

# International Wildlife Consultants



هيئة البيئة - أبوظبي  
Environment Agency - ABU DHABI

## Saker Reintroduction in Bulgaria



### History

The Saker Falcon was a common bird in Bulgaria in the past, distributed in open landscapes. Today it is extinct as a breeding species. The last successful breeding attempt was recorded in 1997 and the last active nest in 1998 – the pair laid eggs but failed to raise chicks.

The reasons for the species decline are believed to be mainly anthropogenic, acting over a period of several decades. Persecution of birds of prey in the early part of 20th century seems to have had a great impact on their population. Massive changes in agricultural practices dramatically altered the Bulgarian landscape. Habitat loss occurred through abandonment of lowland grazing or conversion to arable crops, which in turn contributed to the decline of important prey species for Saker Falcons such as the European Soudlik and various grassland birds.

It is likely that organochlorine pesticides had some detrimental impact on the Saker Falcon population in Bulgaria, and may have significantly contributed to its disappearance in lowland agricultural regions.

In the 1970's there was a resurgence in falconry in western Europe, which was accompanied by an increased demand for falcons. Falcons were needed not just for falconry but to stock the newly established breeding centres that were being created to meet the demand for falcons from European falconers.

During the 1970's to 1990's Saker Falcons and Peregrines were taken from many nests in central and eastern Europe, reducing the breeding success of wild populations that had already been badly affected by pesticides and other negative factors.



www.deepwildphoto.com  
Oscar Dominguez

### Surveys

In 2005, Saker Falcon breeding numbers in Bulgaria were estimated to be less than 5 breeding pairs, though no nests had been found since 1998. Teams from several organizations, coordinated by the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research (IBER), performed large scale surveys across Bulgaria at former breeding sites and in areas with suitable habitats. More than 10% of Bulgaria was investigated. Over 500 raptor territories were revealed, Long-legged Buzzards, Golden Eagles, Ravens, Peregrines, and Egyptian Vultures were found but no breeding Saker Falcons were detected. To date, no Saker nests have been reported in Bulgaria and the species is considered extinct as a breeding bird.

### Workshops

Three specialist raptor meetings were organized in Bulgaria during 2009-2010. The first was an international meeting held in 2006 aiming to

- present the current Saker Falcon research activities in Southeast Europe;
- discuss and coordinate Saker Falcon conservation activities in the future;
- create partnerships in Bulgaria for better protection of the species.

### Feasibility study : Saker Falcon reintroduction

A feasibility study regarding a Saker Falcon reintroduction programme in Bulgaria was undertaken and published on-line. Multidisciplinary and international teams participated in the preparation of the feasibility study including The Central Laboratory of General Ecology, Green Balkans Federation, International Wildlife Consultants (UK) Ltd, Institute of Zoology, National Museum of Natural History and the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research. The feasibility study is based on IUCN criteria for reintroduction and includes the following issues:

- Historical Saker Falcon population status
- Reasons for decline and extinction
- Possibilities for natural re-colonization
- Biology, ecology and habitat requirements of Saker Falcons
- Release area assessment (15 regions were investigated)
- Best practices and methods in raptor reintroduction
- Taxonomy of the Saker Falcon
- Modelling of the effects of harvesting potential donor populations
- Modelling of reintroduced population in Bulgaria

## Preparatory activities regarding Saker Falcon reintroduction

Central Balkan Mountains area (Central Bulgaria) was assessed as the best place for pilot releases of Saker Falcons. Several activities were implemented prior to the release of the birds.

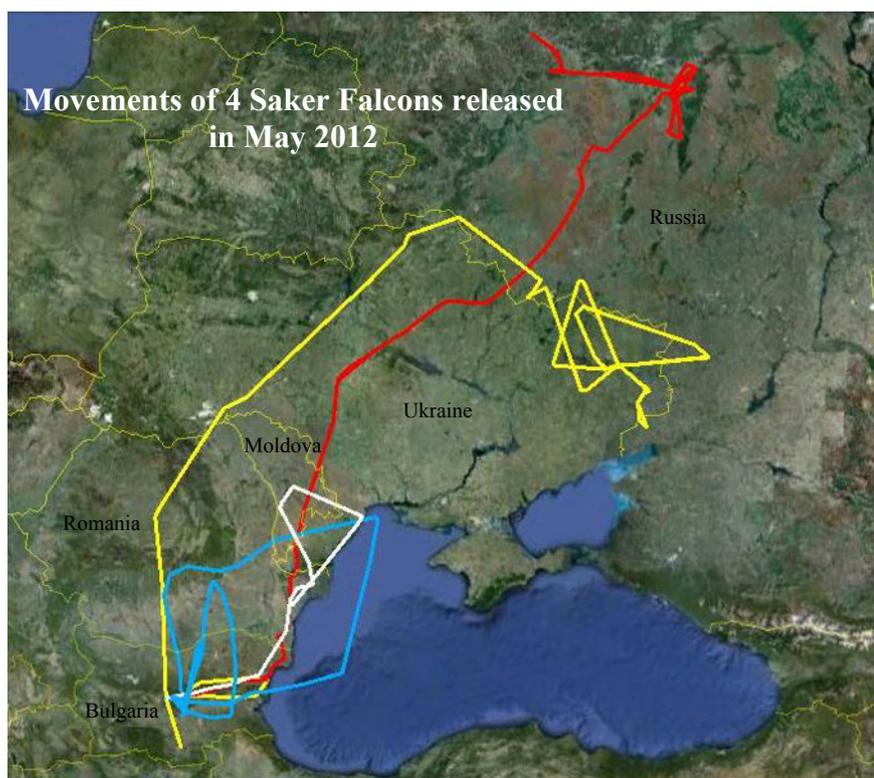
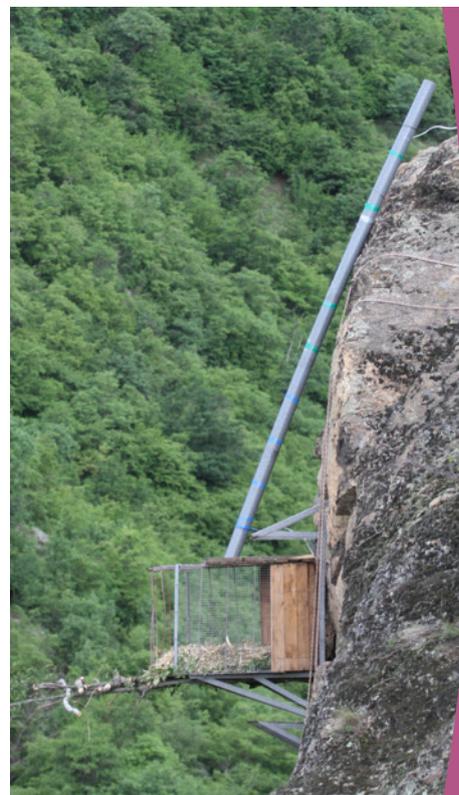
1. Assessment of local opinion towards Saker Falcon and other birds of prey, including hunters and pigeon breeders.
2. Assessment of the risk of mortality caused by electrocution – mapping of risky pylons and poles of middle and low voltage power lines and an assessment of the effect of the power lines on local raptors.
3. European Soudlik study and management – activities toward protection and management of a model Soudlik colony threatened by extinction.
4. Raptor monitoring in the Central Balkan area as an indicator of general conditions of the area for Saker Falcons.

### Release activities

A pilot release project was initiated in 2011 using birds hatched in captivity in breeding centres in Germany and the Czech Republic. Six young Saker Falcons were released in the Central Balkan National Park using the hacking method. They were equipped with satellite transmitters that records data on their movements and survival. Four days after the release the birds were recorded hunting insects in the air and on the ground.

In 2012 another group of 4 young Saker Falcons was released in the same spot. The birds spent 4 weeks at the hacking area improving their flying and hunting skills. On 3rd of July all the birds started their post fledgling dispersal. Two of them made long excursions and came back in the vicinity of the release area suggesting that they recognise the hack area as their natal home. Five weeks after dispersal 1 bird reached Russia (near Moscow) and established 2 Temporary Settlement Area (TSA) during its travels, one established a TSA in Romanian Dobrogea, another established a TSA in Central Bulgaria in the vicinity of town of Stara Zagora and the forth bird settled in East Ukraine for several days.

The pilot release aims not only to support the species restoration to the country but to obtain valuable information about the hidden threats for the species in Bulgaria; collect data about the survival of the reintroduced birds and collect movement and habitat use data.



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