

Saker Falcon Task Force Teleconference

24 June 2020 14:00 – 15:30 (UAE time, UTC+4)

Summary Note

Participants:

| Range States | Name |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Armenia | Dr. Karen Aghababyan |
| Hungary | Mr. Mátyás Prommer |
| India | Dr. Suresh Kumar |
| Iran (Islamic Rep. of) | Mr. Mohammad Asghari Tabari |
| Kazakhstan | Dr. Sergey Sklyarenko |
| Saudi Arabia | Prof. Mohammed Shobrak |
| Slovakia | Dr. Peter Puchala |
| Ukraine | Dr. Maxim Gavriluk |
| United Arab Emirates | Dr. Salim Javed |
| Partner Organisations | |
| BirdLife International | Dr. Vicky Jones |
| CITES | Mr. Johannes Stahl |
| CMS | Dr. Tilman Schneider |
| CMS Appointed Councillor (Connectivity/Networks) | Dr. Fernando Spina |
| Independent researcher | Dr. Andrew Dixon |
| International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF) | Mr. Janusz Sielicki |
| IUCN-Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM) | Prof. Robert Kenward |
| UNEP/Regional Office for West Asia | Ms. Etaf Chehade |
| Coordinating Unit | |
| STF Chair | Prof. Colin Galbraith |
| STF Technical Advisor (designate) | Mr. Andras Kovacs |
| SakerGAP Coordinator (designate) | Dr. Robert Sheldon |
| Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU | Mr. Lyle Glowka / Ms. Sofi Hinchliffe |

Apologies: European Commission

Also Invited: Bahrain, China, Iraq, Mongolia, Pakistan, Qatar, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, European Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation (FACE) and Siberian Environmental Center (Russia).

1. Welcome, introductions and purpose of the teleconference

The Chair Prof. Colin Galbraith welcomed the Saker Falcon Task Force (STF) members to the teleconference and thanked everyone for joining the meeting. He noted that this is a critical point, half way through the implementation timeframe for the Saker Global Action Plan (SakerGAP) which runs from 2015-2024. The purpose of the meeting was to update on actions taken so far, and to get the STF view on key priorities that can be taken forward for the next phase of implementation, keeping in mind resource limitations.

2. Context and update on recent actions

a) CMS Conference of the Parties and related side events

A side event on the Saker Falcon was held during the CMS COP13 in India, to update on key actions under the SakerGAP. Details of the meeting including presentations can be found on the [CMS Raptors MOU website](#).

b) Update on Raptor MOU Staffing situation

Lyle Glowka gave a short update on CMS Office Abu Dhabi operational issues. Nick Williams resigned his post as the Raptors MOU Programme Officer in February 2020. The advertisement of the new post will be circulated to all stakeholders once online. The Coordinating Unit (CU) of the Raptors MOU has since been working to identify key areas of work to advance, including on the Saker Falcon. The extension of the partnership agreement between CMS and Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi (EAD) (2020-2023), was signed during COP13 in February 2020. In mid-March, CMS Office – Abu Dhabi moved into new offices provided by EAD.

c) Update from Task Force members

Matyas Prommer updated the group on a recent genetic study which has found that the eastern and western Saker populations may be two separate species. The Russian and Mongolian Saker Falcon populations are genetically closer to (Russian) Gyrfalcons than to the Central European Saker population. This has potential implications on the taxonomy and may therefore have an impact on the species conservation strategy. Further analysis is planned with additional samples to be collected throughout the breeding range.

Action 1: Matyas to keep STF informed of the genetic work going forward and circulate the publication when available.

Karen Aghababyan reported that in a recent study, evidence of Saker breeding in Armenia was found. The question remains if these are indigenous populations of Sakers within Armenia or they could be escapees from falconry.

Andrew Dixon updated the group on his work since the last STF meeting, including authorship of six publications (see Annex 1). Papers relating to electrocution at power lines in Mongolia investigated the efficiency of different remediation techniques and demographic impact of electrocution on the Mongolian Saker population. One paper was on the Green Balkan's pilot project in Bulgaria (now supported by Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund), looking at the survival and movements of captive bred Sakers and its potential application for reintroduction in Bulgaria. A single breeding pair has been recorded in Bulgaria each year since 2018, involving 3 different birds – all of which were released in this pilot project. Other

genomic work with Institute of Zoology of Beijing includes the development of microsatellite markers that can be used for individual identification which are now being applied to a breeding turnover study. Another paper identified a mechanism facilitating rapid adaptation in the Saker arising from mutations in the process of RNA transcription. He is also undertaking a review of the conservation status of the Saker in China, which is the most important range state. An ongoing project on the evolutionary history of Sakers and Gyrfalcons found that there is a lot of linkage and shared demographic history between Eastern Sakers and Gyrfalcons.

Mohammed Shobrak updated the group regarding structural changes to the Saudi Wildlife Authority (SWA) including appointment of the new President. SWA has been collecting data on trapping in the Gulf region and numbers have been reducing since a peak in 2014-2016. This could be a result of SWA patrolling the Red Sea coast in a key trapping area and reducing the amount of hunting. SWA produced some brochures on Saker Falcon and the SakerGAP for trappers and other stakeholders. He noted that it is important to look at the membership of the STF and to include more falconry clubs.

Salim Javed mentioned the new 400kV power line being constructed in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman (part of the GCC grid). He noted that it was important to be proactive and see how the STF can engage with the project to minimise the risk of electrocution on connecting distribution lines.

Vicky Jones reported that Birdlife has been supporting the European Red List Assessment of birds and it is likely that the EU population status of Saker will be raised from *Vulnerable* to *Endangered*. Population declines have been reported from Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia and Turkey. The Birdlife partner in Hungary are preparing an EU LIFE proposal to assess some of the threats and research needed.

Karen Aghababyan reported on a key threat in Armenia of the poisoning of raptors mainly by those involved in pigeon breeding.

Robert Kenward gave an update on [Sakernet](#), originally set up as a multilingual information platform and to facilitate a survey of falconers, trappers and falcon hospitals in 2015. There has been increasing interest since 2015 with around 17,000 visits in total. IAF recently upgraded the site to add five additional languages. The site lists the falcon hospitals and main points of contact with falconers and trappers throughout the region. The system is now functioning as a hub, with satellite websites from different regions. It was planned in the SakerGAP to use Sakernet as a way to develop the Saker Adaptive Management Framework (AMF), but this has not moved forward as yet.

Janusz Sielicki provided an update on IAF's electrocution work which includes the website [Bird Electrocution](#). The website contains information on preventing avian electrocution including a brochure in 14 different languages. IAF joined the CMS Energy Task Force and electrocution is now a key priority. In 2019, IAF in collaboration with the International Finance Corporation of World Bank (IFC) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), created a simple guide for non-specialists to understand how to prevent bird electrocution. IFC and EBRD are already using the guide internally, and IFC may adopt it as an official document by the end of the year.

Suresh Kumar reported via email that India has been taking active steps in the conservation of the Saker Falcon which is generally regarded as a passage migrant, however, there are recent reports of small populations breeding in the north western part of India along the border with China. Efforts are being made to survey these areas with the local forest department to assess the status of the species along with other breeding raptors in the region. Studies have also been undertaken in the State of Gujarat in collaboration with power companies to assess powerline impacts on birds of prey. Large populations of Steppe and Imperial Eagle and other raptors winter in this region and there have been records of Saker Falcons that are possibly on passage. Addressing issues related to electrocution in this area has been a priority.

Slovakia reported via email that the population of Saker Falcon is only distributed in the Western and Eastern parts of the country. Altogether 32 breeding attempts were recorded in 2020 with more than 100 juveniles. The population is very fragile and dependent on human assistance (all pairs breeding in nest boxes on electric pylons). The NGO, Raptor Protection of Slovakia has been carrying out a systematic survey of the species and threats for over 30 years with active implementation of mitigation measures. Particular conservation actions are implemented (installation of nest boxes, improvement of quality and availability of natural prey sources, eliminating and preventing threats) as well as policy measures. Increased attention is being paid to the problem of electrocution in Slovakia, as a result of which 62,000 power line pylons have been mitigated so far, around one third (18,000) stand in the home territories of the Saker Falcon. The most significant current threats to maintaining stability and nesting success rates of the Saker Falcon population in Slovakia include intensive agricultural practices, and bird crime activities, primarily poisoning.

3. Priority work areas

a) Developing the Adaptive Management Framework

The STF agreed that this is still a key priority and that it will form a small sub-group to discuss how to take the work forward. Tilman Schneider updated the STF on recent findings under CMS work on Illegal Killing, Trapping and Trade of Wild Birds (IKB). According to the IKB scoreboard assessment, the largest gaps occur in the law enforcement and prosecution and sentencing components. It has been reported under other processes/projects that illegal killing and taking of wildlife has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating that this is related to a decrease in enforcement during this period.

Andrew Dixon noted that there was one model under consideration for the AMF, the mark recapture technique but little consideration of the artificial nest initiative. CMS excluded the Mongolian population from Appendix I listing on the basis of the implementation of the artificial nest programme. He highlighted that an artificial nest management system can help meet the principle set out in SakerGAP Objective 2 to ensure that the taking of wild Sakers is legal, controlled and sustainable.

Action 2: CU to organise a discussion group meeting on AMF with Fernando Spina, Robert Kenward, Vicky Jones, CITES, Janusz Sielicki, Mohammed Shobrak, Andrew Dixon, Karen Aghababyan, Andras Kovacs, Mohammed Tabari and Colin Galbraith.

b) Remediation of dangerous power lines

Janusz Sielicki reported that work is still underway in Mongolia on electrocution with funding from the Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund. Salim Javed noted that there was an international meeting planned in December 2020 but was postponed due to the pandemic. It was suggested that the fund could be invited to participate in the STF as a partner organisation. It was also noted that coordination with the CMS Energy Task Force will be important.

Andrew Dixon noted that emphasis should be on mitigating electrocution on existing dangerous power lines, as new power lines make up a smaller proportion of the network. From the experience in Mongolia, the bottom up approach of working directly with power companies worked well. Fernando Spina agreed that the bottom up approach is more effective.

Robert Kenward noted that Sakernet is one way to incorporate citizen science with the electrocution issue as local communities can be encouraged to look for, and survey, dangerous power lines.

Action 3: CU to invite the Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund to participate as a partner organisation in the STF.

Action 4: CU to organise a discussion group with Janusz Sielicki, Mohammed Shobrak, Salim Javed, Robert Sheldon, Andrew Dixon, Andras Kovacs, Vicky Jones and Colin Galbraith on the issue of electrocution.

c) Monitoring, research and the evidence base

Vicky Jones noted that there were breakout sessions held at the Global Flyway Summit in 2018 which facilitated interesting discussion around these issues. There is further work to do on understanding which threats are most important for Saker.

Andrew Dixon explained that information on China was lacking in the SakerGAP and that it is a critically important country. Andras Kovacs indicated that China was listed as one of the four top priority countries in the SakerGAP, but there was limited data available at the time through the CMS Focal Points. It will be important to engage with China on research and monitoring.

Action 5: STF and CU to look for notes and outputs of the 2018 Global Flyway Summit breakout sessions.

Action 6: STF to target engagement with China as a key range state and identify contacts in China that could be invited to join the STF.

d) Stakeholder engagement

Lyle Glowka noted the importance of having regular meetings of this group and that the CU can also supplement with questionnaires of key activities. Suggested a standing agenda item for horizon scanning for events that STF could engage on. Mohammad Tabari noted that not all groups of stakeholders were identified in the draft paper. Colin invited the STF to send any additional comments on the paper by 13th July.

Action 7: STF to send any further comments on Colin's draft paper by 13th July.

e) Funding

Colin Galbraith emphasised the need to work beyond CMS on funding and asked the group for comments and ideas on how to move forward.

4. Future working practices

Action 8: CU to schedule another meeting of the STF in October 2020.

5. AOB

Janusz Sielicki noted that it will be important for the STF to cooperate with the other CMS Task Forces: Energy Task Force and the Task Force on Illegal Killing, Taking and Trade of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean (MIKT).

Sergey Sklyarenko informed that in Kazakhstan, 2020 is the year of the Saker Falcon.

Colin Galbraith thanked the STF members for their engagement and closed the meeting.

Annex 1: Publications authored by Andrew Dixon

Dixon, A., Batbayar, N., Bold, B., Davaasuren, B., Erdenechimeg, T., Galtbalt, B., Tzolmonjav, P., Ichinkhorloo, S., Gunga, A., Purevochir, G. and Rahman, M.L. 2020. Variation in electrocution rate and demographic composition of Saker Falcons electrocuted at power lines in Mongolia. *Journal of Raptor Research* 54: 136–146.

Dixon, A., Ragyov, D. Izquierdo, D., Weeks, D., Rahman, M. L., Klisurov, I. 2019. Movement and survival of captive-bred Saker Falcons *Falco cherrug* released by wild hacking: implications for reintroduction management. *Acta Ornithologica* 54: 157-170.

Dixon, A., Rahman, M. L., Galtbalt, B., Bold, B., Davaasuren, B., Batbayar, N., Sugarsaikhan, B. 2019. Mitigation techniques to reduce avian electrocution rates. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 43: 476-483.

Dixon, A., Bold, B., Tzolmonjav, P., Galtbalt, B. and Batbayar, N. 2018. Efficacy of a mitigation method to reduce raptor electrocution at an electricity distribution line in Mongolia. *Conservation Evidence* 15: 50-53.

Hou, X., Xu, P., Lin, Z., D'Urban-Jackson, J., Dixon, A., Bold, B., Xu, J. and Zhan, X. 2018. Integrated tool for microsatellite isolation and validation from the reference genome and their application in the study of breeding turnover in an endangered avian population. *Integrative Zoology* 13: 553–668.

Pan, S., Bruford, M.W., Wang, Y., Lin, Z., Gu, Z., Hou, X., Deng, X., Dixon, A., Graves, J. A. M. and Zhan, X. 2018. Transcription-Associated Mutation promotes RNA complexity in highly expressed genes - a major new source of selectable variation. *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 35: 1104-1119.

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