



# Sandscript

Number 9 April 2011



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Cricket Warbler (top) and Cutthroat (bottom) are just two of the host of smaller Sabelian birds that feed on seeds and insects.

## *Fasten your seatbelts please*

It will not have escaped anyone's attention that North Africa is going through significant turmoil at the moment. Turbulence that often dramatically upsets society and which also impacts heavily on our ability to carry out our conservation mission.

I was recently asked whether we would be abandoning projects as a result of the unrest. "No way" I said "we will in fact be redoubling efforts to stay in touch with the new realities emerging". It is in the crucible of conflict that vital lessons may be learned. Take Tunisia, for example. During the early days of unrest there, several national parks were ransacked and livestock introduced to their verdant interiors. The premise that their role and value as national assets, guaranteed for all Tunisians by the state, was clearly not a universally shared concept. The parks were seen as belonging to the old regime, underlining the need to find ways of creating parks with stronger public support, as well as fostering the idea that they are there for the benefit of all. I would be the first to recognize this is far

easier said than done but one thing I am sure of is that without active engagement and a high degree of loyalty through thick and thin, lasting solutions will never be found. For sure, we are not taking any silly risks and are carefully monitoring situations before sending staff into the field but we do intend to keep on working as best we can. Our ability to do this resides both in the way we have gone about developing and implementing our projects to date and in the steadfast and generous support from you, our donors and partners. Just as in flight, that little yellow fasten seatbelts sign will surely enough go off sometime. And when it does we will be very well placed to pick up where things left off.

This issue of *Sandscript*, like all the others, underlines and illustrates the many reasons why we should not withdraw but on the contrary, redouble our efforts whatever the circumstances. The articles on the world's biggest bird, the North African ostrich, the vultures and bustards of the Sahel and the dama gazelles of Chad all bring hope and encour-



agement.

I would also like to draw your attention to our new donate-on-line capability, accessible through our website. Donations can now be made via a secure PayPal connection. This will, I am sure, facilitate giving and at the same time respond to the many requests we get regarding on-line payments. Over the coming weeks we will also be adding videos to the site, another way of sharing with you the amazing variety of desert wildlife. Enjoy the website and please do let us know what you like and also what you think we need to do better.

*John Newby*



SCF partners are pooling brainpower and resources to help restore Niger's ostriches to the wild

## Adopt-an-Ostrich

**THE biggest bird on the planet** is on the verge of extinction. The Saharan race ostrich (*Struthio camelus camelus*), largest representative of its species, has been extirpated across 95% of its range. Within Niger, the bird is extinct in the wild.

Fortunately, there are still roughly 100 pure-bred *S. c. camelus* in small privately-held captive flocks scattered across the country. Niger is exceptionally poor, but with some modest assistance the Nigeriens caring for ostrich can substantially improve the chances of these birds breeding successfully and rearing young. Given how productive ostrich can be, there is every reason to believe that with the right material and technical support, Niger can breed desert ostrich and return them to the wild in relatively short order.

SCF is part of a public-private partnership with the

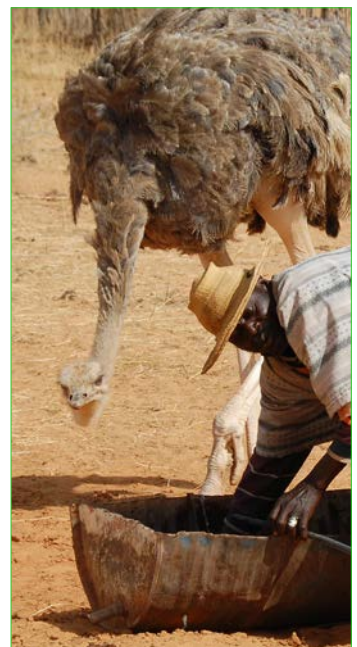
Republic of Niger and a consortium of private local breeders (CERNK) that was launched in an effort to breed some of these birds with an eye towards producing chicks for eventual reintroduction. Significant improvements to the ostrich breeding pens in Kellé, Niger, were completed in 2010. We are now focusing on improving the diet and promoting natural incubation until such time as we can develop the capacity in Niger to manage artificial incubation and chick-rearing operations.

SCF, in partnership with the AZA Ratite TAG, has developed its **Adopt-an-Ostrich Program** to support the acquisition, care and feeding of pure-bred Saharan ostrich in Niger; to help maintain the ostrich facilities; and to improve capacity for ostrich management. With your help, we can get Saharan ostrich back on the road to recovery in

Niger. This is a great opportunity for all of us to make a connection between our interest in the Sahara and the conservation of the largest bird on the planet.

**\$500 will cover the care of one ostrich in Niger for a year.** What is most important to us, however, is our goal of 100% participation by all *Sandscript* readers, at whatever level they can afford. Towards this end, I am happy to kick off this public appeal with a personal pledge of \$100.00. Please consider joining me today in making a pledge and add your voice to the growing chorus speaking for the conservation of the Sahara's wildlife. A pledge form has been provided for your convenience on Page 3. If you would prefer to make your donation on-line via a secure PayPal portal then [click here](#). Thanks in advance for your support!

*Bill Houston, St Louis Zoo*





## PLEDGE FORM

<b>FROM:</b>	Name: _____ Address: _____ City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal Code: _____ Country: _____	e-mail address: _____
<b>TO:</b>	Sahara Conservation Fund	
<b>DATE:</b>		
<b>PURPOSE:</b>	Support for the AZA Ratite TAG/SCF Adopt-an-Ostrich program in Niger	

- \_\_\_\_\_ wishes to adopt an ostrich for one year for the sum of \$500  
 OR  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name here) would like to pledge the amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name here)

Please make checks payable to Sahara Conservation Fund and mail to:	<b>Sahara Conservation Fund</b> c/o Karen Sausman, Treasurer 60-450 Hop Patch Springs Mountain Center, CA 92561 USA
Or wire funds to: Wells Fargo Bank, 27630 Ynez Rd, Temecula, CA 92591, USA	
Account Name:	Sahara Conservation Fund
Bank Account No.:	2681061277
SWIFT Code:	WFB1US6S
US Interior Transfer Prefix:	121000248

Thank you again for your support.

Sincerely,

Karen Sausman, Treasurer  
 Sahara Conservation Fund

Thank you for your support. The Sahara Conservation Fund is a not-for-profit organization exempt from federal income tax under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions to the Sahara Conservation Fund are tax-deductible in accordance with the law.



*Four of Chad's last remaining dama gazelles spotted in the Ouadi Rimé—Ouadi Achim Game Reserve (Photo: Tim Wachter/ZSL/SCF)*

## *Rare dama gazelles rediscovered*

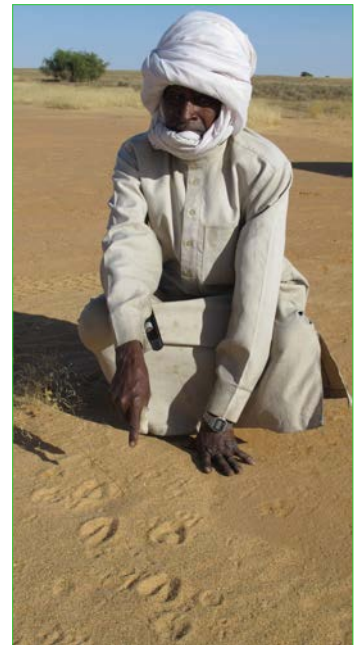
Recent fieldwork carried out in Chad thanks to the Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey, generously funded by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has yet again turned up ground breaking data on endangered desert species. Accompanied by staff from Chad's parks department and an experienced guide and expert ranger, the team surveyed part of the vast Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve. The reserve, approximately the size of Indiana, was until civil war broke out in the 1980s a haven for desert antelopes, including several thousand of the now extinct in the wild scimitar-horned oryx. The reserve's dama gazelle population was also truly astounding and it was not uncommon to see upwards of a hundred of these magnificent gazelles in any one day. Following the war and the almost total disappearance of larger wildlife, it was assumed the dama ga-

zelles, now a globally critically endangered species, had gone the way of the oryx into oblivion. And although the odd rumour of gazelles did pop up from time to time no tangible evidence could be secured.

So with the somewhat daunting challenge of finding dama gazelles we set out. Our initial strategy was to talk to local nomadic herders and we were pleasantly surprised to hear news of recent sightings and some good indications of where the gazelles might be found. Once in the general area we then started a systematic search, combining long, vehicle-based transects with shorter excursions on foot to optimize chances of picking up tell tale tracks. It did not take long for our guide, Abdelaziz, to pick up the first spoor and soon enough we finally spotted our first dama gazelle. This was quickly followed by a small group of four, including a youngish animal (see photo

above). It is difficult to say exactly how many gazelles are left but first indications are very positive.

Apart from dama gazelles, the fieldwork also confirmed the reserve as being almost certainly the best remaining reservoir in the whole of Africa for dorcas gazelles. In all we saw over fifteen hundred. And while camels in some areas outnumbered gazelles by 6 to 1, the prospects for their conservation are extremely positive. Significant efforts have been recently undertaken by the Chadian Government to curtail illegal hunting. On our return to Chad's capital, N'Djamena, we were able to present our findings to senior government officials and to discuss how best to conserve the precious gazelle populations of the reserve. Further work in the coming months will consolidate options, including the possibility of reintroducing scimitar-horned oryx.





*Sudan or Arabian bustard (left) and Nubian bustard (right) (Photos: Don Miller/SCF & John Newby/SCF)*

## *Bustards: strutting their stuff*

Bustards are mostly large, ground living birds that comprise some of the heaviest flying species in the world. In Africa's Sahelo-Saharan region a number of species occur, including two of the biggest, the Arabian or Sudan bustard, and the Nubian bustard. Both are conservation dependent species, having disappeared from large parts of their former ranges, and both are of particular concern to SCF's conservation work. With over-hunting by far the main cause for the bustards' decline, efforts must focus on a cocktail of measures, that include enhanced protection and sustainable use where hunting is legally practiced. Through our work, significant new infor-

mation is coming to light regarding breeding, migration, natural predation and distribution.

Our work in the Termit region of Niger to monitor wildlife and establish a vast new protected area is already demonstrating the positive impact of protection on bustard numbers. Breeding as they do during and just after the short rainy season from July to September, it is a joy to see adult birds accompanied by their animated chicks, striding through the tall grass. A simple nest is built on the ground and two or sometimes three eggs laid. At birth, the chicks are often left by the adults while they forage for seeds and insects. The Nubian bustard per-

forms a spectacular display to attract his mate (see photo at bottom). From his parade ground along a prominent ridge, the bird thrusts out his chest, and with head back and tail feathers erect to display the brilliant white under parts, he struts along his beat repeatedly to attract a mate.

In spite of their large size, bustards fall prey to a number of the larger birds of prey. Whilst in Chad carrying out survey work we were privileged to witness the fatal attack of a bustard whilst in flight by an eagle. On closer inspection the bird turned out to be the very first record in Chad for another enigmatic and magnificent species, the golden eagle.





*A nice group of six Rüppell's Griffons with a Lappet-faced Vulture in the centre (Photo: John Newby/SCF)*

## Focus on vultures

Against the backdrop of catastrophic declines in vulture numbers in India and elsewhere, it is always heartening to find areas where vulture populations seem to be doing all right. Thanks to our Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey we have been able to visit and survey a number of areas in the Sahel and Sahara that are rarely looked at from a wildlife perspective. As a group of species of great conservation concern, we take special care to record all vultures seen and as such are gradually building up a useful and unique database.

In the course of our work we have had occasion to see all six of the regular West African species (Egyptian, hooded, Rüppell's, white-

headed, white-backed and lappet-faced) in one afternoon. Of these, the strikingly spotted Rüppell's griffon appears to be the commonest, with occasional gatherings of over 200 birds on dead cows or camels. Within the Saharan domain, the massive lappet-faced vulture, weighing in at up to 10 kg and with a wingspan of almost 3 metres, appears to be the commonest species. In the absence of rocky ledges on which to nest, both lappet-faced and Rüppell's will breed, often in diffused mixed colonies, on treetops. Of the smaller vultures, both hooded and Egyptian appear to be far less common than in the past. In days gone by, it was commonplace to see hun-

dreds of hooded vultures perched over market stalls and abattoirs, patiently waiting to clear up any offal and bones discarded.

Whereas in India and Pakistan the main reason for plummeting vulture numbers has been renal failure linked to the use in cattle of veterinary anti-inflammatory drugs, such as diclofenac, one of the biggest threats in West Africa is the traditional medicine market in vulture parts. Vulture grease, brains, heads, feet and feathers are still widely used as cures for rheumatism and diarrhea, as well as in various powders and potions to increase clairvoyance. Clairvoyance?! Sounds more like short-sightedness to me.

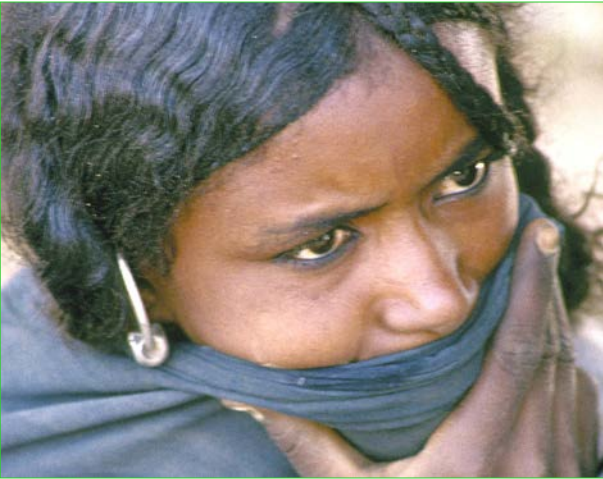


*Egyptian vulture (1), white-backed vulture (2) and white-headed vulture (3). To the left is a typical West African traditional medicine stall with a variety of animal parts, including vulture feet and the skull of a sacred ibis.*

**Sandscript** is the twice-yearly newsletter of SCF, the Sahara Conservation Fund.

SCF is grateful to Bill Houston, Don Miller, Scott Tidmus and Tim Wachter for the articles and images used in this issue.

Donations to our work can be made by [clicking here](#).



**SCF's mission is to conserve the wildlife of the Sahara and bordering Sahelian grasslands.**

Our vision is of a Sahara that is well conserved and managed, in which ecological processes function naturally, with plants and animals existing in healthy numbers across their historical range; a Sahara that benefits all its inhabitants and where support for its conservation comes from stakeholders across all sectors of society.

To implement our mission, we forge partnerships between people, governments, the world zoo and scientific communities, international conventions, non-governmental organizations and donor agencies. A powerful network with a common goal – the conservation of deserts and their unique natural and cultural heritage.

**If you would like to know more about our work and how to contribute to our projects, please contact us at [scf@saharaconservation.org](mailto:scf@saharaconservation.org) We would love to hear from you!**

## *Desert All Stars: Dr. Tim Wachter*



Longtime conservation biologist with the Zoological Society of London, Dr. Tim Wachter is also Project Leader of SCF's Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey (PSWS). A tireless champion of conservation and the building of effective wildlife monitoring programmes, Tim is equally adamant about the need to train young wildlife biologists. Among his many accolades and interests, Tim is co-author of a field guide to the birds of Gambia and Senegal and a passionate stargazer and ornithologist.

Having studied zoology at Oxford University, Tim started his career in West Africa studying sleeping sickness. It wasn't long, however, before the desert beckoned and Tim found his true niche, working in Egypt and Saudi Arabia on a number of groundbreaking initiatives. These included work on Mount Sinai and for many years, efforts re-

lating to the reintroduction and monitoring of gazelles and Arabian oryx in the Uruk Bani Mârid nature reserve in Saudi Arabia's famous Empty Quarter. Through his research and fieldwork Tim has justly earned his reputation as one of the most knowledgeable and respected desert biologists. His leadership and commitment to conservation has played a significant role in SCF's development and in the scientific work that underpins our projects and programmes and which contribute greatly to the organization's effectiveness and credibility.

As leader of PSWS, Tim's commitment to capacity building and training is helping ensure our partners in Africa have the skills and understanding not only to actively assist in the work being carried out but more importantly to promote and sustain it within their own institutions for years to come.