

# Proceedings of the International Conference ‘Advancing the Conservation of the Great Bustard in Asia’: Editors’ preface

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The Great Bustard *Otis tarda tarda* has one of the broadest ranges of any Palearctic bird species, from near the Atlantic seaboard of southern Portugal to the Pacific coastlands of China and to Khanka lake in Russia’s Primor’e, a distance of almost exactly 10 000 kilometres. A little under half of this range—a massive 4500 km—falls across the OSME region, which extends from Turkey in the west to Kazakhstan in the east. In Europe to the west the situation of the species is kept under close and constant scrutiny. In Asia to the east the history and status of the species has at least been chronicled and charted in great detail in BirdLife International’s *Threatened Birds of Asia* (Collar *et al* 2001). By contrast, however, information about the condition of the Great Bustard in the Middle East and Central Asia is troublingly inaccessible and fragmentary. Political, cultural, linguistic and logistic barriers have stood in the way of research and reporting, coordination and collaboration. In their isolation both inside and outside the region, conservationists have doubtlessly fallen back on the comforting hope that there is somewhere in this vast range, in those supposedly unending steppes of Central Asia, a place where the Great Bustard has been able to escape the ravages that modern development has elsewhere so comprehensively wrought on populations of the species.

To redress this imbalance in the community of knowledge, the Eurasian Bustard Alliance, in partnership with the Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia, and Institute of Biology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, conceived and convened an international meeting, *Advancing the Conservation of the Great Bustard in Asia*, to which delegates from Iran eastwards were invited to provide historical reviews and contemporary



updates on the status of the species in their countries. The meeting was hosted by the Mongolian Ministry of Environment and Tourism at the Fresh Water Resources and Nature Conservation Center in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on 25–29 May 2017 (see photo). The Trust for Mutual Understanding generously provided funding for conference expenses, article translation, and publication of the proceedings.

Those proceedings are published here, in this special issue of *Sandgrouse*, or more strictly the larger part of the proceedings which deal with the nominate (western) subspecies of the Great Bustard that occupies the OSME region (it is hoped that the papers relating to the eastern subspecies *dybowskii* will appear elsewhere). Speaker-authors were asked to present their evidence in a simple formulaic manner, involving a comprehensive overview of the species' historical presence and current state in their region, with a special outreach to capture unpublished records and easily overlooked sightings logged in dozens of brief journal reports and citizen science portals. Contributions also included a basic matrix for population estimations, in order to allow for a regional population summary to be compiled. Inevitably the resulting material varied massively depending on the size of the geographical unit under review, its historical and current importance to Great Bustards, and the size of the observer base on which to draw.

Following the decision to publish the Central Asian materials in *Sandgrouse*, supplementary papers were elicited from species experts in adjacent areas within the OSME region, resulting in contributions from the Russian Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Turkey. These, however, merely confirm what emerged so strikingly from the conference in 2017: there *are* no tracts of steppe where Great Bustard populations are robust and stable. The species is at risk—or already extirpated—from west-central Turkey right across to Nei Mongol, China. Nevertheless we have here an important set of conservation recommendations. An additional output of the Ulaanbaatar conference was a proposal to establish a *Concerted Action for the Great Bustard in Asia* under the umbrella of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). This Concerted Action was unanimously approved at the 12th Conference of Parties to CMS in Manila in October 2017. With this framework for cooperation firmly established, and recommendations for action clearly laid out, increased efforts and financing by governments and conservation donors are now imperative in order to undertake the key activities that will stabilise populations across the entire range of the species in the Middle East, Central Asia and East Asia.

The papers in this collection were written either in their authors' native language and then translated, or in English by non-native speakers of that language. We have edited the material intensively in order to ensure clarity of information and conformity of style, and we have encouraged updates to improve the quality and completeness of the record that each paper represents. We have sought to avoid geographical overlap, but the contribution by Prokopov forms a more focused study within the wider analysis by Shakula *et al* covering eastern Kazakhstan. When translating citations, the overriding concern was to facilitate future attempts in finding original sources; however, owing to changes in orthography over time, this results in some inconsistencies in place names between the main body of the article and the literature cited. The ICAO romanisation system was used for translation of place and family names, with the addition of an apostrophe to mark the Cyrillic 'soft sign'. An effort was made to use contemporary official place names.

Many organisations and individuals have contributed towards this continental-scale initiative. The Trust for Mutual Understanding gave invaluable support for the conference, and the Mongolian Ministry of Environment and Tourism was a generous host. B Nyambayar at the Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia and N Tseveenmyadag at the Institute of Biology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences were welcoming partners in the conference organisation. D Ariuntuyaa at the Ministry and

B Heredia from the CMS Secretariat played central roles in the conference. They, and B Nyambayar, were vital to the development and advancement of the proposal to CMS. S Gareev provided several translations. M Koshkin helped with various aspects of the Kyrgyzstan paper.

OSME itself must be identified as a major benefactor in the production of these proceedings. We particularly thank Rob Sheldon for his enthusiastic championing of this publication and his role in commissioning and checking the additional material from the Russian Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Furthermore, a bursary is planned by Eurasian Bustard Alliance to support Great Bustard conservation in the region, and OSME has very generously added significantly to the total available. We express our profound gratitude to the society and to its chairman for this outstanding support.

#### **LITERATURE CITED**

Collar, NJ, AV Andreev, S Chan, MJ Crosby, S Subramanya & JA Tobias. 2001. *Threatened Birds of Asia: the BirdLife International Red Data Book*. BirdLife International, Cambridge.

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