

**Memorandum of Understanding
on the Conservation and Management of the Middle-European Population
of the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*)**

NATIONAL REPORT

Czech Republic

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1. Habitat protection

1.1. Designation of protected areas

In the past as well as at present, the Great Bustard has occurred mostly in the Znojmo region, southern Moravia. Three quite large areas (1,800, 700 and 950 ha) were used as display grounds and for breeding, another one (1,800 ha) for wintering. However, only an area of 75 ha (a former military airfield) is designated as a temporarily protected area, for a period of 10 years (since 2001). This site, traditionally grassed, was ploughed in 1996 and re-grassed in 2003. It is a part of the former display ground, Great Bustards used to breed in the surroundings. This temporarily protected area has been maintained as a grassland with controlled mowing practices (timing etc.).

It was intended to establish a different form of protection there, but this plan has turned out not to be feasible outside of the current protected area.

1.2. Measures taken to ensure the maintenance of Great Bustard habitats outside of protected areas

Due to intensive farming, it has always been extremely difficult to protect any land in this part of the country. Any effective measures would have been very expensive. The availability of suitable habitats for Great Bustard in the region is dependent on current land use, which is in turn affected mainly by the situation on the market of farm products. And it was unfavourable for many years because maize, sunflower and potatoes were the most profitable crops.

1.3. Measures taken to avoid fragmentation of Great Bustard habitats

The display grounds and breeding and wintering sites have been save from development projects (new power lines, power stations, windbreaks, construction of buildings,

afforestation, highways etc.) potentially causing fragmentation of the Great Bustard habitat for decades. Some of them, for example power stations or highways, are subject to environmental impact assessment.

2. Prevention of hunting, disturbance and threats

2.1. Hunting

According to current hunting legislation in the Czech Republic, the Great Bustard is not included among game species. In the old hunting act adopted in 1962, the Great Bustard was listed as a game species but with a year-round close season. Since 1965 it has been listed as a protected species according to the nature conservation act as well. Despite that, 11 individuals were shot illegally in the period 1970-1976 (no other case reported since that).

2.2 Prevention of disturbance

Since 1990 the occurrence of the Great Bustard in the Czech Republic has been very rare. Disturbance of these birds has not been a significant problem. In the case of the species' presence, local people are informed about necessary measures to avoid disturbance of these birds. The frequently used field road going through the wintering area can be closed in case Great Bustards are recorded.

2.3.1 Prevention of predation

Predation has never been an important cause of losses in the Great Bustard population in the Czech Republic. E.g. in 1970-1990, only one egg out of a total of 66 destroyed eggs was predated.

2.3.2 Adoption of measures for power lines

Power lines at the traditional display grounds and breeding and wintering sites have not been regarded to have an essential impact on the Great Bustard mortality. During the period 1970-1990, two cases of deaths on power lines were recorded.

2.3.3 Compensatory measures

Great Bustard habitats were probably most deteriorated around the year 1998. A core area of the traditional display and breeding site, the former military airfield, was ploughed by a farmer and there was no possibility to make him re-grass the area. The grassland was restored as late as in 2003, using state funds. But the surrounding landscape remained unchanged - intensively used large fields.

Changes in the structure of farming production are the most important factor affecting Great Bustard habitats, rather than the intensification.

3. Possession and trade

The Great Bustard is included among critically endangered species listed by the Czech legislation. It is prohibited to hunt, kill, disturb, hurt the birds, take their eggs or chicks, and to keep them in captivity.

4. Recovery measures

4.1 Captive breeding in emergency situations

Captive breeding has never played an important role in Great Bustard conservation in the Czech Republic. In the past, eggs from certain endangered clutches were incubated and chicks reared artificially but releasing of these birds was difficult and it is not supposed to be successful.

4.2. Reintroduction

In the Czech Republic, habitat loss is considered to be the main cause of Great Bustard disappearance. Reintroduction has never been included in conservation plans. Birds from the nearby Austrian population have been visiting the Czech site from time to time, so it is supposed they might resettle there if they find a suitable habitat.

4.3. Monitoring of the success of release programmes

In 1982-1988, a total of 7 artificially reared chicks (incubated from endangered clutches) were released but it was rather a private than scientific-based activity with the aim to save birds with no other chance to survive in the wild. It was found out that birds which grew up in contact with humans were not able to join the flocks of wild living adults. There are no proofs of successful surviving of those birds in the wild.

5. Cross-border conservation measure

The experts from the Czech Republic are in contact with colleagues from Austria and especially Slovakia. Co-operation includes visits of suitable habitats in these countries, exchange of data on appearance of Great Bustards and discussion on conservation measures.

6. Monitoring and research

6.1.1 Monitoring of population size and population trends

Traditionally occupied areas have been monitored regularly, since 2002 more intensively, other suitable sites occasionally. Most of the checks are done during spring and winter.

According to some ornithological literature, the Great Bustard is considered extinct in the Czech Republic.

The size of Great Bustard population has never been very large, the highest number of nests found was 8 (in 1976). The largest winter flock ever recorded was 44 individuals (1982), usually there were around 35 birds. Since the 1980s the population has been declining, the last breeding was recorded in 1996. Since that only individual birds or small groups have been observed, especially at the end of winter and in spring.

6.1.2. Monitoring of the effects of habitat management

There are only a few measures that have been taken to improve the habitat of the Great Bustard. The impact of these measures has been monitored, but no important results were recorded due to the short time effort.

6.2.1 Comparative ecological studies

No such studies have been carried out.

6.2.2 Promotion of studies on mortality factors

In the past, farming activities and hunting were the most important mortality factors. Since 1996, Great Bustards have been appearing in the Czech Republic only for short time periods, so no mortality cases have been known.

6.2.3 Investigation of factors limiting breeding success

In the past, harvesting had a very negative impact on breeding success of the Great Bustard population in the Znojmo region. Many eggs were destroyed, sometimes the chicks or even females were killed. E.g. during the period 1970-1990, 54 eggs were destroyed and 11 chicks and 3 females were killed during harvesting. Nowadays Great Bustards cannot find suitable crops for breeding in the area. In 1970-1991, out of a total of 73 nests found, 56 (i.e. 75 %) were situated in alfa-alfa, 5 in maize, 4 in grassland, 3 in sugar beat, 2 in barley, 2 in stubble field and 1 in pea. At present, maize, sunflower, cereals and potatoes are the most frequent crops.

6.2.4 Studies on migration

The display, breeding and wintering sites were known very well in the past. Although no birds were ringed (except for the released artificially bred chicks – see 4.3) or marked, the migration of birds between Czech and Austrian sites is highly probable, which is supported by several observations from the last years. Most probably, all the birds which have been observed in the Czech Republic recently, come from Austria - the nearest sites where Great Bustards breed regularly are situated only about 20 km from the traditional Czech breeding sites.

7. Training of staff working in conservation bodies

People interested in Great Bustard conservation study available literature, visit sites in the Czech Republic and other central European countries, meet experts from different regions, summarise information and try to raise some funds for conservation activities. In the past, great effort was taken to save endangered clutches or incubate endangered eggs artificially, but everything (including many other activities such as monitoring, census, habitat checks etc.) was done by one man with only a very little support from the state. The situation has slightly changed recently, but many of the above mentioned activities are still carried out privately or with a support from NGOs.

8. Increasing awareness of the need to protect Great Bustards and their habitat

The Czech Republic has not ratified the Memorandum of Understanding yet. Nevertheless, the awareness of the need to protect Great Bustards and their habitat is high among local people, farmers, hunters and regional authorities. Many of them are able to contribute to the effort to assist the species in re-occupying of the formerly used areas. However, the essential measures which are to be taken, i.e. changes of the current way of land use, are very expensive with uncertain results.

9. Economic measures

None have been taken so far.

10. Threats

The Great Bustard belonged to species irregularly breeding in the Czech Republic ten years ago. Nowadays it is almost extinct, from 1 to 6 birds are recorded every year recently. However, they do not find suitable habitats in the region. Alfa-alfa, which was used for breeding in the past, is not produced anymore, fallow land or grassland is lacking, and there is a lot of disturbances in the area - besides farmers or hunters there are also people with dogs, horse riders, bikers, joggers etc.

Note:

Data from the period 1970-1991 (nest locations, nest losses and mortality) were used after:
Fiala L. & Fialová H., 1995: *Dropi na Znojemsku* (Great Bustards in the Znojmo region).
OkÚ Znojmo & ČSOP Znojmo. 82 pp. (*in Czech*).