

media release

Press release issued on behalf of the following partnership:
Great Bustard Group, Natural England, RSPB; and the University of Bath

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BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO SALISBURY PLAIN

An ambitious programme to return the world's heaviest flying bird to the UK has been given a considerable lift from the European Union.

The Great Bustard Project, based on Salisbury Plain, has been awarded a EU LIFE+ €2.2million grant to enlarge the project over the next five years. The EU LIFE+ project is run by the RSPB, Great Bustard Group, University of Bath and Natural England.

The grant, which will provide 75 per cent of the project's costs, will transform the Great Bustard Reintroduction Trial. The Great Bustard Group, which has led the project since its inception in 2004 has battled to cover the costs of the project with a hand-to-mouth existence.

Releasing great bustards reared from eggs rescued in southern Russia, the project had its greatest success in 2009, when the oldest males became sexually-mature and mated successfully, producing the first great bustard chicks to hatch in the wild in the UK for 177 years.

"Despite our great successes over the last six years we would sometimes struggle to find £10 or £20 to put diesel in the old Land Rover; now we have the chance to give this project real wings," says David Waters GBG Director. He continued: "The funding will provide a properly-resourced project, with four new posts, new monitoring equipment and even the possibility of a second release site."

David Waters added: "The Great Bustard Group is anxious to point out that the grant will not end the funding worries as a quarter of the project costs will need to be found by the project partners, and the LIFE project is very much about new work. Much of the existing work will need to be funded as before."

Tracé Williams, previously the RSPB's Chalk Grassland Restoration Manager based in Wiltshire, has been appointed as LIFE Project Manager for the RSPB. "It is so exciting to be working with these charismatic birds and with the staff who have achieved so much already in this awe-inspiring project. The funding will take the project to another level, with more security and a greater ability to gather vital information on the birds."

An early impact of the project has been the way in which monitoring has been conducted on this year's release of great bustards. Sixteen of them are carrying GPS satellite transmitters. Prof. Szekely from Bath University explains: "Monitoring is an essential element of the LIFE+ project. We need to understand what the released birds do, what food they eat, how they interact with other bustards and how they evade enemies. Effective monitoring will give us the information we need to improve the survival and reproduction of British bustards."

The LIFE+ project brings the Great Bustard Project into mainstream conservation, with Natural England, the government agency for nature conservation in England, as a partner. Ian Carter of Natural England welcomed the new partnership: "The LIFE funding will clearly put the project on a much firmer footing and ensure that key areas such as monitoring of the released birds are adequately resourced. We are set to learn a great deal more about this species over the coming five years!"

The great bustard is one of a number of species that the RSPB is working in partnership to restore to our countryside. RSPB species recovery officer, Leigh Lock said: "Great bustards last bred in the UK in 1832, and the RSPB is delighted to be working with partners to re-establish them as breeding birds after an absence of 170 years. We also hope that the great bustard project will help promote the restoration of a lost landscape in southern England that will support some of our other rare and threatened wildlife."

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Photographs:

Photographs are available to download free of charge from the RSPB Images website. To download images, click on the hyperlink below and please enter the username and password when prompted.

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Broadcast-quality radio interviews:

RSPB: To arrange an ISDN broadcast-quality radio interview with an RSPB spokesman please contact Grahame Madge at the RSPB press office.

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