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The Mongolian Saker Falcon: migratory, nomadic or sedentary?

The Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*) is a widespread falcon of Eurasia which has been used for falconry for thousands of years. In recent years the pressure on Saker populations has become more intensive due to persistent, but not always justified reports of high prices for this species, and widespread poverty in Asian countries. As a result the Sakers are caught and sold, and many perish due to lack of knowledge of basic veterinary procedures. Most of the legal and illegal trapping takes place in autumn-early winter, when the birds migrate. Knowing the migration patterns is essential for establishing protection measures for Saker Falcons.

An international co-operative study between the Falcon Research Institute, UK, the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, UAE and the Mongolian Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1998. In 1999-2000 the Mongolian team discovered that Mongolian Sakers do not all migrate in winter and some stay throughout the winter season

close to their nests. Using conventional radio-tracking we found that some of the Sakers were present in their nesting areas for the whole winter and did not disappear for long periods. Mongolian Sakers previously were thought to be migratory or nomadic, and although their breeding and wintering ranges significantly overlap, there was no indication that the Sakers stay in their breeding areas throughout the winter in the same way as Peregrines do in some parts of their range. However, from previous studies and winter surveys, it is clear that the Sakers living in areas with deep snow cover in winter do leave, but the extent of their travel was not known. In 2001 we decided to use the Argos system to track seasonal movements of the Sakers in Mongolia to try to define the border between the sedentary and migratory parts of the population.

In summer 2000 we fitted 5 PTT tags (three 35 g solar PTT-100 Microwave tags, and two 20 g PTT-100) on Sakers: 1 on an adult male, 3 on adult females and 1 on a juvenile

female. The tags were fitted on birds in locations strategically spread across Mongolia from northerly regions in the forest-steppe zone to semi-desert in the south. We also incorporated data from the tracking of a Saker we tagged in the Russian Altay close to the Mongolian border in our project there.

Generally the pattern of movements of Mongolian Saker Falcons suggests that they are nomadic or migratory, and that some of the individuals stay at their breeding sites all winter, as was confirmed by conventional telemetry. The migratory birds from the north have to move extensively and expose themselves to the risks of being caught by trappers. Clearly the non-migratory part of the population is less exposed to such risks, and the only danger they face is the local pressure.

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