

Preface

The 6th World Conference venue was the Hotel Agro, situated on a hilltop on the edge of the city, with a fine view of Budapest and several nearby areas of forest. Here participants gathered from around 47 countries including Brazil, Cuba, the USA, Canada, South Africa, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Russia, China, Taiwan and Japan.

At the opening, the assembled participants were welcomed by the WWGBP Chairman (Bernd-Ulrich Meyburg), the Hungarian Minister of the Environment, the President of MME/BirdLife Hungary (Gyorgy Kallay) and a leading member of BirdLife International (Nigel Collar). Following the official opening Ian Newton gave an hour-long keynote address on "Population Limitation in Owls", Laszlo Haraszthy and Janos Bagyura presented an overview of the status of raptors and their conservation in the host country, Hungary. followed by Robert Risebrough with an account of the population crash of the three vulture species of the genus *Gyps* in the subcontinent of India. Finally, A. Muller-Helmbrecht and M. Barbieri gave a summary of the Bonn Convention on the Protection of Migratory Species, its present and future role in the conservation of birds of prey and owls. After a drinks party and dinner two films were shown, one on bird protection in Hungary, the other, by Michel Terrasse, on the Andean and Californian Condors.

Monday morning (19 May) was devoted to birds of prey in Hungary. Today, in Hungary, 21 raptor species breed and 34 in all have been recorded. Between 600 and 800 members of a special Working Group are dedicated in particular to their protection. Their activities form an exemplary model which one wishes other countries would follow. Conservation measures include monitoring, nest guarding, erection of artificial nests and prevention of electrocution from power lines.

Particularly intensive activity is devoted to the Imperial Eagle and Saker Falcon, both of which have seriously declined worldwide and are today threatened with extinction. For both these species the results are truly impressive, showing a remarkable upward trend. In 1980 only 13 pairs of Saker were known, with an estimated possible maximum of 30 pairs. In 2002 113 known pairs fledged 279 young and the total population is estimated to be 113-145 pairs, 78% of which breed in artificial nests. Since the introduction of systematic protection measures 2,553 young falcons have flown. What becomes of the majority of these remains a mystery. Better marking and possibly satellite tracking are being considered, in order to close this gap in our knowledge.

The second success story concerns the Imperial Eagle. After World War II the population declined dramatically, reaching a lowest point at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s with only *ca.* 20 breeding pairs remaining in Hungary. In 2002 54 pairs were known, 38 breeding attempts were successful and 63 young fledged. The population today is estimated at 61-65 pairs. Of special interest is reoccupation of the lowlands, from which the species had retreated to the mountains. Today the Imperial Eagle can once more be seen on the wide

plain. nesting in small clumps of trees or even solitary trees, not infrequently in close proximity to busy roadways.

There is now a three-year Life project, for which the EU has made considerable funding available and within the scope of which three biologists are employed to work exclusively on this species.

The increase in number of the White-tailed Sea Eagle is also heartening. Strictly protected since 1954, the population in 1957 was only *ca.* 25 pairs and in 1987 still only 18 pairs, whilst in 2002 there were again 90 pairs which reared 105 young to fledging. Today there are 18 pairs on the lower Danube, where 60-80 birds regularly overwinter.

Unfortunately, there are also several declining species: Short-toed Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Black Kite, Levant Sparrowhawk, Red-footed Falcon and Booted Eagle. One cause for concern is the situation of the Lesser Spotted Eagle. Since 1994, when there were 150 pairs, the number had declined to 40-45 in 2002. The reasons for this are presumed to lie outside the breeding area. The Booted Eagle, never very numerous, is now reduced to *ca.* 1-4 pairs and there has been no breeding recorded for some years. Both kite species have also ceased to occur. For both of these, and perhaps other species too, a more active management plan is desirable.

The Golden Eagle and Peregrine Falcon have both voluntarily returned as breeding species. There is at least one tree-nesting pair of Golden Eagles in the lowlands.

The outstanding topic of the conference was the population crash of three *Gyps* vulture species in Southern Asia, particularly in India and Pakistan. Almost one whole day of the vulture session was devoted to this, followed by a Round Table discussion. Since the disappearance in India of these vultures, which only a few years ago occurred in huge numbers and which no-one not directly concerned could scarcely have conceived possible, the cause has been frantically sought. A lethal virus together with pesticides was assumed, but without any direct evidence.

Now came the greatest sensation of the conference, astonishing all other researchers working on the problem. The American veterinarian J. Lindsay Oaks and his colleagues have shown that the cause is to be found in a kidney failure brought about by Diclofenac. This is an analgesic and antirheumatic drug extensively prescribed for humans for a long time. For several years, in India and Pakistan, it has also been widely used to treat the livestock which form the basic food of the vultures. It had been proved experimentally that this in turn affected the three *Gyps* species. Thus Diclofenac, which can also engender serious side-effects in humans, is in fact the direct cause, borne out, for example, by the fact that the vultures in Bombay, which fed on the corpses put out by the Parsees on their Towers of Silence, already disappeared long ago. It remains unclear why other carrion-eating raptors such as the other vulture species, kites and eagles are not affected.

Much further research is needed on this subject. Martin Gilbert of the Peregrine Fund summarised all that was known about Diclofenac and undertook to seek further information. Whether and how its application to livestock can be reduced was the next all-important question to be tackled.

There is insufficient space here to report in detail on the other sessions during the conference, covering such themes as Falcons, Environmental Contaminants, Population Limitation, Electrocutions, Raptor/Human Conflicts, Taxonomy and Phylogeography, Eagle Studies, Biology of Owls and General Raptor Studies. The scientific programme ended with the 5th Imperial Eagle Workshop and a Round Table on the Red Kite.

In all 173 abstracts were submitted for 124 oral and 53 poster presentations which were assembled in a 72-page booklet given to all participants at the start of the conference. This collection provides the most up to date survey of current raptor and owl research worldwide. It is regretted that only a limited number can be accommodated in this volume of proceedings.

At the close of the conference 16 Resolutions were adopted, of which that dealing with the Saker Falcon provoked several days of heated discussion until a version acceptable to all concerned could be arrived at. The proposal to ban all taking of individuals from the wild was not adopted, despite the dramatic decline of the populations in nearly all range states and the shining example of Hungary and its advocacy. The text of the Resolutions is appended herewith.

On one day (Wednesday 21 May) during the conference and following its close, participants could enjoy excursions arranged by several tour organisations. These visited different regions, especially in the east of Hungary, where there were good opportunities to observe the typical avifauna of the country.

The success of this meeting was almost entirely due to Jozsef Fidloczky and his team of helpers from MME, who set up and ran the conference with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of efficiency

R.D. Chancellor
Hon. Secretary

Bernd-U. Meyburg
Chairman

World Working Group on Birds of Prey (WWGBP)