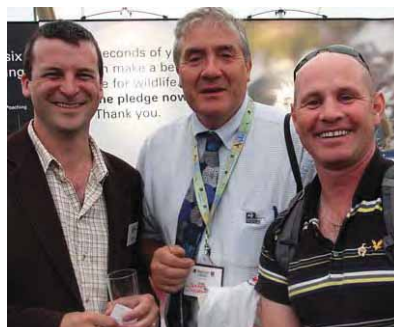
With the expansion of the bustard team under the LIFE+ project the new staff quickly recognised that any "where is" or "what happened to" questions were best directed

at Al. Al has now moved to the west coast of Scotland with his wife Liz, their two sons Parker and Roscoe and Hamish the dog. He will doubtless keep in touch with his friends and colleagues, and we are sure that they will be phoning him for a long time to come with questions like "where is the battery charger kept", "who did you get to empty the tank" or "was it Yellow 5 who chased the swans" and endless other questions which reflect the variety of tasks Al undertook, and his intimate knowledge of the bustards.

***"He will be very much missed and all within the project wish him and his family the best of fortune in their new life."***



*Al was always present at the releases*



*With supporter & presenter Mike Dilger*



*Ensuring effective monitoring of the birds*

## Morris Men, Ministers and a marvellous auction

*We report on a fun and unusual summer's eve*



Mayor of Salisbury John Abbott JP & John Holt (above)



Sarum Morris Men (left) & Fiona McWilliam (above)



**On 7th July the GBG held a Garden Party in the wonderful setting of the Wardrobe, in Salisbury's spectacular Cathedral Close.**

The unlikely name for the venue comes from a previous use as being the place where the Bishop of Salisbury kept his robes. The building now hosts the Regimental Museum of the Wiltshire Regiment and its new descendent The Rifles.

The weather gods were kind and a showery morning gave way to a glorious evening. Over 150 guests were treated to an entertaining event. John Hiscox, the High Sheriff of Wiltshire continued the long association of the Bustard Project and that ancient office, the Mayor of Salisbury Councillor John Abbott gave a short address and GBG members and supporters were all

treated to the wonderful food from Bernieres Tea Room.

Auctioneer Chris Linney encouraged and then expertly managed some enthusiastic bidding, which, along with a silent auction helped raise just over £2,000 on the evening. A wonderful Great Bustard painting by Lesley Fudge was won by Prof. Tamas Szekely from the University of Bath. Tamas promised it would have pride of place in his office.

An additional area of retail was provided by the arts and crafts made by the school children of Krasney Kut, the local town to the field station in Saratov. These crafts raised over £400, which will go towards the visit by two children and two teachers from the school to the UK in the autumn.

The marquee was enhanced by Mike and Phyllis Prior from Wiltshire Flag with their stand and Lesley Fudge and her team from the Warminster based Great Bustard Arts

Project. Artist Romaine Dennistoun brought along a wonderful selection of her paintings, all Bustard themed and delightfully, all found buyers, and Romaine kindly gave all the proceeds to the project.

Ruth Manvell, best known as the highly regarded Virologist, featured previously in Otis, had made a splendid cake in the form of the Wiltshire Flag with its prominent Great Bustard. GBG Vice President and Consultant Veterinarian John Chitty cut the cake with Torsten Langgemach who heads the Great Bustard Project in Germany. Torsten had travelled over to participate in a Technical Working Group meeting on release techniques earlier in the week, and was a very welcome guest at the party.

A further feature of the evening was a marvellous performance by the Sarum Morris troupe. With a little encouragement there was a healthy degree of audience participation, and maybe even a new recruit or two to the Morris Side (the correct collective noun for Morris Dancers).

The GBG thanks all those who donated auction lots and the staff of the Wardrobe.





### *A huge thankyou to C&O Tractors and New Holland' 'Boomer' joins the team*



Allan Goddard (GBG Farm Liaison) and Paul Shutler (Agricultural Sales Manager) with Boomer

Paul meets the bustards at Hawk Conservancy

**The Great Bustard Group would like to offer sincere thanks to local company C&O Tractors and New Holland Agriculture for their generous donation of a sparkling new tractor.**

The man behind the incredible deal is Paul Shutler, Agricultural Sales Manager of C&O Tractors of Wilton, Wiltshire. Paul arranged

for the Boomer 2030 to be leased to the Great Bustard Group free of charge and the tractor will be replaced annually.

GBG's Farm Liaison Allan Goddard was delighted as he will be able to continue with developing a program of more effective management of the Project Site to provide ideal habitat for the Great Bustards year

round. C&O have also generously invited the GBG to share their stand at the 2011 New Forest Show from July 26-28. A full report will be featured in the next edition of Otis and on our website. A huge thankyou to Paul and his team for their generosity.



## A day's filming with Dr Manuel Hinge

James Millar reports on a day with the professionals



**James Millar reports on a most interesting day spent**

**filming with top cameraman Dr Manuel Hinge.**

In 2010 I attended the Great Bustard Group's charity auction held at the Royal Geographical Society in Kensington Gore. Having been delightfully wined and dined by GBG staff and entertained by Mike Dilger on the podium I settled down to watch the auction. I am not a natural camera-man, nor indeed do I have any pretensions to be one. A few slightly awkward photo albums and a plethora of shots still inside my digital camera are testimony to these points. However I have always had an unremitting admiration for wildlife cameramen, the unsung heroes of many years of televisual delight for me. So when I saw that Lot 10 was a Day Out with a Top UK Wildlife Cameraman (with extensive BBC experience no less) and that it could be adapted "to the interests of the successful bidder", I started paying attention. To my surprise I outbid the opposition and the deal was sealed ... and thus began my inter-action with Dr Manuel Hinge.

After a number of e-mails back and forth we eventually decided to wait till the Spring of 2011 and on a sunny Monday in mid-April I set off to meet him and his party in a field not far from where I live in Gloucestershire.

**"The main aim of the day was for Manuel to film some shots for his new wildlife programme concept which he intends to pitch to television executives."**

To do this he has teamed up with the UK's Grand Bustard Meister, David Waters. David

is playing the front-man, the friendly tv face gently talking to camera about the intimate details of the snakehead fritillary or the modern-day benefits of the ancient Saxon practice of natural hay meadows, while Manuel is the heavy-gear beast-of-burden-producer-on-the-spot-editor-cameraman, also charged with checking the kit, answering daft questions from the passing public and filming and refilming shots as the weather, dogs, farmers and little old ladies getting in the way, dictate.

It was a wonderful day weather-wise, highly relaxing and informative and hopefully successful from Manuel and David's point of view in getting footage "in the can". However it was more than that for me. Although the main protagonists were flowers, which were (a) not very difficult to spot (b) unlikely to run away or hide and (c) delightfully colourful, demure and entirely photogenic (the famous Pasqueflower is a really beautiful gem) it was obvious that the successful cameraman must look beyond these facts. Each flower was blowing in a light spring breeze, which was honestly hardly noticeable to me on such a warm day. However it meant that when shot up front and personally, each flower shook

like a killer whale tossing a seal, when seen through the lens. It required immense patience, much realigning, lens-changing and new angle-manoeuving before the right shot could be obtained. At every stop along the way, a gaggle of interested on-lookers would gather round (often quite obtrusively) and ask what we were doing and when would they be able to see it on the telly. Manuel answered with great humility and virtue and not a little humour, while obviously wishing they would naff off and leave him to get on with it, so he could steal a little closer to his quarry without further ado.

**"It confirmed my opinion that we really ought to celebrate cameramen more readily and openly. In particular wildlife cameramen who spend days, months, even years, waiting for the perfect shot"**

Basically, I think wildlife cameramen need better lawyers !

I thank Manuel and David for letting me in on the action that day and wish them the very best with their film.



Manuel and David can often be found filming in the Wiltshire countryside

## The LIFE+ team visit Austria

Allan Goddard reports on a most useful trip



The GBG Project team at the point where Austria, Hungary and Slovakia meet

**In April five members of the Great Bustard Project team had the opportunity to visit Austria, where another Great Bustard LIFE+ Project is running concurrently with ours.**

After a 20-hour drive across France, Belgium, Germany and Austria, we went straight out into the field, and spent the whole of the next three and a half days observing bustards and exploring their habitat.

The Central European population of Great Bustards inhabits the border region between three countries. Bustards may spend the morning in Hungary, the afternoon in Slovakia and the night in Austria. The regional population had been on a steep downward trend, from 3500 in 1900 to 129 in 1996, but the decline has been reversed thanks to a concerted conservation effort. By 2010, numbers had risen to over 400.

We found the landscape striking – long thin fields, perhaps 20m wide but several hundred metres long, with no fences or hedges between them, and just the occasional shelterbelt breaking up the flat, open countryside. This mosaic of strips of different crops was probably the reason bustards survived here, before work began to

protect them. We were hosted by Rainer Raab, the head of the Austrian Great Bustard Project, who has been responsible for much of the population increase. The focus of his LIFE+ project, which immediately follows a successful LIFE project, is to bury medium voltage power lines and mark high voltage power lines. Around half of known bustard mortalities in Austria in the last ten years were caused by power lines, and the reluctance of bustards to fly across them has been shown to restrict their use of suitable habitat.

We were shown marked lines, lines due to be removed and sites where lines had already been removed. The improvement was obvious, not only for bustards but also aesthetically. We even saw a pair of saker falcons, nesting on a platform Rainer had installed on a pylon.

**“This is important, expensive work, but crucially it is underpinned by the Austrian agri-environment scheme, ÖPUL.”**

This has a set of Great Bustard conservation measures, designed for the purpose by Rainer. The measures are implemented within the Austrian Special Protection Areas

(SPAs) for Great Bustards and have achieved excellent coverage: currently 5500ha at a cost of around £2 million per year.

We were able to visit all the Great Bustard SPAs in Austria, which meant we could see the measures in place on the ground. On our first evening, we saw a variety of bustard fallows, sown with a seed mix which usually included lucerne then mown annually, but left in place for seven years. The combination of fallows at different stages of development scattered across the landscape helps to provide the mosaic of habitats required by bustards throughout the year. A second vital measure, although not so visible, concerns the protection of nest sites. Great Bustards in Austria favour winter wheat for nesting, and in some wheat fields within the scheme, no farming operations take place between mid-April and harvest. This allows nesting female bustards a long period without disturbance, giving them every chance to raise a brood successfully.

The results in bird numbers speak for themselves. We saw bustards every day, including 119 in one place. The sight of a lek of 40 or 50 male bustards, strutting around with occasional fights breaking out, was spectacular. We saw several injured males with bloodied faces. The females were not yet nesting, so they could also be seen in groups around the leks. In one spot we looked down from a low ridge onto a flat area with a tight drove of 50 bustards – perfect for showing people birds, as we were doing that day with a group of farmers.

**“Many kinds of wildlife appeared to benefit from the bustard conservation areas.”**

It was not possible to stop without seeing several marsh harriers, and we saw far more hares than could be found anywhere in the UK. We were also shown imperial eagles, which have been drawn to breed around the bustard sites by the habitat improvements. We heard positive stories all week, and learnt many things to take back and apply in Wiltshire. Thanks are due to Rainer and his team for their generous hospitality.

## The biggest bustard we've ever seen

A visit report by David Waters



*During the first few days of May I was working in Saratov during the spring census. Great Bustards are surprisingly difficult to see anywhere, and the vastness of the Russian landscape adds to the challenge.*

It is by no means clear which of the several possible census methods is the best to use – each has its own difficulties, and to a degree they all answer a slightly different question.

I spend several evenings and some mornings at one Great Bustard lek close to my base at Diakovka. The lek is known as Talovka after the nearest village. When compared to distance sampling or covering 20km by 20km squares remaining static in a hide at a location close to the field station is an appealing option. The rough roads, long journey times and the requirement to endure the dirt tracks which offer either sliding around in the mud or, if the weather is dry, half choking on the fine dust are all absent from the static option.

The leks are known to be traditional gathering grounds for the Great Bustards. By visiting the same lek on successive days one may expect to see similar numbers of Great Bustards. The reality was not so straightforward. Even allowing for changes in weather, chances of local disturbance by a passing tractor or cowboy with his cattle, the numbers present always varied. I had noted the number of Great Bustards visible at interval of 30 minutes and they had varied from 5 to 37 individuals. A more detailed

account of this census problem will appear in a future Otis. But suffice to say the real question is if one stops and sees 50 Great Bustards, how many are likely to be in that area?

It was after a hot, but pleasant session at Talovka with numerous Marsh, Montagu's and Pallid Harriers and a pair of Demoiselle Cranes close by, that I began to make my way back to the Field Station at Diakovka. On the far side of a large field, a pair of headlights appeared at the front of a plume of dust, and gradually a car appeared in my line of vision. On becoming level with my

position the car stopped and a female voice from inside enquired, "You must be David Waters". Thus was my first meeting with Olga and Stas who are based in the city of Saratov. Stas is a professional wildlife photographer, who amongst other things provided the images for the public information signs about Great Bustard, which are on all the roads leading in and out of the main town of Krasney Kut.



Stas and Olga, welcoming and hugely entertaining hosts



*David and Stas try out the new camouflage suit in the fields of Russia*

was invited back to the house they were staying in at Diakovka and we shared many tales about the difficulties of getting close to Great Bustards. Stas told me of a special hide he had made, one that had only brought moderate success. He offered to go and find it from a shed and set it up. My offers of help were declined and after a few minutes I was called outside to view the hide.

***“Great Bustards are undoubtedly great, but the creation in front of me was not only a Great Bustard.*”**

***It was immense.”***

The super size bustard was worn by Stas and he found that distant birds would see it and then fly towards him. However they would not come closer than a hundred metres or so – presumably at which range they could appreciate the massive nature of the new bird.

Against an evening sky the shape of the giant bustard looked very realistic and the lack of any other objects for a reference of size made quite an illusion. The project had not quite been the success Stas was hoping for in getting close to the Great Bustards, but I immediately saw the potential for events, fetes and schools here in the UK. I took notes and plenty of photos on the construction of the bird. With Olga’s perfect translation I was able to explain to Stas why I was so interested. On hearing my reasons he very kindly offered to give me the whole outfit but sadly there was no way it would ever fit inside any luggage. I thought the only way it could come to the UK would be if I wore it on the plane, and then with sadness I had to reject that idea as being just too ambitious!

***“Is there anyone who would take on the production of a similar outfit? It really would be a great asset at all sorts of open days and the like – raising both interest and funds.”***



*A most interesting handshake should anyone be looking on*

## News from LIFE+

Tracé Williams reports



Tracé Williams of the LIFE+ Project Team

***It is hard to believe that it will soon be a year since the LIFE+ project started!***

In that time we have seen several new staff join the project. Andrew Taylor has been getting to grips with the habitat requirements of the birds, talking to farmers who have bustards visiting their farms, and assessing how the Entry Level and Higher Level Government paid schemes can help farmers provide habitat for bustards. Kate Ashbrook, along with other staff, has spent many hours this spring and summer monitoring the behaviour of birds at the lek and of the nesting females. Also in April, five of the team went on a valuable fact finding tour to the Austrian Great Bustard project, where we learnt about how the landscape is farmed for bustards.

This year we have concentrated on several key elements of the LIFE+ project and all have a common goal; to increase survival of the released birds. We have set up a Technical Working Group (TWG) to discuss different topics of the reintroduction project, where guests are invited to share their knowledge and expertise. Topics so far have been 'nest protection and nest monitoring' and 'rearing

to release- effects on condition and survival'. The recent group meeting had 25 attendees with three presentations.

Damon Bridge from the Great Crane project described how crane eggs are taken from Germany to be reared in the UK. The chicks are reared in isolation with carers dressed in crane suits walking them out for exercise 30 minutes per day. After 28 days the cranes learn to socialise, and associate a pellet feeder and decoys with the release site. During this period, predator and human aversion training takes place, with a suited person playing alarm calls and running away from an unsuited person and a fox-like dog. All of the cranes have colour rings, most have leg mounted radio transmitters, some have leg mounted satellite tags and some have GPS backpacks. The cranes then spend three weeks in aviaries within a larger release enclosure, to anchor them at the site before release. Survival from the first year has been very good, with only three of 21 birds lost.

***“Dr. Torsten Langgemach from the Brandenburg Great Bustard project told us that clutches of Great Bustard eggs had been brought to the project by local farmers since the 1970s”***

But now that disturbance by farmers is so low, early clutches are taken systematically. Nearly all of these clutches would normally be lost to predators, mainly foxes, and females produce a second clutch of eggs. Chicks have an area of 300m<sup>2</sup> for their first four weeks, and are then released into 3000m<sup>2</sup>. The chicks used to be released at about eight weeks old, however, there were problems with birds being too tame and too naïve. Following release, the rate of survival was 30% alive the next spring. Predation is mainly by white-tailed eagles, whose population has grown dramatically in the last 50 years. From 2009, the technique was



improved. Oil seed rape was grown inside and outside the enclosure, attracting wild birds to integrate with released birds.

Birds were given guided walks, encouraging them to exercise pre-release. Human contact was minimised, and all people coming into contact with the bustards wore the same clothing. Predation was much lower in 2009/10, but cold winters meant that mortality remained high.



Crane chick with toy crane head



Brandenburg Great Bustard showing leg ring



*Quarantine has been rebuilt and prepared for this year's birds*

David Waters discussed methods of egg collection in Russia and how the hatch rate has always been good, reaching 85% in 2011. However, the quality of released birds is a concern, as mortality due to foxes or collisions can be exacerbated by poor feather condition, and any poor feathers will be carried right through until the next spring when the birds moult. Causes of poor feather condition may include diet, particularly a high protein content which will make the birds grow too quickly. Also, males and older birds are likely to dominate the food bowl, making it difficult to ensure that all birds receive the same amount. No one knows what represents a balanced diet for Great Bustards, however, Chris Davis, veterinary consultant at the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, who visited Russia in June, has offered to investigate the nutrient content and has already suggested reducing the amount of protein, so that the birds are altogether leaner. Abrasion of feathers due to rubbing against netting has been a problem in Russia.

***“This year the pens have straight side netting and the pen size has doubled. In addition, changes have been made to the quarantine facility at Compton.”***

The netting that used to line the walls of the

quarantine units is now replaced by plastic sheeting; a smooth surface that will not damage feathers should the birds rest against it. Another change to quarantine has been to introduce small windows. In previous years, the birds have been known to jump while in quarantine and this may damage their feathers, or, as they are birds of open spaces, they might be exhibiting some kind of ‘claustrophobia’. Hopefully being able to see out will lessen any stress from confinement and give them the opportunity to see any adult birds in the release pen. The birds will be housed in same sex groups, as same sex Great Bustards associate in the wild.

Professor Carl Jones, from the Durrell Conservation Trust, responsible for projects such as the Mauritian Kestrel, Pink Pigeon and Echo Parakeet, was able to attend the TWG and suggested that trying to replicate, as far as possible, the natural conditions, could only benefit the birds. In the wild, the normal family group would at most be three; mother and two young, and this group would stay together, with a protracted period of learning until the autumn. For the most part males and females remain separate. The critical learning stage is the first few weeks after hatching, and so releasing birds earlier from quarantine would be beneficial, allowing the young bustards to adapt and adjust to their new environment. A major obstacle to this is

the legal requirement to quarantine the birds for 30 days. Quarantine facilities are a necessary evil when importing wild birds, to ensure no diseases enter the country, and have been called ‘deprivation chambers’. There was consensus around the table that if we were able to bring eggs back from Russia, this would not only allow greater control over the diet but would also allow birds to be released earlier, as quarantine would begin from the day of hatch. The import of eggs has previously been impossible on political grounds, due to the abuse of the egg trade, and also the provenance of chicks is easier to track. However, such problems move into the background with the LIFE project in place. For the advantages mentioned above, we will aim to bring a proportion of eggs back to rear in the UK next year.

***“Another tool that we hope will result in increased survival is to release birds at another site, as well as the current site.”***

We believe that when released, the bustards, especially females, anchor themselves to the site and return to breed in the vicinity. Males on the other hand travel more widely.

Putting together what we have learned about habitat requirements, and movements of birds, we hope that a new site will allow us to not have ‘all our eggs in one basket’, to allow birds to move between sites and socialise. By releasing them into a field of oil seed rape, their favourite winter food, along with provision of supplementary food and plastic decoys to attract them, we hope that the birds will remain in a safe area with the opportunity to grow and mature over the winter months and not be enticed to look elsewhere. Moving away from the release site while they are young puts them at risk. We will provide temporary electrified fencing for the release period and employ the help of professional keepers to suppress the local fox population just before breeding season and around release time. This year's birds will soon be arriving from Russia and on release will be carrying black wing tags with white numbers. Your sightings are always valuable to us, so please let us know if you see any!

### **GBG exhibit at Big Bang 'Solent' event**

*Tricia Brown of the schools team reports on a hugely successful day*



*Tricia Brown and her team talked to pupils and kept the crowds enthused about nature*

***The GBG was delighted to exhibit at the Big Bang STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths] event held at the Rose Bowl, Southampton on 23rd June.***

This major STEM event, organised by Solent EBP, [Education Business Partnership] was aimed at secondary students across S W Hampshire and Southampton. The event was part of a series of Big Bang regional fairs held across the country.

Big Bang Solent aimed to educate and inspire young people, both those already interested in STEM and those not yet engaged, to choose studies and careers in STEM. Big Bang Solent worked in partnership with regional and local networks to showcase the largest possible range of exciting and inspiring STEM initiatives and engage widely with local schools, STEM providers, businesses and industry to highlight the many STEM opportunities that are available. Twelve schools brought 500 students and teachers and 20 organisations were represented with exhibits and activities. We even attracted some of

the Hampshire County cricketers and there is now at least one GB poster in an office at the Rose Bowl. Rumour has it that one member of the team is a serious twitcher!

Our active display, 'Where Conservation Meets Community', showcased the work of the group and related careers. The focus was on local and global community work and the significance of partnership. The students were thoroughly engaged with our activities linked to the reintroduction of Great Bustards and were blown away by such a huge local success story. Some were aware of other reintroduction programmes such as the Beaver and Sea Eagle and had seen the Great Bustards featured on last year's BBC Springwatch series. They related to the idea of Great Bustards being seen in Hampshire as well as Salisbury Plain. Several have visited the Hawk Conservancy and seen Fergus and his friends.

***"The GBG workshop, led by Tricia and Lynda, included measuring the wingspan of a typical adult male and comparing this with the students' own 'wingspans'."***

As ever, the live mealworms proved an immediate success as did our stuffed fox. The interactive food chain activity was very popular and some of the students were hoping this topic would come up in the science exam they were due to take the next day.

We took the students on a 'Great Bustard Journey', set in the context of ethics in science. The roles of the people involved, starting with the phone call from our Russian farmer to notify an abandoned nest and progressing through the incubation phase in the laboratory, the dehumanising process, chick transportation, quarantine and eventual release, provided a flavour of just what it all takes. The concept of white lab coats as the uniform of a scientist was seriously challenged when the dehumanisation suit was demonstrated and students were amazed at the effort taken to save our rarest breeding bird. Whilst the job of feeding chicks appealed we don't think that the suit will be on the catwalks in the near future.

The workshop activities stimulated interesting questions and discussions about scientific ethics, the law relating to reintroduction of species, imprinting and the many and varied people whose work links with the Great Bustard Group including landowners, farmers, vets, conservationists, academics and other scientists as well as STEM-related volunteering opportunities.

Teacher feedback shows that the exhibitors were highly thought of, due to the level of learning and the interactive tasks they brought. They felt the best part of the event was the interactive element and the challenges that were provided. **Many thanks to: Robin Smith and the team at Solent EBP for organising the event and inviting us to participate and The Rose Bowl for a magnificent venue. We look forward to working with SEBP at future events.**



## A Great Big Bustard Egg Rescue

### Karen Waters reports on GBG's recent trip to Cowplain

*Scientist, designer, construction engineer marketing executive and detective – these were just some of the skills needed by pupils from the Cowplain Group who took part in the Great Big Easter Egg Rescue hosted by Padnell Infants School, Cowplain on a very hot and sunny 9th April 2011.*

The two sessions were attended by a total of 149 people from 14 different schools and were organised by Hampshire Extended Services, Cowplain and supported by Tricia, Lynda and Karen from the Great Bustard Group.

The fun event was open to pupils and their families and rounded off a term of extended services' out of hours science clubs led by Tricia and Lynda. The event's theme, based around the reintroduction of the Great Bustard, was perfect in providing a natural progression from the weekly science clubs' topics of food chains, habitats, biomes and flight. Tricia and Lynda provided the range of activities including K'nex engineering challenge, a slogan challenge and an Egg Hunt based around Great Bustard facts. Karen ran her 'hands-on' Great Bustard activity area.

After a welcome and introduction, pupils were issued with their mystery challenge. The other family members went to Karen's exhibition with 'Fergus' the wire bustard, feathers, mealworms, crickets, stuffed fox and other bustard items whilst the youngsters rose to their challenge. They were told 'news has just come through from Saratov in Russia that the Great Bustard Group conservation team have had a call from one of their partner farmers. A Great Bustard nest has been disturbed and they need to get the eggs to the incubation and hatching centre as soon as possible. However, they are having

problems transporting the eggs from the field to the road and will need a new vehicle to speed this up.'

Working in teams of four the youngsters challenge was to design and make a prototype vehicle at least 15cm x 20cm to transport the endangered birds' egg (5.5cm x 7.5cm) using only the K'nex kits provided. Their vehicle had to have a portable incubator with the following features:

- A sterile area
- An electricity supply
- Protection against damage over the rough terrain

The teams were told they also needed to publicise that their vehicle is being used by the Great Bustard Group to transport valuable eggs for the reintroduction project. Once constructed – with an inspiring variety of designs – the prototype vehicle was tested by being launched from a smooth ramp and then over 'rough terrain'. Teams pitched their prototypes to the impartial judging panel and family members, explaining how they were powered, the main features and their slogan for the GBG. For each session, three teams received prizes in 3 categories- the vehicle that went the furthest, the one that met the design brief the best and the one creating the best slogan. Pupils then joined their families to take part on a Great Big Easter Family Egg Hunt in Joey's Field. Great Bustard cardboard eggs were hidden and each had answers to questions about either the Great Bustard or the reintroduction project. All the children who handed in the completed quiz sheet received a chocolate egg. Michelle Petzer, Head Teacher of Padnell Infants School was particularly pleased that Joey's Field, which had been donated to the school for community use, was put to such good use – 'seeing the vision become reality'.

Finally pupils visited Karen's exhibition and were fascinated to handle crickets and mealworms and learn about our rarest breeding Bird. They loved Fergus and each received a Great Bustard goody bag.

*"Jayne Ashberry, Extended Services Co-ordinator for Cowplain schools said ' There were many lovely comments received from families following the day"*

The following is just one example 'Just a quick note to thank you and everyone involved in making the Great Big Easter Egg Hunt such an enjoyable event. The whole family enjoyed our morning and what a good way of encouraging the children to mix and learn.

Another parent later wrote ' My two children thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They learnt so much about the Great Bustard and also developed their skills in science and in teamwork. They really enjoyed handling the mealworms too!'

Jayne added 'It was wonderful to see local families finding out more about the Great Bustard, taking part in a science based activity and enjoying the wonderful woodland area that is part of Padnell Infant School site. It was a pleasure to organise.

We know that the event embraced whole families, because one pupil asked for an extra feather for her Grandfather and he has since been in touch with the group to say how wonderful it looks in his hat!

The event embraced the wider community, extended the education side of the GBG and raised awareness of its good work.

Thanks to: Jayne Ashberry - Extended Services Co-ordinator (Cowplain) – organiser  
Michelle Petzer – Headteacher Padnell Infants School  
Tricia Brown  
Lynda Springate

## Illegal Syrian Bustard Hunting

Alex Stott reports

**Horrifying footage has recently come to light showing Syrian hunters displaying the carcasses of four adult Great Bustards.**

There are claims that one of the participants is the brother of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with many anti-establishment comments on the video, posted on YouTube, seeming to support this assertion.

The video, uploaded this February, shows the hunters taking turns to pose with the four dead birds on the bonnet of their 4x4, before arranging the corpses to amuse each other, one of their group lifting two of the birds heads like puppets. One of the men goes on to mockingly kiss one of the birds for more photographs.

As the hunters climb across their car to be photographed, one of the birds carcasses falls from the bonnet of the vehicle onto the ground, before being thrown back into place by one of the older men. Several members of their party then take turns holding the birds up by their primary feathers, to show the wing spans of their kills to the camera.

Great Bustards are migratory, and travel several hundred kilometres during European winters. Flocks of Great Bustards numbering in the hundreds used to arrive in northern Syria, but their status in the region is now unknown, with no recent evidence of breeding in the area.

Globally, Great Bustards have a status of 'near threatened', but are listed as 'endan

gered' in Syria, their numbers having been impacted by the upsurge of large-scale farming over the last half-century. Historically, hunting has been the most consistent threat to the species, their impressive plumage and stature making them highly desired trophies. Great Bustards are among several other species of birds whose numbers in the Middle East are in decline, due in no small part to hunting.

***“All forms of hunting are illegal in Syria, meaning there are no hunting agencies, with guns only being legally available through the government.”***

However many firearms are illegally manufactured on a small scale within the country, whilst larger volumes are smuggled in from Russia and Italy via Lebanon.

The video has already garnered 200,000 views on video sharing website YouTube, with many negative comments directed towards the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Maher al-Assad, the brother featured in the video. The majority of comments are in Arabic and express distrusting and openly hostile sentiments towards the president, who has faced countrywide and international criticism, since the beginnings of the Syrian uprising, which began in January this year and lead to government violence against its citizens.

Apart from its well-know subject, this footage is notable not only for its clearly identifying

law-breakers and the registration of their Syrian vehicle, but also for the music track laid over the footage and the stills at the end of the video, suggesting it was edited and uploaded by one of the participants, rather than having been leaked by a third party.

There is evidence that Syrian attitudes towards wildlife are changing, in a partial reaction to the high levels of pollution in the country, awareness of which has only recently risen.

***“The recently-created Ministry of the Environment was set up to oversee and regulate the Syrian ecosystem in an effort to preserve rapidly declining species and habitats.”***

President Bashar is also reported as being eco-conscious and has spearheaded several campaigns to involve the population in improving the environment, notably calling for the population to plant thousands of new trees.

Despite this, there are significant obstacles to overcome for Syrian wildlife asides from illegal hunting. Frictions between the Ministry of the Environment and large polluters in the country, as well as the limited budget of the ministry, stand to limit its influence.

The greatest obstacle though, is the current political unrest in Syria, meaning environmentalism will be unlikely to become a high priority in the near-future.



The hunters joke and show off their catch



Proudly holding up the massacred birds



Posing with the dead birds for film

## A boost for GBG merchandise

### Phillip Hutchings, artist reports

*From early childhood Phillip Hutchings has enjoyed creating pictures of things of interest around him and found that drawing these images was a good and interesting way to learn and memorise.*

After leaving Kings Norton Grammar school in Birmingham he signed up for an apprenticeship at a large commercial artists' studio and also studied at the Birmingham College of Art. This background enabled him to become a full time graphic artist in an advertising agency. Following his two year National Service at the School of Military Survey in Berkshire he started his successful career in the printing and publishing industry.

In 2002 Phillip attended a Fine Arts Course at Wiltshire College after which he became a full time visual artist and soon found venues to display and sell his work in and around Salisbury.

His early work focused on portraits in oils but then devoted time to include landscapes, and wildlife using pastels and has recently produced a number of colourful abstract pictures. His method of work is to concentrate and research on a specific subject and then produce a number of pictures incorporating different times of the season or day to capture

the changes in atmosphere and colour. Last year Phillip became interested in the Great Bustard story and made contact with the Great Bustard Group who operate in conjunction with the Hawk Conservancy Trust near Andover. He visited the site so he could watch the two male Great Bustards in their enclosure.

*"The staff provided lots of useful information and the essential facts to enable him to create his series of Great Bustard paintings."*

Some of the images of these paintings can now be seen on greetings cards and drinking mugs on sale in the shop at the Hawk Conservancy.

Phillip's work can be viewed on his website [www.philliphutchings.co.uk](http://www.philliphutchings.co.uk)



One of Phillip's original mugs (left) and his famed self-portrait (above)



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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

**Pay monthly from just £1.66 a month**

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

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

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

#### Annual Membership (tick box)

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

#### Your details

Organisation (if applicable) .....
Title ..... Forename ..... Surname .....
Address ..... Phone .....
..... Email .....
.....
.....
Post code .....

#### Payment method (please tick)

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

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

To the Manager Bank/Building Society
Branch Address
Post Code

Account Name .....
Sort Code .....
Account Number .....

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

#### Donation

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

#### Gift Aid.

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

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

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

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

**GBG is a registered charity number 1092515**

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

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

*Fold here, glue or tape edges closed*

Affix stamp  
here

**Membership Secretary,**

**The Great Bustard Group,**

**1 Down Barn Close,**

**Winterbourne Gunner, Salisbury,**

**SP4 6JP.**



**GBG thanks Swarovski for their generosity to the Project**



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

Why not join us? All welcome

Or you can Sponsor the GBG team on JustGiving

[www.justgiving.com/gbg-team](http://www.justgiving.com/gbg-team)



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

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