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Imperial Eagle Populations Begin to Recover in European Russia

by Victor Belik and
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The Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) is a powerful, beautiful raptor that fully deserves its European names: "Imperial" (in French, English and Spanish) and "Kaiser-Keizer-Kejs" (in German, Dutch and Swedish). Unfortunately, its Russian name "mogil'nik," which also means "burial ground," reflects neither its appearance nor its habits. This name was given because these eagles were first seen sitting on gravestone mounds in the Kazakh Steppe.

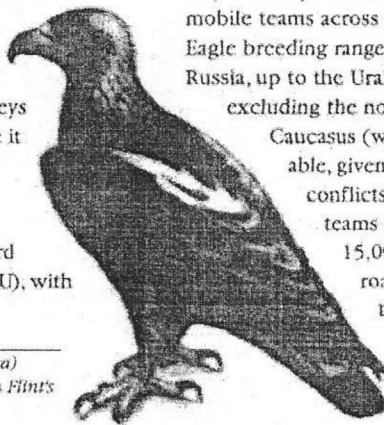
Adult Imperial Eagles are dark brown with marked white "braces" on their shoulders. They are large, with a wing span of about two meters, and heavy (females weigh up to four kilograms). Their breeding range covers the steppe and forest-steppe zones of Eurasia from Hungary to Lake Baikal. Eagles nest in tall trees, and their favorite food consists of large rodents, such as gophers and marmots, as well as birds such as rooks.

In the twentieth century, virgin steppe has been largely transformed into culti-

vated fields, resulting in a decrease in their primary prey. With human encroachment upon their breeding ground, the numbers of Imperial Eagles have fallen so sharply that the species is now considered "globally threatened," a status recently established by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and BirdLife International. In the latest lists, twenty-four such species are indicated for Europe and 35 for Russia. In the early 1990s, the total European population of the Imperial Eagle was roughly assessed at between 320 and 570 pairs (Tucker and Heath, 1994) including up to 300 pairs in Russia (Galushin, 1994). The latter figure was based on a few fragmented surveys in a few regions; therefore it badly needed to be updated.

In 1996-97 the Russian Bird Conservation Union (RBCU), with financial support from

Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*)
(Drawing by Y.V. Kostin from Flint's
Birds of the USSR, 1983).



Vogelbescherming Nederland, implemented an Imperial Eagle Project as a relevant BirdLife International Action Plan (Heredia et al., 1996). The project aimed to outline and update the breeding range and assess the size of the Imperial Eagle population within European Russia, in order to develop appropriate measures for conservation of the species and its habitat. Implementation of the project started out shakily, when almost half of the funds allocated by Vogelbescherming Nederland were lost due to the sudden bankruptcy of Tveruniversalbank. Though threatened with termination, the project was saved thanks to internal RBCU reserves.

More than ten ornithologists from various RBCU branches conducted the Project. Major surveys were undertaken by mobile teams across the entire Imperial Eagle breeding range within European Russia, up to the Ural mountains but excluding the northern slope of the Caucasus (which is understandable, given the military conflicts in the area). The teams covered about 15,000 kilometers of roads, including more than 4,000 km. of mud. These major mobile surveys were supplemented with local

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studies performed by specialists from regional RBCU branches such as Uljanovsk, Saratov, Perm and Volgograd, to mention just the most active. Overall, twelve administrative regions of more than 800,000 sq. km. in area were surveyed within the framework of the project.

Along with the assessment of the Imperial Eagle, data were collected on other rare birds such as the Greater Spotted Eagle, Steppe Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Levant Sparrowhawk. As a result, around twenty new Important Bird Areas have been proposed.

A similar project supported by Vogelbescherming Nederland and implemented in Ukraine in 1996 (with Vitaly Vetrov as coordinator) revealed more than 50 Imperial Eagle pairs nesting there.

Overall, the results are promising: more than 200 Imperial Eagle nesting sites were recorded, including more than fifty active nests. Comparison with previous data has led to the major conclusion that this Eagle's nesting range has practically not changed for thirty years, while most of the local populations are stable or growing. The number and density of nesting pairs increases from west to east. A large and growing population (more than 200 pairs) inhabits primarily pine woods within the forest-steppe zone, from eastern Ukraine to Bashkortostan at the Middle Volga River. Another population (up to 250 pairs) inhabits some

steppe areas from the Lower Don to Lower Volga Rivers. Eagles nest there primarily in isolated trees.

Despite general trends of stability, in some places the number of eagles is decreasing due to the vulnerability of their nests to human disturbance, as well as to a very sharp decline in major food sources such as gophers. According to

local studies, many minor populations inhabit the foothills of the Crimea (five to seven pairs) and the Northern Caucasus (20-30 pairs). Total populations of the Imperial Eagle in Russia and Ukraine are most likely to exceed 500 pairs, which is twice as high as previous data for those areas.

From the study it also appeared that local residents have adopted a benevolent attitude towards Imperial Eagles and their nests. When they found out about the importance of birds included in the Red Data Book, they even began to take pride in their famous neighbors. This tendency is very encouraging and must be strongly supported, since the attitude of local people is one of the major factors sustaining conservation of the Imperial Eagle and other rare birds.

To secure the stability and growth of the Imperial Eagle populations, certain conservation measures should be undertaken. The first step is identification of Important Bird Areas to be proposed as protected areas of varied status, such as Zakazniki. Environmental education that

would awaken people's awareness of the threatened eagles is also vitally important for creating a sympathetic atmosphere towards the birds and inspiring people to protect them from occasional disturbance and destruction of nests. Chopping down tall trees with eagle nests in them must be prohibited. Restoration of gopher populations as a major food source is very important, for example, between the Don and Volga Rivers, but such activity demands a great deal of time and money.

There is reason to hope that successful implementation of the Imperial Eagle Project will stimulate further international projects to study and protect other globally threatened raptors in Russia, such as the Lesser Kestrel and Spotted Eagle.

Victor Belik and Vladimir Galushin are Coordinators of the Imperial Eagle Project and members of the Russian Bird Conservation Union.

References

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