

On the Present Status of the Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* in the European Part of the former Soviet Union

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In earlier times the Imperial Eagle was widespread throughout the former Soviet Union. In recent decades, however, ornithologists have been gravely concerned over its evident decline, both in numbers and in its breeding range. In some regions this decline has been rapid, leading in several cases to total disappearance. Included in the Red Data Book of the former USSR (1978, 1984), it is to-day listed in the Red Data Books of Moldavia, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

One hundred years ago the Imperial Eagle was generally not uncommon, as is testified by the numerous references in the ornithological literature. These data have been researched and analysed up to 1930 by Pancheshnikova (1983). We believe that comparison of such data with what is known of the present status of the species may be useful in the development of a conservation strategy in current conditions. We in turn have therefore studied all the more recent relevant literature, much of which is to be found only in specialist publications with highly limited circulation, often inaccessible to general ornithologists, particularly in the West. An added difficulty is the fact that in the former USSR ornithologists were severely restricted over what they published and were often forced to confine themselves to mere summaries of their findings. Although the situation to-day is different, many authors have retained the habit of confining themselves to brief abstracts.

In all, we examined over 100 publications on the Imperial Eagle, even those which refer to it only casually. In addition, the first author has been collecting unpublished data from colleagues and his own studies since 1973, covering all the different regions of the European part of the former USSR.

It soon became clear that the Imperial Eagle has been very little studied over the past ten years; apart from a few brief accounts, data are extremely scanty regarding its numbers and distribution. It is therefore difficult to estimate with any degree of accuracy its present-day status and the limits of its breeding range. We nevertheless consider it possible, on the basis of such data as we have, to more or less determine the current population and its trends.

Moldavia. As a breeding species the Imperial Eagle undoubtedly disappeared during the 1980s and to-day it occurs only as an occasional passage migrant or winter visitor (Ganya & Zubkov 1989; Kunichenko & Gusan 1992). Yet in 1960-70 single pairs still nested in the east of the country and along the Lower Prut River (Averin *et al.* 1971; Red Data Book of the Moldavian SSR). At that time there were about 10 pairs, and a few of these may have survived into the 1980s at some points on the Lower Prut (N. Zubkov, pers. comm.).

Ukraine. The situation here is similar to that in Moldavia. During the past decade sporadic breeding has been recorded, particularly in the region bordering with Moldavia (Kinda 1991). In the Lugansk region one pair tried to breed in 1989 but abandoned the attempt due to disturbance (Vetrov 1991). Isolated pairs may still survive in the Kharkov region but we have no reliable information from this area (Krivitskiy 1991). Ukrainian ornithologists estimate a maximum of 7 pairs (Shcherbak 1989, information from Vetrov). Sightings of single birds are periodically recorded in different parts of Ukraine, but these are either nomads or passage migrants (Zhivotkoi & Chugai 1991; Vetrov 1991, etc.).

Russia. The total number of these eagles in the European part of Russia is unknown (Red Data Book of Russia 1983). According to ornithologists working in different areas, the position is as follows: Don River region, *ca.* 40 pairs (V. Belik, V. Vetrov, pers. comm.); Volga River region, *ca.* 60 pairs (data from local ornithologists); Lipetzk region, 1 known territory (Dudin 1990); Voronezh region, 1 known territory; and about 3 pairs in the central (European) region (data from local ornithologists).

Russian Caucasia. Data collected over recent decades by various authors have significantly enlarged existing knowledge of the species in this region (Dement'yev 1951; Ivanov 1976; Pancheshnikova 1983). Thus there are sound breeding records in the Northern Caucasus: 5 pairs in the Kabardino-Balkarian Autonomous Republic (Nikitina 1991); 2 pairs during the 1980s in the Stavropol region (Khokhlov 1989, 1991; Melgunov & Teplov 1989); in the same place and also in the Karachaevo-Cherkessian Autonomous Region both pairs and single birds have been observed during the breeding season (Til'ba 1989; Tel'pov & Bitarov 1986). In the south of Stavropol region earlier cases of nesting were known (Boehme 1958). Clearly the western and northern limits of the breeding range of the Caucasian population lies here, on the boundary between the Western and Eastern Caucasus. The mountain steppes are the habitat of this species in the Central Caucasus. The total in the region can be about 30 breeding pairs.

The overall number in European Russia, including the north Caucasus, may be 130-150 breeding pairs. This figure differs somewhat from the earlier estimate arrived at for this territory by the first author and V. M. Galushin, since the latter considered that, while no census of Imperial Eagles has been conducted in the greater part of its breeding range, a considerable number of pairs must escape notice. However, in our opinion, the nesting habitats of this species - old flood-forests in wide river valleys -

are attractive to ornithologists and the level of their field-work is high. This is particularly so in the European part of Russia.

Georgia. During the 1980s 9-11 breeding pairs. All nests located in the eastern parts of the country (Abuladze 1986, in press).

Azerbaijan. Total number unknown, probably about 40 pairs. There are 25 pairs in Western Azerbaijan (Abuladze, in press; Patrikeev 1990).

Armenia. There are isolated pairs in the northern regions of Armenia. The total number for the country remains unknown.

Summarising the foregoing, we consider that in the late 1980s and early 1990s there are 220-250 pairs of the Imperial Eagle breeding in the European part of the former USSR.

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