

Tracking Our Student Scientists in Mongolia

With our goal of introducing students to satellite tracking and providing opportunities in field research, last year MTI awarded free transmitters to two student projects. One project, led by Mimi Kessler, doctoral student, Arizona State University, sponsors students from a province in rural Northern Mongolia who have been tracking the Great Bustard breeding in their region.

Only 1500-2000 Great Bustards, large, ground-nesting birds of open grasslands, are estimated to remain in Mongolia, a country the size of Western Europe with the lowest population density of any nation in the world. Current low Great Bustard population sizes in Central Asia are especially alarming in light of the low reproduction rate of the species and the low total population of the Asian subspecies, in particular.

As human activities, including poaching and mechanized agriculture, play roles in Great Bustard population declines, we carry out public education campaigns in conjunction with our research, focusing our efforts on local children, particularly members of local "EcoClubs" organized by the non-profit Taimen Conservation Fund (TCF).

We take students to the field with us to search for Great Bustards and, in spring, to observe the spectacular breeding display of the male Great Bustard.

Our students have shown a keen interest in the birds. They have many ideas about causes for the species' decline and methods of conservation. They identify poaching as an important issue and understand the destruction of clutches by farm machinery, as this species often nests in agricultural areas.

Our educational programs are already making an impact. It is rare for us to meet someone who is unfamiliar with our research and sometimes strangers surprise us by asking how "our" transmittered bustards are doing!

Next year, we plan to share the migration routes of "local" bustards with the students, practice map-reading, discuss reasons for migration and compare migration timing with local weather phenomena.

We hope that the children will continue to share their enthusiasm about birds, and particularly Great Bustards, with their parents and communities.



Mimi Kessler and research team with EcoClub students.



EcoClub students and Buddhist monks (in yellow) from a local temple. At a summer camp arranged by the non-profit TCF, we play games to introduce children to methods of wildlife research, including GPS, map-reading, and telemetry.



Our team has been pleasantly surprised by the students' eagerness to learn about birds at our presentations.



Using the 70g Argos/GPS PTTs, our team is collecting information important for conservation, including habitat use patterns, critical habitat, and migration routes.



We succeeded in harnessing three Great Bustards with Argos/GPS PTTs. These birds are beginning their migration and one individual has already migrated south over 1700 km.



Students run to the binoculars and spotting scopes. We have designed curricula on bird identification, bird ecology and conservation for local schools.



TCF's summer camp takes place at a Buddhist temple where a monk and young monks-in-training are resident in the summer. In addition to lessons on ecology and outdoor activities, schoolchildren attend religious services and lectures about Buddhism as part of an effort to revive traditional conservation values.