



Lesser Spotted Eagles leaving a roost-site to continue forward on migration. The flocks are especially vulnerable during dawn and dusk when flying at low altitude which brings them into shooting range.

Photo: T. Krumenacker, 28.9.2012.

BIRD HUNTING IN LEBANON - POACHERS DECIMATE
LESSER SPOTTED EAGLES FROM EUROPE:

Fatal Flight

Each year, millions of birds die during migration to their wintering areas in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the key bird poaching hotspots is Lebanon – which lies along the ‘Eastern Flyway’ (the second busiest bird migration route in the world). Here, in addition to millions of songbirds and tens of thousands of birds of prey, Germany’s most endangered eagle, the Lesser Spotted Eagle, faces severe persecution. Every single shot bird not only needlessly destroys an eagle’s life, it also undermines the conservation of the eagles in the far-flung breeding areas of Europe and Asia. Here we trace the fate of one victim and try to approximate the extent of the eagle massacres occurring in Lebanon.

The Vorpommern-Rügen district in Western Pomerania is a quiet and remote wetland delta region.

Despite some problems with intensive farming biodiversity remains high compared to other parts of Germany. One special treasure of the region is the Lesser Spotted Eagle, which breeds here in a double-digit number of pairs. This includes a radio-tagged male known as "Dieter" who spends the summer months breeding in an old, richly structured deciduous mixed forest not too far away from the old Hanseatic city of Greifswald. Local ornithologist Hinrich Matthes is responsible for monitoring Dieter's nest and has been especially keen to ensure successful breeding this year. In 2017, despite repeated protests, the brood failed after dredging work was carried out close to the nesting site. Thankfully, everything is going smoothly this year. The pair of eagles moved to a new location following last year's disturbance. The eyrie is now perched in a stately beech. „Dieter“ is at least 14 years old and a very experienced and cautious eagle. Together with his mate, he successfully raised a chick - marking Dieters third confirmed fledgling success since being ringed and fitted with a radio-transmitter back in 2009. Each mid-September, the eagles leave their breeding areas to spend the winter in southern Africa. Matthes is satisfied that the effort to protect the nest from disturbance this year has paid off well. „Dieter“ has travelled more than 100,000 kilometres on migration in his life so far; in terms of figures, he has flown around the globe more than three times! However, this is to be his last trip. Less than three weeks after his departure from northern Germany, the joy of breeding success gives way to horror. „Dieter's“ radio tracker broadcast position data for the last time on the morning of October 10, 2018, before being struck with gunshot and plummeted to the ground. He had just reached Lebanon. „Near the village of Aadbil, 58 metres above ground, 40 metres from a roadside,“ reports eagle researcher Bernd-Ulrich Meyburg, who tagged the bird in 2009 and published the news of his death. All protection in the breeding area was in vain.

Unfortunately, the fate of „Dieter“ is anything but an isolated case and has only been confirmed because he was wearing a transmitter. Only a few Lesser Spotted Eagles are tagged in this way, allowing their journey on migration to be monitored so closely. However, if you compare how many

of this handful of tagged birds are killed by 'hunters' in the Middle East and look at other clues, you can begin to get a picture of the true extent of eagle massacres taking place each year in the Lebanon; and the impact this is having on conservation efforts being made by many people in the breeding countries of the Lesser Spotted Eagle.

„We are trying to bring the last Lesser Spotted Eagles back from the brink of extinction and despite our best efforts the species is simply being trampled out of existence. It is infinitely depressing, to see how the concerted efforts to protect the species are being negated in such an ignorant, brutal and unscrupulous way“ comments nest-watcher Matthes. Another Lesser Spotted Eagle tagged and ringed as „W68“ this summer as a juvenile in the nest near Stary Dzikow in southeastern Poland, was found shot dead in Lebanon only days after „Dieter“ by conservationists from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS).

How big is the eagle massacre?

The precise extent of the number of eagles and other large migratory birds lost along the Eastern flyway is hard to determine.

The vast majority of birds simply disappears into a migration black-hole after being shot down. More often than not, they are not even collected by the hunters, because they fall too far away in rough mountain terrain. Or, simply because the sight of a big bird falling from the sky brings enough of a „thrill“ and is deemed as a sufficient motivation for killing these birds. Despite the introduction of new hunting laws, many poachers have complete disregard to the ecological devastation such actions are causing to entire global populations. Lebanon is also just one of several notorious bird-poaching countries along the Eastern Flyway. In parts of South-eastern Europe, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt, the indiscriminate shooting and trapping of birds is commonplace.

However, Lebanon must be the primary focus of attention, as the migration of large birds is particularly concentrated and narrow as a result of the geographical position and structure of the country - thus many birds are far more vulnerable than on other sections of the flyway which have significantly wider corridors.

There is hardly any data available on the exact course of bird migration through Lebanon. However, from Northern Israel



Last picture of „Dieter“ in his breeding territory, taken a few months prior to being shot dead in Lebanon.

Photo: M. Runze, 1.7.2018.



This Lesser Spotted Eagle was found with severe gunshot injuries and brought to a rehab centre in northern Lebanon. Unfortunately only a small fraction of the injured birds survive.

Photo: CABS – www.komitee.de



Lebanese poacher with freshly shot Lesser Spotted Eagle. Hundreds of images such as this can be found on social media.

Photo: Screenshot/CABS – www.komitee.de

which is immediately adjacent to the south and with a similar geographical-structure, an evaluation comprising 30 years of bird census data illustrates the concentration and overwhelming number of large avifauna passing through the region: Most birds of prey use a migratory corridor which is just 20 kilometres wide. In the case of Lesser Spotted Eagle, the majority funnel through an even narrower corridor of only about 15 kilometres wide. In addition,

almost the entire world population of some species funnel through this 'bottleneck'. Lesser Spotted Eagles have an estimated global population of <124,000 individuals (2010). On average, more than a quarter (25.7%) of all Lesser Spotted Eagles migrate through this region in just one day. In some years, the density of migration in the Middle East can be even more concentrated: On 1 October 2000 - more than half of all Lesser Spotted Eagles (54.5%) passed

over a narrow area in Northern Israel in just one day.

On 4-5 October 2008 in the same region, 53,000 Lesser Spotted Eagles were recorded passing overhead, which equates to 64% of the total global population. A very similar picture is therefore surmised to have taken place on the previous days just a few miles north across Lebanon. It is hard to imagine what kind of massacre will have taken place under such favorable conditions along the mountain passes. Similar concentrations in number and passage period apply for other species such as Honey Buzzard, Levant Sparrowhawk and White Stork.

How to help

The Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) and its Lebanese partner organisations plan to expand their local activities in 2019. For this purpose, the autumn operations are to be extended to have monitoring teams present during the peak of the eagle migration in early October. In addition, the number of teams will be doubled in order to simultaneously monitor several important migratory concentration points which have been identified since 2017. In addition, the successful education campaign for hunters will be continued and cooperation with the police will be intensified. As a result of our field investigations in 2018, 15 poachers were fined and had their weapons confiscated. In the medium term, we want to ensure that a regular police presence is established in the main migration corri-

dors and that the Lebanese authorities are implementing more proactive enforcement measures against poaching.

To fully implement the planned expansion of bird protection operations in Lebanon, we still need to raise around 25,000 Euros to enable the planned operations. We therefore decided to take the unusual step of inviting our readers here to help fund this important conservation project. Who wants to do this can help with a donation to the following account:

Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS)
IBAN: DE61 3702 0500 0008 1255 00
Name of the bank: Bank für Sozialwirtschaft
BIC: BFSWDE33XXX
Keyword „EAGLE“

Several thousand Lesser Spotted Eagles die every migration season

So how many Lesser Spotted Eagles are shot each year in Lebanon alone? This question will probably never be answered exactly. However, on the basis of the evidence we have collected so far, we can safely conclude that the average number per year is in the range of approximately +/- 5000. Indications for this figure include the hundreds of injured live birds which are found and recovered each year by Lebanese NGOs and animal rescue groups as well as the relative frequency of ringed birds from Europe being picked up with injuries from gunshot. Further evidence that Lesser Spotted Eagles are being shot down in Lebanon is also provided by numerous trophy photos published by the

poachers themselves on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Since autumn 2017, investigators from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) and the Middle East Sustainable Hunting Centre (MESHHC) have been recording and collating such images from social networks and repeatedly find „selfies“ of men posing with dead Lesser Spotted Eagle and several other species of conservation concern. Typically, there are one or two dead eagles per picture, but even photos with eight or more freshly shot eagles are not uncommon.

Another piece of the puzzle on the scale of the Lesser Spotted Eagle massacre, is the analysis of the statistics from the Wildlife Hospital in Tel Aviv, in which many birds are brought who have just about managed to make it over the Lebanese-Israeli border and are found weakened with varying degrees of physical injury. Hundreds of birds of prey, storks and pelicans are recovered in this manner each year. Thirty percent of the bird of prey recovered have gunshot wounds, often by different calibre, indicating the injuries are sustained by multiple separate incidents of being shot at. Lesser Spotted Eagles are particularly affected due to their concentrated migration through the region. Between 2006 and 2016, 245 Lesser Spotted Eagles were treated – a staggering number given the low probability of detection.

The number of birds which die in Lebanon in one season also depends on the exact timeframe of the peak passage. For example, eagles that cross the concentration points during the week and at noon have a higher chance of survival than birds that pass these places on the weekend, in the morning or later in the afternoon, when, on the one hand, most hunters are active and, on the other, the thermals carry the birds at a lower altitude. Birds of prey are also particularly susceptible when they come to roost in large numbers in the late afternoon (as they often do) and are unable to gain lift to their maximum height until about two hours after sunrise (only then will there be sufficient thermals).

Therefore, when factors like weekend and heavy winds come together, it can result in hundreds of eagles being shot in a single bottleneck area. This is made even worse because Lesser Spotted Eagles are unable to compensate for such losses in the short term due to their low rates of reproduction. This species only become sexually mature in their fourth or fifth calendar



Lesser Spotted Eagles are masters of migration each year travelling more than 10,000 kilometres between their breeding and wintering areas. Photo: T. Krumenacker 1.10.2010.

year. Thus, many birds simply do not live long enough to successfully reproduce and replace themselves. The slaughter of a single experienced breeding eagle such as “Dieter”, weighs heavily. The consequences of such loss can be increasingly observed in the breeding areas: Even in optimal habitats, nesting sites appear to be inexplicably abandoned from one year to the next - a clue that the birds have not survived the dangerous journey south or upon attempting to return.

There can be no doubt that poaching on the migration route is one of the key factors jeopardizing the conservation efforts for these and other species in Germany and elsewhere.

Thomas Krumenacker, Axel Hirschfeld

	<p>Thomas Krumenacker works as a journalist in Berlin and is a member of the editorial team of DER FALKE magazine and editor of the „Flugbegleiter“ project. www.krumenacker.de</p>
	<p>Axel Hirschfeld is a conservationist and Operations Officer of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS). In his spare time he maps and rings birds of prey in the area of Bonn, Germany.</p>

Literature

Krumenacker T 2012: Der Durchzug von Schreiadler *Aquila pomarina*, Wespenbussard *Pernis apivorus*, Kurzfangsperber *Accipiter brevipes*, Weißstorch *Ciconia ciconia* und Rosapelikan *Pelecanus onocrotalus* über Nordisrael – eine Bilanz aus 30 Jahren. *Limicola*, 26, Heft 3.