

A new phase for the Great Bustard Reintroduction

Press release by the Great Bustard Group

23rd July 2014

The Great Bustard Trial Reintroduction has entered a new phase. Up until this year the project has used only birds sourced from Saratov, Russia, and the UK Government restricted this to birds hatched from eggs rescued from destroyed or abandoned nests.

The difficulties in rescuing the eggs, combined with the huge distances and logistical challenges of working in Russia meant that the number of birds the Great Bustard Group was able to import into the UK was small – as low as six birds a year.

The Great Bustard Group received a tremendous boost when Dr Paul O'Donoghue of the University of Chester undertook a genetic comparison of European Great Bustard populations. He discovered that, contrary to the previously held belief, the Great Bustard population in Spain is the closest living population of Great Bustards to the original UK population, before its extinction.

The Great Bustard Group is very grateful to the museums and private collections that allowed genetic material to be removed from their specimens. Spain holds around two thirds of the world's Great Bustard population with over 30,000 birds, and that number is increasing.

Working with the invaluable support of local land owners and government officials in Spain the Great Bustard Group undertook the collection of Great Bustard eggs from the Castilla-La Mancha region. Having been granted the appropriate licences from the regional and national governments, a team of four GBG staff with two specially trained dogs and two staff from RSPB collected 56 Great Bustard eggs.

The eggs were exported in partnership with Madrid Zoo, and then transported by ferry to the UK to specialist bird park, Birdworld in Farnham, Surrey, home to the only public captive Great Bustard enclosure in Britain. Here a team of incubation experts undertook the incubation and hatching of the eggs with excellent results, achieving a hatch rate of over 80% of the viable eggs.

The young chicks were then taken from Birdworld to the GBG Project Site in Wiltshire and reared by Great Bustard Group and RSPB staff. The young chicks need to be bill fed with a puppet and then exercised as they grow. The rearing team wear dehumanisation suits to stop the chicks becoming imprinted on their human foster parents.

The project is now entering the release phase with a 'soft release' technique being used that gently allows the birds to find their freedom in stages. The first birds are now at the release sites. A total of 33 Great Bustards will be released this year at two secret sites in Wiltshire.

The use of Spanish birds promises to be a major step forward for the project. The previously released Russian birds have demonstrated a tendency to disperse in a South Westerly direction, often to their detriment. Studies in Russia by a German/Russian team, and by the GBG and its project partners in Russia – the Severtsov Institute of Ecology – have shown that some birds head South West to escape the Russian winter, but indicate that others do stay. It was thought that the mild UK winter would encourage the released birds to stay, but many of them dispersed, some even reaching French shores. Although some have successfully completed a return journey to France others are thought to have perished.

The Spanish Great Bustard population is the largest in the world. It is currently increasing and is largely sedentary.

The cost of collecting the eggs and importing them to the UK were covered by the Rural Trust, whose support for the Great Bustard Group goes back to the beginning of the project when the first UK licences were being applied for.

The Great Bustard Trial Reintroduction was started in 2004 by the Great Bustard Group. Since 2010 the Reintroduction Trial been assisted by an EU LIFE+ grant which is coordinated by the RSPB. The LIFE+ programme covers up to 75% of eligible expenditure.

High resolution photographs from this story are available from

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/52840039/Press%20release%20images.zip>

Contacts:

David Waters
Great Bustard Group
davidwaters@greatbustard.org
Tel 079747 85426