

CONSERVATION EFFORTS TO RESTORE THE HOUBARA BUSTARD *CHLAMYDOTIS MACQUEENII* POPULATION IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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The Saudi Arabian houbara bustard breeding programme was started in an attempt to restore the population of this native species after the breeding population virtually disappeared. The reintroduction of captive birds to the wild would be critical for the survival of the houbara population. During 1986 to 1988 fertile eggs were collected from resident populations in the Baluchistan in Pakistan. By the 1990s, through the application of artificial insemination techniques the National Wildlife Research Centre (NWRC) was able to produce enough houbara chicks for the first trial release.

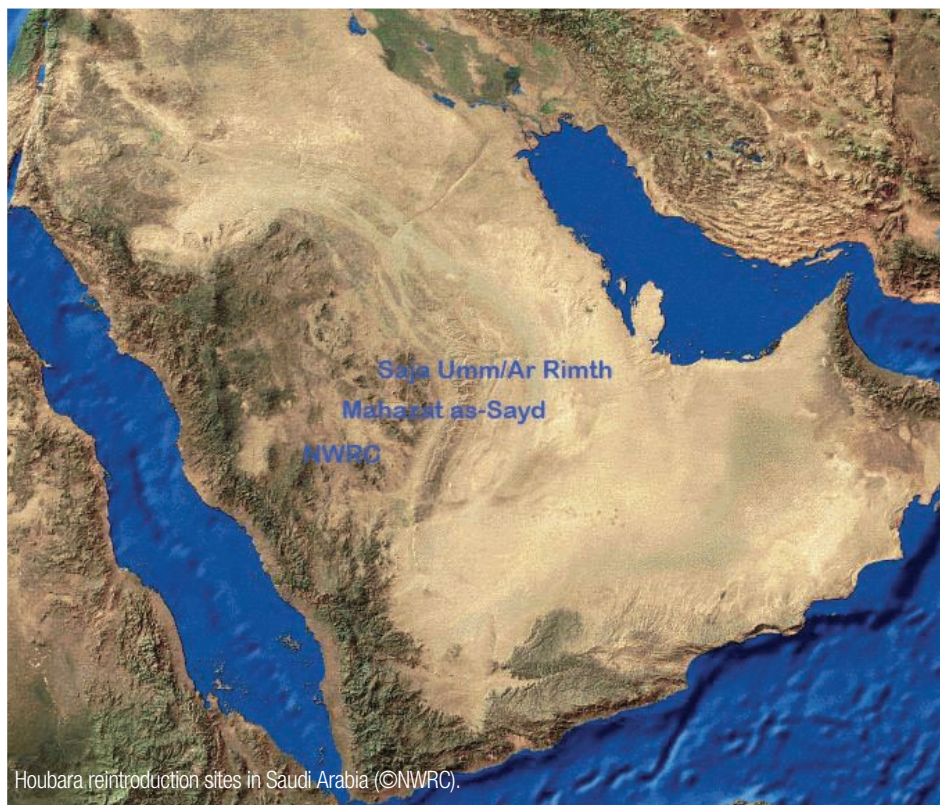
Two sites were selected for houbara re-introduction sites Mahazat as-Sayd and Saja Umm Ar-Rimth protected areas in Saudi Arabia. All re-introductions were done in accordance with the IUCN Guidelines for Re-introductions.

Release of houbara in the protected areas: In Mahazat as-Sayd protected area since 1991 a total of 781 houbara (374 males and 407 females) have been released. Out of the 781 Houbara released in Mahazat, 133 died within the first month of their release and a total of 648 have survived. Mortalities were mainly due to mammal predation and a small number because of starvation.

The re-introduction programme in Saja Umm Ar-Rimth Protected Area was started in 2003. By 2006 a total of 145 houbara bustard (67 females and 78 males) had been released. In Saja around 35 houbara have survived up to May 2007. Most of the birds died due to predation by mammals (foxes and cats) while some mortalities were due to starvation as well as poaching.

The creation of a predator free enclosure of 2km² may allow houbara to become better acclimatized to the natural environment which would significantly improve survival rate.

Total population of houbara in Mahazat and Saja protected areas: The total houbara population in the park is calculated using a number of parameters including the number of birds released, number of wild born chicks and number of birds that have died post release. The current population of houbara in Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area is estimated to be greater than 500 individuals.



Houbara reintroduction sites in Saudi Arabia (©NWRC).

Houbara density: Houbara densities were also assessed using three methods. The methods were observations during car driving transect, observation on circular points and by calculating the number of houbara radio tracked during the month divided by the size of the area they used (Kernel 95 method). The minimum density of houbara in 2006 was 0.367 individuals per km², which we feel is high compared to the natural density in the wild.

A full version of this article including references is available for download from the Wildlife Middle East Newsletter website (www.wmenews.com).

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Houbara bustard fitted with radio transmitter in the Mahazat as-Sayd protected area (©NWRC).