

# PRODUCING SAKER FALCONS BY THE BARREL



Photo: Dimitar Ragyov

FOR MILLENNIA falconers have harvested falcons from the wild. In the Middle East, the Bedouin hunted *houbara* and hares with peregrines and sakers in the deserts during the winter months. These falcons were trapped on passage or obtained via the ancient “silk road” trade routes from Central Asia. This deep rooted falconry tradition not only survives, but is thriving in the Arabian peninsula, though the requirements of modern-day recreational falconers has resulted in severe pressure on the continued survival of the falcons and their quarry. Arabic falconry creates a trade demand

for falcons that can be met from wild and captive-bred sources. Despite increased use of captive-bred falcons in recent years, many Arabian falconers still prefer to hunt with wild-taken passage birds and regard their captive-bred equivalents as inferior. The saker has been particularly hit hard by this trade demand as post-Soviet economies collapsed in Central Asia in the early 1990s. Increased and unregulated harvesting and trade contributed to the dramatic decline in breeding populations across large areas of Central Asia and led to the saker being classified as Globally Endangered by the World Conservation Union.

## A CONSERVATION INITIATIVE OF EMIRATES FALCONERS

Words by **ANDREW DIXON**

The saker is listed in Appendix II of CITES, which means that signatory countries can harvest and trade wild birds as long as this has no detrimental impact on the wild population. However, few Central Asian countries have healthy saker populations that could sustain a harvest, and fewer still have the capacity to regulate such a trade. Consequently, the supply of wild-caught sakers to the Arabian falconry markets is met largely by illegal trade undertaken by a network of trappers, smugglers and dealers. This demand and supply is not a new phenomenon, like falconry the falcon trade also has deep traditional roots, especially among Syrians and along the Central Asian silk road. What has apparently changed in the modern world is the extent of this trade, with greater numbers of trappers extending further into hitherto inaccessible parts of the saker's range, to supply a seemingly insatiable demand for falcons in the Middle East.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of former communist states and China has seen Syrian and Pakistani falcon trappers seeking sakers in new places as remote as central Siberia, northwest China and Mongolia. The Mongolian government was quick to catch on to this developing trade and started charging visiting trappers a fee to export the wild-caught sakers from the country (wildlife is regarded as state property in Mongolia). Mongolia signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1995 and since this time their saker falcon trade has needed to meet the requirements of the Convention. However, despite having a large breeding



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population of sakers, Mongolia has not been able to demonstrate that its annual trade quota has no detrimental effect on the wild population. Furthermore, poor recording and lax regulation has meant that the saker trade has been heavily criticised both nationally and internationally, damaging the reputation of the Mongolian government. Currently worth around US\$3 million per year, Mongolia is now the only country to operate a legal harvest and trade in saker falcons, with a CITES trade quota of *ca.* 300 birds per year.

‘Sustainable use’ is a familiar environmental term that is frequently used but often poorly understood. The principle behind the term is that resources should be used in such a way that their continued existence is not threatened, thereby ensuring their availability for future usage. Human utilisation of wildlife is not necessarily bad. In fact, as CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity recognises “commercial trade may be beneficial to the conservation of species and local people when carried out at levels that are not detrimental to the survival of the species in question”. Following a CITES trade review (a process initiated by the UAE because of concerns about the way the saker trade was conducted) the Mongolian government is now faced with the option of either stopping their saker falcon trade or developing a demonstrably sustainable system of trade with conservation benefits. This is the position today, at the beginning of 2010. Which direction Mongolia takes for the future depends primarily on the political willingness to overhaul the current discredited system and the ability to develop a



Photo: Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir

regulated and sustainable system in its place.

International Wildlife Consultants (UK) Ltd, on behalf of Abu Dhabi, UAE, have been conducting survey and research work on saker falcons in Mongolia for over 15 years within the framework of agreements signed with the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism. The commitment shown by Abu Dhabi to saker conservation in Mongolia has meant that International Wildlife Consultants have developed an unrivalled knowledge of the ecology and conservation requirements of the saker in the country and are now in a position to advise and assist the Mongolian government in the development of a truly sustainable saker falcon trade. This process is developing at two levels, the first is the practical implementation of the Artificial Nest Project that underpins the sustainable harvest, and the second is the development of policy and a regulatory framework to manage and operate a sustainable falcon trade. The latter may be more difficult to achieve than the former!

Since 2002, International Wildlife Consultants have been investigating the potential of



Photo: Dimitar Ragyov

**The sakers at our artificial nests had a higher breeding success than their compatriots breeding in nearby mountain blocks because the artificial nests afforded more protection from the harsh spring weather in Mongolia, a major cause of natural nest failures.**

Photo: Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir







Photo: Nicola Dixon

**The correct location for each nest site is achieved by using GPS navigation.**

increasing the saker breeding population in Mongolia by using artificial nest sites. This form of wildlife management is based on the fact that large areas of steppe grassland in Mongolia are inhabited by sakers that do not breed because there are very few nesting sites available. These sakers can be encouraged to breed by providing them with a suitable nest site. Over the last four years we have been working with the Wildlife Science and Conservation Centre in Mongolia to conduct trials at two experimental areas to identify the most suitable design of nest site and to gather data on occupancy rates, breeding success and survival of sakers using our grids of artificial nest sites. The results have been very encouraging, and the level of occupancy has increased annually at our two study areas, with 20 per cent of artificial nests occupied after 4 years at one site

and 12 per cent after 3 years at a second site.

At current levels of occupancy our research indicates that we can expect a breeding density of at least 5.2 breeding pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup> in habitats with low availability of rodent prey and densities of up to 16.7 breeding pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup> in habitats with high rodent availability. Our nest monitoring has shown that these breeding sakers produce an average of three fledglings per nest. The sakers at our artificial nests had a higher breeding success than their compatriots breeding in nearby mountain blocks because the artificial nests afforded more protection from the harsh spring weather in Mongolia, a major cause of natural nest failures.

In 2009 the Emirates Falconers' Club supported a project to establish 5,000 artificial nests in nest site limited habitats of central Mongolia, to be erected



Photo: Andrew Dixon

in 20 grids of 250 nests over 12 months from November 2009. The artificial nests themselves are simple structures, each comprising half a 60cm diameter barrel, with a steel roof and a side entrance hole. The nest barrel is bolted to a steel plate welded

onto a 3-metre-long metal pole, which is cemented 50cm into the ground. The construction of 5,000 nests represents a serious logistical challenge. The barrels are sourced from a soft drinks manufacturer in Ulaanbaatar (they import concentrated fruit juice in them) and we are buying all the empty barrels the factory produces for a year! To cut the barrels we shall use over 40,000 cutting discs. We need 1.5 km of steel pipe to erect the nests together with 20,000 sets of nuts, bolts and 40,000 steel washers. We have a team working at temperatures of minus 30°C throughout the Mongolian winter to construct the barrels in our rented workshop, so that they will be ready for the erection

the correct locations. However, despite these challenges our biologists and nest construction teams in Mongolia are enthusiastic about a project that has

falcons after 4 years, depending on the local availability of rodents. Our target is to have 500 pairs of sakers producing around 1,500 fledglings at our 5,000



Photo: Sandy Crichton

**Above: Working throughout the Mongolian winter in temperatures of -30°C the team will construct 5,000 artificial nest barrels.**

artificial nests by 2015. This newly created breeding population would represent a 10-25 per cent increase in the Mongolian population. Harvest quotas could be based on annual productivity of this population and the fee charged to falcon trappers could include a 'conservation levy' to support the maintenance and monitoring of the artificial nests and to provide direct benefits to local communities. A well-regulated CITES trade from Mongolia can play an important role in combating the international illegal trade by reducing the demand for illicit wild-caught sakers. No less significantly, this project to produce sakers by the barrel will heighten awareness of falcon conservation issues in Mongolia and amongst falconers in the Middle East. ■