The status of the eastern population of Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*: editors' preface

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As western populations of the Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* suffered precipitous plunges over the past decade, conservationists and government actors have inquired with increasing anxiety about the health of the 'eastern population', with hope—fuelled very largely by a single report of 150 000 birds wintering in Azerbaijan (Gauger 2007)—that the expanses of Asia might hold sufficient numbers of the species to allay fears and preclude conservation uplistings. The status of this population was the focus of global discussion in 2020 at COP13 of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), at which a breakout group gathered some two dozen national representatives to deliberate a proposal from a party to list the Little Bustard on CMS appendices (Convention on Migratory Species 2020).

With less than a day's notice MK, attending the meeting in her capacity as an IUCN delegate, was able to mobilise the IUCN Bustard Specialist Group's network to assemble population estimates and trends from a vast area that stretches from the Black Sea across Central Asia to western China. She endeavoured to convey to the audience, primarily from Europe and Oceania, the paradoxes of the Little Bustard's ecology in Asia, where migratory flocks create spectacles of abundance but also facilitate hunting, and where recent population increases reflected not a stable conservation environment for this steppe and farmland bird, but rather a temporary reprieve resulting from the massive decline in intensive agriculture that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The evidence mustered in those few hours resulted in the listing of the species on both appendices of the Convention, Appendix I (for migratory species in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range) and Appendix II (for migratory species with an unfavourable conservation status requiring international agreements for their conservation and management). This arrangement now protects Little Bustards from hunting within countries that are party to CMS and raises global awareness of the need for their conservation. However, that improvised meeting also highlighted the increasing urgency of conducting a robust review of the status of the eastern population and its conservation needs. Such a review is needed now more urgently than ever, as renewable energy infrastructure developments are expanding across the species' Asian range at a scale and speed unimaginable even just five years ago.

Among these developments, the AZURE project in Azerbaijan (World Bank 2024) plans no less than 700 km of new transmission lines, including sections perpendicular to the Beshbarmag migratory bottleneck, through which the vast majority of the reported 150 000 Little Bustards visiting the country pass each autumn, and encircling the terrestrial boundary of Shirvan National Park, where thousands of birds winter. These developments present significant mortality risks to the Little Bustards breeding across south-western Russia and western Kazakhstan, which visit Azerbaijan to overwinter. Like other species in its family, the Little Bustard is prone to collisions with overhead cabling, for which no flight diverter yet tested has demonstrated meaningful reductions in mortality (Silva *et al* 2023). The establishment of a baseline of information on the status of the Little Bustard is vital to our ability to monitor trends in populations and advocate appropriate measures in the face of mounting developmental threats, of which energy generation and transmission are in the top tier.

Plate 1. Part of a Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* flock, Dashtobod, Uzbekistan, 12 January 2025. © *Relisa Granovskaya*

For this reason, we must express our fulsome thanks to all the commissioned authors in this special feature in *Sandgrouse,* who have collaborated so constructively, generously and rapidly to produce the body of evidence assembled here; we thank too the photographers whose images so strongly enhance the papers (eg Plate 1). We must also most gratefully acknowledge Shamil Gareev for his conscientious translations of three of the papers from Russian into English. We are particularly glad that this initiative has provided the occasion

to bring the latest results of certain long-term research projects—representing in some cases up to twenty (Oparin *et al* 2025) or even fifty (Rustamov & Shcherbina 2025) years of labour in the field—to a wider audience. The result is a fine complement to the recent global overview by Morales & Bretagnolle (2022), bringing a sharper contemporary focus on the situation in the eastern portion of the species' range. We hope the information here will prove at once insightful as to the ecology of Asian populations of this species and helpful in advocating for Little Bustards at national and continental scales, in contexts as varied as new energy projects, national and transnational conservation policies and protected areas, changes in land use and agricultural practices, and hunting and poaching controls.

As well as evaluating population levels and trends, the articles herein highlight a wide variety of phenomena including the impact of de- and re-intensification of agriculture in post-Soviet states, the threat posed by falconry and poaching in general, the effect of climate change on the species' migratory behaviour, the challenge of conducting research on a lekking species across such a vast area, and the unexpected irruption of Little Bustards in winter 2024–25. Thanks to these contributions, this special issue geographically covers almost the entirety of the eastern range of the Little Bustard, reporting on 21 countries and providing unprecedented clarity to our understanding of the status of this population.

We note that the eastern range of the Little Bustard closely matches the OSME region, with the exception of Egypt (for which the last record was in 1922: Goodman & Meininger 1989) and Cyprus (three records in the 21st century, in 2013, 2016 and 2017: Flint & Richardson 2024). Indeed, the very idea of this special feature emerged from a virtual conference on the Little Bustard's status in Central Asia on 15 March 2024, organised in the context of a project funded by OSME's Conservation Fund. *Sandgrouse* is thus the ideal venue for this collection of work, and for this hospitality we thank its editor and the membership and leadership of OSME, particularly Rob Sheldon, who has encouraged us over the past 18 months. OSME and its journal play a unique role in providing essential support and encouragement for collaborative efforts such as this, linking ornithologists, birdwatchers and conservationists across political and linguistic barriers. We hope the collection of papers that follows contributes to this important tradition.

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