

BirdLife Position on Minimising threats from hybrid falcons (originating from captive-bred birds) on wild European falcon populations

For external use. Adopted by the Birds and Habitats Directive Task Force on 23 April 2008

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BirdLife asks for a ban on the production and keeping of hybrid falcons in the EU and beyond due to the unacceptably high risk of unnatural genetic introgression to native wild falcon populations in the EU, and especially to the globally threatened Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*).

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The position follows the sensible precautionary approach, as the impact of hybrids on the genetics of wild Falcon populations is not known. As hybrids are unsuitable for ex-situ conservation, their production is questionable; there is no valid reason why their production should still be permitted. Furthermore, the leisure or commercial interests of very few people would be disadvantaged by this restriction. The position is also based on the understanding that:

- The risk of unnatural genetic introgression into natural populations of Falcons, and other problems caused by escaped hybrid Falcons, is not negligible.
- Significant numbers of reproductively viable hybrid Falcons are being produced and used in falconry.
- Significant numbers of hybrids, originating from captive-bred birds, are escaping into the wild.
- The problems caused by escaped hybrid Falcons and the numbers of hybrid Falcons in Europe are not being closely monitored.
- Genetic monitoring of the wild Saker population is not taking place.

Background

Article 11 of the EU Birds Directive states that: Member States shall see that any introduction of species of bird which do not occur naturally in the wild state in the European territory of the Member States does not prejudice the local flora and fauna. In this connection they shall consult the Commission.

Since the development of artificial insemination techniques in the 1970s, it has become common to produce, keep and practice falconry with hybrids between different falcon species. Concerns have arisen in some countries, about the risk of wild falcons breeding with escaped/released hybrid falcons.

Hybrid falcons are typically created from crossbreeding of Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* with the four heirofalcon species, especially Gyr F. *rusticolus* and Saker Falcons *F. cherrug* but also Lanner *F. biarmicus* and Laggar *F. jugger*, as well as with other falcons, such as Barbary falcons *F. pelegrinoides*, Merlin *F. columbarius* and Kestrel *F. tinnunculus* and even species from the Americas eg Prairie falcon *F. mexicanus* and New Zealand eg. New Zealand Falcon *Falco novaeseelandiae*. Different subspecies of Peregrine falcon (e.g. *F.p. pealei* from the Pacific coast in North America) have been mixed with *F. p.peregrinus* and *brokei* in European captive breeding populations.

By breeding with wild species, these unnatural hybrids ultimately risks causing local genetic pollution, such as for example to the Peregrine falcon and the globally threatened Saker falcon through the mechanism of genetic introgression^{1,2}. Introgression is gene flow between populations whose individuals hybridise, achieved when hybrids backcross to one or both parental populations³. Escaped hybrids may also cause other conservation problems, such as aggression towards native falcons^{2,4}.

For the EU, there is no specific regulation on producing and keeping hybrids of raptors. However, some EU countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia) have chosen to forbid use of hybrids for falconry (in other countries, the last survey found that in five countries there was no regulation on hybrid raptors; five restrict ownership for falconry to native Eurasian species, two permit only a limited number of those - in one case only of two species)⁵.

¹ Nittinger F et al. (2007) Phylogeography and population structure of the saker falcon *Falco cherrug* and the influence of hybridization: mitochondrial and microsatellite data. *Molecular Ecology* 16: 1497-1517.

² Review of cases in Jansman H & Buij R (2015) Inventory of possibilities to widen the opportunities for falconry under the Nature Conservation Act. Alterra WUR [Uitbreiding mogelijkheden voor valkerij onder de nieuwe Wet Natuurbescherming Inschatting van risico's op hybridisatie en overige effecten op inheemse fauna]

³ Rhymer JM & Simberloff D (1996) Extinction by hybridization and introgression. *Annu. Rev. Ecol. Syst* 27: 83-109.

⁴ Fleming LV et al. (2011) Captive breeding of peregrine and other falcons in Great Britain and implications for conservation of wild populations. *Endangered Species Research* 14. Pages 243-257.

⁵ Kenward R & Larsson T (2006) A survey of falconry in the European Union in the context of the wild birds directive. ORNIS Committee.