

The White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Ukraine

Jaryna Kolisnyk and Igor Gorban

The White-tailed Sea Eagle is distributed throughout a large part of Europe and Asia, including North Africa in the Red Sea region and some islands off both continents, including Greenland. Although not normally inhabiting steppe and desert regions, it does occur along tree-lined rivers within them. It is not found in mountain regions.

The territory of Ukraine lies within the breeding range of the White-tailed Sea Eagle and the species is in the main resident, although in winter some of the birds migrate. Large concentrations of eagles can on occasion be seen in the south of Ukraine in winter, probably consisting of winter visitors from further north.

Birds of the resident population, after the winter migration, which is not observed every year, appear in their breeding territory usually in mid-February (Zoubarovski 1977). Whereas the species is found in various parts of Ukraine, its breeding range is unevenly and almost wholly spread along the valleys of certain rivers, in swampy forests near lakes or in marshy areas. The chosen nest site depends on the absence of man and the proximity of water as a source of food. Nests are sometimes built on isolated trees; 40% of nests are on pine (*Pinus silvestris*), 20% on oak (*Quercus*) and 20% on alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) (data collected in 1991 by Griechenko during the White-tailed Sea Eagle Campaign).

It is rare for a new nest to be built. Each pair has two or more nests in its territory, usually about 100m apart, alternating between them. Whereas nesting territories are usually many km apart, in the valley of the Siverski Don in Kharkov district two pairs in 1955 had nests within 300m of each other, both of which contained eggs (Zoubarovski 1977). V.T. Averin (1911) recorded eight pairs of eagles in 1909 in an area of about 460km².

Newly built nests are comparatively small but increase in size as they are added to each year. Nest fidelity is extremely strong. In 1953, when a forest was being felled in Zaporozski district, the resident breeding pair of eagles tried to build a new nest on the branches of the felled tree and in the spring of 1954 built another nest 3km distant on a solitary poplar (Orlov 1959).

Pairs mate for life. Two eggs are usually laid, very rarely one. G.F. Gebel (1879) described a clutch of three eggs but the rest of the Ukrainian literature makes no mention of such a clutch. According to Gebel, if the eggs are destroyed, a second

clutch is laid within a month, whilst according to Zoubarovski (1977) no further eggs are laid until the following year. The laying dates are more or less constant: in southern districts from the end of February to early March, and in central and northern areas from mid-March. Incubation, shared by both adults, lasts for 35-40 days. The young fledge at the end of June or in July, when about three months old.

Young birds begin to moult at the end of their first year. Mature birds moult in stages over a long period.

White-tailed Sea Eagles migrate across Ukraine at irregular intervals, usually in December-January, and only in years when there is a shortage of food. Such movements are less frequent in southern districts than in the north (Brauner 1894). Overflying and wintering eagles can be seen in almost all regions of Ukraine, but the majority of the birds winter in the south, on the shores of the Azov and Black Seas, and the mouths of the rivers Dnieper, Dnestr and Douna. According to L.F. Nazarenko (1959), overflying and wintering birds appear already in October on the lower reaches of the Dnestr. There were particularly large numbers in the cold winters of 1949-50 and 1956-57. During the winter of 1988-89 eagles were spread over nine regions, not including Herson and Preazov, for which there was no information. According to Ardamatsky (1983), 50 White-tailed Sea Eagles winter on the Black Sea every year.

A relatively large number of wintering eagles occur round Kiev, Kanev and Dnepropetrovsk. In 1989 a party of 12-16 birds wintered near Kiev. Another group of 5-6 birds frequently visited the area around the power station near Kanev. Apart from such concentrations, single birds could be seen in other places quite far from rivers and lakes. The total wintering population is estimated to be not less than 130-150.

At the end of the 19th century and in the first part of the 20th, the White-tailed Sea Eagle was a regular breeding bird in Ukraine, in relatively significant numbers for such a large raptor, but since that time major changes have taken place. At the turn of the century a campaign was instituted against "harmful" birds of prey, finally leading the species to be included in the Ukrainian Red Book. We know from the literature that before 1960 100-150,000 birds of prey were destroyed annually (Galushin 1980). By 1965 it was estimated that the total population was down to 15 pairs.

Between 1950 and 1970 no special study of raptors in Western Ukraine was undertaken. It appeared that the White-tailed Sea Eagle had ceased to breed in Lvov district (Gorban 1984). However, at the start of the 1980s the species was sighted more frequently on the Lvovchena and Volena, where small family groups often stayed to winter. During the 1980s two nests were located at "Rostochia", one of which was occupied. In all, there are estimated to be three pairs at Lvovchena. In very cold winters they disappear from the nesting territory but are seen again in warmer weather, even in December or January, not far from their nests. In Zakarpatski district there is still considerable nesting activity and in neighbouring Slovakia the species continues to breed (Sladek & Mosansky 1957).

An assessment of the present status of resident and wintering birds in Ukraine was made at the time of the "Year of the White-tailed Sea Eagle" scientific and propaganda campaign in 1991. Table 1 gives the numbers arrived at at that time, showing 24 active nests in 15 districts at 12 breeding localities. Thus the number of breeding pairs in Ukraine amounts to *ca.* 30-40 (Griechenko 1991 referring to 1989), although according to our reckoning there are about 50 breeding pairs.

Table 1. Active nests of White-tailed Sea Eagle in Ukraine.

<i>District</i>	<i>No. of nests</i>	<i>No. of occupied nests</i>	<i>No. of wintering birds</i>
1. Volin	?	1	10
2. Dniepopetrovsk	3	1	5
3. Kiev	2	3	18
4. Kirovograd	1	-	-
5. Crimea	1	-	3
6. Lugansk	2	-	2
7. Lvov	2	-	-
8. Nikolayev	?	1	-
9. Odessa	2	1	27
10. Poltava	3	1	2
11. Rovno	1	-	-
12. Kherson	-	1	-
13. Cherkassy	2	3	10
14. Chernigov	4	-	5
Total:	24	12	82

There is evidence that the White-tailed Sea Eagle has increased in number in recent years (although the rate of breeding success is not very high and remains more or less constant). It is thought that this is due to protective measures and an increased public appreciation of the significant role played by birds of prey (Griechenko 1991).

Given effective protection of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in future, its numbers will increase, as is illustrated by the situation in Germany where, following a massive decline, thirty years of protection have seen the population increase to 115 pairs in 1985.

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Jaryna Kolisnyk
Institute of Forestry
Puzskina St.103
290057 Lwov
Ukraine

Igor Gorban
National Park
264661 Shacik Volyn Region
Ukraine