



**THE SECOND EXPEDITION TO UKRAINE AND VISITING THE LIFE projekt AREA IN
DOBROGEA, ROMANIA**

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2012

LIFE NAT/HU/000384

THE SECOND EXPEDITION TO UKRAINE AND VISITING THE LIFE projekt AREA IN DOBROGEA, ROMANIA

Report on the expedition to Ukraine and Dobrogea carried out on the frame of LIFE09 NAT/HU/000384 programme

29 May – 10 June 2012.

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Background

As a continuation of our trip in 2011, in the frame of the 2nd Saker conservation LIFE programme (LIFE NAT/H/000384), we visited again the Ukrainian steppes. The area is regularly visited by the juvenile satellite-tracked Sakers fledged in the Carpathian Basin and it has, therefore, a special importance for our Sakers in the early period of their life. Thus, the area is especially important from the aspect of the Saker conservation in the Carpathian Basin.

Mátyás Prommer (BNPI) and Luca Dehelean (Milvus Group) represented the LIFE programme on the expedition, which aimed to collect further information about the situation of the species there and to continue the co-operation with Ukrainian colleagues for a more efficient conservation. Róbert Kazi (DINPI) and Andreea Sandu (Milvus Group) joined the team. From Ukrainian side, Maxim Gavrilyuk (Head of the Institute of Natural Sciences of the University of Cherkassy), Yuri Milobog (assistant professor of the Zoological Institute of Kryvvyy Rih State Pedagogical University), Vitaly Vetrov (Laboratory of Theoretical and Applied Ornithology of Kryvvyy Rih State Pedagogical University) and Vladimir Strigunov (professor of the Zoological Institute of Kryvvyy Rih State Pedagogical University).



One of the tagged adult females after deploying the PTT (Photo: Mátyás Prommer)

The reason to visit Ukraine was not only that some Sakers tagged in the previous project (LIFE NAT/HU/000096) had visited the country and some of them disappeared there, but also that a satellite-tracked female Slovak Saker tagged in 2011 was in the area at the time of our visit (and before our departure, of course). One of the main tasks of the expedition was to map the area including the threats used by that bird. In addition, the Hungarian-Romanian team assisted to the deployment of two satellite tags as well.

We gathered useful information during the expedition.

Habitats, nesting

During the expedition, similarly to the previous year, we crossed the Western part of Ukraine up to Kryvvy Rih on the north and east, and we travelled around the Crimea only crossing the southern mountains. We found habitats close their natural state only on some well-defined parts of the Crimea: otherwise we saw mainly intensively and in some places less intensively used agricultural areas. The Ukrainian Saker population estimated to 300-350 pairs and they can be found partly on natural sites, but most of them breed in the intensively used agricultural areas. During the expedition, we checked the nests known from the previous years and we visited those sites that seemed to be appropriate for the species.



A former breeding site in the Crimea (Photo: Mátyás Prommer)

Unfortunately, it was not uncommon that we found only one pair or we did not find any pair at all in areas, where more pairs had been registered in the previous years. In the first 5-6 days of the expedition, we were visiting the former breeding sites without seeing any Saker. It must be added that it was the

time, when freshly fledged juveniles are around the nest (as we experienced that later), thus we certainly should have seen Sakers on those sites in case of successful breeding.

The majority of broods can be found on pylons of high voltage power lines in natural nests (Carrion Crow or Long-legged Buzzard). Although the Ukrainian colleagues installed some nest boxes in 2010, the Sakers have not yet occupied them.

During the expedition we visited and searched those sites, where the juvenile Sakers tagged in 2011 spent longer time. After surveying those sites, we can say that all of them are short-grass steppes, often near settlements, abandoned or active cattle or sheep farms and at almost all those sites susliks can be found.

Threats

We managed to receive more information on threats compared to last year, however those described last have not improved.

Electrocution – On most of the habitats we surveyed, we saw pylons with hanging cables that are not dangerous for birds. On some sites, however, also in Ukraine the so-called 'killer' type pylons (with erected joins lifting the cables above the cross-piece) connections can be found, which may threaten Sakers locally. The question is what kind of pylons will be used in the future, when the old pylons need to be changed.

Agriculture – Old-type farmers' co-operatives are about to fall apart in Ukraine and Russia, and private investment plays an ever bigger role in agricultural production. One of the results is the abandonment of non-intensive (open-air) husbandry or its replacement by intensive farming thus the abandonment of grazing. That transforms steppe habitats drastically. As grazing maintains short-grass habitats for susliks, its abandonment results in growing vegetation thus in disappearance of susliks, the most important prey for Sakers. It is probably not a coincidence that most of the satellite-tracked Sakers returned from Russia where the process is more advanced and prey species like Rooks and susliks have disappeared from large areas.

Shooting and poisoning – According to the Ukrainian colleagues, locally the threat of shooting may exist, however mainly during only the autumn open season for ducks and it does not threaten the Saker population in general.

As for poisoning, the other result of private investments in agriculture is that there are more financial sources for purchasing pesticides. That affects prey species of Sakers (crows, rollers, etc.). Chemicals accumulate in Sakers causing long-term secondary poisoning.

Nest robbing – It may be one of the most serious threats in Ukraine. Syrian and Arab traders are visiting Ukraine for Sakers that they buy from local 'businessmen' to re-sell them for Arab falconry. Recently, the price of a Saker in Ukraine is 200 USD in the black market, which equals 2/3 of an average monthly salary. The extent of the problem is shown by the case from the previous years, when a 'would-be' client visited a local trader, at whom he found about 30 juveniles Sakers all taken from wild nests in Ukraine in the given year, some Gyr Falcons and other birds of prey species. Despite the clear evidence, the police did not investigate the case. Not much more can be expected from the

conservation authorities that are rather focusing on companies in order to make income from fines to supplement their own budget received from the government. During the field visit we found active eyries with empty nests or nests with one chick, with clear signs of nest robberies. Typically, the affected areas coincide with those, where the 'businessmen' are active.



A 2cy male Saker robbed from the nest for the photo business in Bakhchysarai (Photo: Luca Dehelean)

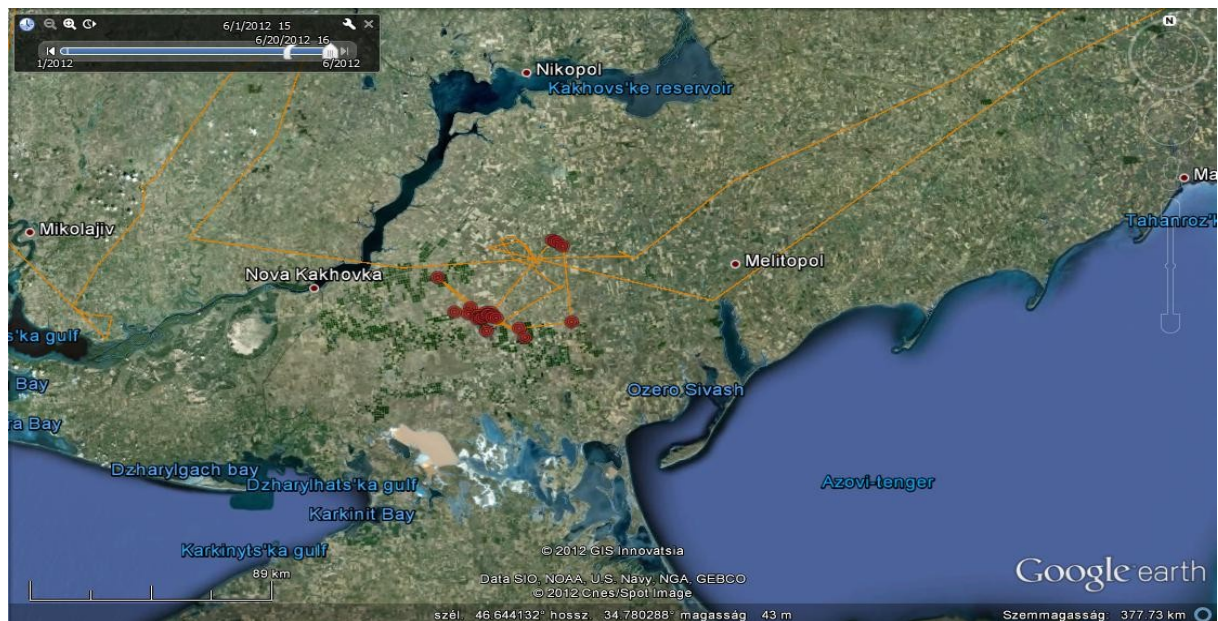
The other reason for nest robbery is to get birds of prey for the 'photo business': at many popular places especially in the Crimea, tourists can take photos with the birds on their arms – for good money. Although, it affects also Sakers, that practice is more targeting eagles as the bigger the bird, the more money the tourist should pay. We saw a 2cy male Saker, a juvenile Imperial Eagle and a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle in Bakhchysarai used for that purpose (see photo). As we learnt from the 'owner' of the Saker, that bird and the Imperial Eagle were taken from nest near the city, while the White-tailed Eagle was taken from nest in mainland Ukraine. Connection between them and the local 'businessmen' is not unlikely especially that they are based only 40 km away from each other.

Natural threats – As a curiosity, it can be mentioned that at one nest on a loess cliff (where we found successful breeding last year) above a lake, we found that the nest ledge had come off along with two eggs that were still laying near the water.

The temporary settlement area of the satellite-tracked Slovak Saker

At the time of the expedition, the female Saker tagged in 2011 was about 80 km north near the village of Frunze. Exactly when we were there, we did not receive proper data from the birds – probably due to the atmospheric conditions blocked

the transmission – thus we organised a search on the sites of the last known coordinates of the falcon. Unfortunately, we were not successful (it turned out later that the bird was alright and she was near us, only we did not see her).



The temporary settlement area of the satellite-tracked Slovak bird in June 2012

The temporary settlement area itself is an entirely flat lowland, about 10 km away from the Crimean main canal. It is an area with vast and partly irrigated agricultural fields. There are also fallow lands and mosaics of smaller remains of the steppe. There are only a few woods and high voltage power line in the area.



One of the favourite spot of the Slovak bird was the irrigation system (Photo: Luca Dehelean)

Surveying the sites, it turned out that the bird used mainly the non-irrigated lands. On one of the coordinates we found remains of a Rook – likely a prey of

the Saker. We did not find imminent visible threats, though the pesticides may cause problems (of course, we could not check that in the field).

Miscellaneous

Beside surveying Sakers, we collected information on Rooks and Red-footed Falcons. We recorded the colonies that we saw on our route. It was an extra reward that we discovered a yet unknown Griffon colony in a remote part of South-Crimea.

Proposals for conservation

Fighting threats, nest guarding is the activity that can be carried out most easily technically, yet its feasibility is strongly questioned due to the society's low support for nature conservation, thus the low number of potential volunteer guards, as well as the attitude of the police and authorities.

One of the most important task, therefore, the public awareness raising in order to present the problems, consequences and possible solutions and to gain public support.

Creating safe nesting places could be a significant help to Sakers. It would raise breeding success and could support the establishment of Saker pairs in appropriate habitats, where otherwise they would not breed due to lack of nests.

It is also important to change the attitude of the government and to launch an international lobby for supporting an efficient birds of prey (and nature) conservation. That lobby should stimulate the Ukrainian government to eliminate or minimise not only direct threats, but also indirect, yet more serious threats like the negative effects of the transforming agriculture.

DOBROGEA

Monitoring LIFE09 NAT/HU/000384 project site

On the way home, we visited Dobrogea to monitor one of the LIFE project site, where three artificial nests were installed following a preliminary research. Sites for the nests were identified based on the movements of Sakers observed in the area. The northernmost nest, unfortunately, became inappropriate for nesting in the last months. Of course, turbines are being built as well. At least a dozen wind turbines are going to be installed in the immediate neighbourhood of the pylon with the nest, and service roads were built already in the previous months. At the other two nests more to the south we saw an adult Saker at both (about 10 km from each other), however we could not prove successful breeding. On a pylon we found a nest where suspected chick(s), however it was not clear after a longer observation (it was impossible to see inside the nest) if we were correct. A few weeks later, however, our colleagues searched the area carefully based on our finding and they found a pair with three fledged juveniles in the same area. It is the first record of successful Saker breeding in East-Romania for seven years.

We visited the old cliff nests in Măcin mountains, but we did not see neither falcons nor any signs of breeding.



The immediate neighbourhood of the LIFE project area in Dobrogea (Photo: Mátyás Prommer)

It was striking to see the intensity of the construction of wind farms. Standing at the power line with the nests and looking around, wind farms can be seen all around; and yet more to be built. Talking to the construction workers (not even living in the area), it turned out that the situation is even worse more to the south. More wind farms are being built around Constanța and we know that the situation is not better. Those wind farms likely mean serious obstacle and threat for the birds migrating along the west coast of the Black Sea.

