

Falcons



A home of their own: recognising that saker falcons will not build their own nests, a project has provided them with artificial ones in Mongolia, allowing trade in the prized hunting birds to continue. Courtesy Andrew Dixon

Abu Dhabi helps Mongolian falcon revival

Fake nests across the steppe

Capital's joint Dh8.6m programme with local conservation group and UK company spreads artificial breeding roosts over 10,000 sq km

Anna Zacharias

BAYAN SOUM, MONGOLIA // On the road south to the Gobi desert, Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir cuts a left on to a spider web of dirt roads. Whistling along to an Abba song, he scans the steppes for nests, binoculars at the ready. In the distance, there is a single structure in a fragrant field of wild grass and white flowers: a turquoise barrel atop a crooked pole. It may not look like much, but to the saker falcon it's home. To conservationists such as Mr Purev-Ochir, it is hope. The recycled juice barrel is one of

5,000 artificial nests erected across the steppe last year in a breeding project introduced by the UAE and Mongolian governments. "Our project really wants to produce conservation through sustainable trade," says Mr Purev-Ochir, the project leader of the Mongolian team. "We will have a number for export based on the chicks that we are checking. It's a good estimation, a real estimation." Since 1993, Mongolia has traded saker falcons to the Middle East, where the birds are prized by Bedouin hunters. Since the break-up of the Soviet

Union, trapping grounds that were once limited to Pakistan and North Africa have expanded to Central Asia – a situation that has not benefited the bird's population. Mongolia is the exception. Saker populations are believed to be stable. Trade is transparent and follows the framework of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites), with an export quota of 300 birds last year. The saker falcon (or *falco cherrug*) is listed as a globally vulnerable species by Cites, downgraded from endangered last year. But the bird can be traded as long as there is no effect on the wild population. Cites considered banning the trade in Mongolia in 2009 because there were no population estimates available, so it was impossible to determine whether the population was being harmed. But things changed last month when Cites ruled to continue the

saker falcon trade based on the results of the Dh8.6 million breeding project implemented by the Environmental Agency – Abu Dhabi, in association with the Wildlife Science and Conservation Centre of Mongolia and the UK's International Wildlife Consultants. In July, the Cites animal committee recommended Mongolia maintain its quota of 300 birds this year. The country can set its own quotas from next year on. The programme's first-year results show that 174 saker falcon pairs had an average brood size of 3.1 fledglings in the nests built over 10,000 square kilometres. A slightly rusted bin on a three-metre pole may seem like a step down from a rocky perch in the Gobi desert, but the birds share a problem faced by many couples: they must find the right home before they can start a family. "We're thinking there is a big non-breeding population of sakers,

that's why we put nests there," Mr Purev-Ochir says. The nests cater to the notoriously lazy nature of the saker, which does not build its own nest but takes over those of ravens and buzzards. Artificial nests on the steppe come with a steady diet of Brandt's vole, the Mongolian gerbil, horned larks and Mongolian larks. The programme is forecast to produce an estimated 1,500 chicks from 500 saker pairs by 2015. Sakers are prized by falconers from the Gulf and Syria who fly to Mongolia for the trapping season between July and October. Trappers prefer strong and broad-shouldered females, which are larger, better hunters and more aggressive. The younger the better: their instincts are wild but they can still be easily trained and managed. Trappers must buy permits from Mongolia's environment ministry that specify when, where and how many sakers can be trapped.

Mongolia exported 3,141 sakers between 1997 and last year, and 99 per cent went directly to the Gulf and Syria. The number of illegally exported sakers, gyrfalcons and peregrine was thought to be at least 3,900 in that same period. "There are still some problems because buyers don't want microchips," Mr Purev-Ochir says. "They say they're not wild." He has helped to microchip 594 saker chicks from 172 nests this year. Last year, 612 nestlings were microchipped. Microchips are now placed near the flank feathers, where they are hard to find and impossible to take out without damaging the feathers, making it difficult for the birds to be resold if smuggled. Scientists hope the microchip can become a trademark of the bird's standard and a falconer's commitment to the sport.

✉ azacharias@thenational.ae

Grasslands // Rodents

Fewer voles won't bother herders

Anna Zacharias

BAYAN SOUM // Life was made miserable by the Brandt's vole in the Bayan soum district. Although only 15 centimetres in length, the rodent wreaked havoc on herders by burrowing through the steppe grasslands where livestock grazed. The Bayan soum municipality turned to pesticides, a costly option for a community dependent on land. A solution presented itself in 2006 when 250 artificial nests were erected on the steppe for saker falcons, buzzards, kestrels and ravens as part of a raptor breeding project involving Environmental Agency – Abu Dhabi. Studies of five nests show the falcons each eat 24 voles a day. "Before the project this was the worst area for the rodents," says Guasendorg, the soum (district) leader. "The project has been here for the last five years and since this time the pasture has grown because the rodent population is very good. "Before we used pesticides; now we will never use them again." Livestock is life in Bayan soum. Over half of the soum's 650 families live in the countryside and breed cows, camels, horses, goats and sheep. It is a typical demographic for Mongolia, where 40 per cent of the population are nomadic. The soum's 1,011 herders live in gers made from sheep's wool, and eat mutton and dairy products from their herd.

Most earn an income with the sale of cashmere wool, and from meat and home-made dairy products. Livestock also attract the Brandt's vole, which prefers the short grass where animals graze. Herders regard the vole as a threat to their livelihood. "It is a very old culture, the nomadic culture," says Guasendorg, who like many Mongolians uses one name. Thanks to the artificial nests project, the rodent population has been stable for the past three years. "Of course we want more raptors because they will keep benefiting nature, and if the pasture is good it's good for the nomadic herders." The soum saved on pesticides,

which cost up to 10 million tugrik (Dh29,750) a year. A trapper's permit costs 14.5m tugrik, of which the province receives a portion. Last year's sale of three birds from the soum made 3.5m tugrik. Now the project has expanded to an area of 10,000 square kilometres, its success will depend on the support of local soum rangers and herders. "All the people here are rangers," Guasendorg says. "All people here watch the nature. Here, everybody knows about saker. The falcon is very strong bird, people like it."

✉ azacharias@thenational.ae



Tamir Jamsran with his three-month-old baby Tenn Tamir and relatives from the city outside his ger. Anna Zacharias / The National

Falcons // Biology

Scientist casts a wide shadow

With help from locals, raptors expert keeps close eye on project

Anna Zacharias

BAYAN SOUM // Herders have an expression in the Bayan soum: "Don't show your shadow on the falcon's nest." Amarkuu Gungaa does not follow that advice. The raptor scientist can often be found on the Mongolian steppes in a Soviet-era Furlong van, tagging falcon chicks and collecting pellet samples. It is something of a bloodsport and he has the scars to prove it. "Saker falcons are very strong, very huge birds," says Mr Gungaa, 23. "But the raptor is my hobby, it is my life." Mr Gungaa, a master's student at Mongolia National University, has worked with the artificial nest project for five years. He spends his summers in the project's "biology ger", which serves as a laboratory. For him, pellet dissection is a kind of zen exercise, best done with classical Mongolian music, akin to opera, playing in the background. "Pellet analysis is very difficult in the city," he says. "You can't concentrate with all the noise. In the field it's relaxed and we just watch the raptors fly by." The scientists live next door to a nomadic herder family: Tamir



Amarkuu Gungaa and a colleague dissect falcon pellets in their ger lab. Anna Zacharias / The National

Falcons have become integral as a form of biological pest control

Jamsran and his wife Byambasuren Pureutheren, who offered them food and shelter when they were lost chasing falcons on a cold November night in 2006. They were invited to return the next evening and soon agreed to set up their biology ger beside them. "If they need our help we are always open to help," Mr Jamsran says. The family live off dairy and meat products, and are famous for their boiled yogurt. Occasionally they sell wool and make felt. They sell food to the biologists, who bring water and supplies from the city. Without the wisdom and help of the herders, the artificial nest project would not be possible. Mr Jamsran's family move their ger tent four times a year, packing up all of their belongings, house included, into a 4x4. When they move, the biology ger moves too. Mr Jamsran, a soft-spoken man who wears riding boots and Adidas track pants, keeps 500 sheep, 30 cows and 40 horses. He and his wife welcome the project as biological pest control but want more regulation over trappers from the Gulf in summer. "The reproduction of the voles is very fast," Mr Jamsran says. "Now when you see the pasture you won't find any voles, but a few years ago it wasn't like that. "The bad thing is trappers drive everywhere and we've had trappers who just left their rubbish behind."

✉ azacharias@thenational.ae