Birds of Prey of Ukraine and surrounding territories

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Migraticions, wintering

Movements of Satellite-tracked Saker Falcons (*Falco cherrug*) in Ukraine: Juvenile Dispersal, Migration, Wintering, Threats and Relations to the Central-European Population

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Introduction. The Saker Falcon is classified "Endangered" by IUCN and its global population has been decreasing for decades. The core of the population can be found in Asia (Mongolia, China, Russia and Kazakhstan), but its range expands to Central Europe towards west. The European population has been split to a western and an eastern population divided by the Carpathian Mountains. The recent study analyses the movements of Saker Falcon in the eastern area including satellite tracked birds in both populations regarding dispersal, migration, wintering, revealed threats and relations between the two European populations.

Material and Methods. We have tagged 12 Saker Falcons in Ukraine since 2011 and more than 100 in Central Europe. We used GPS-Argos and GPS-GSM loggers to track the movements of the tagged birds. We have analyzed the movements by using QGIS.

Results. Ukrainian birds showed a relatively smaller distribution range compared to the Central European birds, however they were more likely to migrate long-distance and spend the winter in the Sahel, North Africa. Long-distance migration, however, increasingly exposed birds to threats like electrocution or illegal trapping, which can be one important reason for population decrease in East Europe. Gene exchange exists, but it is limited between the two disjunctive populations: there was only one Central European Saker Falcon among the tagged birds, which started to breed in East Europe (in the Crimea), even though a considerable number of tagged birds visited East Europe during juvenile dispersal.

Discussion. The difference between the two populations regarding migration strategies may be caused by the difference in prey availability: there are more preys available in winter in Central Europe than in the vast agricultural areas in East Europe, thus Central European birds are not forced to leave the area for winter. Subsequently, they are less exposed to the risks of a long-distance migration, though a small percentage of the juveniles do long-distant migration. Level of gene exchange is low and it is likely to be decrease further with the decreasing population and so decreasing range.

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Keywords: Saker Falcon, Falco cherrug, movement, migration, gene exchange