

## **White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Transcaucasus**

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At present the White-tailed Sea Eagle is one of the endangered species of the Caucasian avifauna. A great number of works in the ornithological literature of the 19th to early 20th centuries affirm that the species was common and widespread at that time throughout the region, occurring all along the coasts of the Black and Caspian Seas, on large lakes, marshes and rivers. The total number was unknown, but we can presume that in Transcaucasus between 1900 and the 1920s it could be estimated at perhaps several hundred pairs (see Map 1).

The decline of the White-tailed Sea Eagle's Transcaucasian populations has been marked everywhere in the region since the 1930s. This process is typical also for other European populations. The coastal population decreased between 1930 and the 1950s, the inland population from 1940 to the 1960s. The main causes of their decline and extinction in the region at that time were:

- habitat loss (reduction of flood-lands and forested areas);
- disappearance of nest trees;
- direct extermination by man;
- drainage and reclamation of lakes, marshes and swamps;
- management of rivers;
- lack of food, mostly in winter (carrion);
- increased mortality due to death in traps near animal carcasses and from poisoned baits;
- human exploitation of the environment.

After the 1950s the main causes of decline became habitat loss (creation of reservoirs), human persecution (1950-70s), pesticides (1950-75) and recreational pressure (since the 1960s).

### **Present status of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in Transcaucasus:**

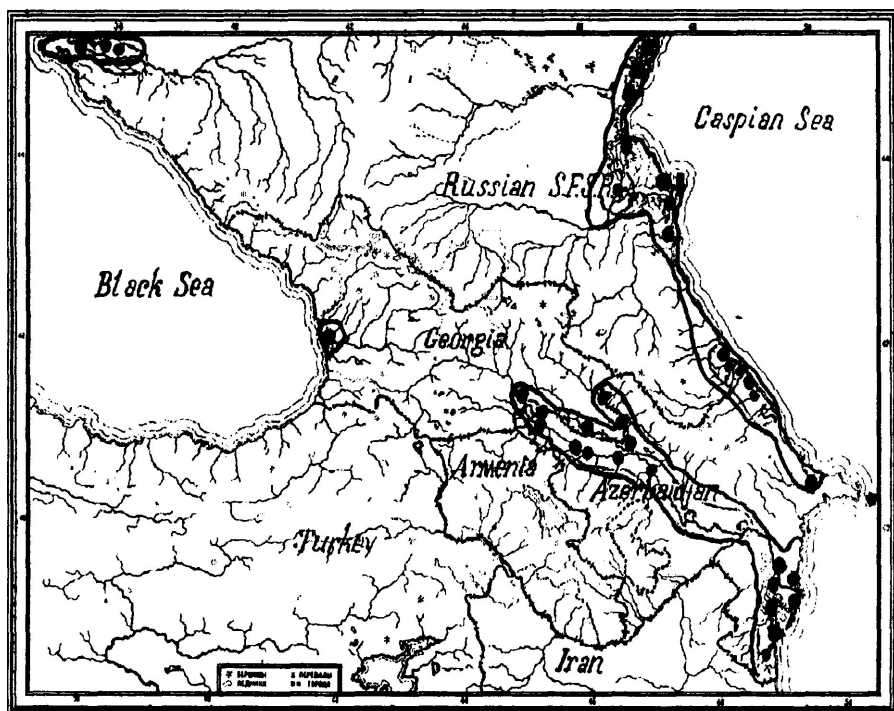
In Western Georgia the bird became extinct in the 1940s. Probably only 1-2 pairs bred in the 1950s in the Kolkhida Lowland (catchment area of Paliastomi Lake).

Since 1973 there have been only about 20 records of Sea Eagles, mainly wintering young or single stray individuals.

In Armenia the White-tailed Sea Eagle became extinct in the 1940s-50s. At present only a few wintering birds occur irregularly, mainly near Sevan Lake (Red Data Book of Armenian SSR 1987; Adamian 1990).

In the central part of Transcaucasus (Eastern Georgia, Western Azerbaijan) already in the 1960s only 10-15 pairs survived in the flood-lands and forests of the Rivers Iori, Alazani, Khrami, Shamkhor-chai and Kura. To-day the species is almost extinct in Georgia.

**Figure 1. Area of distribution of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in Caucasus.**



We have collected data about this bird in the central part of Transcaucasus since 1973. During the breeding period Sea Eagles were observed in some localities only: in the valley of the River Iori (Georgia, Tzitheli Tzkaro district); in the valley of the River Alazani (Azerbaijani Georgian border); in the flood-lands forests of the River Shamkhor-chai (Western Azerbaijan); on the Mingechar and Shamkhor reservoirs (Western Azerbaijan); in the flood-lands and old forests of the River Kura (downstream

from Tbilisi to Taz district of Azerbaijan). A thorough search for nests in the territory of SE Georgia produced no results. The only occupied nest in the central part of Transcaucasus was found on 7 May, 1985, in Taz district. This nest was situated in a fork in the crown of a poplar, 14m above the ground, directly above the bank of the River Kura. In August, 1985, two young were recorded as having fledged. In addition to this one occupied nest, two nesting territories were located in the flood-lands of the river Kura (near the mouth of the River Khramis) and near the NW bank of Mingeaur Reservoir. It is possible that one pair still inhabits the Gardabani-Karaiaz Reserve (SE Georgia - W Azerbaijan), where subadult Sea Eagles have been recorded in recent years. At present the total number of White-tailed Sea Eagles in the central part of Transcaucasus is estimated at *ca.* five pairs.

In SE Transcaucasus White-tailed Sea Eagles still survive along the coast-line of the Caspian Sea. Their number is unknown, possibly now under 10 pairs.

In NE Transcaucasus there is no information on numbers. We believe that to-day some 5-10 pairs breed there.

The total number of White-tailed Sea Eagles in Transcaucasus is now estimated at possibly 20-25 pairs.

In our view, for the conservation of the Transcaucasian population the following measures are needed:

- ban on the use of pesticides in all Caucasus;
- protection of all known present and potential nests and nest sites;
- organisation of winter feeding stations on all Caucasian wintering grounds (1 in Kolkhida Lowland; 1 in Armenia, on the Sevan Lake; 1-2 in central Transcaucasus, near Mingeaur or Shamkhor reservoirs; 1- in NE Azerbaijan; 1 in SE Azerbaijan or SE Dagestan, on the River Samur estuary, where 2-3 pairs now breed (Galushin & Kostin 1990), 2-3 in other locations in the region);
- strict control of the use of traps for mammals and prohibition of the use of poisoned baits;
- a total prohibition on exploitation or development of flood-lands and old forests because this factor is one of the main causes for the eagles' habitat loss;
- registration of all remaining nests and granting them special protection;
- consolidation and joint efforts by all Caucasian ornithologists to co-ordinate activities both on the study and conservation of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in the region.

Unfortunately, the carrying out of the Programme for the Protection of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in Transcaucasus is at present impossible because of various political, economic and social problems.

## REFERENCES

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