

An Assessment of the Raptor Trade in Afghanistan: a Short Visit to Mazar-e-Sharif

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Introduction

Since July 2006, WCS Ecosystem Health Team members have conducted regular surveys in the Ka Farushi bird market in Kabul (Ostrowski 2006a, b), and in other wildlife markets in Afghanistan, to understand wildlife trade patterns in the country. Trade in wildlife is of special concern to our team since it plays a major role in the spread of infectious diseases and may directly threaten wildlife populations (Bailey *et al.*, 2001; Karesh, 2005). In late August 2007, while travelling to Wakhan, team members visited shortly Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh Province, which we had been told is an important hub for raptor trade in Afghanistan. Hawks and falcons are apparently trapped in the region to be sold to middlemen and falconers, often from Gulf States¹. This trade is illegal and approaching the actors of this cryptic business is difficult. Our investigation was voluntarily brief and as little intrusive as possible.

Background

The Arabs have been pursuing falconry since ancient times. In the past, the Bedu typically trapped falcons as they passed through the Gulf during their autumn migration from Eurasia to their wintering grounds in Africa, flew them for one season, and then released them. They used falcons to catch prey, such as the Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), the Eurasian Stone Curlew (*Burhinus oedichenus*), and occasionally the Asian Houbara Bustard (*Chlamydotis macqueeni*; the ultimate quarry of Arab falconers), to supplement their otherwise frugal diet (Allen, 1980). Nowadays, falconry is no longer practiced out of necessity but it remains an integral part of the Arab life style and has become an important sporting activity in the Gulf States (Upton, 2002), especially with the development in the 1980s of an enriched middle class keen on upholding its tribal heritage. At that time, demand for falcons surged and could no longer be satisfied by the local trapping of migrating birds. As a consequence, capture of falcons (trapping and nest robbing) developed in Asian breeding grounds, contributing to a decline in their numbers.

¹ The name of the body of water separating the Arabian Peninsula from Iran is still controversial in the region. To authorize the diffusion of this report in all the concerned countries, we will use the name "Gulf" in this report.

All falcons are not equally desirable to the Arab falconers and some birds are more on threat than others. Due to their larger size and, therefore, greater success at hunting the Houbara Bustard, most sought-after birds are females of Saker Falcons (*Falco cherrug*), the classic bird of Arab falconry, Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) and Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) (Cade, 1982; Barton, 2000, 2002). All three species are on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN, 2006) and they are listed in Appendix I or II of CITES (Table 1), which means their commercial trade is either not allowed or allowed only with CITES permit, respectively.

The case of the Saker Falcon is especially worrying. Biologists from the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) in Abu Dhabi (now Environment Agency, EAD), mandated to address the impact of falconry on Saker Falcon populations, have documented a very rapid population decline, particularly on Central Asian breeding grounds, mostly caused by inadequately controlled off takes for the falconry trade. Annual consumption of Saker Falcons for Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been estimated at 6,825–8,400, mainly juvenile (77%) and adult (19%) females, potentially creating a major bias in the wild population (ERWDA, 2003). This species is now categorized as Endangered by the IUCN.

In the 1990s, high demand coupled with increasing rarity in the wild made the falcon trade very profitable for middlemen and dealers, and provided the incentive for local communities to trap falcons. At the end of the chain, market prices commonly reached an astonishing 20,000–40,000 \$US for an adult female Saker in Riyadh or Dubai, even sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars for exceptional specimens of the more favoured types². During the same decade, the falcon 'harvest' increased considerably and coupled with an increased availability of captive-bred birds progressively saturated the market in Gulf countries³. Thus, between 1999 and 2001, market prices for wild falcons fell by at least 50% (Fox, 2001). This, coupled with the trade ban imposed on UAE by CITES in 2002,

² The Arab system of classification identify over 11 'types' of Saker Falcons based on the bird morphology, which are not equally favoured by Arab falconers. Preferred falcon types are not associated with specific breeding grounds but eastern and northeastern regions (e.g. Altai) seem to provide a large number of excellent specimens and Saker population may be more at risk there (Eastham *et al.*, 2002).

³ Whether captive-breeding has been instrumental in the drop in market prices for falcons is debatable. Certain authors such as Fox (2001) support this opinion. However, whether the majority of inflowing birds were from wild or captive-born origin is unfortunately difficult to assess with precision. Captive-bred falcons are often disliked by purists, who consider them poor hunters compared to wild-born adults.

Table 1. Saker, Peregrine and Gyrfalcons: current categorization in IUCN red list and listing in CITES appendices.

Common name	Scientific name	IUCN Red List Category	Listed in CITES Appendix
Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	EN	II
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	LC	I
Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	LC	I/II

EN: endangered species; LC: least concern species

the implementation of a CITES passport to monitor the captive falcon population, affected the unregulated market there (Fox, 2002; ERWDA, 2003). However, local communities in falcon breeding grounds are poor and even reduced prices and reinforced regulations don't deter people (trappers, middlemen and exporters) involved in this business. The multi-million dollar falcon trade is most probably still going on but, owing to its largely clandestine nature, very difficult to document.

Afghanistan is a known breeding ground and migratory destination for several species of falcons, including the Saker Falcon, and hawks, but the occurrence and extent of raptor trade in this country is unknown.

Report

Through anecdotal reports of captive birds (in Kabul zoo for example) and informal discussions with songbird traders in Ka Farushi market and falconers in Gulf countries, we learnt that Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh Province is considered an important hub for the falcon trade in Afghanistan. We also got the name of a hotel there, whose owner is known to be a major middleman in the regional falcon trade.

On August 26, 2007, while travelling to Wakhan for a summer survey, Ecosystem Health Team members Drs Ali Madad Rajabi and Hafizullah Noori stopped in Mazar-e-Sharif to pay a visit to the hotel owner. He agreed to present two of his relatives involved in the falcon trade for an interview. One belonged to the Uzbek ethnic group, the other to the Pashto ethnic group. We asked each of them a series of nine questions and they responded cooperatively. Interviews were carried out in Dari and subsequently translated into English by Dr Rajabi.

Question 1: Where do traded falcons come from?

Local trapping seems to provide the majority of the raptors sold in Mazar-e-Sharif. Trapping takes place in three contiguous northern provinces: around Mazar-e-Sharif (Balkh Province), and in the west around Sheberghan (Jowzjan Province) and Andkhoy (Faryab Province). A few raptors come from China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The two traders also mentioned that some birds came from Tashkurgan' but it wasn't clear whether they referred to Tashkurgan in western Xinjiang, China, or to a local area in Afghanistan.

Question 2: What are the local mechanisms of falcon trade?

Captured raptors are quickly brought to Mazar-e-Sharif and hidden in private houses. Potential buyers stay at the hotel until the hotel owner informs them of the catches and brings them to inspect the birds. If several buyers are interested in the same bird, it is auctioned and sold to the highest bidder. Buyers are usually local traders who resell the birds to visiting traders or falconers. On several occasions in the recent past it also occurred that rich falconers from Arab countries hired the services of trappers and directly participated in captures. It happened for example in 2006 when an important Arab customer (said to be a Ministers son) hired a team of trappers and succeeded in capturing one valuable specimen.

Question 3: Which species of birds of prey are sold in Mazar-e-Sharif?

In descending order, the most represented bird species in the Mazar market are the Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), the Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and the Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*). Afghan traders favour Sparrowhawks and Goshawks whereas Pakistani and Arab traders are interested by Saker Falcons.

Question 4: What are the prices of bird of prey sold in Mazar?

All good specimens are auctioned. Average price for a good Saker Falcon would be 1000 US\$ while exceptional individuals could reach 2,000–3,000 US\$. On the other hand, poor quality sparrowhawks will not exceed 100 US\$. More sought-after individuals are those with very white belly feathers and very yellow eyes (here obviously referring to sparrowhawks or goshawks).

Question 5: Who are the traders / buyers?

Buyers are, by descending order Afghan traders, Pakistani traders, and Arab traders and falconers. They smuggle falcons to Pakistan or directly to 'Arabistan'. When Pakistani or Arab traders visit the area they often bear documents issued by the Afghani government allowing them to trap falcons in the country. Until 2–3 years ago significant numbers of falcons were also coming from China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Nowadays falcons sold in Mazar-e-Sharif are essentially captured in Afghan provinces.

Question 6: *For which reasons do Arab people buy falcons?*

One of the responder said that there is in 'Arabistan' a kind of pigeon of great value, which when consumed improves longevity. Falcons are trained to capture this species. The other falconer said that there is a peculiar species of fish living only in 'Arabistan' that bears some gold in its stomach. Arabs train falcons to catch this fish species and collect gold.

Question 7: *When is the peak of capture operations?*
Falcons and other birds of prey are captured during autumn. Trapping starts in October but the best time to capture raptors is from the end of November to mid-December.

Question 8: *What kind of technique do you use to catch the birds?*

Trappers use pigeons fitted with a 'snare harness' to trap falcons. Snares are fixed on the back of a pigeon which is either attached to the ground or has a piece of cloth attached to its legs to limit its fly performances. When a falcon is spotted in the sky, pigeons with snares are released in the air or on the ground. If a falcon attempts to catch the pigeon, its claws get trapped in the snares, and it is trapped.

Question 9: *What is your understanding of market trends in recent years?*

In recent years trapping pressure has decreased in the region. Because of the hunting ban promulgated by the Central Government, local police are now bribing trappers if they want to continue their activities. The trappers who do not have enough resources or capture opportunities stop their activities.

Discussion

The present report documents raptor trading activities in Mazar-e-Sharif based on the interview of two persons. Although we have been told that these two persons were intimately involved in falcon trade we have no means to verify this and their answers should be interpreted carefully. Having said that their answers corroborated what I (Dr Ostrowski) already knew from falcon trading in western Asia. Indeed when discussing with falcon dealers and local falconers in Gulf countries, I was told that falcons from Afghanistan or transiting through Afghanistan were often purchased by Pakistani traders from Peshawar, smuggled to Pakistan before being further smuggled to UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The technique described for trapping falcons is very similar to the one used by falconers along the shores of the Red Sea coast, south of Jeddah in October and November, which I have personally witnessed. It is important to understand that migrating adult birds with already good hunting techniques are far more

valued by Arab falconers than juvenile birds collected in nests before fledging or juvenile birds performing their first migration. Kabul zoo displays a confiscated juvenile Saker highly imprinted to humans that might have been collected unfledged from nest. Although of reasonably good size, such animal is of little to no value to falconers.

Prices mentioned by the two responders were about 30–50% of those reported from the UAE market, meaning that prices roughly double between Mazar and the UAE markets, which sounds a reasonable profit for traders provided they succeed buying a cohort of birds or an individual of great value.



Photo 1. *Confiscated Saker Falcon at Kabul zoo.*

Both responders suggested that falcon trade decreased during recent years. Although this information must be interpreted with caution, it is interesting to note the perverse mechanism triggered by the National hunting ban, which unfortunately supports indirectly police corruption.

Prior to the Afghan-Soviet war, Afghanistan had a strong tradition of falconry. It is a known breeding ground and migratory destination for several species of falcons, including the Saker Falcon, and hawks but the occurrence and extent of raptor trade in this country is unknown.

Note worthily Mazar-e-Sharif seems to be a more important marketing place for Accipitridae (sparrowhawks and goshawks) than for Falconidae (falcons). Accipitridae are valued by local people but

are only seldom sold in Gulf countries, most falconers in these countries regarding flying 'yellow-eyed' birds as dishonourable.

Eventually the reasons advocated by the two local dealers for Arab people putting so much money into buying falcons make sense. The 'kind of pigeon' hunted by Arabs refer most probably to the Houbara Bustard, and it is true that Arab falconers believe that eating houbaras improves longevity and is also an aphrodisiac. However the interesting observation is that both dealers did not really know about Houbara Bustard, a species breeding in southern provinces of Afghanistan but also in the north near Mazar-e-Sharif (Olivier Combreau, pers. comm.) and also victim of an intense smuggling to supply Gulf country markets (Combreau *et al.*, 2001; Tourenq *et al.*, 2005)⁴, suggesting that both traders were not involved in Houbara Bustard trade.

We hope that this short document will improve the understanding of conservationists, often misinformed, about the current reality of capture and trade of raptors in Mazar-e-Sharif region, Afghanistan.

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⁴ Large numbers of Houbara Bustards are smuggled out of Central Asia every year to be used for the training of falcons in Gulf countries. Many Houbara Bustard populations suffer over-exploitation due to this double demand, once to supply live animals for training and then as prey during hunting season (Tourenq *et al.*, 2005).