

A SURVEY REPORT ON THE TRAPPING AND TRADE OF RAPTORS IN IRAQ

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INTRODUCTION

Iraq is considered one of the main pathways for migratory raptors passing through to wintering grounds in Arabia and Africa. It also has a remarkable number of resident and breeding birds of prey. Forty-seven species of birds of prey (including owls) were recorded in Iraq (Al-Sheikhly in prep). Every year the local animal markets (Suq singular) in Iraq exhibit thousands of captured wild birds from small passerines to large birds of prey. Four main animal markets in four different Iraqi provinces were surveyed. Suq Al-Gazel in Baghdad, Suq Ba'aquba in Diyala, Suq Al Qa'la in Kirkuk, and Suq Al-Ramadi in Anbar. Thirty-six raptors species (including seven owl species) with a total count of 885 birds of prey were recorded during a two-year period between December 2008 and December 2010. Suq-Al-Gazel and Suq Ba'aquba were visited, when possible on a weekly basis. Suq Al Qa'la and Suq Al-Ramadi were visited, when possible, on a monthly or bi-monthly basis.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Raptors were brought to the *Suq* to be sold for prices ranging from 10 to 300 USD depending on their age and state of health. They were either sold locally, smuggled to neighbouring countries or died in captivity. Raptors are often presented in poor health with injuries usually caused by careless trapping or handling. Detailed information about the trapping and traffic of falcon species such as saker falcons (*Falco cherrug*), lanner falcons (*Falco biarmicus*), and peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) was collected. Iraq has some laws that restrict hunting, but these are not enforced and there is extensive illegal hunting/trapping of many IUCN Red-listed species. Action is seriously needed to stop such practices, otherwise such activities will continue, and could result in a significant decline of raptors numbers in Iraq.

During Nature Iraq Key Biodiversity Area surveys, large numbers of passage migrant raptors were recorded at one site (east of Tharthaar Lake) consisting of a mixed flock of 437 black kites (*Milvus migrans*) and black-eared kites (*Milvus lineatus*), and a flock of up to 450 lesser kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) were found in another site in the western desert of Iraq (Nature Iraq, 2011).

Falconry hunting parties from different Arabian countries have been visiting Iraq in order to trap falcons particularly saker, lanner, peregrine and barbery falcons (*Falco pelegrinoides*) or to hunt houbara (Macqueen's) bustard (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*), great bustard (*Otis tarda*), and little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*). It has been locally reported that both these falcon and bustard species are becoming increasingly rare in Iraq because of hunting and trapping (Nature Iraq, 2009).

During the first visit to the *Suq-Al Gazel* in Baghdad in December 2008, four raptor species were present. In 2009 and 2010 more detailed surveys were carried out in order to cover the main raptor species present at the Suqs. During a total of 97 regular visits to all four Suqs, 885 birds of prey belonging to 36 species were recorded. Seven of these species were listed on the International Union of



Fig 1. Juvenile Asian imperial eagle at Suq Al Gazel in Baghdad (Omar Fadhil).

Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List for endangered species and were frequently present at the Suqs.

Extensive information was also gained from hunters/trappers, falconry associations, and animal shop owners about the main targeted species and counts of birds of prey that have been trapped and sold during the years of 2009 and 2010. In order to develop future conservation efforts to protect falcon species, one goal of these surveys was to determine which species was the most popular and prized for capture and sale. Through interviews, as well as data gathered from visits to the Iraqi Suqs, saker falcons are the most popular species and dominate the international falcon trade. According to one hunter in 2010, he was involved in the trapping of seventeen saker, nine peregrine, and 11 barbery falcons in Anbar and smuggled them to a neighbouring country via Iraq's western and southern borders. More clarification regarding the falcon trade in Iraq is still needed such as determining the methods used to move species across national borders and the number of species and individuals involved in this cross border trade.

Conclusions

Illegal hunting and trapping of birds of prey continues in Iraq and the absence of adequate laws and particularly full enforcement of existing laws may cause regional declines of these species. Each year hundreds of professional falcon trappers set their traps in different hot spots in Iraq for raptors. Trapper camps can be found near oases in the middle of the western desert, on the shores of large wetlands, or close to mountains and foothills of northern and eastern Iraq; anywhere falcons are likely to be found and captured. The continuance of such practices combined with other man-made threats such as poisoning, habitat destruction, disturbance, etc could reduce the population of resident and migrant raptor species in Iraq unless action is taken. It is encouraging to note that Iraq is currently discussing becoming a signatory nation to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES). This will hopefully lead to future conservation steps to protect raptor species in Iraq.

Please see the online version for acknowledgements, references and Tables.



Fig 2 Long -legged buzzards at Suq Al Gazel in Baghdad (Omar Fadhil)