

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE POPULATION STATUS OF BREEDING SAKER FALCONS IN TURKEY

SOUTHEAST EUROPE SAKER FALCON NETWORK



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SUMMARY

The current status of the Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* in Turkey is unclear due to a lack of information. It is known that the species breeds in the country and occurs there during passage and in winter. The most recent estimate of the breeding population is that there are 50-70 pairs and it is considered that the population trend is decreasing. We conducted a review of published literature on Saker Falcons in Turkey in order to gauge the historical status of the species and furthermore we collated precise breeding records from the latter half of the 20th century. We conducted a one month field survey of these known former breeding sites between 21st April and 21st May 2007 in order to determine current occupancy. Of 35 known former Saker Falcon breeding sites visited during our survey, we found only three active nests with a further two unidentified large falcons present at another two sites. From our survey and other recent records it appears that breeding Sakers are currently restricted to areas in Central and Eastern Anatolia. Considering the large amount of apparently suitable habitat, with abundant prey that is available for breeding Saker Falcons in Turkey, we believe that the current population is significantly less than the country could actually support. Possible reasons for this include trapping of falcons, particularly adult birds, for the Middle-eastern falconry trade, landscape scale changes in agricultural practices and, more locally, urbanization.



HISTORICAL STATUS

- 2 breeding records in 1870s (Kirwan *et al.*, *In press*; Kumerloewe, 1961).
- Regularly seen around the city of Istanbul until the mid 1950s (P. J. Hayman per P. Castell).
- 5 published observations between 1950 and 1979
- 15 locations recorded between 1970 and 1989
- Bred in small number in 1970s and 1980s (Acar *et al.*, 1977 and Beaman and Porter, 1985). **This indicates that the population was not large at this time.**

RECENT DATA

- Levent Turan (2005) **only recorded one Saker** during his wide-scale survey on raptors in Turkey in 2001 and 2002.
- **50-70 breeding pairs estimated** in 2001 (Burfield and Bommel, 2004).
- We have found 18 different Saker records during the breeding season between 1990 and 2007 published in the literature

Table 1. Number of places with Saker Falcon records in Turkey

| PERIOD | NUMBER OF LOCATIONS |
|--------------|---------------------|
| <1950 | 3 |
| 1950-1969 | 5 |
| 1970-1989 | 15 |
| 1990-2007 | 18 |
| TOTAL | 41 |

We managed to find 41 different places where Saker was observed during the breeding season between 1872 and 2007 (Table 1). **The breeding records increase in the course of time, but this most probably reflects increased ornithological work in Turkey.**

ECOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS

Landscape:

- Open landscapes such as steppe, open plains or montane plateaus (Cramp and Simmons *et al.*, 1980).
- Physically adapted species to hunt close to the ground in open terrain (BirdLife factsheet, 2008).
 - **The steppe areas in Turkey provide suitable habitat.**
- **Nest sites:**
 - Occupy nests of other species such as Ravens *Corvus corax*, Buzzards *Buteo sp.* etc.
 - Nests on tall trees, crags or artifacts such as electricity pylons.
 - **Only rock nesting recorded in Turkey so far.**
- Prey supply: A very wide range of prey species are taken.
- Mostly hunts on small mammals.
- Birds are also important prey (medium-sized species are optimal).
 - **The Asia Minor ground squirrel *Spermophilus xanthoprymus* is the chief prey species during the breeding season in Turkey although some pairs feed vastly on birds.**

AVAILABILITY OF POTENTIAL HABITATS

- In 20th century inhabited various regions of Turkey (Kirwan *et al.*, *In Press*).
- Inner and Eastern Anatolia optimal for the species.
- Recently recorded in three regions i.e. **Inner, East and Southeast Anatolia.**

The landscape, food and nest site availability in those three regions seem to satisfy the ecological requirements of the species.

THE SURVEY

- Literature and web search for Saker Falcon breeding records in the past.
- Personal observations and data provided from various ornithologists.
- A one-month field survey of the known former breeding sites in 2007 (21st April and 21st May) (Figure 1).

RESULTS:

- **35 former sites were explored.**
- **3 active nests were found (9% occupancy)**
- **Further 2 large falcons (*F. cherrug* or *F. biarmicus*) recorded at another 2 sites**
- **Large amount of suitable but vacant habitats!**

Figure 1. Map of surveyed areas in Turkey 2007

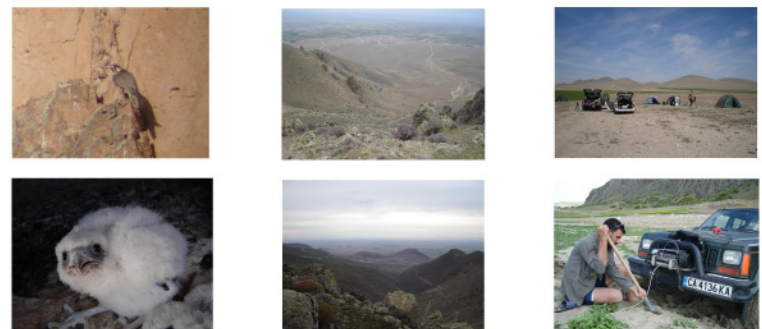


POPULATION STATUS

Considering the large amount of apparently suitable habitat, with abundant prey that is available for breeding Saker Falcons in Turkey, we believe that the current population is significantly less than the country could actually support. Our research suggests that the estimation of 50-70 breeding pairs made by Burfield and Bommel (2004) may be accurate. The population is now fragmented, with single pairs left in isolated places.

REASONS FOR SCARCITY

- **Trapping of falcons**, particularly adult birds, for the Middle-eastern falconry trade.
- **Landscape scale changes** (agri-monocultures; marshes drainage)
- **Urbanization.** The threat operates more locally.



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