

Lesser Kestrel Recovery, LIFE11 NAT/BG/360

Re-establishment of Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) in breeding habitats of Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca heliaca*) in Bulgaria

Authors: Gradimir Gradev, Simeon Marin, Pavlin Zhelev, Dimitar Marinov

Green Balkans – Head Office, 1, Skopje Str., Plovdiv, Bulgaria, tel. +359 32 626 977; +359 887 887 557

“Greater chance for Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) in Bulgaria - Lesser Kestrel Recovery”, LIFE11 NAT/BG/360 project. With the support of the LIFE financial instrument of the European Union
www.greenbalkans.org

Green Balkans' Lesser Kestrel Hacking Facility

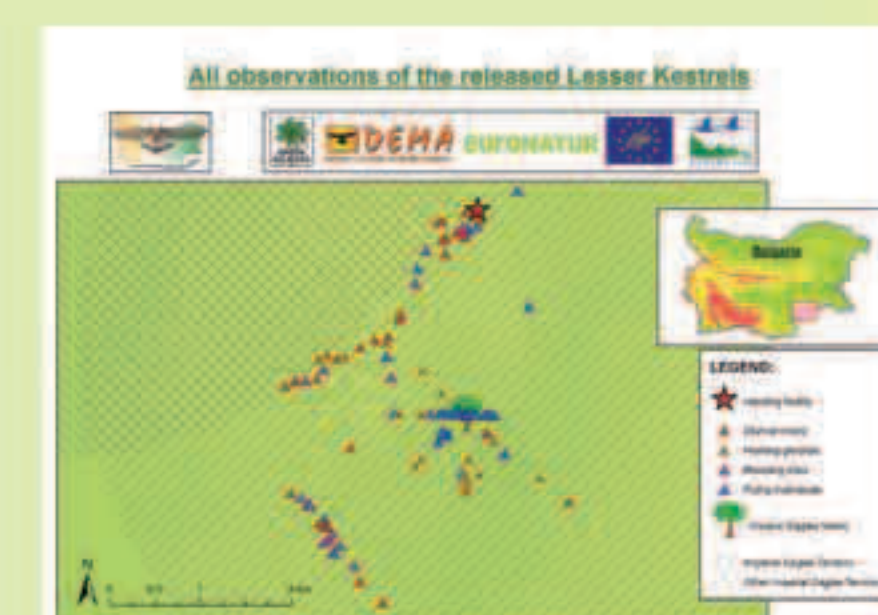


Introduction:

Until the mid-20th century, the Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) was an abundant and common species; however, currently there is no confirmed breeding of the species in Bulgaria. Although the Lesser Kestrel breeds in some neighboring countries (Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia), sometimes even found near Bulgaria's national border, it has gone extinct as a breeder in Bulgaria. In 2012, in order to re-establish the Lesser Kestrel population and to restore the breeding of the species in the region of Sakar SPA (BG0002021), Green Balkans launched the realization of “Lesser Kestrel Recovery” LIFE11 NAT/BG/360 project (<http://greenbalkans.org/birdsofprey/lesserkestrellife/>), funded by the LIFE financial instrument of the European Union. The project is implemented in partnership with DEMA, Spain (www.demaprimilla.org) and EURONATUR, Germany (www.euronatur.org).

Materials and Methods:

The re-establishment of the Lesser Kestrel population in the target region is to be implemented by releasing juvenile birds – offspring of pairs bred in captivity (ex-situ) at the specialized Lesser Kestrel Breeding Center of DEMA in Almendralejo, Spain, and the Wildlife Rescue Center of Green Balkans. The juvenile birds are to be released applying the hacking method. The area, where the juvenile Lesser Kestrels are to be released into the wild, was identified through the implementation of a viability study (Kmetova et al., 2012) and other expert assessments. This is the region of Sakar SPA, harboring the densest population of Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) in Bulgaria. There are 10 breeding localities of the species found in this particular area. Sakar is one of Bulgaria's regions supporting huge variety of raptors and rich biodiversity as a whole. The hacking facility is situated near two Imperial Eagle breeding pairs, which, in 2013, raised successfully three chicks each (Green Balkans, BSPB). One of the nests is located at about 2270 meters to the south of the hacking facility, while the other is at a distance of approximately 4500 meters to the northwest of the hacking facility. In June, 2013, within this project, 90 juvenile Lesser Kestrels were released from the hacking facility in the target region, which, although absolutely independent and confident, stayed in the area for a long period of time. The adaptation of the juvenile Lesser Kestrels and the related areas, as well as any potential relationships with the Imperial Eagles breeding in this region, were monitored by a team of Green Balkans on a daily basis through linear transects and view-point observations. Additional data were also received from the field officers of LIFE07 NAT/BG/000068 project (BSPB).



An Imperial Eagle mobbing Common Kestrel



A Lesser Kestrel mobbing Imperial Eagle



Results and Discussion:

According to the available data, there is no case of confirmed predation or competition by Imperial Eagles on Lesser Kestrels in Bulgaria. The Common Kestrel, a species similar to the Lesser Kestrel, is sometimes recorded in the diet of certain Imperial Eagle pairs (Demerdzhiev 2011). During the field observations of the juvenile Lesser Kestrels it was found out that after leaving the hacking facility they stayed mainly within the breeding area of the nearest Imperial Eagle pair. Lesser Kestrels were regularly seen in the area of the Imperial Eagle nest, directly above it, or at a distance of several tens - up to several hundreds of meters from the nest. With more than 75 observations in the vicinity of the Imperial Eagle nest, no mobbing was recorded between these two species (Green Balkans, BSPB, and FWFF). With more than 150 observations of adult and juvenile Imperial Eagles in the area of the hacking facility (a distance of 150-250 meters), no mobbing by Imperial Eagles on Lesser Kestrels was recorded. Within this perimeter, Lesser Kestrels demonstrated considerable mobbing towards Imperial Eagles - at least 10 such cases. Quite often, several Lesser Kestrels intensely attacked the eagles that passed through or tried to rest in the area of the hacking facility. The Imperial Eagles did not respond to these attacks. The Long-legged Buzzard was also indifferent to the presence of nearby Lesser Kestrels in the air. A case was recorded, when a Common Buzzard was forced to land by the aggregation of Lesser Kestrels. An attack by a Levant Sparrowhawk was recorded on the cage of the adult Lesser Kestrels in the hacking facility. For two days in a row, the Levant Sparrowhawk used to perch on the cage, which caused disturbance and stress of the adult Lesser Kestrels in the aviary. Some of them used to stand still and stop feeding, while others responded by hiding in the nest boxes. In general, no fatal relationships were recorded between Lesser Kestrels and Imperial Eagles or other bird species in the target area.