



Registered Charity 1092515

This press release is subject to an embargo
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The First Great Bustard chicks in the UK.

For the first time since 1832, the Great Bustard – one of Europe’s most threatened birds – has this week, nested in the UK with two females successfully hatching chicks. This milestone has been greeted with euphoria by the team striving for several years to bring back the world’s heaviest flying bird to the UK.

For security reasons the nest sites, on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, are being kept secret.

David Waters, founder and Director of the Great Bustard Group, said:

“This is a tremendous step forward for the Great Bustard Reintroduction Project, the wildlife of the UK, Great Bustards and for me. It has been a hard struggle to get this far. I am exhausted and nearly broke, but to see Great Bustards breeding after an absence of 177 years is brilliant”.

During May a female Great Bustard was observed incubating a clutch of eggs. A few days ago they hatched and two chicks were seen following their mother and being fed. A day later another female was seen feeding a chick.

Prof. Tamas Székely, of the University of Bath – a partner of the Great Bustard Consortium – said:

“The Great Bustard is a difficult species to reintroduce as it is a long lived, slow maturing bird, but this is a very encouraging sign that the reintroduction trial will be successful”.

The RSPB has recently joined the project group. Dr Mark Avery is the RSPB’s Conservation Director. He said:

“This fantastic news marks another chapter in the struggle to bring back England’s lost wildlife”.

“The Great Bustard is the only bird nesting in the UK that is facing global extinction. Establishing a new population here should ensure a brighter future for this Globally Threatened bird, which continues to decline across parts of Europe”.

The successful hatching of these eggs marks a huge milestone for the project to reintroduce the Great Bustard to Britain. The last wild Great Bustard chick to hatch in the UK was in 1832, when a female Great Bustard was seen with a single chick in Suffolk.

The Great Bustard Group was formed in 1998 and is a UK Registered Charity. The reintroduction began in 2004 with annual releases of between six and 32 birds each autumn. The birds are

released under a licence issued by DEFRA to the Great Bustard Consortium (the Great Bustard Group and the University of Bath).

The reintroduction trial, led by the Great Bustard Group, began in 2004 using Great Bustards reared from eggs rescued from cultivation in Saratov Oblast, southern Russia. The chicks are reared in the Russian Federation in a partnership with the A.N. Severtsov Institute of Evolution and Ecology – a branch of the Russian National Academy of Science. When the chicks are about six weeks old they are imported into the UK and after a period of quarantine they are released on to Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire.

The first known nest from this project was in 2007, and there was at least one further nest in 2008. However, the eggs from these clutches were found to be infertile, most likely due to the young age of the males. It is widely considered that male Great Bustards become fertile at an age of four or five years, so 2009 is the earliest that eggs were expected to hatch.

David Waters added: *“The Great Bustard is a slow bird to mature, so it has been a long wait to get this far, but this could not be speeded up. A small UK population of about 18 birds has been built up, but it is only when this population begins to produce its own young and becomes self-sustaining that the project can be judged as successful. The indications are extremely positive”*.

The reintroduction project is being carried out by the Great Bustard Group. The Group has been essentially self supporting from the start, and is funded by membership subscriptions, private donations and through self generated income. It needs about £130,000 a year to fund the whole project which is allowing for a great deal of assistance given without charge by volunteers and project supporters and sponsors. Costs range from compliance with government health screening for the imported birds, through to renting the land at the release site and the costs of monitoring birds.

Despite the obligations of the EC Birds Directive, the Bern Convention and the Labour manifesto of 2005 to support the restoration of formally native wildlife, direct support from the government has been minimal (less than 2 %). Natural England have assisted with the costs of monitoring the released birds, but the vast majority of the project costs are covered by private donations and the work conducted by volunteers.

Bustard Fact File

Great Bustards (*Otis tarda*) are the heaviest flying birds in the world with weights of over 20 kg reported.

The males are much larger than the females and the sexes live apart for most of the year. They do not pair, but are a lekking species. The males gather in traditional areas and perform an incredible display, showing the undersides of all their feathers. The spectacle is visible for huge distances and the females are attracted to the largest and heaviest males.

After mating, the females carry out all the nesting, incubation and chick rearing activities without the help of the males.

Great Bustards are long lived birds with males living for over 20 years. Though the chicks are vulnerable to a range of predators, adult birds have few, if any, predators.

Through hunting and agricultural intensification the range of the Great Bustard has been much reduced since the Second World War. Populations in Europe occur in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well as Spain and Portugal. The Distribution extends further east to Ukraine, across the Russian Federation to Mongolia and China.

The extinction in the UK is understood to have been brought about by changes in agriculture which led to both the collection and the destruction of eggs and by the habits of ornithologists who desired to collect specimens for their collections.

Further information is available at www.greatbustard.com

Access and Filming

Media access to the nest areas is not possible for a variety of reasons. The birds are very sensitive to disturbance themselves and the locations are on the Ministry of Defence Training Estate.

Video footage and still images are available for download free of charge from the Great Bustard Group website (video from 16.00hrs on 2nd June) www.greatbustard.com/chicks.html.

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

<http://www.rspb-images.com/respages/storysetsignon.aspx?key=2ce967ad-29db-4eee-b1f8-976199d0bf7d>

User Name: GM_GB

Password: Great Bustard

Please note these pictures are only to be used in conjunction with this story.

Great Bustard Group staff are available for interview on Salisbury Plain and the Great Bustard Group has two captive male Great Bustards which may be filmed at close range. These are located at the Hawk Conservancy Trust close to Andover in Hampshire in the only Great Bustard Aviary in the UK. Access to the aviary for filming is welcomed but prior arrangements must be made with the Hawk Conservancy Trust to film these birds. Great Bustard Group staff will be available for interview with them.



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