GREAT BUSTARD (Otis tarda)

IDENTIFICATION
98-102 cm. A very big species with grey head and neck; upperparts marked with black and cinnamon bars; white underparts; wing with white coverts and black and white flight feathers. Only males have in breeding plumage a rufous band on breast and elongated moustachial feathers at sides of chin.

SIMILAR SPECIES
This species is unmistakable.

SEXING
In breeding plumage, male with head and neck blue grey; large chestnut band on breast; long moustachial feathers at both sides of chin; tertials white with black margin along tips, the innermost with black and cinnamon bars. In non breeding plumage similar to female, without moustachial feathers and lacking the chestnut pectoral band (but with chestnut patches on both sides of breast), but tertials are whiter and upperparts with deeper cinnamon colour. Female with head and neck ash grey; without pectoral band or with only pale cinnamon traces; inner tertials with black and cinnamon bars less wide than male; without moustachial feathers at both sides of chin.

Size is a very useful character for sexing: in adult birds, male with wing longer than 59 cm; female with wing shorter than 49 cm. CAUTION: young birds have always smaller sizes.

AGEING
3 types of age in females and 4 in males can be recognized:
- Juvenile with dark crown; upperparts and lesser and median wing coverts with cinnamon bars, narrower and closer than adult; narrow and yellow buff tail feathers, with two black bars; flight feathers narrow and with duller black than adult; primaries with larger white patch on bases and pale buff tips; secondaries with white tips; alula with similar colour than primaries.
- 1st year autumn/2nd year spring with retained juvenile outer primaries and a variable number of secondaries; body feathers, alula, wing coverts, tertials and most of the tail coverts can be also retained; males can have in spring a short moustache.
- 2nd year autumn/3rd year spring in males still retaining the outermost juvenile primaries, which will be very eroded.

Adult with grey crown; upperparts and lesser and median wing coverts with cinnamon bars wither and deeper than juvenile; wide and white (except the cinnamon central pair) tail feathers, with only one black bar; flight feathers wider and with deep black than juvenile; primaries with smaller white patch on bases and grey tips; secondaries without white tips; alula grey or white.

CAUTION: during some years (subadult birds) females have very grey head and breast and, in males, the length of moustachial feathers and amount and intensity of cinnamon on chest in breeding plumage increase with age, but it is not possible to give an exact age using these characters due to the variation in the period needed to acquire the typical adult plumage.

PHENOLOGY

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http://blascozumeta.com
MOULT
Complete postbreeding moult, changing body feathers each year and spending two years in change flight feathers; moult period is between July and October. Duration of postjuvenile moult is 2 years in females and 3 years in males; body feathers, some wing coverts, inner primaries and tertials and the central pair of tail feathers are moulted in 1st year; the other juvenile feathers are changed in 2nd year but males can still retain the outer primaries till 3rd year. On late winter this species has a prebreeding moult acquiring males the breeding plumage.

STATUS IN ARAGON
Resident, with breeding pairs in the Ebro Basin and open plains of Sistema Iberico.