Status and Population Trend of the Eastern Imperial Eagle
(Aquila heliaca) in Europe in the Period 2000-2010

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Abstract: The summary of data from range countries estimates the population size of the Eastern Imperial Eagle (Aquila heliaca) Saviñy 1809) in Europe at 1800-2200 pairs, which reflects a significant increase compared to previous estimations. Also, there has been a significant increase in the number of known breeding pairs reaching 1134 known territories. Recent intensified surveys on distribution and abundance in key regions (Russia, Kazakhstan, European Turkey, Macedonia, Azerbaijan), as well as the currently recorded stabilization and increase of the entire Carpathian population makes a more precise status assessment of Eastern Imperial Eagles in Europe possible. Although in recent years the population of Eastern Imperial Eagles in some Balkan countries has been studied more intensively, further detailed research is still needed in potential breeding areas in SE Europe. In the region of Thrace (Bulgaria and European Turkey) the Eastern Imperial Eagle population was found to be more abundant, while population decline has been recorded in Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia. Russia and Kazakhstan hold the largest populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Europe, which seem to be stable. Between 2000 and 2010 a sevenfold increase was documented in the number of known breeding pairs of Eastern Imperial Eagles in Europe. Based on the results of regional surveys in range countries, the Eastern Imperial Eagle population status in Europe can be considered to be stable and probably increasing.

Key words: Eastern Imperial Eagle, Population, Europe, status

Introduction

The conservation threat status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle is classified as vulnerable globally (BIRDlife International 2008) and rare at European level (BIRDlife International 2004). The species is listed in Annex 1 of the European Union’s Birds Directive, Appendix 1 of CITES, and Appendix 2 of the Bonn and Bern Conventions. It is a Palearctic species (Vouos 1960), whose breeding range extends from Austria in the west (16° E) to Lake Baikal in the east (110° E) and from the South-Ural mountains in the north (57° N) to Turkey in the south (39° N) (Wichmann 2011, Karyakin et al. 2008, Görsan, Bilgin 2002). Scattered breeding populations of the species are known in Central Europe, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Eastern Europe, Kazakhstan, Southern Siberia, and northernmost parts of China and Mongolia. Possible northward range expansion has been recorded for the past decade, and single pairs have been bred even in the 59° and 60° northern latitudes in Siberia (Sorokin 2009, Moshkin 2009). The western populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle (i.e. Central Europe, Balkan and Asia Minor) are mainly residents, while the eastern ones are long-distance migrants (Del Hoyo et al. 1995). The

The population size and status of the species was not precisely known in most of its European range until the end of the 20th century. Scarce bibliographic data shows that in the 19th century the Eastern Imperial Eagle was a widely distributed species with high-density populations in the Balkans and other parts of Europe (Ettinger 1857, Rudolf von Österreich et al. 1878, Leverkühn 1907, Alleon, Vian, 1869). During the 20th century the species’ population in Central and Southeast Europe was subject to strong anthropogenic pressure marked by drastic decline. The last comprehensive summary of the species’ status in Europe was published after the 4th International Imperial Eagle Conference (Budapest, 23-24 November, 1998), and it reported different population trends and completely different levels of knowledge in the range countries at the millennium (Horváth et al. 2002). In the last decade of the 20th century, increasing, decreasing, and stable populations were recorded in various parts of the species’ range in Europe. The population of the Carpathian basin started to increase in size and expanded its range into the lowlands from the mountains during the 1990’s (Bágyura et al. 2002). The Balkan populations were also properly surveyed and reported to be more or less stable (Stoychev et al. 2004), while only rough population estimations and no reliable trend data were available for Turkey and for the largest East-European populations (Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan). The total European population was estimated to be between 1051-1619 breeding pairs in 2000 (Horváth et al. 2002) and 1099-1752 breeding pairs in 2003 (summarized at the 5th International Imperial Eagle Conference, Budapest, 23 May 2003, Horváth, Kovács pers. comm.).

In the present paper we are summarizing the available information on the status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in the European countries between 2000 and 2010.

Methods

The presented population data is based on the 12 presentations held at the 6th International Conference on the Conservation of the Eastern Imperial Eagle (5-7 September 2008, Topolovgrad, Bulgaria). Population data was also updated with the most recent available publications and by personal communication with national experts, where it was possible or necessary. The financial and personnel capacities, and also the exact methods of surveys differed among countries.

Results

The current European status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle is discussed and summarized on a country-by-country basis.

Albania

The species’ status remains unknown. A pair with territorial behaviour was recorded in 1996 and 1997 at the Albanian-Greek national border (Sakoulis, Bourdakis, 2002). The country could possibly hold several breeding pairs, but data on any confirmed breeding of the species is not available in international literature.

Armenia

The recent status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Armenia is unknown. The last confirmed breeding of the species in the country was in 1979 (M. Ghasabian, pers. comm.). Abuladze (1996) reported 2-3 pairs in Armenia at the Georgian and Azerbaijani border between 1984 and 1991. One adult bird was observed 2 km from the Armenian border in Georgia in September 2007 (Horváth, Kovács pers. comm.). Previously, the population was estimated at 2-10 pairs (Horváth et al. 2002), but the most recent estimation is 0-2 pairs, as there is no proof of breeding of the species during the last three decades (Horváth et al. 2006). Except in the north-eastern corner of the country, where the breeding of the species is probable, the Imperial Eagle is very rare in Armenia and it occurs there primarily during migration.

Austria

In 1999, after being absent for almost 200 years, the species returned as a breeder in the Austrian
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For the past ten years, the population has increased slowly but continuously. The population comprised 4-5 breeding pairs by 2009 (Wichmann 2011), and in 2010 six nesting pairs have already been located (Wichmann pers. comm.). The breeding pairs were found in the eastern part of the country, near the Hungarian, Czech, and Slovakian national borders.

Azerbaijan

Thirty-one active territories were recorded in North-western Azerbaijan in the period 2007-2008 (Horváth et al. 2008), and further 18 nests were found in the Western part of the country in 2010 (Sultanov 2010). As the largest parts of the country are potentially suitable for the species and are not specifically surveyed, the estimations for the total population of the country are widely ranged between 50 and 150 pairs (Horváth et al. 2006, Horváth et al. 2008).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

No recent information was found on the status of the species in this country. Breeding of Eastern Imperial Eagles has not been confirmed, but the existence of a few territories cannot be excluded near the Croatian and Serbian borders (BirdLife International 2010).

Bulgaria

Since 2000, following a drastic population decline during the second half of the 20th century, the population number of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Bulgaria has been increasing. The national population was estimated at 20-25 pairs in 2002 (Stoychev et al. 2004 b) and 25-30 pairs in 2008 (Demerdzhiev et al. 2011 a). In the period 2001-2010, 14 newly occupied territories were discovered and 3 cases of re-occupied territories were recorded. In 2009, the number of known occupied territories increased to 20. Between 2001 and 2010, in total, 25 different breeding territories were occupied, mostly in South-East Bulgaria.

Croatia

There is no available data on the status of the species in Croatia. Breeding of one or two pairs near to the Serbian border is possible (Horváth et al. 2002).

Cyprus

Untill the end of the 20th century there was a small breeding population in the Trodos Mountains (Flint, Stewart, 1992), which was most probably exterminated before 2000 (Horváth et al. 2002).

Czech Republic

After the first breeding record of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in the country in 1998, annually 1-3 pairs were breeding in the south-eastern part of the country till 2009 (Horal 2011), while a total of 5 breeding territories have been located in 2010 (Horal pers. comm.). The Czech Republic represents the north-western limit of the species’ breeding range, and the appearance of the species in the country was facilitated by the population increase in Hungary and Slovakia.

Georgia

Galvez et al. (2005) reported a small and decreasing Eastern Imperial Eagle population for Georgia consisting of only 10-15 pairs. On the other hand Abuladze (2010) reported 30-40 breeding pairs in the country for the period 2001-2010, and he also assumes that the population size has been continuously increasing since 1975. The breeding population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle is concentrated in the south-eastern part of the country, with no breeding recorded in the western and northern regions.

Greece

The last breeding attempt of Eastern Imperial Eagles in Greece dates back to 2000, reported for the Dadia Forest Reserve (Poirazidis 2001). Although no nest was found, in the spring of 2000 the birds were recorded bringing food, and on July 27th an adult was recorded flying together with a juvenile. The population in 2000 was estimated to consist of at least 3 breeding pairs (Sacoulis 2001). Bourdakis (2003) estimated the population at 0-3 pairs. In recent years, breeding of 1-2 pairs along the lower reaches of the Evros River, or in the region of Thrace, near the Bulgarian-Turkish border, has been a possiblity (L. Sidirooulos pers. comm.).

Hungary

The population increase of the Eastern Imperial Eagles, which had been observed since the 1980’s, continued between 2001 and 2009 (Horváth et al. 2011). Compared to 2000, when the population was estimated at 55-60 pairs (Horváth et al. 2002), the number of pairs has doubled and reached 120-130
pairs by 2010 (HORVÁTH pers. comm.). This increase was recorded in lowland agricultural habitats, while a decreasing trend was observed in the previously occupied forested mountain territories.

Kazakhstan

The latest researches in Kazakhstan revealed significantly larger populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle, than was previously expected. They are estimating the total population of the country between 3500 and 4000 pairs, which represents the largest national population of the species within its entire range (KARYAKIN et al. 2008, KARYAKIN et al. 2011). The population of the European part of the country (Western Kazakhstan) is located in the Volga-Ural sands, with about 600 nesting pairs (KARYAKIN et al. 2006). There are 93 known nests in Western Kazakhstan, however only 10 % of the potential breeding range has been surveyed to date (I. KARYAKIN pers. comm.). This figure has doubled previous estimations from the late 1990s (BELIK et al. 2002). The population trend of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Kazakhstan indicates a steady increase, which may be directly related to the range expansion of the Yellow Squirrel (Spermophilus fulvus Lichtenstein 1823) and the increase of the eagles’ abundance in semi-desert and desert areas. There, the species has been adapted to nest on electric poles and saxaul savanna, and forced the Steppe Eagles (Aquila nipalensis Hodgson 1833) out in some areas.

Kosovo

There is no precise information available on the status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in country. In April 2004, a pair was recorded in the vicinities of Gnjilane (GRUBAC, STOJNIC, 2011), and the breeding of several pairs cannot be excluded.

Moldova

No recent species specific surveys have been implemented in Moldova. Averin (2001) reports that the population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle is constantly decreasing in the country and only about 3 pairs may be nesting. BELIK et al. (2002) estimates the breeding population at 0-3 pairs.

Republic of Macedonia

During the period 2001-2008, the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Macedonia bred in 27 different active territories, distributed along the Vardar river valley (HALLMAN 2008, LISICANEC PERS. COMM.). The breeding population between 2001 and 2008 was estimated at 15-38 breeding pairs. The population was stable and even slightly increasing between 2001 and 2003, while in the following years a heavy decrease in the number of breeding pairs was recorded, due to poisoning or direct persecution (HALLMAN 2008). By 2008, there were at least 18 active territories known in Macedonia, with a population estimated at between18-23 breeding pairs.

Romania

The new edition of the Red Data Book of Vertebrates of Romania (MUNTEANU 2005) estimates the population at 20-40 pairs, but the breeding of the species has not been proven since 1967 in the country (LIBUS ANDRAS, UNPUBL. DATA in STOYCHEV et al. 2004). Recently systematic and large-scale raptor surveys have been implemented in Romania, which covered all previously known and the most potential Imperial Eagle habitats. The surveys revealed significant populations of other raptor species (e.g. Lesser-Spotted Eagle Aquila pomarina BREHM 1831), but resulted in only scarce observations in most of the cases of a single or maximum of two, mainly immature and subadult Imperial Eagles, which most probably were migrant and vagrant specimens (DAROCZI PERS. COMM.). Based on this data the breeding status of the species in Romania is not certain, and if any breeding population exists in the country it most probably does not contain more than a few pairs.

Russia

During the last decade intensive raptor surveys have been implemented in Russia and Kazakhstan, which resulted in a significant improvement in the available information on the largest populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle. Altogether 1122 breeding territories with 913 known nests have been located in Russia (KARYAKIN et al. 2011), out of which 726 active nests were in the European regions of the country, such as in the Volga-Ural region (570 pairs), along Lower and Middle Volga (120 pairs), in the Caucasus and the Don river basin (36 pairs) (I. KARYAKIN PERS. COMM.). The whole population of Russia is estimated at 3000-3500 pairs (KARYAKIN et al. 2011), out of which 1050 pairs are estimated in the European parts.
of the country. The species is distributed in the forest-steppe on the southern edge of the Ural Mountains (500 pairs), in Bugulminsko-Belebeeyskaya upland (200 pairs), in the Middle Volga (150 pairs) and in the Northern Caucasus (near 200 pairs) (KARYAKIN 2007, KARYAKIN, PAZHENKOV, 2008, BELIK, 2008). The previous estimation of the population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in the European part of Russia was 600-900 pairs (BELIK et al. 2002), but the much higher recent estimate has resulted from the improved surveys and not from any significant increase of the species’ populations. In general, the Russian population of the Imperial Eagle is stable in the European part (KARYAKIN et al. 2011).

Slovakia

Like the other part of the population of Eastern Imperial Eagle in the Carpathian basin, the number of the Slovakian pairs is increasing. Twenty-six nesting pairs were observed in 2009 in Southeast Slovakia (DANKO 2009) and 20 active breeding territories in Southwest Slovakia in 2010 (CHAVKO PERS. COMM.), which altogether represents a population of 45-50 pairs for the total territory of the country. The previous estimation of the breeding population of the species in Slovakia was 35-40 pairs in 2000 (HORVÁTH et al. 2002) and 40-45 pairs in 2007 (DANKO et al. 2011).

Ukraine

The population is estimated at 55-60 pairs distributed in the steppe area of the country, especially eastwards from the Dnepr River and 5-10 pairs also breed on the Crimea Peninsula (VETROV, MILOBOG, 2008). The population is supposed to be stable.

Turkey

The first more detailed research on the distribution and numbers of Eastern Imperial Eagle population in the European part of Turkey was carried out in the period 2008-2010 (DEMERDZHEV et al. 2011 b). Twenty-five active territories occupied by Imperial Eagle pairs, distributed in three different regions were found. The breeding population was estimated at 30-50 pairs inhabiting hilly and low mountain areas of the Dervent Heights, the Strandja Mountains, and the Thracian region north of the Marmara Sea. The population is gradually increasing, being directly connected to the pairs breeding on the other side of the border in Bulgaria and also in the Anatolian part of the country.

Serbia

After a large decline during the 20th century the small population of Serbia is more or less stable, inhabiting mainly the northern part of the country (Fruska Gora Mountains) (GRUBAČ, STONIĆ, 2011). In 2010 there were 2 known breeding pairs in the Fruska Gora Mountains, one additional nesting pair was found close to the Hungarian border (they did not start breeding), while adult and subadult birds were often seen in three other localities during the breeding season (STONIĆ PERS. COMM.). Therefore, recently 3-6 pairs are estimated to breed in Serbia.

Breeding distribution in Europe

The summary of the available data on the European populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle is presented (Table 1). Known occupied territory was defined as a territory where at least one active nest was known in the period between 2000 and 2010.

Migration and wintering distribution

Adult territorial birds in Central and Southeastern Europe are mostly resident, spending the winter period in their breeding territories (BAGYURA et al. 2002, STOYCHEV et al. 2004 b). The dispersal movements of immature Eastern Imperial Eagles of these regions have been clarified recently by satellite tracking studies. Juvenile and immature eagles of Hungarian and Slovakian origin were dispersing throughout the Carpathian basin mostly around the lowland breeding habitats (CHAVKO et al. 2008). However, some individuals have migrated from the Carpathian basin to the Balkans, Asia Minor and occasionally to Israel (DANKO 1996, BAGYURA et al. 2002, CHAVKO et al. 2008). Juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagles from Bulgaria and the European part of Turkey winter to the north of the Marmara Sea, in Anatolia, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Northeastern Africa (GRADEV et al. 2011 A, B, DEMERDZHEV, UNPUBL. MANUSCRIPT, S. STOYCHEV, UNPUBL. DATA). These birds use two migratory flyways – through the Dardanelles, along the coastline of Asia Minor, or through the Bosporus, crossing Anatolia.
The movements of Eastern Imperial Eagles from the East-European populations are much less understood, but they are assumed to be long-term migrants, and they are probably spending the winters in the Middle East, Arabia (Evans 1994) and North-East Africa (Roeck 1993). Six adult Imperial Eagles were fitted with satellite tags at their wintering quarters in Saudi Arabia, and three of them were migrating back and breeding in European Russia (Meyburg, Meyburg, 2008).

Discussion

The summary of the data from the different countries shows that the population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Europe comprises 1800-2200 pairs. This number is considerably higher than previous estimates, as 1051-1619 pairs were reported in 2000 (Horváth et al. 2002) and 1110-1624 pairs in 2008 (BirdLife International 2008). The higher total estimation of the species’ European population is mainly due to the significant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated population size in pairs</th>
<th>Known occupied territories</th>
<th>Population trend in the past 10 years</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Wichmann (pers.comm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Horváth (pers.comm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>120-130</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Horváth (pers.comm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Danko (2009), Chavko (pers. comm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Albania</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Horváth et al. (2002)</td>
</tr>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Demerdzhiev (pers.comm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Horváth et al. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Horváth et al. (2002)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2003</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Bourdakis (2003)</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>Grubač, Stojic (2011)</td>
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<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Demerdzhiev (pers.comm.)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>93</td>
<td>Increasing</td>
<td>Karyakin et al. (2011)</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Stable</td>
<td>Karyakin et al. (2011)</td>
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<td>Stable</td>
<td>Vetrov, Milobog (2008)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Stable</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total population in Europe</td>
<td>1515-1905</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>Stable</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The movements of Eastern Imperial Eagles from the East-European populations are much less understood, but they are assumed to be long-term migrants, and they are probably spending the winters in the Middle East, Arabia (Evans 1994) and North-East Africa (Roeck 1993). Six adult Imperial Eagles were fitted with satellite tags at their wintering quarters in Saudi Arabia, and three of them were migrating back and breeding in European Russia (Meyburg, Meyburg, 2008).

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improvement in the quality of population monitoring in some important regions (i.e. Russia, Kazakhstan, European Turkey, Macedonia and Azerbaijan), where the eagle population sizes were likely underestimated earlier as a result of insufficient data (Demerdzhev et al. 2011 a, b, Hallman 2008, Horváth et al. 2008, Karyakin et al. 2011). The improvement in the quality of surveys is well reflected by the number of known breeding pairs, which increased by one order of magnitude from 154 in 2000 (Horváth et al. 2002) to 1134 by 2010.

In parallel, a well documented increase took place in the entire Carpathian population between 2001 and 2010 (Wichmann 2011, Horal 2011, Danko et al. 2011, Horváth et al. 2011). Compared to 2000, the population of Eastern Imperial Eagle in Central Europe (Horváth et al. 2002) has increased by 90 %. As a result of the conservation efforts and favourable environmental and legal changes, this population seems to be “healthy” and will probably continue to increase.

Although in recent years the population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in some Balkan countries has been studied thoroughly (Hallman 2008, Demerdzhev et al. 2011 a, b, Grubač, Stojnić, 2011), additional detailed research is still needed in many of the territories in SE Europe. In most of the countries of former Yugoslavia, Albania, and Romania, the status of the Eastern Imperial Eagle population is unknown. The population estimates in these countries are based on best expert’s opinion, using, the usually very few available field data. In the region of Thrace (Bulgaria and European Turkey) there is an increase in the number of Eastern Imperial Eagles, while a population decline is recorded in the south-western part of the Balkan Peninsula (Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia). The situation in Macedonia is particularly dynamic – population stabilization was recorded in the period between 2000 and 2003 (29-38 pairs), followed by years of considerable decline (Hallman 2008).

The intensified survey and research in some regions of Eastern Europe (Horváth et al. 2008, Karyakin et al. 2011) provided new data on the size and trends of the Eastern Imperial Eagle population in this part of the species’ range. The East European population, being the most abundant Imperial Eagle population in Europe, is probably stable. It would be particularly important that further research in the vast areas of Russia and Kazakhstan is carried out, where 30 % and 90 % of the potential breeding range of the Eastern Imperial Eagle has not ever been surveyed (I. Karyakin pers. comm.). The breeding population of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in the Caucasus also needs further study (Horváth et al. 2006).

Compared to 2000, there is a sevenfold increase in the number of known breeding pairs of Eastern Imperial Eagles in Europe in 2010. Based on the regional studies of different countries, currently the Eastern Imperial Eagle population in Europe can be considered stable and probably increasing.

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Aquila heliaca
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Състояние и тенденция на популацията на Източния Царски орел (*Aquila heliaca*) в Европа за периода 2000–2010

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(Резюме)

Въз основа на обобщените данни от различните страни, популацията на Източния Царски орел (*Aquila heliaca* Savigny 1809) в Европа се оценява на 1800-2200 двойки, което показва значително увеличение в сравнение с предишните оценки. Увеличение е регистрирано и в броя на известните размножаващи се двойки, достигайки 1134 известни територии. Изследванията върху разпространението и числеността в ключови региони (Русия, Казахстан, европейска Турция, Македония, Азербайджан), както и регистрираните стабилизация и увеличение на цялата карпатска популация, дава възможност за много по-точна оценка на състоянието на Източния Царски орел в Европа. Въпреки че през последните години популацията на вида в някои балкански страни се изучава по-засилено, все ще са необходими допълнителни подробни изследвания в потенциалните гнездови територии в ЮИ Европа. Установено е, че в района на Тракия (България и европейска Турция) популацията на Източния Царски орел е по-многочислена, докато в Гърция, Македония и Сърбия е регистрирано намаляване на популацията. В Русия и Казахстан се намират най-големите популации на вида в Европа, които вероятно са стабили. В периода 2000-2010 г. е регистрирано седемкратно увеличение на броя на известните размножаващи се двойки Източни Царски орли в Европа. На базата на резултатите от регионалните проучвания в отделните страни, популацията на вида в Европа се счита за стабилна и вероятно увеличаваща се.