

Project Update: July 2016

Background

After a long period, the fieldwork was launched in spring 2016. The reason of the relative late start was that the original project proposal included only Ukraine and the Crimea within, however due to the political and military actions in Crimea in 2014, we had to re-consider the proposal. Crimea was left out in the revised proposal, but Moldova was added to West Ukraine covering an area yet almost unknown from the saker falcon population point of view. Unfortunately, the new proposal was submitted too late to be decided upon before the field season in 2015. Thus, although the green light was on from the Board, we could start the active fieldwork only in spring 2016.

Ukraine

In Ukraine, the Ukrainian colleagues, Yuriy Milobog and Maxim Gavrilyuk covered more than 1000 so far to check Kirovograd, Mykolaiv and Odessa regions. Unfortunately, they did not find any sakers in the northernmost range (Kirovograd region) of species, which likely indicates the withdrawal of the species from the previous population edges. We do not know, however, whether this phenomenon is an indication of long-term negative changes, or it fits the natural fluctuation pattern of the population (due to weather, lack of prey, etc.). The coming years will answer that question.

In Mykolaiv and Odessa regions, the monitoring brought more success: seven pairs of saker falcons were found, which is still less than earlier. The reasons need to be investigated in that case too.

It would have been important to monitor also the regions between Dnister and Danube in the southwest corner of Ukraine, however the car of the Ukrainian colleagues got broken on the way near Odessa. It could be repaired only partly, so they had to return to Kryvvy Rih and Cherkassy, their base cities. The area was thus checked later in June 2016. Twelve pairs were found, which was less than earlier according to previous monitoring data. Also one pair was found in Moldova near the border with Ukraine.

Republic of Moldova

In the southern part of the Republic of Moldova, the entire grid was monitored by Emanuel Baltag and his colleagues. Only four active breeding pairs were recorded, however the monitoring was very important, as there had not been done any survey targeting saker falcons. Now, we have the baseline data set due to Rufford Small Grant Programme.

All four pairs laid eggs, but only three pairs were successful. Two pairs had two chicks and one pair had four chicks that makes eight chicks in the monitored area. The fourth pair did not have chicks, but they were in their eyrie in June 2016.

The area is not protected, thus we start the procedure to get a protection for this area. We sent a report to BirdLife International in order to designate this site as Important Bird Area. Also, we share our information the Ministry of Environment in order to designate the area as EMERALD (it is a network of conservation areas like Natura 2000, but in the pre-accession countries) site. Our colleagues from the Society for Birds and Nature Protection (a very new NGO from the Republic of Moldova) discussed the problem of this site in the EMERALD seminar in Minsk in order to put more pressure on the government. The issue will be raised again in the next EMERALD biogeographical evaluation seminar in Kyiv (6th-8th September 2016).

Satellite tracking

In the frame of the programme, two juvenile birds were to be tagged in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in order to follow their movements and migration. Unfortunately, the loggers were delivered too late for tagging (the juveniles were fledged already), so we could not tag them. However, it may be considered positive, as thus we can tag two adult birds in the same area in the autumn (autumn-winter is the best time for trapping adults). From conservation point of view, the information on habitat use and movements of adult birds may be even more important, than data from juveniles. For tagging two experts will travel to Moldova and Ukraine to trap and tag birds for satellite tagging. The loggers will provide valuable data on threats and focus areas for conservation.

Camera traps

Two camera traps were purchased with the aim of setting them to saker nests to learn more about their diet. That method for food analyses work very well in Hungary. The camera traps record the movements at nests and after removing them (after the juveniles fledged) photos could be downloaded and analysed. Unfortunately, we could not install the camera trap in Moldova due to bad weather (it is not safe to climb high voltage power line towers in rainy weather). There was 3 weeks of rain in the period when camera traps could have been deployed. After such an unusually long period, there was another attempt, but the juveniles had already well-developed feathers, thus we did not want to risk premature flushing of young from the nest.

Although sent at the same time, difficulties to posting to Ukraine, the camera traps were delivered too late for Ukrainian colleagues, so it will be used next years.

It is a lucky co-incidence that the team monitoring the Moldavian population is also working on suslik (*Spermophilus citellus*), which is the favourite prey of saker falcons, thus we will learn more about the predator-prey relations.

Artificial nests

During the monitoring trips, locations for artificial nests were chosen both in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova and artificial nests will be built also in the autumn season.

In Moldova, the absence of appropriate nests (as falcons do not build own nest) is an important problem. Saker falcons in the monitored area use only anchor pylons of high-voltage power lines for nesting. It is a special type of pylon, which is used when the high electric voltage network is going in a valley or is turning left or right, a kind of pylons which are very strong, larger than the others. That makes nest boxes to be a very important step in species conservation in the area.

Public awareness

In Moldova, presence of saker falcons were discussed with the border police in south of Republic of Moldova. Similarly to local people approached, border police did not know about saker falcons and their importance.

Although public awareness raising was an important element of the project, we hesitated to go public in some sites. It was partly the extreme low number of pairs and successful breeding, partly because of the global situation of the species (decreasing populations in many areas) and local problems (illegal trapping) in some areas. We should find the best way for communicating the project not to make more harm than good.





After the late start mentioned earlier, the project is due to be completed in late autumn-early winter.