

Current Status of the White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Byelorussia

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The White-tailed Sea Eagle is one of the rarest raptors of Byelorussia, and was included in the Red Data Book of the former USSR. I could find only two published records of nests located in Byelorussia before 1975. I. Serzhanin (1947) described one nest found in Berezinsky Nature Reserve; this was found in an old aspen in mixed spruce-deciduous forest at the end of June, 1940, and contained one young which was about to fly. B. Golodushko found an occupied nest of White-tailed Sea Eagle situated on an old pine in a peat bog near Lake Vygonovskoe (Brest region). This information was published by Fedyushin & Dolbik (1967).

During 1975-91 I conducted a special study of White-tailed Sea Eagle breeding biology in Vitebsk region (northern Byelorussia). During the study period I found 18 nests on seven territories, 22 breeding attempts were recorded and 19 young were ringed.

The eagles used different nest sites: 44% were situated in pine forests, 22% in mixed forests on the edge of clearings, 17% in mixed forests alongside peat bogs, and 17% on lone trees among clear-cuttings. Two-thirds of observed active nests were built on pines, 22% on aspens, 6% and 5% on birches and alders respectively. Half of the nests studied were built on tree-tops, 28% of them on thick boughs and 22% lodged in forks of the trunk. My observations suggested that the most reliable and long-lived nests were situated in the forks of the trunks of aspens. The distance between nest and nearest feeding pond varied between 0.3 and 3 km.

White-tailed Sea Eagles occupy their territories from early March, the earliest observation being on March 1, 1972, on Lake Osveya. On March 15, 1986, I observed an incubating female in the nest near Lake Neshedro. The average duration of incubation is 40 days; hatching was observed between April 19 and May 9, mean date April 29. Young fledged when 70-75 days old, between June 13 and July 15 (mean date - June 29). Adults fed young near the nest for about three months, sometimes until October. The latest observation of a fledgling near its natal nest was on October 28, 1985, near Lake Neshedro. I regularly observed first-year eagles near active nests during breeding, and there was never any aggression towards them shown by the breeding birds.

Clutch size varied between one and three eggs, mean size 2.00 (n=6); 1.80 young hatched (n=10) and 1.52 fledged (n=17) per mean active nest. Eight White-tailed Sea Eagle eggs were measured in Byelorussia, two in the south (Nikiforov *et al.* 1989) and six in Vitebsk region. Mean egg-size was 73.4 x 55.6 mm. I do not know whether or not the smallest egg was added, because this clutch was stolen by egg-collectors. 77% of breeding attempts were successful.

White-tailed Sea Eagles in Byelorussia show a strong site fidelity. One territory near Lake Osveya was occupied for at least 15 years, the eagles changing nests here seven times. Another nest near Lake Vygonovskoe was found in 1948, and the last confirmed breeding in this territory took place in 1990.

Eagles in northern Byelorussia in the breeding season preyed mainly upon birds (51%), especially aquatic, and fish (43%), the roles of mammals and carrion being insignificant - 4.3% and 1.7% respectively (n=231). Pike (22.5%), Great Crested Grebe (13%) and Pochard (10.5%) were the main prey species. According to observations of B. Golodushko, the diet of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in southern Byelorussia seems to be similar: fish comprised 56%, birds 44%; bream (22%) and Great Crested Grebe (16.5%) were the most frequent prey.

The dynamics of the Byelorussian population of the White-tailed Sea Eagle are to-day affected by two contrary processes: increasing recreational pressure on feeding ponds and cutting of nearby mature forests on the one hand, and the creation of new reservoirs and fish farms on the other. It is difficult to predict which process will predominantly affect the breeding population of White-tailed Sea Eagles.

Lakes and forests of northern Byelorussia currently support 20-25 pairs of eagles (Ivanovsky 1985). Apart from known territories, some new localities where adult eagles have been regularly observed during the breeding season were found during recent years. These places are: Lake Tioso (Gorodok dist.), Lake Rogovo (Vitebsk dist.), Lake Otolovo and Lake Cherviatka (both Ushachi dist.), Lake Babinovichskoe (Liogno dist.), Lake Yakovskoe (Polotsk dist.), Lake Valkovskoe (Rossony dist.), fish farms Novinky, (Postavy dist.) and Chernitsa (Braslav dist.).

There are some records of possible breeding of eagles in south Byelorussia. Adults were observed on the River Dnieper in Bragin Region in 1985 by M. Samofalov. Also in that year V.Klakotsky and V.Vadkovsky reported White-tailed Sea Eagles possibly breeding in Pripiatsky Nature Reserve (Gomel region). Some more localities where eagles were observed in the breeding season may be listed: Lake Bobrovichskoe (Ivatshevichi dist.), Lake Kobeliai (Grodno dist.), Peski (Mosty dist.), fish farms Loktyshi (Gantsevichi dist.), Chyrvonaya Zorka (Zhitkovichi dist.) and Selets (Berioza dist.) (Padutov 1967; Red Data Book of BSSR 1981). In winter juveniles and immatures were recorded in many places over all parts of Byelorussia, so I approximate the total size of the Byelorussian breeding population at 40-50 pairs.

In 1984 ornithologists in northern Byelorussia joined in the Baltic colour-marking programme.

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