

Importance of Satellite Tracking in Houbara Bustard Conservation Program in Asia

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The Asian Houbara Bustard is a ground-dwelling migrant bird inhabiting steppe areas from Middle-East to China and Mongolia. The fate of this species is to have been for centuries the main quarry of Arab falconers. Houbara population were recently very severely impacted by over-hunting and habitat destruction over the greater part of their distribution range. As early as 1994, satellite tracking was chosen as being the best option to study the migration pattern of houbara and helping us at the National Avian Research Center of Abu Dhabi proposing appropriate conservation measures. Since then, we equipped 134 wild caught houbara bustards all over Asia. Very important aspects of houbara natural history were unravelled owing to satellite tracking including migration patterns, important stopovers, migratory connectivity, juvenile dispersal and explanation of the observed absence of genetic difference between populations. One original finding has been the computation of annual mortality rates for the species at the scale of its distribution range. Besides the vast knowledge that was gained on the ecology of the birds through following their movements over several years, one important benefit has been to show to our main stakeholders that the houbara bustards that were visiting the UAE were actually originating from all over the distribution range of the species. This has shown that the situation of the species in the UAE was closely dependant on its global conservation status and that isolated efforts were inappropriate. Subsequently, this work has triggered extended efforts from UAE government to put in place an international conservation program for this species with all range states.