

The Status of the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Hungary

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In Hungary we distinguish two basic types of White-tailed Sea Eagle habitat. The first is characterized by the gallery forests along the major rivers (e.g. Danube, Dráva, Tisza), whilst the second consists of lowland forests which are rich in ponds and lake systems. Both types of habitat ensure traditionally suitable breeding and feeding areas for this species.

During recent times the first type of White-tailed Sea Eagle habitat has decreased, the main reason for this being the control and canalization of streams and rivers. The only exception in the decrease of habitat along the river Danube is the internationally important Gemenc Forest Territory. A different situation exists along the river Dráva, due to its former political-strategic importance, being a strictly closed border between Yugoslavia and Hungary, difficult of access even for the local inhabitants. The gallery forests of both river banks provide suitable breeding areas and the river itself serves as a rich natural food resource.

For this reason, even now there is an important White-tailed Sea Eagle population in this part of Hungary. Even to-day we lack precise data on the number of these eagles breeding regularly in this area, just because of the unapproachability of the border.

The more remarkable *Haliaeetus albicilla* habitat is the lowland forests with ponds and lake systems. These characterise the southern part of Transdanubia, the region between Lake Balaton and the River Dráva (mostly in Somogy county). Since medieval times this region has been noted for its old oak and alder forests, together with important wetland areas within these forests, mainly characterised by alder-marshes. The former still ensure suitable breeding areas, while the ponds and lake systems developed by man from earlier alder-marshes ensure suitable feeding areas.

The current Hungarian White-tailed Sea Eagle population numbers 36 pairs, 14 of them in the Somogy region, in fact over 30% of the total Hungarian population. Generally one could say that about 60% of our *Haliaeetus* population occurs in the second type of Hungarian habitat.

Threats

The main threats to the Hungarian population are rather different from those in

other European regions. The use of environmental poisons (e.g. DDT, PCB or other toxic chemicals) and illegal shooting have never been a regular factor. Conversely the recent main threats in Hungary are:

- a) direct disturbance during the breeding period,
- b) direct disturbance due to economic activities and organisations (e.g. forestry, agriculture, state entertainments).

The latter causes the permanent decrease of suitable habitat and of feeding areas and in practice has recently become the main adverse factor for our whole eagle population. Theoretically, therefore, it should not be difficult to preserve this population.

Feasible protection measures

Protection must concentrate on two basic groups: the first is the native breeding population, while the second is the protection of migrants from other European territories.

1. The native, breeding population

- a) Legal protection: the development of privatisation is already making it much harder and more complicated to ensure this most effective kind of protection.
- b) the purchase of breeding and/or feeding areas;
- c) guarding of the nests during the critical breeding period;
- d) the erection of artificial nests on suitable territories.

2. Migrants

The most effective way to protect the migrant *Haliaeetus* populations in Hungary is by regularly feeding them. This helps the birds from northern Europe and we share the common European responsibility for actively preserving them. Such active protection should also be a means of promoting any successful redistribution of this species, even if this method is closely interlinked with the reconstruction of suitable habitats.

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