

REPORTING FORMAT FOR THE GREAT BUSTARD MOU AND ACTION PLAN

This reporting format is designed to monitor the implementation of the Action Plan associated with the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of the Middle-European Population of the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*). Reporting on the Action Plan's implementation will support exchange of information throughout the range and assist the identification of necessary future actions by the Signatory States. The questions presented here go beyond the scope of information already requested from CMS Contracting Parties for national reports to the CMS Conference of the Parties.

GENERAL INFORMATION

<p>Agency or institution responsible for the preparation of this report</p> <p>State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic</p>
<p>List any other agencies, institutions, or NGOs that have provided input</p> <p>Slovak Ornithological Society/BirdLife Slovakia Raptor Protection of Slovakia</p>
<p>Reports submitted to date:2023</p> <p>First: 1/12/2001 – 31/12/2004 Second: 01/01/2005 – 30/06/2008 Third: 01/07/2008 – 31/12/2012 Four: 01/01/2013 – 31/10/2017</p>
<p>Period covered by this report</p> <p>1/11/2017 – 20/08/2023</p>
<p>Memorandum in effect in country since:</p> <p>[01/012/2001 (following signature on 28/11/2001)]</p>

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PART I. GENERAL

This questionnaire follows the structure and numbering of the Action Plan annexed to the Memorandum of Understanding to make it easier to read the relevant action points before the form is filled in. In some cases, however, sub-actions were not listed separately for the sake of simplicity and to avoid duplications. They should however be taken into consideration when answering the questions.

0. National work programme

Is there a national work programme or action plan already in place in your country for the Great Bustard pursuant to Paragraph 4(g) of the Memorandum of Understanding?

Yes No

1. Habitat protection

1.1 Designation of protected areas.

To what extent are the display, breeding, stop-over and wintering sites covered by protected areas?

Designation of protected areas under national law	Classification of Special Protection Areas according to the requirements of Art.4.1 of the EC Birds Directive
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fully (>75%) <input type="checkbox"/> High (50-75%) <input type="checkbox"/> Medium (10-49%) <input type="checkbox"/> Low (<10%) <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable ¹	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fully (>75%) <input type="checkbox"/> High (50-75%) <input type="checkbox"/> Medium (10-49%) <input type="checkbox"/> Low (<10%) <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable ¹

What measures were taken to ensure the adequate protection of the species and its habitat at these sites?

Agri-environmental scheme (AES) for the protection of *Otis tarda* adopted as a part of the Rural Development Programme for Slovakia for the period 2014-2022 – RDP 2014 – 2022 (after the 11th modification approved by the European Commission on 27.04.2023) and implemented in one protected area; Memorandum of understanding in areas aimed at reducing disturbance of *Otis tarda* from agricultural activities and from predators concluded with hunters and farmers using land in concerned protected areas. It was secured by increased control activity by the nature guard. Regular monitoring of occurrence and breeding in protected areas. Protection of bustards nests against agricultural activities.

Where are the remaining gaps?

Are currently unoccupied, but potential breeding habitats identified in your country?

Yes No Not applicable²

If yes, please explain how these areas are protected or managed to enable the re-establishment of Great Bustard.

The Slovak RDP 2014–2022 was approved by the European Commission on 04. 02. 2015 and it

¹ The species occurs only irregularly, no regular stop-over or wintering sites identified.

² Countries *outside* of the historic (beginning of 20th Century) breeding range of the species.

includes several measures for biodiversity protection. The AES for Great Bustard with title "The Great Bustard Protection" with the scope for support for 3 000 ha of arable land has number 8.5.8.3.8. The approved document is presented at the websites of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic (<http://www.land.gov.sk>) and the Agricultural Paying Agency (<http://www.apa.sk/en/>). The AES is applicable in Sysľovské polia and Lehnice SPAs, both areas designated for the protection of Great Bustard in Slovakia. Detailed conditions for application for participation in AES were regulated through "Regulation by the Slovak Government No. 75/2015 Coll. laying down the rules for providing the financial support relating to the measures of the Rural Development Program". Agricultural companies, Agripent s.r.o. Lehnice and Agrolens s.r.o. Āenkovce, both managing land at Lehnice SPA applied for participation in official agri-environmental scheme in 2016 (and up to 2020) with 1360.04 ha, and 427.40 ha respectively. Thus as of 31. 12. 2016, total of 1787.44 ha of land were managed under AES, which represented 43.4 % of the area of both project sites. More information in PART II of this report.

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

Please describe what measures have been taken to maintain land-use practices beneficial for Great Bustard outside of protected areas (e.g., set-aside and extensification schemes, cultivation of alfalfa and oilseed rape for winter, maintenance of rotational grazing, etc.).

No *Otis tarda* specific conservation measures have been taken to maintain land use practices beneficial for the species outside protected areas.

To what extent do these measures, combined with site protection, cover the national population?

- Fully (>75%)
- Most (50-75%)
- Some (10-49%)
- Little (<10%)
- Not at all
- Not applicable¹

Are recently (over the last 20 years) abandoned Great Bustard breeding habitats mapped in your country?

- Yes No Not applicable¹

What habitat management measures have been taken to encourage the return of Great Bustard?

If there were any measures taken, please provide information on their impact.

At Sysľovské polia SPA two plots in total area 6 ha were purchased by the State Nature Conservancy and they are managed from year 2021 as meadows, with regular mowing in end of June/early July, with regard to breeding of birds. Another plot owned by the National Motorway Company (NDS) with area 36 ha, that was gained as compensation for other construction work; is currently managed as fallow and will be mowed in October, also with regard to breeding and other requirements of birds. All of the mentioned plots are regularly utilised by Great Bustards,

either for breeding (fallow), or in non-breeding time (meadow). Important winter habitat for Great Bustard is created by rape seed fields, that form approx. 300-700 ha areas, varying in size and position according to season, planted by agricultural co-operative. These areas are regularly utilised by 100-400 Great Bustards in winter season (considerable part of the West-Pannonian population). Also wheat fields, that form a majority of productive fields at Sysľovské polia SPA form a potential breeding habitat for Great Bustards, even if in that kind of breeding habitat active nest protection is enforced, in case that some nests are found in wheat, due to monitoring effort.

1.3 Measures taken to avoid fragmentation of Great Bustard habitats.

Are new projects potentially causing fragmentation of the species' habitat (such as construction of highways and railways, irrigation, planting of shelterbelts, afforestation, power lines, etc.) subject to environmental impact assessment in your country? Yes No Not applicable¹

Is there any aspect of the existing legislation on impact assessment that limits its effective application to prevent fragmentation of Great Bustard habitats? Yes No Not applicable¹

If yes, please provide details.

Have there been any such projects implemented in any Great Bustard habitat in your country since signing this Memorandum of Understanding? Yes No Not applicable¹

Please, give details and describe the outcome of impact monitoring if available.

2. Prevention of hunting, disturbance and other threats

2.1 Hunting.

Is Great Bustard afforded strict legal protection in your country? Yes No

Please, give details of any hunting restrictions imposed for the benefit of Great Bustard including those on timing of hunting and game management activities.

In Slovakia, according to Act No. 543/2002 Coll on Nature and Landscape Protection as amended (hereafter only „Act 543/2002 Coll“) and Order of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic No. 170/2021 Coll which implements the Act No. 543/2002 Coll (hereafter only “Order No. 170/2021 Coll”), which implement EU Habitats and Birds Directives, the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*, Linnaeus, 1758) is protected, according to § 35 like a protected animal. Pursuant to that it is prohibited to disturb birds in general, i.e. to catch, to hurt, to kill them, to disturb them in their natural sites (in particular during reproduction season or migration) including destroying their eggs, to deteriorate their habitat, etc.

According to Act No. 274/2009 Coll on Hunting as amended the species is included as all-year round protected game species. More restrictions by Order of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic to establish the SPAs - No. 377/2005 Coll (Lehnice SPA) and No. 234/2006 Coll (Sysľovské polia SPA): Hunting restrictions in Lehnice SPA: Prohibited hunting from 16. 1. to 15. 5. except for predators (fox, martens, raccoon dog, European polecat). Prohibited falconry. Hunting restrictions in Sysľovské polia SPA: Prohibited falconry within the whole area of the SPA, prohibited hunting from 1. 1. to 30. 6. except for predators within the specified part of the SPA, prohibited hunting on all goose and duck species within the specified part of the SPA.

Please, indicate to what extent these measures ensure the protection of the national Great Bustard population? The national population is covered by restrictions on hunting to prevent hunting-related disturbance:

- Fully (>75%)
- Most (50-75%)
- Some (10-49%)
- Little (<10%)
- Not at all
- Not applicable¹

2.2 Prevention of disturbance.

What measures have been taken to prevent disturbance of Great Bustard in your country, including both breeding birds and single individuals or small flocks on migration?

See above

Please, indicate to what extent these measures have ensured the protection of the national population.

- Two SPAs designated for the protection of Great Bustard; Sysľovské polia SPA and Lehnice SPA. Slovak Government adopted the Management plan developed for Sysľovské polia SPA for period 2017 – 2049 with protection measures for *Otis tarda* population and its habitat.

- Regulations through which respective SPAs have been designated establish restrictions to prevent disturbance of the species, for instance access of public/ visitors to SPA is prohibited, except on short nature trail on the edge of SPA Sysľovské polia; a new part of the area has been made accessible for the public in 2023 through a nature trail + bike-route at a limited part of the SPA with a temporary access from 1st July – 30th September in Sysľovské fields SPA

- Memorandum of Understanding concluded with local hunting societies – MoUs include measures to be implemented by hunters that would decrease disturbance of the species from their activities.

The national population is covered by restrictions on other activities causing disturbance:

- Fully (>75%)
- Most (50-75%)
- Some (10-49%)
- Little (<10%)
- Not at all
- Not applicable¹

2.3.1 Prevention of predation.

What is the significance of predation to Great Bustard in your country?

Medium significance

What are the main predator species?

Significant predator species are fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), stone marten (*Martes foina*), some Corvidae species and stray dogs.

What measures have been taken to control predators in areas where Great Bustard occurs regularly?

Increased hunting of predator species, or other ways of elimination of predators agreed with local hunters.

How effective were these measures?

- Effective (predation reduced by more than 50%)
- Partially effective (predation reduced by 10–49%)

- Less effective (predation reduced by less than 10%)
- Not applicable¹

2.3.2 Adoption of measures for power lines.

What is the significance of collision with power lines in your country?

Highly significant.

What proactive and corrective measures have been taken to reduce the mortality caused by existing power lines in your country?

Project LIFE13 NAT/SK/001272 “Energy in the Landscape - power lines and conservation of priority bird species in the Natura 2000 sites” has been implemented since 2014. It is the first project with a systematic approach to solving the problem of bird collisions with power lines through the design of suitable methods for the identification and elimination of risks. The project area includes Lehnice SPA.

What is the size of the populations affected by these corrective measures?

How effective were these measures?

- Effective (collision with power lines reduced by more than 50%)
- Partially effective (collision with power lines reduced by 10–49%)
- Ineffective (collision with power lines reduced by less than 10%)
- Not applicable¹

But it is important to stress, that there are no power lines leading through the Sysľovské polia SPA, so that kind of threat is not applicable in that SPA.

2.3.3 Compensatory measures.

What is the size (in hectares) of Great Bustard habitat lost or degraded for any reasons since the

Memorandum of Understanding entered into effect (1 June 2001)?

Ca 20 000 ha in the whole Slovakia - lost due to fragmentation in SPA Ostrovné lúky which was important site for Great Bustard before Slovakia accession to the EU in 2004; there are included also former Great Bustard habitats in the vicinity of SPA Lehnice near village Orechová Poton, where racing ring for the sport cars was constructed and which caused permanent loss of former potential habitats for Great Bustards. Besides that grasslands in SPA Sysľovské polia – 36 ha, utilised as fallow land, as breeding habitat.

What is the size of the populations affected?

Totally 100 % of the national breeding population is affected by the severe changes since 2001. Converting land from grasslands into arable land led to the disappearance of Great Bustard as breeding species from Slovakia for several years. Successful negotiations with land owners, land purchase, realization of the LIFE project and implementation of agri-environmental schemes led to the return of Great Bustard as a breeding species in Sysľovské polia in 2010. Probable breeding of 3 females was recorded in 2016 and 1 female in 2017, approved breeding of 4 females in 2018, 2 nests located in 2022 and further 2-3 females has probably bred, 3 females bred in 2023. These severe changes affected 3 % of the European population of *Otis tarda* during winter, although 75 % of the population from Austria, West Hungary and Slovakia has regular wintering sites in SPA Sysľovské polia. However degradation of habitats has had more negative impacts on breeding population, than on wintering, despite the probable breeding of the species in 2016 8/18 and 2017, as well as proved breedings in years 2018-2023.

Were these habitat losses compensated? Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

If yes, please explain how.

In the SPAs Sysľovské polia and Lehnice agri-environmental measures were applied, which changed species composition of unsuitable crops to the crops more suitable to the breeding of Great Bustard. Although no area of arable land was converted back to grassland.

Were these measures effective? Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

Please, give details on the effectiveness or explain why they were not effective if that is the case.

In 2010 Great Bustard was once again breeding in Slovakia. In SPA Sysľovské polia, probable breeding of 3 females was recorded in 2016 and 1 female in 2017, 4 nests found in 2018 (in wheat), 2 nests located and further 2-3 cases of probable breeding found in 2022, 3 nests found in 2023 (all nests were located at a fallow land gained through compensation measures). Also 6 ha meadow area is regularly utilised by small flocks, in 2021-23, total number of breeding females in year 2023 was estimated to 10, most of them has bred in a fallow..

3. Possession and trade

Is collection of Great Bustard eggs or chicks, the possession of and trade in the birds and their eggs prohibited in your country? Yes No

How are these restrictions enforced? What are the remaining shortcomings, if any?

These restrictions are enforced by the Act No. 543/2002 Coll on Nature and Landscape Protection and there was never tradition of eggs collection, or Great Bustard chick collection in Slovakia.

Please indicate if any exemption is granted or not all of these activities are prohibited.

There was no exemption granted.

4. Recovery measures

4.1 Captive breeding* in emergency situations.

Is captive breeding playing any role in Great Bustard conservation in your country?

Yes No

Please, describe the measures, staff and facilities involved and how these operations comply with the IUCN criteria on reintroductions.

NA

4.2 Reintroduction.

Have there been any measures taken to reintroduce the species in your country? Yes No

If yes, please describe the progress. If there was any feasibility study carried out, please summarize its conclusions.

4.3 Monitoring of the success of release programmes.

* In effect, "captive breeding" should be read as "captive rearing" according to current practices.

Are captive reared birds released in your country?

Yes No

If yes, please summarize the experience with release programmes in your country. What is the survival rate of released birds? What is the breeding performance of released birds?

What is the overall assessment of release programmes based on the survival of released birds one year after release?

- Effective (the survival is about the same as of the wild ones)
 Partially effective (the survival rate is lower than 75% of the wild birds)
 Ineffective (the survival is less than 25% of wild birds)
 Not applicable³

5. Cross-border conservation measure

Has your country undertaken any cross-border conservation measures with neighbouring countries?

Yes No Not applicable⁴

Please, give details of your country's collaboration with neighbouring countries on national surveys, research, monitoring and conservation activities for Great Bustard. Especially, list any measures taken to harmonise legal instruments protecting Great Bustard and its habitats, as well as funding you have provided to Great Bustard for particular conservation actions in other Range States.

Regular – monthly counting of Western-Pannonian population of Great Bustard implemented jointly with Hungarian and Austrian experts. Along the Slovak – Hungarian – Austrian borders SPAs for the species were designated, however no special effort was made in terms of harmonizing applicable legal instruments. Management measures consulted at the expert level with Hungarian and Austrian experts. Slovakia has not provided funding for conservation actions in other Range States.

6. Monitoring and research

6.1.1 Monitoring of population size and population trends.

Are the breeding, migratory or wintering Great Bustard populations monitored in your country?

Yes No

What proportion of the national population is monitored?

- x All (>75%)
 Most (50-75%)
 Some (10-49%)
 Little (<10%)
 None
 Not applicable¹

³ No release is taking place in the country.

⁴ For countries which do not have any transboundary population.

What is the size and trend in the national population?⁵

Breeding/resident population

Non-breeding population (on passage, wintering) 160 – 400 ex

No. of adult males: 0-10

No. of adult males: 100 - 250

No. of females: 1-10

No. of females: 50 - 150

No. immature males: 0-5

No. immature males: 30 - 85

Trend: Declined by % over the last 10 yearsx
 Stable
 Increased by 50 % over the last 10 years

Trend: Declined by % over the last 10 years
 Stable
 Increased by 45 % over the last 10 years

During reporting period breeding occurred only inside Sysľovské polia SPA, in Lehnice SPA in period 2018-2023 breeding was not recorded.

For countries where the species occurs only occasionally, please give the details of known observations within the reporting period:

6.1.2 Monitoring of the effects of habitat management.

Is the effect of habitat conservation measures monitored in your country?

Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

Please, provide a list of on-going and completed studies with references if results are already published.

1. Chavko J. & Maderič B. (2008): Výskyt dropa fúzatého (*Otis tarda*) na Slovensku v rokoch 2008-2009. Tichodroma 18: 7-12.
2. Maderič B. & Chavko J. (2010): Dodatok k súčasnému výskytu a ochrane dropa fúzatého (*Otis tarda*) na Slovensku. Tichodroma 20: 109-113.
3. Gúgh, J., Trnka, A., Karaska, D., Ridzoň, J., 2015: Zásady ochrany európsky významných druhov vtákov a ich biotopov. Štátna ochrana prírody SR. Banská Bystrica, 332 pp.

What can be learned from these studies?

Population status of the Great Bustard up to 2010 in Slovakia and conservation measures which recommended to be done in core areas with the species occurrence.

What are the remaining gaps and what measures will your country do to address these gaps?

A comprehensive study to evaluate changes in habitats during last 40 years in Slovakia and to evaluate reasons for which the breeding population of Great Bustard almost disappeared is missing. There are some studies only from two SPAs, which are now designated for Great Bustard protection, but in the past the occurrence of this species was much wider in the country.

⁵ Only for countries where the species occurs regularly.

6.2.1 Comparative ecological studies.

Have there been any comparative studies carried out on the population dynamics, habitat requirements, effects of habitat changes and causes of decline in your country in collaboration with other Range States?

Yes No Not applicable¹

Please, provide a list of on-going and completed studies with references if results are already published

What can be learned from these studies?

What are the remaining gaps where the Memorandum of Understanding could assist?

6.2.2 Studies on mortality factors.

Are the causes of Great Bustard mortality understood in your country?

Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

Please, provide a list of on-going and completed studies with references if results are already published.

Majority of known mortality factors are known from data, which were not published in Slovak scientific magazines yet.

Factors influencing mortality were published in a book of The Birds distribution in Slovakia in 2002:

Chavko J. & Siryová S. (2002): Drop veľký/Drop fúzatý (*Otis tarda*). – Pp.: 248-250. In: Danko Š., Darolová A. & Krištín A. (2002): Rozšírenie vtákov na Slovensku. VEDA, Bratislava. (in Slovak).
Gúgh, J., Trnka, A., Karaska, D., Ridzoň, J., 2015: Zásady ochrany európsky významných druhov vtákov a ich biotopov. Štátna ochrana prírody SR. Banská Bystrica, 332 str.

What can be learned from these studies?

The most important factors are intensive agriculture and collisions with electricity lines, also cases of nest predation and direct mortality by agricultural machinery were found.

What are the remaining gaps and what measures will your country do to address these gaps?

6.2.3 Investigation of factors limiting breeding success.

Are the factors limiting breeding success in core populations understood in your country?

Yes Partially No Not applicable⁶

Please, provide a list of on-going and completed studies with references if results are already published

What can be learned from these studies?

From unpublished observations arose knowledge on nest-predation occurring by foxes.

What are the remaining gaps and what measures are you going to take to address these

⁶ Only for breeding countries.

gaps?

6.2.4 Studies on migration.

Were there any studies on migration routes and wintering places carried out in your country?

Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

Where are the key sites and what is the size of the population they support?

Numbers of wintering Great Bustards increased from maximum 86 – 90 of wintering individuals in SPA Sysľovské polia in 1998 up to regularly 160 – 300 specimens wintering in 2016 and 100 – 400 specimens in 2017-2023. These wintering places are situated on the border with Hungary and Austria and birds come from adjacent Austrian SPAs and Hungarian SPAs. Important is, that almost complete breeding population of the Great Bustard in Austria and north-western Hungary is wintering in Slovakia and therefore this SPA Sysľovské polia is a key site for conservation of this species.

Do you have any knowledge about the origin of these birds supported by ringing or other marking methods?

There is some evidence of radio-tagged specimens from Austria found wintering in Slovakia.

What are the remaining gaps and what measures will your country do to address these gaps?

7. Training of staff working in conservation bodies

Is there any mechanism in place in your country to share information on biological characteristics and living requirements of Great Bustard, legal matters, census techniques and management practices to personnel working regularly with the species? Yes No Not applicable¹

If yes, please describe it.

Have personnel dealing with Great Bustard participated in any exchange programme in other Range States?

Yes No Not applicable¹

If yes, please give details on number of staff involved, country visited and how the lessons were applied in your country.

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

What measures have been taken to increase the awareness about the protection needs of the species and its habitat in your country since signing the Memorandum of Understanding?

Public awareness material produced, press released. Excursions and particularly lectures organised for different stakeholders.

Cooperation instruments (MoUs) concluded with key stakeholders – farmers and hunters.

Do farmers, shepherds, political decision makers and local and regional authorities support Great Bustard conservation?

Yes Partially No

What are the remaining gaps or problems and how are you going to address them?

More information in PART II.

9. Economic measures

Have there been any initiatives taken to develop economic activities that are in line with the conservation requirements of Great Bustard in your country?

Yes Partially No Not applicable¹

What percentage of the population is covered in total by these measures?

- All (>75%)
- Most (50-75%)
- Some (10-49%)
- Little (<10%)
- None
- Not applicable

How effective were these measures?

- Effective (more than 50% of the targeted area is managed according to the species' needs)
- Partially effective (10–49% of the targeted area is managed according to the species' needs)
- Ineffective (less than 10% according to the species' needs)
- Not applicable¹

10. Threats

Please, fill in the table below on main threats to the species in your country. Use the threat scores categories below to quantify their significance at national level. Please, provide an explanation on what basis you have assigned the threat score and preferably provide reference. Add additional lines, if necessary.

Threat scores:

- Critical:** a factor causing or likely to cause **very rapid declines** (>30% over 10 years).
- High:** a factor causing or likely to cause **rapid declines** (20-30% over 10 years).
- Medium:** a factor causing or likely to cause relatively **slow, but significant, declines** (10-20% over 10 years).
- Low:** a factor causing or likely to cause **fluctuations**. Both a lack of suitable management of breeding habitats, as well as changing quality and size of available wintering habitats can be regarded as low level threats, causing local declines of fluctuations.
- Local:** a factor causing local declines but likely to cause **negligible declines at population level**. Direct mortality caused by predation of nests (by foxes) and by agricultural machinery are causing local declines, that probably could not affect the whole W Pannonian population by considerable decline.
- Unknown:** a factor that is likely to affect the species but it is unknown to what extent.

PART II. COUNTRY-SPECIFIC ACTIONS

Please report on the implementation of the country-specific actions listed for your country in Part II of the Action Plan and provide information if that is not already covered by your answers under Part I. Please describe not only the measures taken but also their impact on Great Bustard or its habitat in the context of the objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding and the Action Plan. Where you have already answered on country-specific actions in Part I, please only add a reference to the relevant answer here.

Slovakia specific actions

Report structured according to the Rescue Plan for protected Critically Endangered Species – Great Bustard

1 Policy and legislation

1.1 Agriculture policies

1.1.1 To promote the maintenance of biodiversity as an objective of agricultural policies alongside production objectives including and elaboration of a sectoral plan under the EU biodiversity strategy. Agricultural policy and legislation have to make suitable conditions for the environmentally acceptable management. It is very important to support extensive /traditional/ methods of management and to establish gene pool refuges with natural biodiversity elements.

No specific actions were implemented.

1.1.2 Preservation and recovery of extensive farming. To apply the agri-environment regulations to encourage land uses, agrochemical use and timing of agricultural practices which are compatible with Great Bustard conservation.

Nature conservation authorities and environmental NGOs developed a proposal for agri environmental scheme for the protection of Great Bustard and were advocating the inclusion of the AES for Great Bustard into the Slovak RDP 2014–2020, whose implementation is financed by the European Commission. The scheme has been finally included into the RDP 2014–2020 (continuing in better modified version than in RDP 2007 – 2013).

According to this scheme, a farmer is obliged to meet the following conditions on the land with occurrence of Great Bustard:

- to implement the established crop rotation:
 - o to grow at least 4 species of the main crops
 - o the total proportion of winter cereals, oilseed rape, perennial forage, grass on arable land and intermediate crops of at least 70%, of which
 - share of oilseed rape or perennial fodder is at least 15%
 - share of grass on arable land mowed after 15.7. is at least 5%
- not to use chemical plant protection products according to a special regulation,
- mowing and carrying out harvesting work always from the center towards the edges or from one side of the piece of land to the other side; use of warning devices during the mowing and harvesting
- attend a training course by the end of the first year of the commitment

The Slovak RDP 2014–2020 was approved by the European Commission on 04. 02. 2015 and it includes several measures for biodiversity protection. The AES for Great Bustard with title "The Great Bustard Protection" with the scope for support for 3 000 ha of arable land has number

8.5.8.3.8. The approved document is presented at the websites of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic (<http://www.land.gov.sk>) and the Agricultural Paying Agency (<http://www.apa.sk/en/>). The AES is applicable in Sysľovské polia and Lehnice SPAs, both areas designated for the protection of Great Bustard in Slovakia. Detailed conditions for application for participation in AES were regulated through "Regulation by the Slovak Government No. 75/2015 laying down the rules for providing the financial support relating to the measures of the Rural Development Program."

Agricultural companies, Agripent s.r.o. Lehnice and Agrolens s.r.o. Čenkovce, both managing land at Lehnice SPA applied for participation in official agri environmental scheme in 2016 (and up to 2020) with 1360.04 ha and 427.40 ha respectively. Thus as of 31/12/2016, total of 1787.44 ha of land were managed under AES, which represented 43.4% of the area of both project sites. The Slovak State Nature Conservancy with some NGOs have intensively communicated with representatives of agriculture company PD Dunaj, Rusovce, managing almost the entire land at Sysľovské polia SPA, about their opportunity to enter into the AES for Great Bustard Protection within new RDP 2014-2020. Unfortunately, PD Dunaj has refused this option and has no interest **to improve conditions for the Great Bustard in Sysľovské polia SPA**. The Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan of 2023-2027 was approved by the Commission on 24/11/2022 and it includes operation "The Great Bustard Habitat Protection" within intervention "Protection and Maintenance of biodiversity". The operation is applicable in the Sysľovské polia and Lehnice SPAs.

Currently conservation of Great Bustard is continuing as part of AES in period 2023 – 2027 too. In present are in Slovakia valid two schemes in framework of CAP, which can bring benefit for the Great Bustard. Both schemes are valid since January 2023.

First scheme is agri-environmental scheme (in framework of second pillar of CAP) targeted directly to protection of Great Bustard habitats and framework of this scheme is set by decree 3/2023 Coll. This scheme is site specific for SPA Lehnice and SPA Sysľovské polia and can not be applied in any other SPA in Slovakia. This scheme was upgraded in comparison with scheme valid until December 2023 on the basis of results of the scheme and environmental ambition of the scheme was significantly increased. Mentioned agroenvironmental measure was applied only in SPA Lehnice in 2023. Farmers consider joining this measure in SPA Sysľovské polia since 2024.

Second scheme, which can brings benefits for protection of Great Bustard habitats in Slovakia, is whole-farm ecoscheme, which is valid since January 2023 and which sets requirements, which have to be met in all farm. In relation to Great Bustard habitats protection whole-farm ecoscheme requires that at least 5 % of arable land outside SPAs will be fallow, and at least 7,5 % of arable land will be designated to fallow in SPAs, or farmers can select option in SPAs, that they will create 4 % of fallow land and 4 % of pastures at arable land. Second important condition in framework of whole-farm ecoscheme is obligation to divide large fields by 12 m wide biobelts (grasslands, clovergrass or flower strips). If area of field exceed 50 ha outside SPA, then field has to be divided by biobelts. If fields exceeds area of 20 ha inside SPA, then field has to be divided by biobelts, or if farm select option to create 4 % of fallow land and 4 % of pastures, then maximum size of field in SPA is 50 ha. Ecoscheme was applied in almost all farms active in SPA Lehnice and SPA Sysľovské polia. Detailed conditions agri-environmental scheme for Great Bustard protection in Slovakia are as follows:

§ 30 Protection of Great Bustard habitat

(1) Support for operation according to § 28 letter b) of decree n. 3/2023 Coll. is provided for an agricultural area of arable land located in the SPA Lehnice or in the SPA Sysľovské polia if supported area is at least 1 ha.

(2) The recipient of operation according to § 28 letter b) is mandatory in the area according to paragraph 1

a) to ensure the sowing procedure in the representation of:

1. alfalfa at least 10%,
2. fallow at least 5%,

3. winter cereals at least 25%,
 4. peas at least 5%,
 5. grasses on arable land in a proportion of at least 10%, while at least half of the area of grasses is mowed after July 1,
 6. rapeseed at least 15%,
 7. together corn (maize) and sunflower no more than 15%,
- b) do not use plant protection (pesticides) products if they are not labeled according to a special regulation,65)
- c) mow and carry out harvesting work always from the center of the area to its edges or from one side of the area to its other side; use warning devices and chain slings when mowing and harvesting,
- d) after the harvest of cereals and rapeseed, at least 30% of the stubble should be plowed only in September
- and

1. leave stubble in July and August unploughed or
2. sow areas with catch crops.

Until December 2022 agri-environmental scheme for protection of Great-Bustard had very weak ambitions. Also payment was small (only 86 EUR/ha, in comparison to 250 EUR/ha today), therefore farmers in SPA Sysľovské polia did not apply for this agri-environmental scheme. Only farmers in SPA Lehnice applied. Following rules were valid in agri-environmental scheme for Great Bustard protection until December 2022:

- implement the established sowing procedure:
- grow at least 4 types of main crops
- the total share of winter cereals, rapeseed, perennial fodder, grasses on arable land and intercrops in total at least 70%, of which
 - § share of rapeseed or perennial fodder at least 15%,
 - § share of grass on arable land mowed after 15.7. is at least 5%
- completely exclude the application of specified plant protection products (pesticides), the list will be determined in national legislation and in the Bulletin of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic,
- mow and carry out harvesting work always from the center towards the edges or from one side of the plot to the other side of the plot; use warning devices when mowing and harvesting

From overview of scheme valid until December 2022 it is clear, that in January 2023 new condition of mandatory share of alfalfa, fallow and peas was added in Slovakia. Besides that mandatory share of grasslands was extended. And share of crops not favorable for Great Bustard (corn/maize and sunflower) was limited since 2023.

1.2 International cooperation

Field counting was followed with joint meetings of Slovak, Hungarian and Austrian experts.

2 Species and habitat protection

2.1 Designation of protected areas

2.1.1 To establish protected areas under national law in SPAs and other areas harbouring nationally important populations of the Great Bustard.

Two Special Protection Areas have been designated in Slovakia for the protection of Great Bustard - Lehnice SPA and Sysľovské polia SPA (reported in the previous report).

2.2 Protection and management of protected areas

2.2.1 To prevent developments that could change or fragment the habitat, such as the construction of highways, roads, railways and power lines, or irrigation and landholding concentration schemes.

According to the draft management plans for SPAs Sysľovské polia and Lehnice reported in the

previous report.

2.2.2 To increase habitat diversity and food availability through the increase of legume crops and unploughed fallows and the temporary set-aside of cultivated land.

Up to now totally 51,1 ha of agriculture land were purchased for the Great Bustard protection. Of that, the State Nature Conservation purchased 6,5 ha of land in Syslovske polia SPA and 39,5 ha of land in Lehnice SPA and SOS/Birdlife Slovakia purchased 1 ha of land in Syslovske polia SPA. RPS purchased another 4,1 ha of land in SPA Syslovske polia. The mentioned agriculture land is managed in accordance with the ecological requirements of the Great Bustard.

2.2.3 To control key predators, in cases where predation is found to be a significant problem, in order to prevent high levels of breeding failure.

Memorandum of understanding has been signed with three hunting organisations active in the SPAs. Measures to reduce negative impact of predators were agreed through the memorandum.

2.2.4 To reduce pesticide use in order to ensure adequate food resources.

Restrictions on the use of chemicals in agriculture activities are established by the regulations

through which SPAs in question were established.

2.3 Hunting

2.3.1 To prevent any hunting or poaching of the Great Bustard. This should include law enforcement and education of hunters and farmers on whose crops the bustards may feed (see 4.1).

Hunting of Great Bustard is prohibited all year round in Slovakia. The two SPAs are regularly (on a nearly daily basis) monitored by wardens.

3 Monitoring and research

3.1.1 To standardise census methods to be used throughout the range of the Great Bustard.

Census methods harmonised with Austria and Hungary. Monthly census of Great Bustard performed once a month in co-ordination with Hungarian and Austrian experts.

3.1.2 To develop and implement an international monitoring programme which will accurately quantify and monitor trends in: the distribution, population size, density of breeding males and sex ratio of the Great Bustard throughout its range in Slovakia.

No formal international monitoring programme is in place. Coordinated and joint monitoring of the size and the structure of the Western Pannonian population of Great Bustard shared by Slovakia, Austria and Hungary performed once a month. Data are summarised in Annual monitoring reports.

3.1.3 To evaluate the effects of habitat management methods used for the purpose of improvement the habitat conditions of the Great Bustard.

The effects of habitat management methods used for the purpose of improvement the habitat conditions of the Great Bustard were evaluated in a framework of the LIFE project.

3.1.4 To realize the research of factors causing the mortality of the Great Bustard.

3.2.1 To investigate the diet of adults and chicks and to relate it to food availability.

Limited activities were implemented in a framework of drafting management plans for both SPAs.

3.3 Breeding biology

3.3.1 To determine the breeding success of the Great Bustard and to analyse the factors which have an influence on breeding success, such as food availability, predation, social structure.

After several years of break in breeding in Slovakia, one successful breeding was recorded in 2010 in SPA Sysľovské polia. Factors influencing breeding success have not been determined. In SPA Sysľovské polia, probable breeding of 3 females was recorded in 2016 and 1 female in 2017. In 2018 4 nests were found (in wheat), 2 nests located and further 2-3 cases of probable breeding found in 2022, 3 nests found in 2023, and breeding of 10 females was estimated (all nests were located at a fallow land gained through compensation measures).

Most of the land is managed for intensive growing of crops. From that reason, breeding in most cases occurs in agricultural crops, especially in wheat. To increase breeding success, these nests are protected by a protective zone, that is created in co-operation of State Nature Conservancy and nature conservation authorities and NGOs (RPS, SOS/Bird/Life Slovakia) in order to prevent nest destruction from agricultural machinery. Also the farming organisation is informed about location of nests at wheat fields. In case of breeding in a fallow or in a lane between two fields there is no need for declaring protective zones, only predation could be a limiting factor. Further threats include possible disturbance by public (tourism, leisure activities), what is prevented by strict conservation measures limiting public access for breeding and wintering season in Sysľovské polia SPA.

Social structure of breeding population: breeding occurs close to Austrian border, so it is assumed, that breeding birds form one population with birds breeding in Austria. Thus numbers recorded in Slovakia within breeding season should not show a comprehensive picture.

According to actual conditions (distribution of crops and habitats suitable for breeding) Great Bustards can occur during breeding season in Slovakia in numbers not exceeding 20 birds - max. 10 adult males, max. 5 females and max. 5 immature males. Social structure in non-breeding season, in September – April is the following: 60% of males approximately, from that number 20-35% is comprised by immature males and approximately 40% of females. These figures are not corresponding with natural social structure of the whole West-Pannonian population, where females should be prevalent with approximately 60% representation in the population. Reasons for that bias in sexual structure of the population outside breeding season in Slovakian part of the range are not fully understood.

3.4 Movements and wintering areas

3.4.1 To determine the movement patterns of the Great Bustard by marking birds. To enhance international cooperation in order to locate the wintering areas and to study habitats requirements in winter.

Movement patterns have been studied in cooperation with Hungarian and Austrian experts. Wintering areas mostly fall within borders of Sysľovské polia SPA. Occasional movements outside that SPA are rare (years 2017-2023) and occur at the end of summer and in autumn time. That movements can reach distance of 30-100 km from Sysľovské polia SPA, in NE, E, SE directions across the Danube lowlands, rarely in NW direction to Záhorie lowlands. Total number of these moving birds has not exceed 4 specimens and in most cases included only individual birds.

4 Public awareness and training

4.1 Rural community

4.1.1 To inform the rural community about the conservation needs of the Great Bustard.

To inform on the species requirements as well as on the potentially harmful or beneficial

farming practices, seeking the collaboration of farmers. Numerous meetings with and lectures for farmers were organised in a framework of the LIFE project.

4.2 General public

4.2.1 To increase public awareness on the need to protect the Great Bustard and its habitat.

Various public awareness materials and information materials were produced. Lectures and guided tours/excursions focused on the conservation of Great Bustard were implemented for various stakeholders groups including school children and students. Voluntary guides were trained to be available for individuals and groups interested in conservation aspects of the Great Bustard.