

Lost in Africa – Chasing Hungarian Sakers (*Falco cherrug*) in Niger



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When the Hungarian-Slovak Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*) Conservation LIFE-Nature project began, no one had ever thought that not only two countries, but also many other ones would be involved. The project aims to ensure the conservation of this globally endangered species in Central and Eastern Europe. The support of the European Union enabled experts of Bükk National Park Directorate, BirdLife Hungary and Raptor Protection of Slovakia to deploy 46 satellite transmitters on Sakers to explore migration and roaming routes of juveniles and habitat use of adult birds. Beside direct conservation measures, such as insulation of pylons of mid-voltage power lines and creation of appropriate nesting places, satellite tracking was an indirect tool to identify potential threats to falcons and show the priorities for conservation actions.

Due to the tagged Sakers, we know already that juveniles leave the parental eyrie 1-1.5 month after fledging. Until the fall migration, juveniles usually



Migratory route of a juvenile Saker from Hungary to Niger.

discover the Carpathian Basin (roughly covering Hungary, South Slovakia, West Romania and North Serbia), but some of them make it as far as Kazakhstan. Fall migration starts in September and may last until December. Juvenile Sakers are partial migrants, some birds migrate south, some remain for the winter. Adult Sakers do not migrate. The main wintering areas are the Mediterranean and North Africa – neither is without serious risks for juvenile Sakers.

Every time our birds stop in a foreign country we look for local colleagues in order to request information on the area and possibly on our Saker. It is always a very exciting story and beneficial for all parties. As a result of the project, a ‘Saker-network’ has been built from Mauritania in Africa to Russia and Kazakhstan, at the edge of Europe and Asia involving 18 countries since the start of satellite tracking.

The African wintering range is especially interesting to us as we did not know much about it so far. On fall migration, 5 females out of 43 tagged juveniles reached Africa between 2007 and 2009. Unfortunately, only two of them made it to the wintering ground. Data from those two Sakers revealed the area and habitat types they prefer in Africa and enabled us to take further steps to gather more information.

Dorottya, the second Saker, arrived in Africa in October 2009 and established her temporary settlement area in Niger. At that stage there was an urgent need to find someone who could check the bird and the area. After some attempts with no results, a reply to an

e-mail with an entirely different topic on the raptor conservation list-serve arrived from Mr. Wim Mullié, who as it turned out, worked in Niger. On his recommendation we turned to Mr. Joost Brouwer from Holland. From that point on, everything went easily, as he kindly organized an ‘expedition’ to search for Dorottya and survey the habitat.

During the field visit in mid-February 2010, Housseini Issaka, a local biologist, patrolled the roosting sites of Dorottya. Prey remains and pellets were collected, habitats and



Housseini and his wife.

prey species were surveyed and potential threats (power lines, poisoning, hunting, etc.) were estimated. In addition, locals were questioned about their attitude towards raptors and awareness raising activity was carried out. The results are still being processed, and along with other information will form the basis for a bigger study on Saker wintering sites in Africa.

Dorottya’s story, however, came to a sad end. In early March, signals started to come from a single spot that appeared to be a village. Ms. Halimatou Amadou, biology student at the University of Niamey, was able to visit the area and discovered that Dorottya was killed by a young Peuhl herdsman with his slingshot. The



Dorottya right after tagging.

circumstances are unclear and apparently it is not so easy to recover the PTT, but we are working on it.

Undoubtedly, species conservation cannot stop at the border, but needs to be expanded to all affected areas even in the case of such partial migrants as Saker falcons. International conservation needs well focused international

cooperation and this is where satellite tracking is an unbeatable tool. The Saker conservation project is an excellent example of that. Such projects also highlight the fact that developed and developing, rich and poor, technologically advanced and lagging behind countries have common responsibilities in conserving biodiversity, and all have to do their own share. Hungary and Niger are far away from each other, but the conservation of Sakers is their common responsibility.

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† We have sadly learnt that Ms. Halimatou Amadou died of meningitis during an epidemic raging in her work area. We are deeply shocked to hear about the death of this talented and helpful student. We keep her in our hearts.