

LIFE PROJECT FOR CONSERVATION OF LITTLE BUSTARD IN ALENTEJO (PORTUGAL)

The Little Bustard

Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) is a medium size bird, strongly associated with steppe habitats. It lives in dry grasslands with scarce tree cover. These birds have a cryptic plumage, which allows them to go unnoticed amongst the grass. They are ground-nesters, and chicks are able to follow their parents very soon after hatching. They are gregarious most of the year, occurring in flocks of ten to several hundred birds. During the breeding season, males exhibit a striking black and white neck and head plumage, which they use in courtship displays to attract females and drive out rival males.

Little Bustard populations have been declining since the 19th century, becoming extinct in many countries of Central and South Europe. Its global distribution is now divided into two distinct areas. In the East, it seems to be abundant in Russia and Kazakhstan. In the West, inside the European Union, the larger populations are found in Spain and Portugal, while relic populations remain in France and Italy. In Portugal the Little Bustard is largely distributed to the south of the river Tagus, particularly in Alentejo Region, where the largest known populations occur. The species is closely connected with the traditional Alentejo farming system, where they inhabit mosaics of long-rotation fallow, extensive dry cereal and pasture. If the present trend to the abandonment, forestation and intensification of farmland is not reversed, the Little Bustard will be extinct in short- to medium-term.

The project

The project is a partnership between SPEA - Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (BirdLife partner in Portugal), ICN - Institute for the Conservation of Nature (the government nature conservation agency), and two local farmers unions (AACM - Association of Farmers from the Municipality of Mourão and AJAM - Association of Young Farmers of Moura). It aims to conserve the Little Bustard in Alentejo through the implementation of a Species Action Plan. This Plan will clearly identify the core populations to preserve, and the land-use, planning and management activities to implement, establishing a model of sustainable agriculture to support these goals. The project is co-financed by the European Commission through the Life - Nature Programme and will run for 4 years. The following main activities are planned:

- 1 - An experimental land management plan, developed together with local farmers in the Mourão/Moura/Barrancos Special Protection Area, which will benefit Little and Great bustards while maintaining farmers' income;
- 2 - An inventory of breeding and wintering Little Bustard populations throughout Alentejo;
- 3 - A public awareness campaign, to inform decision-makers, farmers and the general public about the need to conserve the populations of Little Bustard and other species depending on the dry grassland and extensive farming of Alentejo;
- 4 - An Action Plan for the Little Bustard in Alentejo, in cooperation with farmers, local and central administration.

By the end of the project, we should know the precise distribution of Little Bustard populations in Alentejo, their level of vulnerability and which management measures to adopt. We shall also work in close cooperation with local and central decision-makers, in order to incorporate the necessary measures to preserve the Little Bustard and its farmland habitat into land management and planning.

The contacts

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