



THE SOOTY FALCON

Sooty Falcon (*Falco concolor*) © Eyal Bartov

NAMES AND GENERAL TRAITS

- Scientific: *Falco concolor*
- Arabic: صقر أسخم
- English: Sooty Falcon
- French: Faucon Concolore

The Sooty Falcon is a medium-sized bird of prey with long and narrow wings. It displays a dark plumage in its adult stage and a brownish-grey one when young.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Owing to its population being considered a single, small and declining one, the Sooty Falcon has been classified by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as 'Vulnerable' since 2017. However, information on its population and ecology is largely considered fragmented and incomplete.

Under CMS and CITES, the species is classified as follows:

- CMS Appendix II, since 1979
- Raptors MOU Category 1, since 2008
- CITES Appendix II, since 1975

POPULATION SIZE

Sooty Falcon population estimates have been widely varying and inconsistent. Using the best information available on the species, the International Single Species Action Plan for the Sooty Falcon 2024-2036 has estimated the global number of mature individuals at 2,298-3,194.

Threats at Breeding and Migrating Sites

Around breeding sites, human disturbance and development are thought to be the most significant factors contributing to the decline of Sooty Falcons. These factors are believed to particularly impact birds nesting in coastal areas (e.g., in Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia). For instance, research has suggested that the development of tourism infrastructure, housing and shrimp farms on the islands of the Arabian Red Sea has resulted in the loss of suitable habitat for the species to nest.

Habitat loss due to development may also reduce the availability of habitat preferred by migrating passerines, which are prey of the Sooty Falcon. As Sooty Falcons are specialised predators, declines in their prey populations are likely to affect their survival.

Threats are also a concern along the Sooty Falcon's migratory route. For example, one such threat is the increased use of chemical compounds for insect and Red-billed Quelea (*Quelea quelea*). These compounds can cause primary, though more often secondary poisoning.

Habitat alteration linked to agricultural expansion, intensification and deforestation is also likely to affect Sooty Falcons, both directly and indirectly, by reducing the availability of insects that are their main source of food outside of the breeding period.

Lastly, intrinsic factors, such as the relatively low survival rate of young birds, can result in fewer birds joining the breeding population, potentially leading to a decrease in the population's size. Radio-tagging of Sooty Falcons in Oman in 2007-2014 (McGrady et al. 2016) found that only about 12% of young birds survived until the age at which they could breed. That research also found that most deaths occurred during the birds' first year of life, either during migration or shortly after arriving at non-breeding sites.

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CONSERVATION NEEDS

There is an urgent need to invest in monitoring of the species so that robust data on its population can be obtained. It is necessary to undertake annual monitoring of reproductive colonies to be able to identify population trends, the composition of nesting populations, their productivity and the percentage of floaters.

Additionally, monitoring surveys should also be promoted and conducted in areas where the status of the species is not clearly understood and where nesting population densities have not yet been mapped (especially in inland desert areas of Egypt, Libya, Jordan and Saudi Arabia). Research using tagged birds from different nesting populations should be promoted to understand migration routes, individual survival rates, and the contribution of each population to maintaining the global number of active pairs.

To protect important breeding colonies, human access should be restricted in those areas. Measures should also be taken to counteract direct persecution and theft of eggs and young individuals, and to limit tourist activities near nests. When designing and developing tourism infrastructure, every possible mitigation action (e.g. creation of buffer zones, facilitating the recolonisation of adjacent areas using nest-boxes) should be taken to reduce impacts on breeding pairs and their productivity.

In migration and wintering sites, foraging areas should be identified, and the possible effects of the extensive use of chemical compounds in local agriculture, as well as the loss of suitable habitat and prey, should be analysed.

DISTRIBUTION RANGE

Sooty Falcons are notable long-distance migrant species that choose to breed in some of the most desolate and inhospitable environments of the planet. They can nest in open deserts with rocky outcrops, arid mountainous regions, desert archipelagos or islands.

Sooty Falcons have a patchy and highly localised breeding pattern, nesting in the deserts of West Asia and North Africa, in Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, but also in the Red Sea islands and coasts south to Eritrea and Yemen, and in the islands of Oman to Qatar.

As a facultative colonial species with a delayed breeding phenology, the Sooty Falcon can rear its chicks during the post-breeding migration of passerines from Eurasia to Arabia and Africa.

Towards the end of the breeding season, both juvenile and adult birds undertake a migration to South-eastern Africa and the Malagasy region, where they are known to winter. Sooty Falcons also adapt their diet according to the season, shifting from avian prey during the breeding season to predominantly feeding on insects during the boreal winter.



Photos: Preferred wintering (left; © Canva.com) and breeding habitats of the Sooty Falcon (middle: © Meidad Goren; right: © Eyal Bartov).

About CMS

The Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), also known as the Bonn Convention, is an environmental treaty of the United Nations that provides a global platform for the conservation and sustainable use of terrestrial, aquatic and avian migratory animals and their habitats.

CMS Instruments

Animals receive protection under CMS through listing on its two Appendices, through global or regional agreements and through action plans. The Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Birds of Prey in Africa and Eurasia (Raptors MOU) is the CMS instrument devoted to the conservation of this group of species.

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For more Fact Sheets please visit: <http://www.cms.int/en/publications/factsheets>



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