

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

Sustainable Conservation of the Saker Falcon



The Bedouin falconry tradition probably extends back over thousands of years and is based around the annual migration seasons of the Saker falcon and its prey. Sakers migrate south in winter, to the Arab Peninsula, along with Houbara Bustards and Stone Curlew. The Bedouins learned to trap the Sakers, train them rapidly, and hunt bustards and curlew. As the warmer weather of spring heralded the northward migration, the trained Sakers were released back into the wild. This entirely sustainable custom was practiced from time immemorial.

At the turn of the 21st Century, some populations of Saker falcons were noted to be declining. The decline coincided with an increase in the popularity of falconry as a cultural heritage in the Gulf region, and was initially associated with measurably increasing legal and illegal trade in Sakers.

As a reaction, the United Arab Emirates decided to cease using wild-taken Saker falcons and to opt for

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

captive-bred birds; this resulted that at least 95% of falconry birds used in the Emirates are captive-bred. The Emirate of Abu Dhabi led the response to investigate the cause for the decline and efforts to restore the iconic Saker falcon. As the availability of nest-sites is the limiting factor to Sakers breeding in the Eurasian steppes, the Emirate of Abu Dhabi developed a project to create 5,000 artificial nest boxes in Mongolia. In the process, it was noted that huge numbers of Saker falcons, and other raptors, were electrocuted on medium voltage electricity distribution lines that snaked across the endless rolling steppe. The poles of these lines provided the only elevated perching points for birds of prey; poor pole design made them perfect raptor killing machines.

Research was undertaken to establish the magnitude of this decimation and the results were horrific; approximately 10,000 raptors, of which 4,000 are Saker falcons, are electrocuted annually in Mongolia alone. This can be extrapolated across the immense Saker distribution range, which extends from Hungary in the west, to China in the East, and from Siberia to East Africa. The electrocution is selective of larger birds, so more female Sakers than males are killed. Clearly such losses are unsustainable.

Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the disappearance of the huge collective grain farms. The resulting habitat change caused a decline in the numbers of rodents used by Sakers to feed their chicks. Other raptors were also affected, but their declines have largely gone unnoticed, although the Steppe eagle was recently reclassified in the IUCN Red List from *Least Concern* to *Endangered*.

In 2011, the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) faced a call to up-list the Saker falcon from Appendix II to Appendix I, citing unsustainable illegal trafficking as the cause. This position was by challenged by IAF, FACE and CIC and lead to the recognition of electrocution as principle cause for the decline; habitat change and illegal trade were considered other contributing factors. The value of the artificial nest project in Mongolia was recognized, and this population was retained in Appendix II, allowing to a limited sustainable harvest. Following this agreement, the Saker Task Force was established under the CMS Raptors MoU. The task force developed the Global Action Plan for the Saker Falcon, which incorporates the principle of sustainable use into the conservation plan. The plan was accepted by the CMS CoP in 2014.

The establishment of the 5,000 artificial nests in Mongolia resulted in over 500 of these being occupied by breeding Saker falcons by 2014. About 2,500 young birds are now produced annually. Since the Saker is a particularly fecund species, a 10% harvest of young birds is completely sustainable. Political change in Mongolia resulted in a moratorium on the export of Saker falcons, however, and there is ongoing controversy relating to issues of governance and transparency.

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.



Steppe Eagle, *Aquila nipalensis*. Photo Credit: Korsh Ararat, NatureIraq

The CMS CoP accepted the principle of conservation through sustainable use in 2011. The Saker Project provides a practical example of the implementation of this principle. At the BirdLife Flyways Conference in Abu Dhabi in April 2018, during a one-day symposium on the implementation of the CMS Saker Falcon Global Action Plan, the issues of conservation through sustainable use were discussed and received a measure of acceptance.

Assessment of Current Trade: Reliable estimates of the numbers of Saker falcons traded are not available, but it has been estimated that 6,000 and 9,000 Sakers, mostly young females, have been imported annually to the Gulf region. Since illegal trafficking also causes significant mortalities during trapping and smuggling at least a 5% this mortality rate must be added to the import figure. This certainly contributed to the observed population declines.

The falconry community is seriously concerned about this situation, not only because of its negative reflection on falconry, but also because of our conservation commitment and our concerns for the

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

Saker.

Assessment of the Pros and Cons of a Legal Harvest: Since illegal harvest is a significant factor in the Saker population decline and that this is undesirable and unacceptable, we need to consider the following alternatives:

1. Termination of the practice of falconry, recalling that this was proposed by the Council for Bird Preservation in 1975.
2. Increased enforcement for an international ban on all trade in wild Saker falcons. Thus, no legal harvest would be permitted.
3. Encouragement on a monitored sustainable legal harvest of Saker falcons where harvest quotas are scientifically determined and balanced by conservation actions that increase or sustain existing Saker populations.
4. Disincentivize the use of wild-taken falcons and replace these with captive bred falcons (demand reduction).



Photo Credit: International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey

It is evident that no single approach is ideal. Realistically, we would propose that measures to address the unsustainable illegal trafficking in Saker falcons should include elements of points 2, 3 and 4.

There are a range of conservation actions which can affect the conservation status of the Saker falcon. The ultimate objective would be downlisting the IUCN Red List status of the Saker falcon from *Endangered* to *Least Concern*. That this is achievable, has been demonstrated by successful falconer-led efforts to restore the Peregrine falcon. This bird of prey was decimated by pesticides in the 1960s; now the Peregrine is considered *Least Concern*.

Recognition of the importance of sustainable use in the conservation of the species is, however, essential. In 2016, efforts to downlist the Peregrine falcon at the CITES CoP failed, despite its

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

improved conservation status, and despite of good supporting scientific evidence that the species not under threat by illegal trade.

The Saker falcon is highly valued by falconers in the Gulf region; it is, therefore, reasonable to expect that significant funding will be made available to develop and implement Saker conservation efforts.

Additionally, recognition of the Saker as a “natural asset” within range states will result in conservation measures benefitting local communities, supporting habitat improvement and restricting illegal trade:

- **Reduction of electrocution through mitigation, remediation and correct design of new distribution lines.** Recognizing electrocution as the single most significant factor in the collapse of the Saker, the Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund led the research for solutions and corrective measures, providing \$1,000,000 to initiate the process in Mongolia and other range states. Measures to mitigate dangerous distribution line poles have been developed at a cost of \$20 per pole. If a conservative estimate shows that currently 4,000 Sakers are electrocuted per annum, a reduction of 80% would introduce 3,600 additional birds into the environment annually. It will also correct a gender imbalance, as electrocution selectively kills the larger females. These results may be extrapolated across the Saker distribution range.
- **Provision of artificial nests.** The success of the Mongolian Nest Project demonstrated the existence of a large population of floating non-breeding birds, limited by nest site availability. Artificial nest provision can create new breeding populations and potential exists for this in China, Kazakhstan and further west. An artificial nest project is under way on the Tibetan Plateau to restore resident Saker falcons as natural rodent control.
- **Modification of the environment.** The disappearance of collective grain farms along with progressive desertification and the use of rodenticides has reduced populations of rodents as prey base for breeding Sakers and their chicks. This situation can be reversed with support by local communities who may come to see the Saker as an asset.
- **Conversion of illegal trafficking to legal trade.** Unregulated and unsupervised illegal trafficking results in high mortalities and animal welfare issues. Whilst antipathy exists towards the commodification of wildlife, such antipathy is unacceptable, if legal trade benefits local communities, results in fewer mortalities and improved welfare. Legal trade can regulate excessive trapping of larger female birds as well as the trapping of mature breeding birds. Falconers desire “passage” falcons taken on their first migration. Such birds have developed flying and hunting skills, but have the mental plasticity to rapidly adapt to falconry training. Trapping occurs along migration routes, such as in Pakistan, which are distant from the breeding areas further north. There is a need to incentivize local communities along these routes so that they benefit from the regulated harvest and will oppose illegal traffickers who poach their resource.

The Saker falcon is the only currently endangered raptor popular with falconers. The threats to the Saker are not primarily related to overharvesting, as was initially proposed. To solve the problem, falconers must be incentivized to champion Saker conservation. The development of a sustainable legal harvest based on calculated yearly surplus of young Sakers as a result of conservation measures will be

by Adrian Lombard, President, International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

a workable solution.

It will require broad support and determination from the conservation community to succeed. Many other species of steppe raptors will benefit from the measures taken as these other raptors silently disappeared along with the Saker.