**Stratford sub Castle Guild report March 2022**

**The Great Bustard Group – a talk by Steve Colwill**

 

As a volunteer at the group, Steve is the Visits manager, organising visits to the project on Salisbury Plain.

 David Waters, MBE, started it in 1998. and is now the director.

The Great Bustard had disappeared from the plain in 1832. It had been common in various parts of England. Witness to this is that it appears on the County flag of Wiltshire (above) and also on the crest of Wiltshire and of Cambridgeshire. It became extinct due to shooting and persecution. Ornithologists shot them to examine and display. Henry V111 served 40 of them at one banquet.

The average weight of the male is 13kgs. They can be as heavy as 20kg. They have a 6-8 foot wingspan and can be a metre tall. The males are 2-3 times bigger than the females, this being the greatest sexual diamorphism of birds. They are omnivorous but 60% of their diet is green vegetable matter from arable crops. The birds lay eggs directly on the ground amongst arable crops. The females sit tight on their eggs and many have been destroyed by combine harvesting. Birds that survive will return to breed where they were hatched. The hatched chicks stay with their parents until the next breeding season.

Great Bustards have a range across Eurasia, from Iberia and Morocco in the west to China in the east. The entire species underwent long term decline but this has been slowed in the past 20 years by conservation in many countries. The greatest population is in Spain and Portugal.

At the start of the project David Waters brought chicks back from Russia in crates. Probably because they did not have their parents to guide them, they did not thrive. Some DNA research on extinct British birds showed that they were more closely matched with Spanish birds. Next from 2014-18 eggs from Spain were brought back using portable incubators. They hatch after 26 days and are then self- sufficient. First they are raised inside and fed small pieces of alfalfa and similar with tweezers. They are then kept on the reserve behind fox proof fencing until they are 4 months old and turkey-sized. A vet examines them before release, including blood tests and DNA test. Only those 100% healthy are released. Each has a leg ring riveted on using a different colour ring for each year with an identity number and telephone number on it. Once released they go far afield. Recently a bird was found in Oxfordshire that had been released in 2019.

Females are sexually mature at 2years and males at 5years. They then return to the area of the reserve to breed. Having bred they stay in the local area. Now there is no longer a need to import the eggs. So that the eggs are not destroyed, rescue parties comb the fields and pick them up. (Some are not found and hatch naturally.) The ones collected are incubated at the Cotswold wildlife park and the chicks brought back to be raised on the plain. Last year there were 8 nests, 15 eggs, 13 of which were viable. In September 8 birds were released on the plain.

There are quite a few naturally raised birds now, identified because they are unringed. They are about a quarter of the local population. Being social creatures the birds go about in droves. They are hardy due to their thick coat of feathers and can live for about 20 years.

Great bustards have a mating system called ‘lekking’. Males compete for females with an elaborate visual display. During the display males appear to grow in size and change colour from brown to white. This is done by ruffling the feathers and inflating a special balloon-like structure in the neck called a gular pouch. Females appear to visit several males before copulating, choosing the one with the most elaborately displayed white feathers. The majority of the matings are performed by a small number of males at the lek site. No pair bonds are formed and pairings differ from year to year. We were shown a film of a male displaying or ‘lekking’.

The patron of the group in The Prince of Wales. He has visited and seen the birds from the hide. The Shrewton running club has a fundraising run each year. The High Sherriff has had a fundraising gala evening. Going forward – this year they are still trying to get the birds recognised as a re-established native species of England. In 2023 it is planned to buy land to build a state of the art visitor centre. In 2024 to gain improved legal protection. In 2025 to achieve a successful captive breeding programme. In 2028 to start releases in other suitable areas.

There is more good information, pictures and a video on the website, where you can also arrange visits and donate. [www.greatbustard.org](http://www.greatbustard.org).

Jenny Stone