

## White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* in Southern Moravia

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The landscape of Southern Moravia has been greatly affected by human development, in order to promote intensive agricultural and industrial production. However, until now, sites important for the survival of wild life have been preserved in this region. Many of these represent important refuges for birds of prey. Areas which have preserved their original, nearly wild character are particularly important. These are above all hilly and mountainous regions rich in forests, rocks, rivers, lakes or peatbogs, or plains and lowlands with numerous fish-ponds, rivers and reservoirs in canyon-like valleys, wetlands, steppe habitats, and the extraordinarily rich areas of lowland riverine forests. Thirteen species of raptor breed in this region. We suppose that two further species also currently breed here.

The White-tailed Sea Eagle has never been a common raptor in Southern Moravia, even in the past. Records of its breeding are extremely rare. In fact, we cannot be sure to-day whether data on its breeding in the past were correct. In 1920 and in several following years the species was reported to have bred in Southern Moravian riverine forest (Karasek 1922, 1923 in Jiršík 1941; Hudec *et al.* 1977). Since then, any further concrete data are lacking, with only mentions in the literature that eagles visited main wintering sites occasionally in spring and summer (Jiršík 1941; Hudec *et al.* 1977).

In the past, however, Sea Eagles regularly visited Southern Moravia for wintering, gathering especially in several areas with many fish-ponds (Lednice and Pohorelice ponds) or in the region along the lower streams of some rivers (Morava, Dyje). According to data in the literature, the number of wintering birds has never been great (Hudec *et al.* 1977); however, a systematic winter census has never been made.

The present situation of the White-tailed Sea Eagle in Southern Moravia is as follows: the birds winter regularly at all historic localities. Large water reservoirs (Nove Mlýny lakes), filled in 1978, became the centre of the wintering population, whilst wintering eagles have been observed occasionally at other sites (fish-ponds near Zahlinice, Tovacov, Hodonín Jaroslavice, Studenec). Like the staff of the Protected Landscape Area Trebonsko, we made a winter count of Sea Eagles in Southern Moravia. This was carried out in 1982-1990 and many co-workers took part in it. The results have not yet been published in any scientific paper; we have only published a

short report in 1988 (Hudec & Mrlík 1988). The total number of wintering eagles was 7-17 birds in individual winters. We believe that an average of about 20 birds can be expected also in future years. In the European context, the South Moravian wintering site is very important, due both to the number of birds and to their concentration in a small space (the wintering sites in Southern Bohemia-Trebonsko and in SW Slovakia, the inner delta of the Danube, are of similar value). This importance is supported by repeated observations of ringed birds released in neighbouring Austria (released 22nd May 1990, observed 4th-17th August 1990)

At the start we did not expect to find the Sea Eagle breeding in Southern Moravia. Observations of these birds never even indicated such a possibility. Only in 1983 observations in April and May were added to the earlier records from March. The following year, in March 1984, the first occupied eyrie was found (Horák 1989). The breeding pair were in adult plumage. It is important to mention here that in the same year, after about 100 years (the last recorded breeding probably in 1889, Jirsík 1941) Sea Eagles also bred in Southern Bohemia (Sevcík 1987, 1989). These birds later turned out to be descendants of those birds released from artificial breeding stations in Southern Bohemia since 1978. However, these were wild eagles that bred in Southern Moravia. Both in Southern Bohemia and Southern Moravia the breeding was unsuccessful in that year. However, in both cases it marked the start of regular breeding in both regions.

Between 1984 and 1988, breeding of only a single pair was observed each year. Another pair was observed building a eyrie in 1988. In 1990, the number of breeding pairs probably increased; although we found only two nests, we assumed breeding by a third pair in a very suitable extensive wooded area.

To summarize the position in Southern Moravia, the White-tailed Sea Eagles are a regularly wintering and since 1984 a regular though rare breeding species. Over eight years (1984-1991), there has been evidence of breeding 12 times. In some cases eggs (1985, 1988) or young were found in eyries (1984, in Horák 1989). Unfortunately, breeding has so far never been successful.

All known breeding sites in Southern Moravia are situated close to wintering sites or are identical with them. This is an important finding, underlining the importance of these localities. We assume that the natural habitat of Southern Moravia fully meets the needs of these eagles and that they can breed here in future years provided that several essential conditions are maintained. These are the preservation of sufficiently extensive tall and old forests near large water surfaces (riverine forests), and the elimination of any wood-cutting or other disturbance at breeding sites during nesting. Only then can the outlook for Sea Eagles breeding in future years be a hopeful one.

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