

Bird poo study to help Great Bustards thrive

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The LIFE+ Great Bustard Reintroduction Project aims to create a sustainable colony of the birds on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire

Move over Gillan McKeith – scientists at the University of Bath are studying the droppings of Great Bustards to help understand their diet and nutrition with the aim of boosting their survival in a conservation project to reintroduce the birds to the UK.

Great Bustards, the world's largest flying [birds](#) and the county mascot for Wiltshire, became extinct in the UK in 1832. The LIFE+ Great Bustard Reintroduction Project is a partnership between the Great Bustard Group, RSPB, Natural England and the University of Bath, which has been working together to establish a self-sustaining population of Great Bustards in southern England.

The reintroduction project has been regularly rearing chicks imported from Saratov, Russia and releasing them once they are fully fledged at a secret location on Salisbury Plain. For the first time this year, they have also successfully hatched chicks from eggs brought over from Russia.

As part of the [conservation project](#), Scott Gooch and Dr Kate Ashbrook from the University of Bath LIFE+ project monitoring team have been collecting droppings of the released birds to monitor what they prefer eating and how their [diet](#)

changes through the year.

Scott Gooch explained: "Relatively little is known about the diets of Great Bustards living in the UK. Watching bustards in the wild can give you information on where they prefer to feed and how much of their time they devote to feeding, but by examining their droppings under a microscope we can discover the quantities of different insects and plants in their diet and how this changes across the year."



The project is monitoring the birds' diets to understand how it changes throughout the year

Understanding what the birds eat in the wild will help the development of targeted habitat management for Great Bustards in the UK.

Dr Ashbrook explained: "The success of this reintroduction project depends on whether there is enough food to support great bustards through the autumn and winter.

"We believe there is, but it is important to monitor their diet so we can ensure there is sufficient suitable habitat for them as the population grows, and to establish more through agri-environment management if needs be."

Provided by University of Bath

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