

Conservation Perspectives of the Imperial *Aquila heliaca* and Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* in Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is endowed with a wide diversity of ecosystems. These in turn attract a wide diversity of birds to exploit their resources. Situated at the junction of the Oriental, Ethiopian and Palearctic regions, Pakistan numbers more than 44 species of diurnal raptors. The majority of these are winter visitors to the great Indus River which passes through India to empty into the Arabian Sea on the coast of Pakistan. It is traditionally known as the Indus flyway and provides food and shelter for millions of birds and their predators, i.e. raptors. In the past very little attention was paid to these birds of prey; however, during the past decade almost every village child has been aware of their significance, especially falcons, due to the involvement of falconers from Arabia. Any raptor, whether eagle or buzzard, has become an attraction which everyone would like to procure. Also many professional trappers are using other raptor species as lures to trap Saker Falcons *Falco cherrug*. This study is confined to the conservation of Imperial and Steppe Eagles only.

HABITAT

In Pakistan both of these eagles are inhabitants of lowland areas of Baluchistan, North-west Frontier Province, Sindh and Punjab provinces. They usually avoid high, mountainous areas, preferring desert, arid and semi-arid zones, even when there are low-altitude mountains. They can also be readily observed near wetlands on account of their abundant food supply (birds, rodents and reptiles).

The Imperial Eagle is believed to be largely a winter migrant from Central Asia. A few pairs may breed sparsely and there is only a single record from the Salt Range areas of Pakistan (Roberts 1991). Waite (1962) never recorded the Imperial Eagle from the Salt Range area, but a fair number may be observed wintering in the Salt Range wetlands. It is held to be scarce (Roberts 1991). Previous records reveal that the Imperial Eagle's population was almost stagnant during the last decade, but our survey has now shown it to be on the increase and individuals could also be sighted

daily in any of Pakistan's lowland areas. The Steppe Eagle, being a very common winter visitor to the lowland areas of Pakistan, migrating from Central Asia, can easily be seen either as solitary individuals or in groups near wetlands and their roosting sites.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During the years Jan.1993-Jan.1995 the birds were observed in the Punjab, South-western Sindh, southern lowland areas of the North-west Frontier Province and the Chaghai Desert area of Baluchistan. The survey was carried out from vehicles and sometimes on foot (Table 1). Binoculars (7x, 8x) and telescopes (30x 60x) were used to spot the birds. Special attention was paid to areas round roosting sites, poultry farms and slaughterhouses. Interviews with local people, wildlife officials, poachers and falcon trappers were also recorded in order to procure information on the past and current status of raptors.

Table 1. Details of Imperial Eagle Survey, January 1993 to January 1995, in areas (by province) of Pakistan.

Number of Observers	Area	Distance covered in Kms	Total days Observation	Roosting sites located
24	NWFP/PUNJAB	1200	6	
20	NWFP/PUNJAB	600	6	
5	PUNJAB	300	23	1
3	PUNJAB	280	14	1
3	BALUCHISTAN	800	20	
1	SINDH	135	2	
1	NWFP	180	6	
2	PUNJAB	200	22	1
1	PUNJAB	120	12	1
1	PUNJAB	500	13	1
Total 61		4315 Km	84	5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to our survey, the population of the Imperial Eagle in Pakistan is increasing. This is due to the enhanced poultry farming and availability of ample food in the wintering and transit sites. There are some unconfirmed reports from local people of the species' occasional breeding in some areas of Sindh, N.W.F.P. and

Punjab provinces. It is estimated that more than 150 Imperial Eagles winter in Pakistan.

According to our survey the Steppe Eagle does not breed anywhere in Pakistan but is purely a winter migrant. Its numbers are on the increase and an appreciable number of birds, isolated or in groups, can readily be seen in lowland areas, especially deserts, semi-deserts and the vicinity of wetlands. During our survey a maximum of 32 birds was observed in the company of three Imperial Eagles at carcasses. Apart from this, one or two birds may easily be seen soaring on thermals or perching on electricity poles or on trees.

The ranges of Steppe and Tawny Eagles overlap in almost all areas; the Tawny Eagle, however, breeds in Pakistan. The Tawny can easily be confused with the Steppe due to its polymorphic plumage. The dark morph of the Tawny is very rare and occurs only in India, North Africa and Pakistan, which is why it may be confused with the Steppe Eagle (W. S. Clarke 1993, pers. comm.).

CONSERVATION PERSPECTIVES

Although continuous data are not available due to a lack of interested observers, interviews with many bird watchers have revealed that the populations of both Imperial and Steppe Eagles are gradually increasing, as a result of enhanced poultry farming and increased slaughtering of livestock to meet the need for protein by a rapidly growing human population. In addition, where eagles were formerly hunted for trophies, all the efforts of trappers are now confined to catching falcons. This has provided the eagles with an opportunity to prosper.

It has also been observed that both the Imperial and the Steppe Eagle change their food preferences so often that, if one food source declines, they readily switch to another. This fluctuation in food selection gives them an edge over other raptors in exploiting all the food resources of their habitat.

Further research and training on raptor studies in Pakistan should be encouraged.

REFERENCES

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