

Fourth Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group | *Online, 13-15 December 2021*

REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAKER FALCON GLOBAL ACTION PLAN

Prepared by the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU

Introduction

1. CMS Resolution 10.28 established the Saker Falcon Task Force (STF) in 2011, under the auspices of the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU, to develop a coordinated Saker Falcon Global Action Plan (SakerGAP), including a management and monitoring system, to conserve the Saker Falcon. The SakerGAP was developed over three years and adopted at CMS COP11 in 2014 by means of CMS Resolution 11.18. The SakerGAP was also endorsed by Signatories to the Raptors MOU at the second Meeting of Signatories (MOS2), held in October 2015. The SakerGAP has been translated into both Arabic and Russian and published on the Raptors MOU website.

2. CMS Resolution 11.18 (Rev. CMS COP12)¹ extended the STF's remit to oversee SakerGAP implementation and recognized that the work of the STF had been a unique and productive partnership employing a transparent consensus-building approach, involving a wide range of parties internationally.

SakerGAP Implementation

3. The overall goal of the SakerGAP is “to re-establish a healthy and self-sustaining wild Saker Falcon population throughout its range, and to ensure that any use is sustainable”, and the plan is envisaged to be implemented over a 10-year period (2015 – 2024). The SakerGAP outlined four Flagship Projects that aimed to fill gaps in knowledge and spur action in key areas to conserve the species. Excellent progress has been made on the four projects, primarily led by collaborating partner organisations, NGOs and experts.

4. Significant financial support was received from the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF) to support the first Flagship Project identified in the SakerGAP, which developed an online information portal (SakerNet) at www.sakernet.org. SakerNet was launched in 2015 in five languages: Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Russian and English. There has been increasing interest with around 17,000 visits to SakerNet in total and IAF recently upgraded the site to add five additional languages. The site lists falcon hospitals and contact points for falconers and trappers throughout the region. The system is now functioning as a hub, with links to satellite websites from different regions.

5. The second Flagship Project (to deploy 100 satellite tags on Saker Falcons) has also seen good progress with, based on the latest published data, at least 79 Saker Falcons satellite tagged in Austria, Bulgaria, China, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Mongolia, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine since 2014. The actual number is likely to be close to the target of 100 tags.

¹ CMS Res.11.18 (Rev.COP12) <https://www.cms.int/en/document/saker-falcon-falco-cherrug-global-actionplan-sakergap>

6. With respect to the third Flagship Project (to erect 1,000 artificial nest platforms for the Saker Falcon), a ground-breaking project led by International Wildlife Consultants UK Ltd and supported by Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi created a managed breeding population in Mongolia occupying some of the 5,000 artificial nests installed. By 2015, there was an average of around 600 breeding pairs of Sakers producing ~2,000 chicks each year. According to report from the Emirates Falconers' Club, two hundred closed box design artificial nests have been erected on Qinghai Tibetan Plateau as part of pilot research by Institute of Zoology in Beijing and partners. The project also utilizes data from artificial nests erected by local authorities (ca. 10,000 across the Qinghai Tibetan Plateau). Artificial nest platforms have also been established in Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

7. Regarding the fourth Flagship Project (to install or retrofit 1,000,000 new or existing bird-safe electricity poles), retrofitting of poles and related activities have been undertaken in Bulgaria, China, Hungary, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Slovakia. Designing and applying bird-safe pole configurations and insulation of existing poles are actively ongoing in several Range States. For example, the MBZRCF is supporting an initiative in Mongolia to remediate up to 34,000 power poles in the steppe zone where nearly 20,000 birds are killed by electrocution annually, including 4,000 Saker Falcons. The initiative has seen impressive results with an expected mortality reduction of 98 per cent. As another example, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) has insulated more than 4.600 powerlines across Bulgaria, to reduce the number of electrocution related deaths.

8. Reintroduction programmes are an important part of the effective conservation of the species and there is an ongoing initiative in Bulgaria being supported by the MBZRCF. The breeding population in the Southern Balkans became extinct in the late 20th Century due to habitat degradation and poaching. The Saker Falcon Reintroduction Programme was launched by the Green Balkans Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre in 2015 to restore breeding populations in areas of Bulgaria where the species was considered to be extinct. Between 2015-2020, Green Balkans released 80 captive bred Saker Falcons into the wild and one pair has successfully bred since 2018.

Saker Falcon Task Force

9. The Fifth Meeting of the STF was held virtually on 24th June 2020 with the aim of getting the STF's view on key priorities that could be taken forward for the next phase of implementation, keeping in mind resource limitations. The STF agreed to prioritise its work under Objective 1 and 2 of the SakerGAP namely (i) reducing the impact of electrocution; and (ii) conceptualising and developing an Adaptive Management Framework (AMF) for the sustainable use of the Saker Falcon. The STF set up two discussion groups in order to facilitate the work. The discussion groups met several times throughout 2020 and drafted Terms of Reference (TORs) for the work of each group.

10. The Coordinating Unit convened the Sixth and Seventh Meetings of the STF on 28th October 2020 and 14th December 2020 respectively where the TORs of each group were discussed².

11. The STF agreed upon the TOR for the Electrocution Discussion Group with the following priority actions:

- a) Stakeholder engagement and communications: raise awareness of and engage with key stakeholders, including CMS Energy Task Force, in preventing construction of dangerous lines and retrofitting of existing dangerous lines.
- b) Request information from all STF members on ongoing and recent (from 2018 on) activities relating to electrocution, effective mitigation techniques and key publications.

² All meeting reports are available on the dedicated webpage of the Saker Falcon Task Force: www.cms.int/raptors/en/workinggroup/saker-falcon-task-force

- c) Review the main principles of best practices and technologies across different geographies and species.
- d) Collate information and identify gaps in knowledge and implementation.

12. The priority actions will focus on the Saker Falcon as the primary species however, these activities will be relevant and beneficial for other species and the group will coordinate actively with other CMS initiatives such as the Energy Task Force. Engagement of stakeholders is key to success of all these actions as well as utilising available channels for outreach and communications. IAF has promoted bird-safe powerline development through their Bird Electrocution website³, brochure⁴ in 14 different languages and quick guide for preventing electrocution⁵. The next steps for this Discussion Group will be to engage a consultant to coordinate activities and develop a practical workplan to implement the priority actions.

The STF's previous work outlined the issues to be addressed in the development of an AMF to ensure that any use is sustainable; and to ensure the overall recovery of the species. This approach identified the importance of following the six key steps inherent in an adaptive management cycle, namely: (i) Plan; (ii) Design; (iii) Act; (iv) Monitor; (v) Evaluate and learn; (vi) Adjust management. By developing such a management system, the intention is to shift the existing unregulated, illegal harvest of Saker Falcons towards a regulated legal one enabling controlled, sustainable harvest of the Saker Falcon in parts of its range, while simultaneously decreasing the overall level of harvest globally and exerting minimal adverse impact on decreasing non-target populations. The AMF Discussion Group developed TORs that have been noted by the STF, however the need to fully take into consideration existing legal frameworks under international conventions (e.g., the Saker Falcon listing on CMS Appendix I) and EU Directives was stressed. The next steps will be to engage a consultant to develop a full programme of work to be endorsed by the STF.

SakerGAP Coordination

13. The SakerGAP identified the need to recruit a coordination team to drive forward its implementation in a coordinated and effective manner. Supporting the Coordinating Unit have been a SakerGAP Coordinator (Rob Sheldon) and an STF Specialist Technical Advisor (András Kovács) who were recruited on a short-term basis between November 2017 and the fourth quarter of 2019 and continued contributing to the process on a voluntary basis to date. In addition, Colin Galbraith has continued to support the process as STF Chair. These individuals and the Head of the Coordinating Unit comprise an informal steering group established by the Coordinating Unit to help guide progress and to support the work of the STF.

14. Changes in the Coordinating Unit's staffing between the end of 2018 and early 2020, and UN administrative rules related to short-term consultants, complicated the advancement of work in 2020 and 2021. But the work of the STF and the two discussion groups did make progress and will be further advanced in 2022.

15. The next milestones for the STF are the Third Meeting of Signatories to the Raptors MOU in 2022, CMS COP14 in 2023, and the SakerGAP review foreseen in 2024.

Action requested:

TAG is requested to take note of this report and is invited to provide ideas and constructive feedback on how to further promote effective implementation of the SakerGAP.

³ <http://birdelectrocution.org/>

⁴ Preventing the Electrocution of Birds on Power Infrastructure https://birdelectrocution.iaf.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/11/2017-IAF-electrocution_booklet_English_LR-1.pdf

⁵ <https://birdelectrocution.org/quick-guidance-preventing-electrocution-on-birds/>