

The Situation of the Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* in Austria

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Abstract: After being extinct for nearly 200 years, the Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca* SAVIGNY 1809) returned to Austria in 1999. By 2009, the population has increased to reach 4-5 breeding pairs. The main habitats of the Eagles include agricultural steppe areas, as the most common prey species are Hare (*Lepus europaeus* PALLS 1778), Common Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus* LINNAEUS 1758), European Hamster (*Cricetus cricetus* LINNAEUS 1758), and Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia* f. *domestica* GMELIN 1789). The breeding success amounts to 1.63 juveniles/started brood. The reasons for chick mortality are mostly human disturbance, bad weather or a combination of both.

Key words: Eastern Imperial Eagle, Austria, population

Introduction

In 1999 the Eastern Imperial Eagle celebrated its comeback in Austria after being extinct for nearly 200 years, as the last proven breeding attempt occurred in 1811 in the Lobau, a floodplain forest east of Vienna (MARSCHALL, PELZELN 1882). The eagles' comeback had been encouraged by conservation measures implemented across the border in Hungary (HORVÁTH *et al.* 2011) and Slovakia (DANKO *et al.* 2011) as well as by the widespread supply of market set asides and the implementation of agri-environmental programmes. A conservation project developed by BirdLife Austria on behalf of the province Lower Austria is focusing *inter alia* on monitoring the population of breeding and non breeding Imperial Eagles, securing eyries and providing artificial nests as well as on informing the public, particularly the land users.

Material and Methods

Presented data is based on running protection efforts and projects in Austria. To get information about dispersion, new settlements and non-breeders syn-

chronised transect counts were conducted. In Lower Austria the counts were coordinated with Czech and Slovakian colleagues. Breeding data was got during regular nest controls. Information about diet was collected under the eyries.

Results and Discussion

During the last ten years the population increased slowly but continuously, and by 2009 the population consists of 4-5 breeding pairs (Fig. 1). Another 6-8 pairs exist in the close neighbourhood in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary (HORAL 2011, HORVÁTH *et al.* 2011, DANKO *et al.* 2011), which are probably in close connection with the Austrian pairs. Until 2009 the Austrian breeding distribution was limited to Burgenland situated in an area close to Hungary; now it has enlarged its breeding distribution to the north-eastern part of Austria (Fig. 2).

The main habitats of the Eagles are agricultural steppe areas holding a high proportion of set-asides. The central areas of the distribution are character-

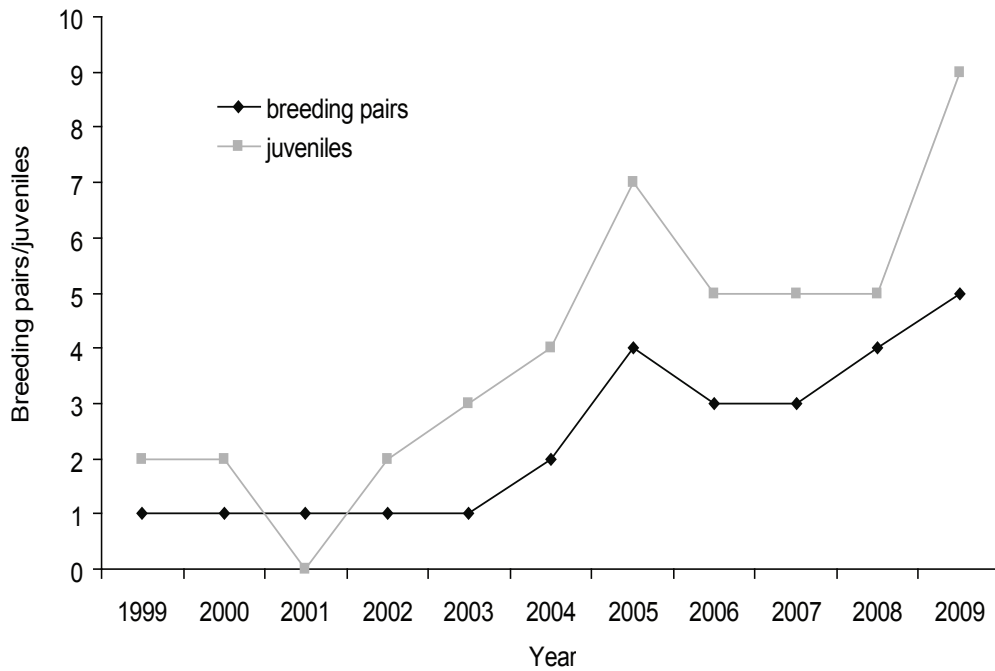


Fig. 1. Trend of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Austria

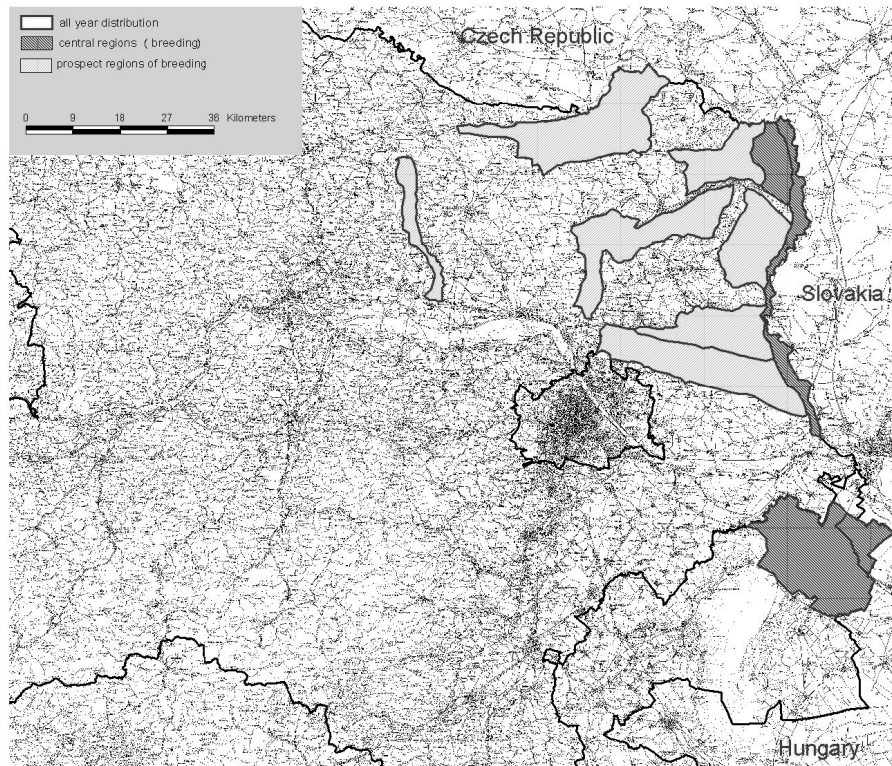


Fig. 2. Distribution of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Austria. Dark are central areas, light are prospect areas of breeding

ized by small lots of lands holding high populations of prey species. As shown in Fig. 3 the most common prey species are Hare (32.2%), followed by Common Pheasant (15.3%), European Hamster (11.9%) and Feral Pigeon (7.4%).

In the period 1999-2009 all in all 27 breeding attempts with egg deposition were observed; 22 of them were successful raising 44 juveniles. Accordingly the breeding success amounts 1.63 juveniles/started brood. The reasons for chick mortal-

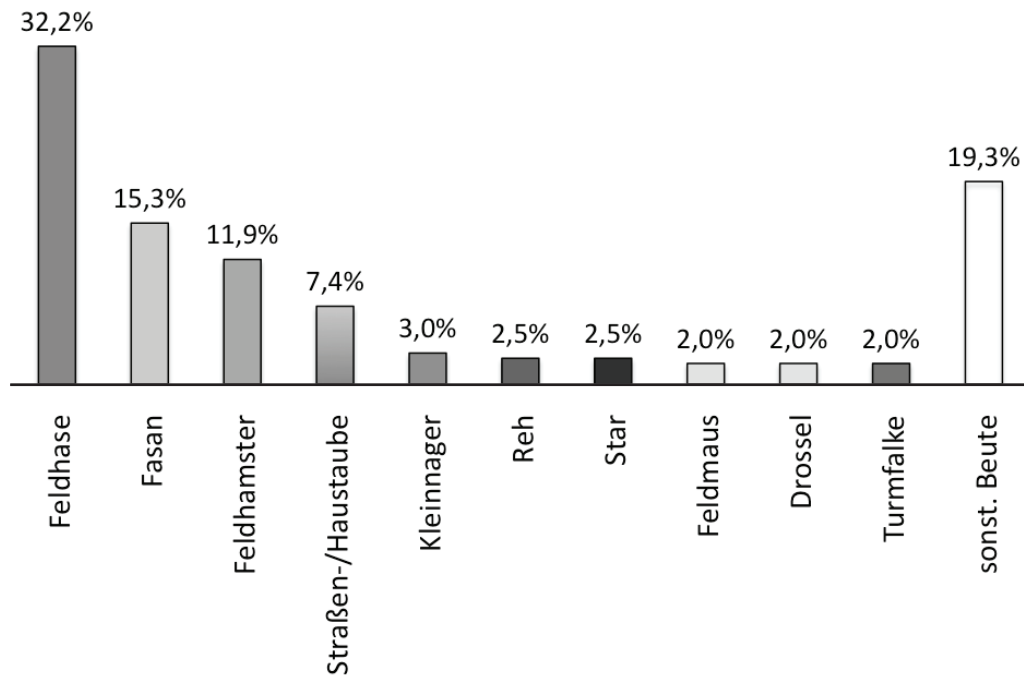


Fig. 3. Diet of the Eastern Imperial Eagle in Austria including breeding pairs at Soutok (Czech Republic). The figure is showing the quantity. Mass was not analysed. N = 202. Results in BIERBAUMER ET AL. (in press)

ity are mostly human disturbance, bad weather or a combination of both. Protecting these majestic birds against illegal persecution will be of crucial importance. However, success might well be jeopardized by the changes in the European Unions Agricultural Policy scheduled for 2013. If the Imperial Eagle is to have a chance this time, long-term strategies for habitat protection will have to make up for the negative effects of the abolition of market induced set asides in 2008 and the growing intensification of farming.

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Състоянието на Източния Царски орел *Aquila heliaca* в Австрия

Г. Викман

(Резюме)

След близо 200 години, през 1999 г. Източният Царски орел (*Aquila heliaca* SAVIGNY 1809) се завърна като гнездящ вид в Австрия. Към 2009 г. популацията се увеличава, достигайки 4-5 размножаващи се двойки. Местообитанията на орлите са предимно земеделски степни територии, като сред основните видове плячка са Дивият заек (*Lepus europaeus* PALLAS 1778), Фазанът (*Phasianus colchicus* LINNAEUS 1758), Обикновеният хомяк (*Cricetus cricetus* LINNAEUS 1758) и Домашният гълъб (*Columba livia* f. *domestica* GMELIN 1789). Гнездовият успех се изчислява на 1.63 млади екземпляра / гнездяща двойка. Най-често причините за смъртността при малките са човешко безпокойство, екстремни климатични условия или комбинация от двете.