

Patron: His Majesty King Charles III



A naturally reared female with naturally reared chick, observed at Compton in June

June 2024

Bustard Update

At time of writing, we have confirmed over 30 nest sites, which is the highest number we have found in any single year since the start of the project. This record is a result of our growing experience in using the drone (acquired last year through funding from the Ernst Kleinwort Charitable Trust and Cranbourne Chase AONB), an improved understanding of nesting patterns and the increasing maturity of the birds rescued from Spain.



Male and female Great Bustards on the Reserve, picture courtesy of Stephen Dodd

The main period of the lek is now over, although we continue to see males displaying, hoping to attract females who at this point in the year will be breeding for replacement clutches. Last year we were still finding nests into July, though our immediate objective is to search silage fields in the run-up to the second silage cut, likely starting in late June.

A male with a blue (2017) ring appears to have dominated the reserve this season, with 2-3 other challengers making appearances, including Purple 5 (2007), our oldest known wild male. As of early June, our males are increasingly being observed back in their drove, though there are still outliers looking for females.



A lone female observed at dawn on Deptford Down

The females are now increasingly difficult to spot now that the grass is higher, though we have a steady stream of sightings from freshly cut silage fields in the local area. Nesting seems to have been delayed by the very wet Spring season. Happily, though, we have now had the first confirmed sighting of a wild reared chick, with the suggestion that there are more out there waiting identification.



A solitary egg laid in a field of lucerne, south of the A303. This nest was discovered by drone and the egg retrieved for incubation before the field was cut for silage.

The Return of Red 75

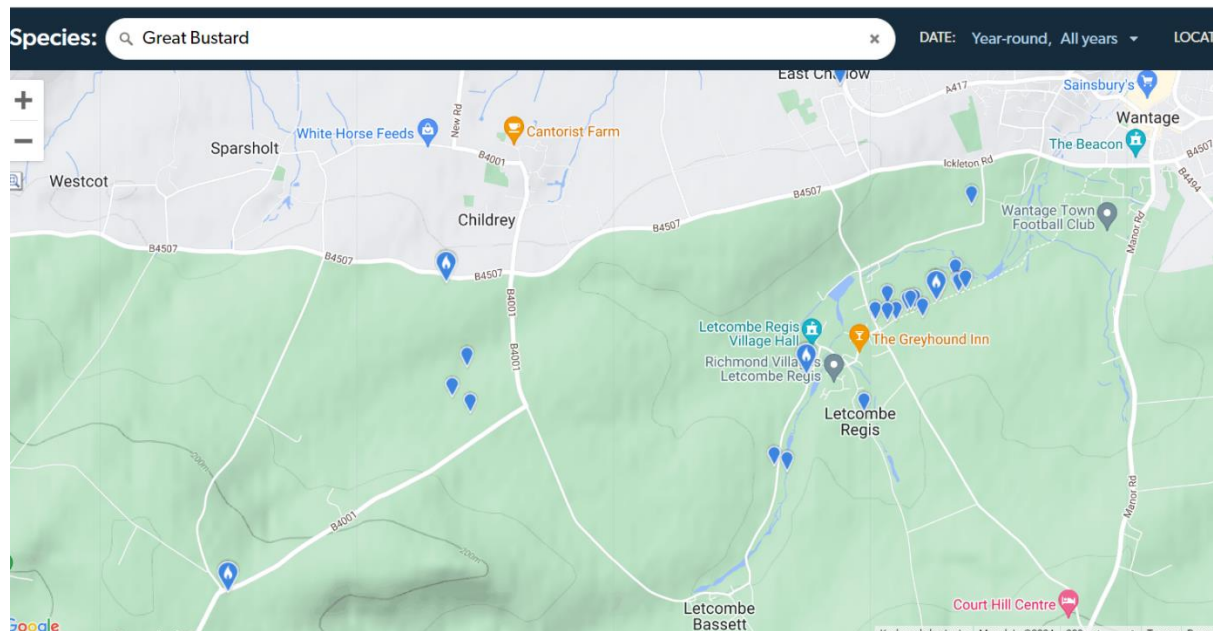
Most of our birds are naturally shy and will avoid areas of human activity – however we have seen one red-ringed (2019) female closing to within 50m of our project cabin. We were able to read her leg ring using the project's bridge camera, clearly shown here as Red number 75.



Red 75 on cultivated ground at the Eastern edge of the Reserve.

Red 75 is among the birds known to have frequented Oxfordshire, where she was first identified in 2020. She is one of three different birds known to have been sighted around Letcombe Regis, southwest of Wantage. 2024 is the first year in which we have identified her back at the point of her original release. She is a familiar sight in Oxfordshire and there are several records captured on the eBird website. Interestingly, most of these sightings are during Winter. Where she has spent previous Spring and Summers remains a mystery for now.





*Reports of a Great Bustard in the vicinity of Letcombe Regis, shown on the eBird website.
The sightings are marked by the blue drop shaped icons.*

Of interest, a single cold egg was found abandoned on the reserve, and subsequently retrieved for incubation on the off chance that it would hatch. The shell was a very pale blue, entirely devoid of the brown flecks we would normally expect to see. To our surprise, the egg hatched and the resultant chick has joined our hand reared cohort. Given the position of the nest in the Reserve, we strongly suspect Red 75 to be the mother.



The unusual pale blue egg recovered from the reserve, apparently abandoned.

Droning On

Our drone team has been out each day Monday to Friday, weather permitting. The run up to the first silage cut was the most pressured period, after which we were able to be more exploratory and search fields where there was no other recent evidence for nesting. The thermal sensor works best around sunrise, once sufficient light is available for an optical check of the thermal signature but before the sun has heated the fields. Unfortunately, sunrise is now around 0450hrs, which means a very early reveille...



Sunrise droning. The hill-like feature is actually a giant muck heap!

We have seven new drone pilots who we have recruited, who now join either Steve or Tim on the morning sorties. In addition, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust have also offered up some of their staff to be trained. This has eased the burden on us, and will, we hope, allows us to deploy our new pilots independently, or even consider the purchase of a second drone in order to double up our search capacity during critical periods.



Paul and Duncan who stayed locally and helped us out for a full week



Droning around 0800hrs, in this instance getting too warm and light for effective searching

The drone effort has been a significant success this year, resulting in the highest number of nests identified since the project started over 20 years ago. Critically, we have retrieved a significant number of nests from silage fields due to be mown, thus preserving the life of the nesting females.

Most of our exploratory flights adjacent to known nesting locations do not yield finds, although we have been lucky in a small number of instances in finding nests in fields where we have no previous records of nesting taking place, which is exciting of itself, and will help focus future search effort. In one instance, we found nesting on a field where the last record was in 2014, which could indicate the readoption of a previously abandoned nesting zone or that we have simply not detected nesting there for several years.

We have successfully mitigated casualties thus far this year, though cannot afford to be complacent. One near miss occurred on a field of silage where we have not previous evidence of nesting, and which had not been drone searched. Fortunately, the tractor driver was alert, avoided the bird (pictured), and called us out to search the remainder of the field.



*A female amongst freshly mown silage.
A near-run thing!*

Ground Searching

Whilst the drone is an excellent tool, it still has some limitations. It cannot fly in all weathers, and in tall cropping the angle of the sensor must be near perpendicular, which increase the chances of the operator missing a thermal hotspot. We therefore deployed our newly recruited ground search team for a second time this year. A very large field at Compton, which has previously taken close on an entire afternoon to search by a slack handful of our staff, was completed in around an hour. We are very grateful to those who offered up time to support.



The line advances across a field of lucerne, under a threatening sky

*The massed
ranks of our
ground
search team!*





David marking an egg prior to transportation. Keeping an accurate record of clutch number is important for understanding nesting trends and genetics.



A valiant trio (David, Steve and Siobhan) returning from a silage field with rescued eggs. They were guided onto a known nest site with the assistance of the drone and a walkie-talkie.

Egg Runs & Incubation

Whilst we would normally prefer to leave nests in-situ, eggs from silage fields have been recovered for incubation at Cotswold Wildlife Park. Similarly, eggs from nests in fields about to receive livestock have also been recovered, as these eggs would otherwise have been abandoned and destroyed.

The eggs were recovered (under DEFRA license) from several separate sites within a tight time period, immediately preceding the first silage cut. This required shuttle runs from the find-site to Cotswold Wildlife Park, with the eggs inside a travel incubator.



Left - A chick hatching out

Right - Guy holding a newly hatched chick, about to start the journey back to Salisbury Plain

Although the eggs were collected within days of each other, the hatching dates were quite spread out, as some had been in position for a couple of weeks before rescue, other only a matter of days. This necessitated several separate journeys to collect the newly hatched chicks to bring back to the project site.

Hand Rearing

At time of writing, we have 27 rescued chicks on site for hand rearing. The newly hatched chicks must be bill-fed for several weeks. This is very labour intensive for us, requiring feeding every hour when the chicks are small. Fortunately, this cohort were all hatched within a three-week period, which means that the intensive period of bill feeding will not be protracted.



Newly arrived chicks at the project site

Alongside the task of physically feeding the chicks, their food needs to be gathered and prepared, and the astroturf within the rearing facility regularly changed and cleaned. We are very fortunate to have a team of dedicated volunteers sacrificing time to ensure these chicks are well looked after.



Andy cleaning up after the chicks. A stinky but necessary task.

Assuming all goes well with the rearing effort, we are looking forward to releasing this group in early Autumn. We are in discussions with local landowners, harnessing all the knowledge we have thus far accumulated to select the release site that has best breeding and nesting potential.



The chicks are moved outside by increments.

Natural Rearing

It has been a wet spring and nesting seems to have been delayed. However, as this newsletter was going to press, David took this cracking photo of a female with chick out on the Reserve. Chicks are always difficult to spot in the wild, so it is great to have had a clear view of one. We have suspected the presence of wild chicks for a few days now, so it is great to get confirmation. There is at least one other location where we suspect chicks have been hatched – so will continue to monitor in hope of detecting more natural rearing.



A recently sighted chick with its mother at Compton

The chick in the photo is likely to be 5-7 days old. Interestingly, the mother is apparently unmarked, with neither wing tag (Russian sourced birds) or leg ring (Spanish sourced). Thus, what we are observing here is almost certainly a second generation wild reared Great Bustard on Salisbury Plain.

Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

We have had very positive interaction with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust over recent weeks. Last month we hosted a visit from Joanna Lewis, the Trust's new Chief Executive Officer and Andrew Moore, the new Chief of Nature Recovery. It is great to see the Trust taking an enlivened interest in the Great Bustard, which of course holds a special place in Wiltshire's history and iconography.



Separately, we have also had Wiltshire Wildlife Trust staff supporting our early morning drone sorties on a weekly basis. Aurora, Andy, Jonny and Rosie from Wiltshire Wildlife Trust attended training run by GBG and have since supported Thursday morning droning on Salisbury Plain and beyond. They have also had the opportunity to assist the rescue of eggs from silage fields, which has generated a great deal of insight and enthusiasm for the work of GBG within the Trust.

We look forward to continued cooperation and future closer working.



Andy (WWT) and Tim (GBG) posing proudly after a successful drone sortie

Geographical Databasing

Admittedly not as exciting as droning or chick rearing (!), we have also been progressing our databasing capability. Jon Isherwood at the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Record Centre (WSBRC) has been helping us develop our own mapping on ArcGIS – a geospatial database which is the industry standard for professional conservation bodies.

With Jon's support we have secured a charitable discount for 3 ArcGIS user licenses and now have three GBG members under weekly training at WSBRC in Devizes.



Jon (WSBRC) and Charles (GBG) discuss the capabilities of ArcGIS

We hope by the end of the summer to have a full electronic record of Bustard sightings and nesting which we can use in the field, in concert with our conventional monitoring and drone survey.

Visits

Visits to the project site at Compton have continued apace. The period of the lek is always our busiest of the year, during which we also host early morning photo-hide sessions, which again have proven very popular this season. It is perhaps easy to overlook the significance of the visit program whilst we are focussed on nest detection, rescue and rearing. However it is the visits program that brings in steady revenue into the project and without which we could not effectively fund the conservation of the species.



A group visit from the Christchurch Harbour Ornithological Group.

A massive thanks is due not only to our regular visits team, but also all those who have stepped in to cover gaps or assist with the larger group visits this spring. The feedback we get from visitors has been glowing, and aside from the financial benefit for the project, the visits project a significant amount of positive influence far and wide.

Fixing and Making

Site maintenance continues meanwhile. Although we will not be doing much in or around the reserve during nesting season, there is still a myriad of minor tasks that require work, the bulk of which is undertaken by our volunteer staff.



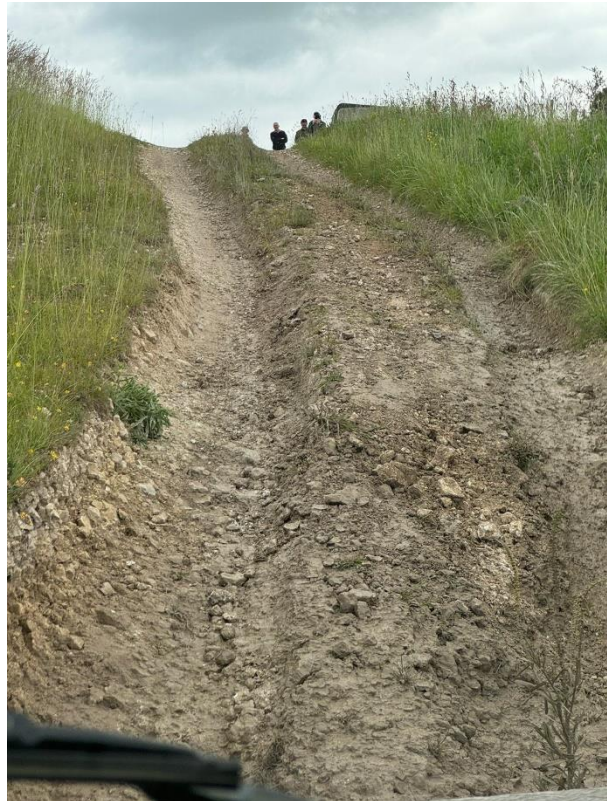
Adrian and Trevor doing their best Blue Peter impersonation, apparently making cardboard trays for egg transit



Len fixes a persistent niggle in a Land Rover door

Land Rover Training

We are fortunate in having an influx of newly recruited staff who have been supporting in a variety of ways – including droning, visits, chick rearing and site maintenance. However, the requirement to drive Land Rovers is universal. Paul Carter of Salisbury Plain 4x4 very kindly offered to provide another off-road driving tutorial, following the success of last year's session.



GBG staff under instruction tackle a slippery incline

Ten of our staff underwent training, building confidence in off-road driving and benefitting from Paul's tutelage. This should prove highly beneficial once driving conditions deteriorate later in the year.



The Land Rover training cadre. Paul Carter from Salisbury Plain 4x4 is centre in the hoody. Amongst some GBG veterans we have several new faces here, who have kindly stepped forward this year to help the project.



Another Gold for Bustard Gin

We are pleased to report yet more success for Downton Distillery's Great Bustard Gin, having gained a highly commendable gold award at the International Wine and Spirit Competition and two Gold medals at the Gin Guide Awards 2024. Great Bustard Gin was also recently showcased on Channel 4's Sunday Brunch programme.



Hugh from Downton Distillery holding a freshly distilled bottle of Great Bustard gin

Downton Distillery very generously donate £10 from the sale of each bottle to GBG to support the conservation of the species. If you are interested in purchase, the gin can be order direct from the Distillery here: www.downtondistillery.com



Another splendid cartoon from Alex Crump – here celebrating Great Bustard gin

Bustard of the Month

This month's feature Bustard is the Black Bellied Bustard (*Lissotis Melanogaster*).

This splendid Bustard is another African species, resident all year round through much of the African continent south of the Sahel, albeit absent from the Horn of Africa. It can be found in savannah, arable fields and tall grassland.

The black colouring from which the species takes its name is a feature of the male, whilst the female is much more subtly coloured.

When displaying, the male will arch his head towards his back and beginning with a whistling call, bring forward his head to make a clicking or plopping noise.

Although the overall number of the species is decreasing, it seems to have maintained its range and as such is still classified as a species of 'Least Concern' under IUCN criteria.



*A Black Bellied Bustard in Sofala, Mozambique.
Source: Zak Pohlen, Birds of the World website*

If you've made it this far through the newsletter (well done!) you'll notice that your normal correspondent is occupied elsewhere. David will soon be back at the helm of this periodical once the bulk of the rearing is done.

Thanks as ever for your support,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Edwards'.

Tim Edwards