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ON THE GROUND

Protecting the Great Bustard bird

The Great Bustard is the largest bird capable of flight. It is estimated to number between 44,000 and 57,000 individuals, of which 57-70 per cent are in Spain and 15-25 per cent along the lower Volga River.

The species is included in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List as its population is declining.

For this reason, a workshop on the cross-border protection of the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*) in Central Europe took place in Illmitz, Austria from 8 to 10 March 2017.

Forty-two experts from eight European countries attended the meeting and presented results for strategies and projects on the conservation of the Great Bustard in Europe.

Thanks to dedicated conservation, management and re-introduction efforts supported by the EU LIFE Regulation, local populations in Central Europe have been re-established, participants heard.

However, the long-term survival of these populations depends on strict protection and specific management measures, ranging from environmentally-friendly agriculture and power lines to the designation of fallow lands.

Collision with power lines, wind turbines, transport infrastructure and habitat loss and fragmentation pose the main threats to the bird, with low habitat quality leading to insufficient food resources. Threats vary locally - it was established at the meeting - with an influence of predation by foxes, badgers, wild boars, raccoon dogs and corvids in Hungary and Germany, and by White-tailed Eagles - particularly on juveniles in Germany.

Current and future projects under the EU LIFE Regulation aim to study migration, population and behavioral traits. Meanwhile, more countries are expected to sign the Great Bustard agreement in 2018 to improve cross-border conservation of the species.

The EU LIFE Project on the conservation of the Great Bustard in Austria organised the meeting within the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of the Middle-European Population of the Great Bustard under the Convention on Migratory Species. The Convention's next meeting to take place in 2018 was also discussed.

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