

EXPERTS' VISIT TO UKRAINE

LIFE NAT/H/000384

29 May – 10 June 2011

On the invitation of local Saker experts, a two-man team from BNPD (Mátyás Prommer, and Hunor Török) visited Ukraine and a person (Szilárd Daróczi) from Milvus Group accompanied them on his own costs. The visit took place between 29 May and 10 June 2011. The invitation was sent officially by the Zoological Department of Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, but experts also from Cherkasy University participated in the programme. The aims of the visit were to pass the expertise regarding the conservation of the species (including nest boxes, nest guarding, satellite-tracking, finding downed satellite-tracked birds, etc.), learning about the threats on Sakers, visiting habitats where Sakers breed and where the satellite-tracked Sakers stayed for months and discuss the possibilities of further common work with the Ukrainian colleagues. During the field visits the Hungarian team contributed also to the field work by participating in monitoring, collecting prey remains, ringing and tagging of juvenile birds.

From Ukrainian part four experts participated in the meetings and field visits (two from Kryvyi Rih SPU and two from Cherkassy University). It turned out that there are only two experts in Ukraine (included in the team we met), who regularly work on Saker Falcons. It means that no annual monitoring occurs in Ukraine due to lack of human resources. They are only able to visit a breeding pair in every 3-4 years. They are not able, therefore, to follow the changes in the population as closely as it happens in Hungary and it was very important that we could share our knowledge on that with them.



2. Saker habitat (steppe)

During the field visits we focused on the Crimea and South-Western Ukraine. The Saker population on the visited places seemed to be stable, although there were abandoned sites as well. We saw Saker pairs breeding in various habitats: steppes, agricultural areas, seaside cliffs and lakeside loess cliffs. It was interesting to see that a large proportion of the prey items were birds, however that could be because usually less mammal remains can be

found in the nest – further studies would be needed to discover the exact diet of the Ukrainian Sakers.

Sakers in the South-Western region of Ukraine is especially interesting because the population there seems to be well-established (3 pairs on a 15 km long section of a power line) and more importantly they are just a few kilometers away from the Romanian border. The closest Saker pair is just 17 km away from the border and it is only about 30 km away from Macin Hills, where the last known East-Romanian Sakers bred a few years ago. It may have been strong relation between the West-Ukrainian and East-Romanian Saker population and apparently there is still hope for re-colonization of the abandoned Romanian eyries in the region.



1. Breeding site of Sakers (loess cliff)

Threats on Sakers in Ukraine are manifold. Natural predation is not limited to fox, Eagle Owl and Imperial Eagle, but in case of pairs breeding on seaside cliffs large gulls may also take their toll. Fortunately electrocution is not as a big risk as in Hungary, because most of the mid-voltage power lines have ‘hanging-type’ pylons: the wire are hanging from the cross-piece thus it is impossible for a bird to get electrocuted. Nevertheless, collision can appear. Shooting and poisoning are apparently not a considerable factor. Secondary poisoning is not important either as they do not use much pesticides in the agricultural practices due to financial reasons.

Wind farms are spreading in Ukraine as well, which may pose a threat on Sakers and other bird species as well.



3. An abandoned nesting site of Sakers



4. A juvenile Saker in Hunor Török's hand before ringing

What needs to be mentioned as a large problem is the nest robbery. Some nests are robbed (probably year after year) and sold. The possibility that the robbed Sakers are exported to Arab falconers cannot be excluded, however most of those birds land in legal and illegal zoos and collections, raptor shows and private persons as 'pets'. Some years ago a man was filmed with a secret camera, who kept 30 Sakers. The actuality of the problem is shown by the fact that we saw robbed nest too. There was only one male in the nest (they usually take the larger females for falconry) and there were clear and relatively fresh tracks of a car under the pylon (which was an inactive pylon without lines, so the visit of the electric company can be excluded).

Lack of safe nests may be a limiting factor of the population. The Ukrainian colleagues try to help that by erecting artificial nests both on trees and pylons.

After the visit, we agreed with the Ukrainian colleagues to continue the cooperation, and we give all the support we can for facilitating Saker conservation in Ukraine. In addition, they promised to give all the help in case of any of our tagged Sakers downs in Ukraine.

