



Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals



SECOND MEETING OF THE SIGNATORIES TO THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE MIDDLE-EUROPEAN POPULATION OF THE GREAT BUSTARD (*Otis tarda*)

*Feodosia, Crimea, Ukraine
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Agenda Item 6.0

OVERVIEW REPORT

(Prepared by BirdLife International on behalf of the CMS Secretariat)

I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to paragraph 9 of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of the Middle-European Population of the Great Bustard (MoU) the Secretariat shall prepare an overview report compiled on the basis of all information at its disposal pertaining to the Great Bustard. It shall communicate this report to all Signatories, signing Organisations and to all other Range States.
2. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of the MoU, MoU Signatories that are also Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) should in their national report to the CMS Conference of the Parties make specific reference to activities undertaken in relation to this Agreement. At the same time, MoU signatories not Party to the Convention shall be invited to prepare, after the adoption of their national work programme, a report on the implementation of the MoU both of which they should then communicate to the Secretariat.
3. By letters dated 20 February and 10 September 2008, the Secretariat provided to all MoU Signatories the reporting guidance for Parts I and II of the Great Bustard Action Plan adopted at the First Meeting of the Signatory States. As of 17 October 2008, the following Signatories had submitted their national reports to the Secretariat: Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In addition, the report draws from national reports submitted by Signatories and non-Signatories who are also Parties to CMS COP-9: Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovenia. National reports from Hungary, Ukraine and Bulgaria submitted after 17 October 2008 were incorporated into the Rev1 version of the Overview Report. Finally, information available to BirdLife International in the form of data, project or threat reports, as well as, information available on the Internet was also used.
4. The structure of this report follows that of the reporting guidelines. Corresponding action points from the Action Plan are indicated in square brackets. This report does not repeat the information provided in the national reports. It only summarizes the main issues.

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II. Status of Great Bustard in the Agreement Area and beyond

5. By the time of writing this report only three breeding (Austria, Germany and Slovakia) and three non-breeding range states have submitted their reports. Therefore, the population estimates presented here are based on the information available to the author.

6. A summary of available population estimates are presented in Table 1. Within the agreement area, the overall numbers are stable. Some recovery can be observed in Austria, Germany and Hungary as a result of intensive conservation measures and numbers seem to be stable in Serbia. The presence of the species during breeding season has been confirmed in Romania and suspected in Bulgaria as a result of surveys carried out in 2006 by the respective national partners of BirdLife International under the coordination of the MoU. The Ukrainian population has possibly declined by 10% over the last 10 years. There is considerable uncertainty in the numbers related to the populations in Russia but the wintering population in Ukraine has possibly declined by 20% over the last 10 years.

7. Within Europe, but outside of the agreement area, the species population is regarded stable in the Iberian Peninsula although censuses in both Spain and Portugal indicate that the fragmentation of the population still continues. The population is further decreasing in Turkey.

III. Implementation of the Action Plan

8. **Protected Areas [AP 1.1]:** The Action Plan requires responsible authorities to designate key breeding sites and key migration and wintering sites throughout the range of the species as protected areas and manage them according to the species' requirements. This includes also areas that are essential for the reestablishment of the species. In the *breeding range*, **Austria, Hungary, Germany and Slovakia** have reported that the leks and a significant part of the breeding areas are already protected as Special Protection Areas under the EC Wild Birds Directive. However, only part of the Great Bustard habitats is protected under national law in **Hungary, Germany and Slovakia**. In 2008, **Austria** has made substantial progress in designation of all key areas under the national legislation. In **Ukraine**, less than half of the display, breeding, stop-over and wintering sites are covered by protected areas, but progress in enhancing the protection was reported from the Karalar area, but there are gaps both in Crimea Autonomous Republic, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. In 2007, **Hungary** has introduced Natura 2000 payments to compensate for the restrictions on grassland management within these areas. In **Germany and Hungary**, large areas were purchased by conservation organisations. In **Germany**, the SPA "Fiener Bruch" in Saxony-Anhalt is still not protected and managed adequately. **Serbia** has also increased the protection at the last remaining breeding population in the vicinity of Mokrin. Although there has been significant progress in relation to the habitat of extant populations, the conservation of currently unoccupied but suitable habitats appear to be more problematic, but some progress also can be reported here. In **Germany**, measures targeting the conservation of meadow birds provide some protection to habitats potentially suitable for Great Bustards. The **Czech Republic** reported that a former military airport is managed every year to ensure adequate habitat for Great Bustards, but otherwise there is no possibility to protect the historic range. **Slovakia** has made significant efforts to encourage the resettlement of Great Bustard at one area. In the *non-breeding period* the Middle-European population migrates only occasionally and often only short distances. This makes the designation of protected areas difficult. On the other hand, the majority of the population from Saratov, **Russia** migrates regularly to the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya districts in Crimea, Ukraine. However, Great Bustard habitats are only protected in the Black Sea Biosphere Reserve. The Ukrainian report highlights the importance of protecting the Agayman area near to the Askania-Nova Reserve and in the Kerch Peninsula

9. **Habitat quality outside of protected areas [AP 1.2]:** The Action Plan calls for maintenance or improvement of habitat quality outside of protected areas. It calls for extensification, introduction of appropriate crop rotation, including alfalfa and oilseed rape, and set-aside schemes supported by incentives provided under agri-environmental schemes. In **Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia** only a small part of the suitable habitats are left unprotected. Agri-environmental schemes support appropriate habitat management in **Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia** (including also protected areas). In **Germany**, farmers are also supported under extensification schemes. However, the German and Austrian reports have also highlighted the potential negative impact of abolishing the set-aside obligation in the EU. In **Austria**, special measures were taken to encourage the return of Great Bustards to abandoned breeding habitats nearby established breeding sites inside protected areas and breeding females can be observed on these areas, what indicates that the approach is successful. In the *non-breeding ranges* there is no information about targeted measures taken to address the species feeding requirements during migration or winter. **Ukraine** has reported cultivation of oilseed rape on the Kerch peninsula.

10. **Preventing habitat fragmentation [AP 1.3]:** The Action Plan calls for prevention of afforestation and making infrastructure development, in particular construction of new roads, highways, railways and irrigation, subject of environmental impact assessment (EIA). In general, larger projects and projects within protected areas are subject of EIA, but smaller projects on unprotected areas are not. In addition, EIAs only inform, but do not bind the competent authorities in their decision whether to approve or reject a proposal. Some countries (e.g. Slovakia) have also reported insufficient enforcement of the legislation. Overriding public interest can also justify projects leading to habitat fragmentation. Potentially dangerous infrastructure development projects were mentioned in the **German** (highway, windfarms), **Ukrainian** (windfarms) and **Slovak** (airport) report. The **Austrian** and **Hungarian** reports state that nature conservation authorities managed to prevent adverse infrastructural developments.

11. **Protection from hunting [AP 2.1]:** The Action Plan calls for prohibiting any hunting where it is considered necessary at the time Great Bustard are expected to occur in the area. These restrictions should be then strictly enforced. Already the first overview report noted that the species is officially protected in all countries either as a (strictly) protected species (**Albania, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia**) or as game bird with a year-around closed season (**Austria, Germany, Slovakia**). In **Austria**, hunting activities are voluntarily suspended by hunters at breeding sites. In **Hungary**, roe deer hunting during the display season in May is restricted by the conservation authorities around leks and breeding places. Illegal killing may occur but it is difficult to substantiate, however it is considered to be high in **Ukraine** affecting the wintering population, but actions were taken by USPB, BirdLife in Ukraine.

12. **Preventing disturbance [AP 2.2]:** The Action Plan calls for preventing disturbance of display and breeding sites through restricting or controlling access and adoption of the timing and techniques of land management. **Austria** and **Germany** have reported agreements with various stakeholders (farmers, hunters, armed forces) to reduce disturbance. Surveillance officers also play a role in enforcing legal restrictions and agreements in these countries. In **Slovakia**, access is restricted to SPAs. In **Hungary**, disturbance is prevented through statutory (as part of the protected area/Natura 2000 management plans) and voluntary (as part of conditions for agri-environmental measures) restrictions. In some protected areas, physical barriers were installed to restrict access to dirt roads close to sensitive sites as part of the recent LIFE project. **Germany** has reported visitor management. Protection of breeding and wintering sites from disturbance is carried out in protected areas (e.g. Askania-Nova) and as part of projects (near Tobeckhiskiy Lake, Kerch Peninsula). Awareness raising was reported from **Croatia**.

13. **Preventing predation [AP 2.3.1]:** The Action Plan provides for the control of foxes and feral dogs in areas where Great Bustard occurs regularly. However, other predators have been also mentioned such as Raven, Badger, Raccoon-dog, Raccoon, White-tailed Eagle, Goshawk (Germany), Hooded Crow (Austria, Hungary). Control measures are taken in **Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia**, but predator control is at best only partially effective in these countries. In **Germany** enclosures of 10-20 hectares large are applied to exclude foxes and give higher chance for successful breeding. A large enclosure was also constructed at Dévaványa in **Hungary**. In addition, experiments with electric fences were carried out in the Heves Grasslands. As part of the recent LIFE project, Hungary has also drafted a Predator Management Plan which is in the process of adaptation. No measures have been taken in **Ukraine**.

14. **Adopting measures for power lines [AP 2.3.2]:** According to the Action Plan, existing lines which cross Great Bustard areas should be buried or marked prominently. New lines should not be built across Great Bustard areas. The national reports did not mention the construction of new power lines. During this reporting period **Austria** and **Hungary** have implemented major LIFE projects. In Austria, approx. 45 km of existing medium voltage power lines were buried and 125.2 km of high voltage power lines have been marked with bird protection markings, what affects the majority of the West Pannonian population (c. 300 inds). The measures are considered effective. In Hungary, 11 km powerline was buried as part of the LIFE project and at 8 other sites 1,400 visual markers were installed. In **Slovakia**, 12 km powerline was marked. **Germany** has also reported measures for powerlines affecting some 80% of the national population. Powerlines also causes mortality amongst the wintering Russian population in **Ukraine**, but lack of funding hinders measures.

15. **Compensatory measures [AP 2.3.3]:** According to the Action Plan any activities which will create new loss or degradation of Great Bustard habitat or longer term disturbance of the species should be compensated by appropriate measures. In **Germany** more than 2,400 ha have been lost since the MoU came into force and habitat improvement has taken place on 112 hectares.

16. **Possession and trade [AP 3.0]:** The Action Plan requires that the collection of eggs or chicks, the possession of and trade in the birds and their eggs should be strictly prohibited and the restrictions controlled. General species conservation measures are in place in all countries that have sent a report to the Secretariat as this requirement is also covered by CITES, the Bern and Bonn Conventions and the EU Birds Directive. There is no information available whether the species is fully protected in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova. Exceptions are only possible for conservation purposes. Illegal collection and trade of eggs and chicks was reported by **Ukraine**.

17. **Captive breeding in emergency situations [AP 4.1]:** The Action Plan provides for the possibility of taking eggs into artificial incubation from threatened nests if it is not possible to guarantee their survival on the field. Captive management of threatened nests form part of the conservation measures of Great Bustard only in **Germany, Hungary and Russia**. Chicks from Russia are provided for the UK reintroduction programme.

18. **Reintroduction [AP 4.2]:** The Action Plan requires that reintroduction actions should be undertaken only at those sites where feasibility studies (following the IUCN guidelines for reintroductions) have been carried out with success. There were no attempts reported to reintroduce the species within the MoU area. However, at the 1st Meeting of the Signatories, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine has announced their intention of starting a reintroduction programme. However, both Ukraine and Bulgaria reported that no reintroduction programme has taken place in their country. It is also hoped that the species can recolonise the Czech Republic from a nearby population in Austria.

19. **Monitoring of the success of release programmes [AP 4.3]:** The Action Plan requires that the survival of chicks bred in captivity and of chicks hatched from artificially bred clutches should be closely monitored, as well as the survival and breeding performance of adults released into the wild. Release programmes should be permanently reassessed and discontinued if birds are failing to survive under natural conditions. Release programmes form integral part of the conservation of Great Bustard in Germany and Hungary. In **Germany**, annual survival rates until the next spring varied between 18 and 53 % in the period 1998-2007 with an average of 32 %. The survival rate is lower in **Hungary**.

20. **Cross-border conservation measures [AP 5.0]:** The Action Plan requires that Signatories harmonise their legal instruments in order to conserve and manage Great Bustards more efficiently. Populations which are shared by two or more countries should be the subject of bi- or multilateral programmes to ensure that there is appropriate coordination of national surveys, research, monitoring and conservation activities. The transboundary collaboration has increased substantially since the 1st Meeting of the Signatories partly thanks to the coordination supported by the Lebensministerium of Austria, partly due to the LIFE and INTERREG projects implemented in Austria, Slovakia and Hungary. There are plans to submit a four-country LIFE+ proposal to cover the West Pannonian population. Similar collaboration has been also developed between Hungary and Serbia. A trilateral meeting of Hungarian, Romanian and Serbian experts took place in November 2006 in Mokrin. Efforts were made to submit an INTERREG proposal to support exchange of experience and development of the Mokrin area in Serbia. The Serb project has been also supported by the Pannonische Gesellschaft für Grosstrappenschutz. Hungarian and Romanian experts have also collaborated on surveys along the border. There is also significant collaboration amongst Great Bustard range states, including Russia, Germany and Hungary from the MoU area, in relation to the UK reintroduction scheme. **Ukraine** has reported collaboration with **Russia** during the breeding, pre-migration and wintering periods.

21. **Monitoring of population size and population trends [AP 6.1.1]:** According to the Action Plan, efforts should be made to monitor the basic parameters of all Great Bustard populations, such as size and trends, by applying methods which lead to comparable results, at all breeding and wintering sites. Monitoring of the breeding populations is almost complete in **Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia**, but less comprehensive in **Ukraine and Russia**. The current status of the species is poorly known in **Bulgaria and Romania**. Although the species was considered as extinct, recent surveys have identified where the species still occurs based on direct observations or information from local people. The targeted survey and subsequent conservation of these areas is important. Distance sampling has been tested in **Russia** to provide statistically more robust population estimates. Guidelines are being developed for monitoring of Great Bustard.

22. **Monitoring of the effects of habitat management [AP 6.1.2]:** The Action Plan requires that studies should be carried out on the effects of habitat protection measures, implementation of agro-environmental regulations, etc. These studies should preferably be done at sites where the population has been well monitored for a number of years. In **Germany**, habitat studies focused on extensification. In **Hungary**, studies focused on the Moson project and the LIFE project has included a detailed habitat-use study at 9 sites. The first results of this were published in 2007. There is also ongoing monitoring of agri-environmental measures and the habitat management measures implemented under the LIFE programme. Population changes at a pair of sites with and without agri-environmental measures were also analysed. The results showed that the measures reduced the amount of nest threatened in alfalfa, but in the meantime, number of nest threatened in cereal crops has increased. In addition, modeling studies suggest that the coverage of the site, and especially of the most sensitive habitats (i.e. alfalfa fields and grasslands) within it, determines the population level effect of the scheme. In **Austria** and

Slovakia, detailed monitoring has been carried out in relation to the agri-environmental schemes, but the data are still to be analysed.

23. **Promotion of studies on mortality factors [AP 6.2.2]:** According to the Action Plan all individuals found dead should be examined for the causes of mortality. This, together with field studies and monitoring of marked individuals, should help to identify the direct or indirect impact of land use on Great Bustard mortality. There is detailed mortality monitoring in **Austria, Germany, Hungary** and **Slovakia**, but monitoring of marked individuals is only implemented in **Germany** (apart from some *ad hoc* tracking in Hungary). Studies from all countries indicate the importance of collision with powerlines, predation and agricultural works. In **Ukraine**, also poaching has been reported based on fragmentary data. Recently (2006), only **Ukraine** has reported mortality due to harsh winter conditions, although formerly it has occurred several times in other part of the range including Hungary and Germany. A Population viability analysis studies from Hungary, Germany, Russia and Spain highlight that Great Bustard populations is more sensitive to adult mortality than to breeding success. Therefore, the impact of factors affecting adult survival (such as collision with powerlines) might have been underestimated in the action plan.

24. **Studies on migration [AP 6.2.4]:** According to the Action Plan studies should be made to identify the migration routes and resting habitats of the Great Bustard and especially of key sites along such routes and in wintering areas. Ringing and studies involving satellite telemetry should be planned and implemented for those purposes. Local or short distance movements of birds are well understood in all countries. However, long distance movements and migration between populations are poorly known in the absence of marking and radiotelemetry studies with the exception of Germany. This reflects the sensitivity of the species to capturing (especially of adults) and the lack of experience and relatively limited financial means. To support Range States in this respect, guidelines have been drafted by a leading expert on the field and presented for adoption at this meeting. In addition, an observation reporting site has been created and hosted by MME/Birdlife Hungary (<http://www.tuzok.mme.hu/>).

25. **Training of staff working in conservation bodies [AP 7.0]:** The Action Plan recommends that personnel working regularly in Great Bustard areas (agronomists, biologists, wardens, etc.) should receive specific training on Great Bustard matters, especially their biological characteristics and living requirements, legal matters, census techniques and management practices. Also, communication and cooperation between the various sectors involved (e.g., farmer, hunter and nature conservation organisations, tourist companies and state authorities) should be intensified. Staff working for the conservation bodies is fairly stable. Hence formal training plays relatively minor role, but informal and formal interactions of staff (e.g. under the various LIFE projects, national working groups) played an important training function.

26. **Increasing awareness of the need to protect Great Bustards and their habitat [AP 8.0]:** The Action Plan recommends using Great Bustard as a flagship species to protect steppes, dry grasslands and suitable agricultural landscapes. Furthermore, farmers, shepherds, the general public and decision-makers should be subject of targeted information campaigns to secure their collaboration and adopt their management practices to the species' requirements. The species maintains a high profile in the countries where it breeds. The LIFE projects implemented in **Austria, Hungary** and **Slovakia** have contributed significantly to raising awareness. In addition, **Serbia** has started developing awareness raising activities, including the creation of a visitor centre in Mokrin. From the non-breeding range states, **Croatia** and **Ukraine** have also carried out awareness raising actions.

27. **Economic measures [AP 9.0]:** The Action Plan recommends developing economic activities which are not harmful to the Great Bustard to compensate land users for any damage they may experience as a result of conservation activities. Agri-environmental measures are the main mechanism to compensate farmers in the EU Member States. The 2004 EU enlargement has significantly expanded the number of range states where these measures are applicable. No economic incentives were reported from other range states. **Ukraine** has also reported some local economic measures affecting a small part of the population.

IV. Evaluation

28. Based on the synthesis of the national reports and other available information the following achievements can be recognized:

- Most of the achievements recognised in the 1st overview report in 2004 were sustained.
- Besides transboundary collaboration between Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, similar collaboration has started between Hungary, Serbia and Romania.

29. During this reporting period, also welcome development can be recognised in relation to reducing the mortality caused by powerlines in the EU Member States thanks to several EU funded projects and in relation to applying compensatory measures for habitat loss as a result of the Natura 2000 regulations.

30. On the other hand, the following issues are of high concern:

- Predation seems to be one of the major risks presenting a difficult challenge in areas where threats associated with agriculture are reduced;
- Observational and modeling data suggest that the effectiveness of habitat conservation measures is scale- and location dependent. This has some implications on the way the agri-environmental schemes are designed and managed (including targeting, payment levels and budget). The new Natura 2000 compensatory payments for obligatory restrictions may present new, alternative opportunities, although politically might be less attractive than the voluntary schemes;
- The facultative migratory behaviour of the Central European population continues to pose a challenge in terms of preparedness in potential wintering countries; and
- The predicted range shift due to climate change requires developing new strategies for the Middle European population and underlines the importance of setting up an advisory panel for reintroductions and captive breeding.

Table 1. Status of Great Bustard in Europe

Country	Number of Birds			Trend / Status	Source
	1994	2004	2008		
Albania	-	?	?	Irregular winter visitor	
Austria	50 - 60	107 - 140	167 - 183	Recovering breeding population	http://www.grosstrappe.at/indexe.html
Bulgaria	10 - 15	0 - 10	0 - 10	Nearly extirpated with recent sightings	
Croatia	-			Irregular winter visitor	
Czech Republic	10 - 20	1 - 6	-	Possibly extinct, 13 observations between 2005 and 2008	
Germany	130	85	104	Recovering breeding population	National Report 2008
Greece	-				
Hungary	1,100 - 1,300	1,300	1397	Recovering breeding population	http://www.tuzok.hu/index.php?p=news&nyelv=hun&id=37
FYR of Macedonia	-	?	?		National Report 2008
Moldova	2 - 3	0	0	Possibly extinct, the last observation in 2001	Verbal report from the representative of Moldova at the 1st Meeting of the Signatories
Portugal	1	1,161	1,355	Declining	Pinto and Rocha 2006 (Figure for 2004 revised based on the reference)
Romania	10 - 15	?	?	Possibly breeding near to extant Hungarian and Serbian populations	
Russia	8,000 - 10,000	8,000 - 10,000	8,000 - 10,000		
Serbia and Montenegro	8 - 10	30 - 36	35 - 38	Stable breeding population	National Report 2004
Slovakia	25 - 30	10	0 - 3	Declining breeding population, increasing wintering population from Austria and Hungary	National Report 2008
Spain	13500 - 14000	23,300	22,768 - 24,493	Stable or slightly increasing breeding population	Alonso et al. 2006
Turkey	800 - 3,000	700 - 1,200	764 - 1,250	Decreasing	Özbagdatli & Tavares 2006
U.K.	0	0	10 - 20	Ongoing reintroduction	Goriup pers com 2007
Ukraine	300 - 400	640 - 850	640 - 850		National report 2004
Total	24,945 - 29,983	35,600 - 38,500	35,200 - 39,700		