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The Saker Falcon *(Falco cherrug)* population in the Czech Republic in 2011–2022

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Abstract In 2011–2022, the Saker Falcon *(Falco cherrug)* population in the Czech Republic fluctuated between 2 and 10 breeding pairs. In total, 64 breeding events were recorded, 42 of them were successful and 105 young were reared. The average breeding productivity was 1.6 juveniles/nest and 2.5 juveniles/successful nest. Sakers concentrated to the Pannonian part of the country, breeding at the three known localities in Bohemia finished in 2013. In comparison with former periods, number of pairs was lower, but some pairs apparently moved to neighbouring Austrian areas.

Keywords: *Falco cherrug*, Saker Falcon, Czech Republic, population, trend

Összefoglalás 2011 és 2022 között a kerecsensólyom *(Falco cherrug)* populáció Csehországban 2 és 10 fészkelő pár között ingadozott. Összesen 64 pár költését jegyeztünk fel, ebből 42 volt sikeres, és 105 fióka repült ki. Az átlagos költési siker 1,6 fióka/fészek, az átlagos fiókaszám 2,5 fióka volt sikeres fészkenként. A kerecsensólymok az ország pannon részére koncentrálódtak, a három ismert bohémiai fészkelőhelyen 2013 óta nem volt költés. Az előző időszakokhoz képest a párok száma alacsonyabb volt, és néhány pár a szomszédos osztrák területekre költözött át.

Kulcsszavak: *Falco cherrug*, kerecsensólyom, Csehország, állomány, trend

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Introduction

The Saker Falcon *(Falco cherrug)* belongs to the rarest breeding birds of the Czech Republic, its nesting sites are form the northwesternmost limit of the species' European range (after breeding in Germany has ceased after 2001, see e.g. Steffens *et al.* 2013 for details). The core breeding area is in the SE part of the country (South Moravia), geographically belonging to the Pannonian biogeographical province. Systematic research of this population started in 1976. Data up to 1998 (23 years) was published by Horák (2000), from years 1999–2010 by Beran *et al.* (2012). In this article, data between 2011–2022 is summarized, even if some information between 2011–2018 was partly published (Škorpíková *et al*. 2017).

Material and Methods

The Saker Falcon population in South Moravia has been regularly monitored. Annually, at least four people are involved in field work. They concentrated on observing display and territory defence behaviour at the beginning of the breeding season. Later, they tried to find occupied nests and record the number of nestlings and fledglings. For this article, only data on confirmed breeding was used. More intensive monitoring was only carried out in 2015, when 15 people were involved and suitable regions of Bohemia were also included.

Results

The results of the Saker Falcon monitoring in 2011–2022 are summarized in *Table 1*. In total, 64 breeding pairs were confirmed (5.3 per year, 2–10 annually), 42 pairs (65.6%) were successful and 105 young were fledged. The average breeding productivity was 1.6 juveniles per nest and 2.5 juveniles per successful nest. The number of confirmed breeding pairs usually ranges between 4 and 7 except for 2011–2013, when 2–3 pairs also nested in Bohemia, and a noticeable decline in 2016–2018, when only 2–3 pairs were detected in total *(Figure 1)*. We estimate a maximum population size of 10 pairs for the period 2011–2022.

In 2011–2022, Sakers bred in 16 grid squares of the Czech Republic *(Figure 2)*, squares 10′ of longitude and 6′ of latitude were used, which means roughly 12 by 11.1 km, i.e. 133 km^2 (Šťastný *et al.* 2021). After more than 70 years, breeding in Bohemia was again

Table 1. Annual breeding success data of the Saker Falcon in the Czech Republic between 2011–2022

1. táblázat A kerecsensólyom éves költési eredményei Csehországban 2011–2022 között

Year	No. of confirmed breedings in Moravia	No. of confirmed breedings in Bohemia	Total no. of confirmed breedings in the Czech Republic	No. of successful breedings	No. of fledged juv.	Juv./ nest	Juv./ successful nest
2011	6	2	8	6	16	2.0	2.7
2012	8	2	10	8	24	2.4	3.0
2013	5	3	8	5	9	1.1	1.8
2014	4	0	4	2	2	0.5	1.0
2015	6	0	6	5	7	1.2	1.4
2016	2	0	2	1	3	1.5	3.0
2017	3	0	3	3	8	2.7	2.7
2018	3	0	3	0	0	0	0
2019	4	0	4	4	10	2.5	2.5
2020	7	0	7	3	9	1.3	3.0
2021	4	0	4	2	7	1.8	3.5
2022	5	0	5	3	10	2.0	3.3
Total	**57**	**7**	**64**	**42**	**105**	**1.6**	**2.5**

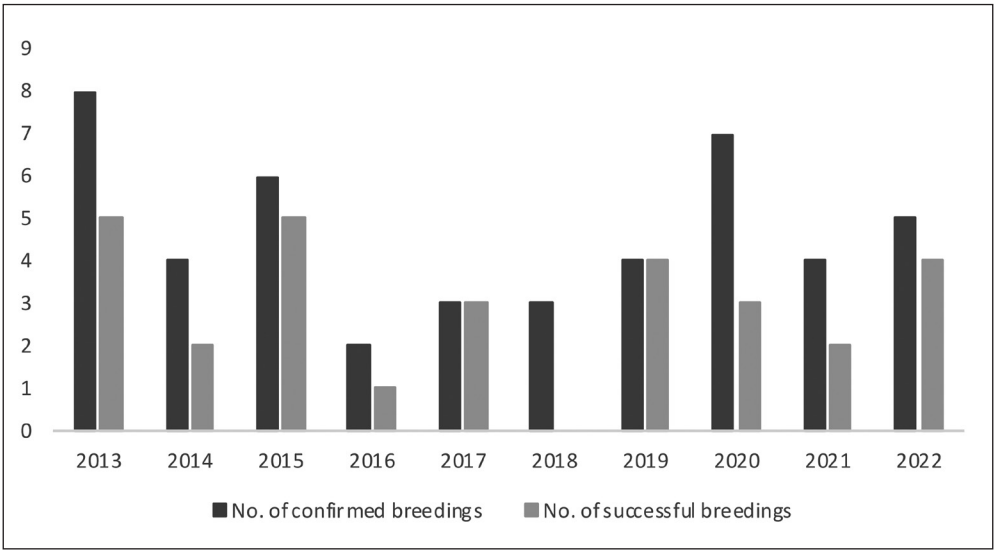

Figure 1. Development of the Saker Falcon breeding population in the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2022

1. ábra A kerecsensólyom fészkelőállományának alakulása Csehországban 2013 és 2022 között

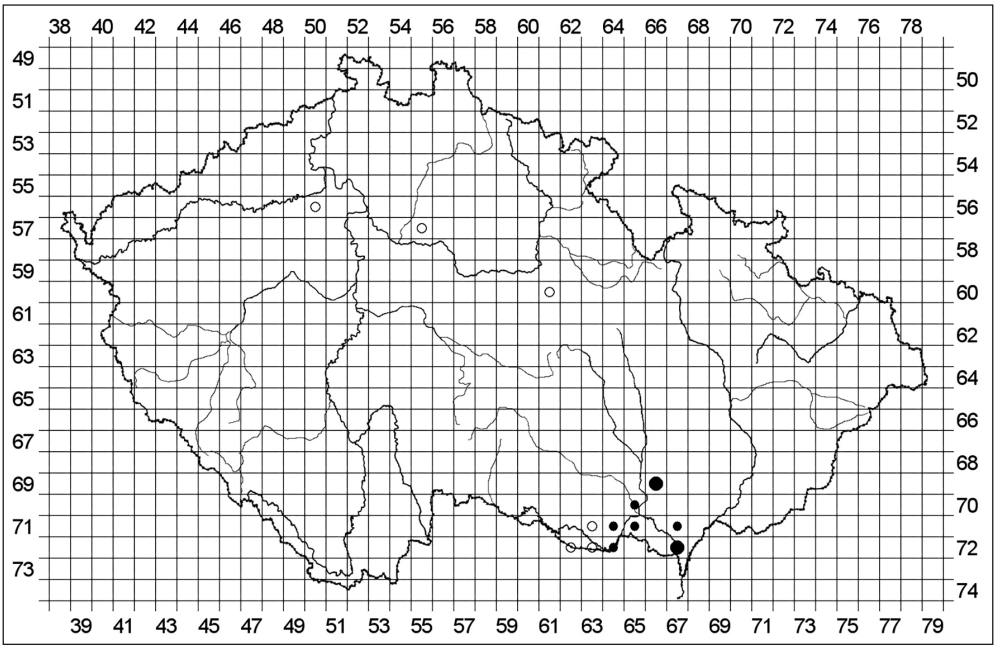

Figure 2. The number of Saker Falcon breeding pairs in the Czech Republic between 2011–2022 (n = 64). Big black dots: >7, small black dots: 4–6, white dots: 1–3

2. ábra A kerecsensólyom fészkelő párok száma Csehországban 2011 és 2022 között (n = 64). Nagy fekete pontok: >7, kis fekete pontok: 4–6, fehér pontok: 1–3

recorded, but just in a few localities. One pair was discovered thanks to the data from a satellite-tagged Hungarian male Barnabás, tagged as a chick near Hegyeshalom, Győr-Moson-Sopron county, in 2007 and regularly (six times) wintering in Sicily. He already stayed in Chrudim district (eastern Bohemia, cca. 120 km from a core breeding area) in 2010, breeding was confirmed in 2011. The birds used an old Common Buzzard´s *(Buteo buteo)* nest in a poplar windbreak, but the breeding was unsuccessful. After wintering in Sicily, the male returned in 2012 and bred with a female in the same nest as in the previous year. They reared four young. One of his chicks (male Tobias) was satellite-tagged (https://sakerlife2.mme.hu/en/content/barnab%c3%a1s%e2%80%99s-son-got-ptt/). Unfortunately this bird, after visiting Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, was shot in Austria (close to Hungarian border) on 9 November 2012. In 2013, Barnabás unsuccessfully bred at the same locality in a nestbox installed on a high-voltage pylon. He was observed for the last time there on 14 October 2013. The last data of this bird (autumn 2013) came from Mediterranean Sea near the southern coast of Italy, later the transmitter stopped working. The second Bohemian breeding was recorded in Mladá Boleslav district (Central Bohemia, cca. 200 km from a core breeding area). Sakers used Ravens´ *(Corvus corax)* nests and reared three young in 2011 and two young in 2012, when the Raven nest with chicks was probably robbed. In 2013, Sakers failed there. The breeding in all these cases started rather late, between 10 and 30 April, replacement clutches are very probable. Kladno district in Central Bohemia (cca 230 km from a core breeding area) was the third occupied Bohemian locality. Displaying Sakers were observed there in autumn 2012 and a family in summer 2013. But in following years, no nesting attempts were recorded outside of the traditional breeding area and all other breeding pairs were found in a region between the cities of Brno, Znojmo and Hodonín belonging to the Pannonian biogeographical province, most of them in 6966, 7164 and 7267 squares (13, 8 and 7 breeding attempts in 2011–2022). In 2012, Sakers abandoned floodplain forests along the lower Morava and Dyje rivers (Soutok-Tvrdonicko SPA), where up to four pairs used to breed for decades. They moved to breed on newly installed nest platforms on high-voltage pylons on the nearby Austrian territory. Along the Czech-Austrian border between the towns of Znojmo and Mikulov, 3–4 pairs alternated breeding localities on both sides, but they mostly bred in Austria since 2014.

In 2011–2022, 58 breedings were recorded at a stage of incubation or small chicks feeding, six times reared juveniles still dependent on parents were observed. In total, 25 pairs nested on high-voltage pylons (17, i.e. 68.0%, were successful), 16 of them on artificial platforms (12, i.e. 75.0%, successfully), 7 in Raven nests, 1 in a nestbox and 1 in a Hooded Crow *(Corvus corone)* nest. Another 33 pairs nested in tree nests (20, i.e. 60.6%, were successful). 23 of them were built by Common Buzzard, four by Imperial Eagle *(Aquila heliaca)*, three by Raven and once a nest of Goshawk *(Accipiter gentilis)*, Red Kite *(Milvus milvus)* and Black Kite *(Milvus migrans)* was used. Most of the used nests were situated in poplars (*Populus* sp.) – 19 and black locusts *(Robinia pseudacacia)* – 7, exceptionally nests in Scots pines *(Pinus sylvestris)*, European ashes *(Fraxinus excelsior)*, oaks (*Quercus* sp.) or elms (*Ulmus* sp.) were used. Repeated breeding in the same tree nest was rare. In 2011–2014, Sakers bred in a nest of the Imperial Eagle built in 2010. They were successful in the first two seasons, but after two following unsuccessful attempts, they abandoned the nest and bred in a Common Buzzard

nest 1,495 m away in 2015. Two nests occupied in 2009 were re-used in 2011, another one from 2010 in 2012. In 2019, Sakers bred in a nest built by Common Buzzards in a black locust tree *(Figure 3)*, which was first occupied by a Saker pair in 2003 (the nest was multiple times re-built by buzzards). If successful breeding occurs in smaller nests (mostly originally built by buzzards), they are so disintegrated at the end of the breeding season that the chicks are in danger of falling out of the nest. This case was recorded in 2013, when one (probably the youngest) chick out of four was found on the ground. Only two young were reared, so it is probable that another chick fell out as well but disappeared between two controls. In another locality in the same year, the nest completely broke up approximately in the time of fledging, but fortunately all four chicks were successfully reared.

In total, 64 chicks were ringed, most of them also with colour rings. Four ringed birds produced the following recoveries:
– a female ringed as a nestling near Litobratřice (Znojmo district) on 11 May 2011 was found flightless near Hollabrunn (Austria) on 16 April 2014 (47 km, 1,071 days), after rehabilitation, she was released;
– a male ringed as a nestling near Hevlín (Znojmo district) on 10 May 2011 was captured near Székesfehérvár, Fejér county (Hungary) on 4 January 2013 (228 km, 605 days);
– a female ringed as a nestling near Otnice (Vyškov district) on 9 May 2012 was found injured near Újezd u Brna (Brno-venkov district) on 10 July 2012 (4 km, 62 days);
– a female ringed as a nestling near Měnín (Brno-venkov district) on 13 May 2019 was found injured (electrocuted) near Rebešovice (Brno-venkov district) on 9 June 2020 and delivered to a recovery station (5 km, 393 days).

In the Czech Republic, seven foreign ringing recoveries were obtained in 2011–2022:
– a female ringed as a nestling near Vadosfa, Győr-Moson-Sopron county, Hungary, on 18 May 2011 was found dead near the Lhovice village in the Plzeň region on 11 March 2019 (361 km, 2,854 days);
– a female ringed (and satellite-tagged) as a nestling near Kostolište, Malacky district, Slovakia, on 23 May 2011 was found electrocuted under medium-voltage pylon near Biskupice, Prostějov district on 25 August 2011 (116 km, 92 days);
– a bird ringed as a nestling in Mosonszolnok, Győr-Moson-Sopron county, Hungary, on 23 May 2012 was found dead (probably a victim of electrocution) near the Dolní Dunajovice village (Břeclav district) on 15 April 2014 (119 km, 692 days);
– a female ringed as a nestling in Kiskunlacháza, Pest county, Hungary, on 19 May 2014 was found injured (a broken wing) probably after collision with medium-voltage powerline near the Kozlany village (Vyškov district) on 8 September 2014 (268 km, 112 days);
– a female ringed as a nestling in Kiskunlacháza, Pest county, Hungary, on 18 May 2015 was found dead below a medium-voltage pylon near the Mšené-lázně town (Litoměřice district) on 25 August 2015 (500 km, 99 days);
– a male ringed as a nestling near Bánov, the Nové Zámky district, Slovakia, on 14 May 2021 was electrocuted by Žalkovice village (Kroměříž district) on 26 August 2021, it had to be euthanized due to severe injuries (156 km, 104 days);

Figure 3. Two juvenile Saker Falcons fledged from a nest in a black locust *(Robinia pseudoacacia)* tree. Nový Přerov. 5 June 2019. Photo: Vlasta Škorpíková

3. ábra Két fiatal, akácfán *(Robinia pseudoacacia)* lévő fészekből kirepült kerecsensólyom. Nový Přerov. 2019. június 5. Fotó: Vlasta Škorpíková

– a bird ringed as a nestling in Bernolákovo, Senec district, Slovakia, on 14 May 2022, was found electrocuted under a medium-voltage pylon near Hrubčice, Prostějov district, on 27 January 2023 (140 km, 258 days)

21 of the recorded breeding cases failed, twelve of them at the stage of incubation, four at the stage of advanced incubation or small chicks and five at the stage of chicks in the nest. We recorded or we suppose following reasons for failure in 14 cases:
– in one case, the *Liometopum microcephalum* aggressive ants, which had their colony in a hollow formed after a branch broke off just below a Saker nest, could be the reason (2011);
– a poor condition of a female resulted in laying low-quality eggs and insufficient care of them (2019);
– a nest with chicks fell down from an unknown reason (2012) or after a supporting branch was broken in a strong wind (2021);
– a pure nest quality (together with unsuitable weather conditions) could resulted in nest destruction (2013, 2018);
– severe conflicts with other birds of prey could cause Sakers to abandon their nests or could resulted in predation of a temporary abandoned clutch. In five cases, a competition for nests could be involved: three times with Common Kestrels *(Falco tinnunculus)* – 2012, 2013 and 2014, and twice with Common Buzzards – 2020 and 2022, once the breeding Sakers were disturbed by raptors (Common Buzzards, Red Kites, Common Kestrels, White-tailed Sea Eagles *(Haliaaetus albicilla)*, etc.) roosting nearby, when a field neighbouring the nest site was rich in voles – 2020;
– a predation without recorded disturbing could cause three cases of breeding failure (2014, 2015, 2016).

We did not find evidence of breeding failure caused by accidental or targeted human disturbance.

In total, the age of 63 breeding birds was determined. Interestingly, most of the breeding females were young, in 2cy or 3cy (67.7%, n = 31), most of the breeding males were adult (78.1%, n = 32).

From 152 food items *(Table 2)* recorded during observation of Sakers or checking nests, Feral Pigeons *(Columba livia* f. *domestica)* formed 54.6% of the diet. Obviously, pigeons are the most important source of food in our region, especially in the period of feeding young. Sometimes, a pair is really specialized on this food resource, as happened in the case of breeding near Drnholec in 2017, where any other food remnants were not found. Common Pheasants *(Phasianus colchicus)* and European Hares *(Lepus europaeus)*, both popular game species supported by local hunters‘ organizations, form an important proportion of the utilized food resources (11.8% and 5.3%, respectively). Young animals, in particular, were hunted or stolen (kleptoparasitism) from other avian predators.

During the monitoring in 2011–2022, we recorded several cases of interesting Saker breeding or behaviour:
– In 2012, a male from the breeding pair had a striking gap in his left wing. It was obviously not caused by moulting, because the missing feathers did not grow back during the

Table 2. Diet composition of Saker Falcon in the Czech Republic between 2011–2022 (n = 152 food items)

2. táblázat A kerecsensólyom táplálékösszetétele Csehországban 2011–2022 között (n = 152 táplálékmaradvány)

Species	No. of recorded items	%
Columba livia f. *domestica*	55	50.0
Phasianus colchicus	17	15.4
Lepus europaeus	8	7.3
Sturnus vulgaris	7	6.4
Vanellus vanellus	7	6.4
Microtus arvalis	7	6.4
Larus ridibundus	3	2.7
Anas platyrhynchos	1	0.9
Columba oenas	1	0.9
Columba palumbus	1	0.9
Asio otus	1	0.9
Garrulus glandarius	1	0.9
Nyctalus noctula	1	0.9
In total	**110**	**100**

breeding season. Despite this disadvantage, the male was very active and successful, the pair reared four young.

– Food caching was observed in two cases. In 2013, a pair breeding in a windbreak in Znojmo district repeatedly cached food items into three concrete cylinders of 1 m in diameter protecting an irrigation equipment 25–260 m apart from the nest (Škorpíková 2013). In 2021, food used by a male breeding near Měnín (Brno-venkov district) was cached in a pylon construction.
– Until the winter of 2013/2014 (typically from November to February), the regular wintering of the Saker Falcon, and in some years also the Peregrine Falcon *(F. peregrinus)*, was recorded on a grain silo in Chrlice, on the SSE edge of the city of Brno; later, the observations became very rare.
– Similarly, since the winter of 2012/2013, regular wintering of the Saker Falcon has been recorded on a grain silo (cca. 50 m high) near the village of Šakvice (Břeclav district), previously also well known as a regular wintering site of the Peregrine Falcon. On some occasions, both species were present (on different sides of the silo). From winter 2012/2013 onwards, Sakers have been found there every winter (typically between October and February) except for 2014/2015.
– In March and April 2016, a Saker Falcon female stayed in a nestbox installed on a chimney of Prunéřov Power Station (at the height of 125 m above the ground) and caused the breeding failure of a local Peregrine Falcon pair. She left the locality later, but she was observed in the surroundings several times during the winter. In spring 2017, she again occupied the Prunéřov nestbox, but no Saker male was recorded. Subsequently, the box was occupied by a Peregrine pair that reared two young from a rather late breeding.

Figure 4. A severe encounter of the Saker Falcon and Peregrine Falcon females. Dukovany power plant. Camera trap snapshot

4. ábra Heves összecsapás egy kerecsensólyom és egy vándorsólyom tojó között. Dukovany erőmű. Kameracsapda fotó

– On 27 September 2016, a severe attack of a young Saker female against a falconry Goshawk resting on the ground was recorded near Pravčice village (Kroměříž district). The Saker female was slightly injured, after recovery in a rehabilitation station it was released, tagged with GPS-GSM logger. The bird sent data for nearly ten months, visiting Slovakia, Hungary and Austria, and was finally found dead near Zurndorf, Burgenland, Austria on 3 September, 2017, for unknown reason (Rozsypalová *et al.* 2021).
– In 2017, a Saker pair bred in a nest only 103 m away from an occupied nest of Norther Goshawks and 110 m away from Common Buzzards. Surprisingly, only Sakers were successful and reared min. 3 juveniles.
– During ringing in a Sakers´ nest near Nový Přerov in 2019, one of the total of two chicks was freed from a string wrapped around its leg. It would not survive without this intervention.
– At least from 27 February to 6 April 2021, a Saker female was present around a nestbox for Peregrine Falcons at a ventilation chimney in the Dukovany nuclear power plant (Třebíč district), she repeatedly chased away a Peregrine pair *(Figure 4)*. She left after 18 May, and it might not be a coincidence that the Peregrine pair breeding failed in that year (only one egg was laid).

– On 22 May 2021, a Saker Falcon female incubating Peregrine chicks in a nestbox at a chimney of the Děčín heating plant was recorded. Later she disappeared and the Peregrine pair reared two chicks successfully (V. Šena *in litt*.).

Discussion

The presented data can be compared with the situation in the five-year periods since 1976, when the Saker Falcon population in the Czech Republic has been monitored *(Table 3)*. Until 2015, the situation was optimistic and the population increased up to 8.6 pairs per year in 2001–2005, later it stayed over a value of 7.0 pairs per year. But in the following five years, we only found 3.8 pairs per year, in 2018 all three breeding pairs failed *(Table 1)*. In the last two years, the situation seems to have improved, but still below the numbers from 1986–2015.

In total, 26 grid squares were occupied at least once in 1976–2018 in the Czech Republic. Breeding outside the main distribution range in the Pannonian part of the country was recorded in 1989–1999 and 2003–2007, when Sakers repeatedly occupied two grid squares in North Moravia near the Polish border, and in 2011–2013, when breeding in three different Bohemian localities was confirmed. However, none of these areas have been occupied continuously up so far. Recently, Sakers again concentrate to southeastern part of the country, they apparently find the best conditions in 6966, 7164 and 7267 squares *(Figure 2)*, which are occupied every year.

Using data from 2011, we attempted to estimate the theoretical recent population size of the Saker Falcon in the Czech Republic. In total, 16 grid sqaures were occupied (2,150 km^2), 13 of them (1,747 km^2) at least twice, 7 of them (941 km^2) more than fourtimes. According to studies by Prommer *et al.* (2018), the average home range size of a successfully breeding pair of Sakers is cca. 190.5 km^2 (51.3–529.7 km^2). Based on this data, 9–11 successful pairs can be expected in the Czech Republic in the best years, and around 5 pairs in years when conditions are worse.

Table 3. Comparison of basic breeding characteristics of the Saker Falcon population in the Czech Republic in 5-year periods between 2011 and 2022

3. táblázat A kerecsensólyom-állomány alapvető költési jellemzőinek összehasonlítása Csehországban 5 éves időszakokban, 2011 és 2022 között

Period	No. of years	No. of confirmed breedings	No. of breedings per year	No. of successful breedings (%)	No. of fledged juv.	Average no. of fledged juv. per successful nest
1976–1998	23	101	4.4	59 (58.4)	172	2.9
1999–2010	12	92	7.7	72 (78.3)	200	2.8
2011–2022	12	64	5.3	42 (65.6)	105	2.5
In total	**47**	**257**	**5.5**	**173 (67.3)**	**477**	**2.8**

In 2011–2012, only 5.3 breeding pairs were confirmed on average annually, 3.5 pairs / year bred successfully. This result could be caused by a fluctuation on the limit of the species range, but as the populations in important neighbouring countries (Slovakia, Austria, Hungary) have been stable or slightly increasing (Chavko *et al.* 2025, Prommer *et al.* 2025, Zink *et al.* 2025), we should look for other reasons. We can exclude the weather, because except for 2013 with a cold and rainy spring, the weather conditions were favourable. However, we have recorded a shift of breeding pairs to Austria since 2013. It was first observed in pairs from localities in the Soutok-Tvrdonicko SPA, where Sakers apparently took advantage of the offer of breeding possibilities on newly installed nest platforms on high-voltage pylons. Two other pairs regularly breeding on the Czech side of the border in Znojmo district have moved to Austria since 2016. All of these pairs obviously had transboundary territories and recently they have bred in Austria, so the total size of the Central European Saker population should not change. However, this is a very strong signal about the quality of our open landscape, where Sakers apparently have not found enough food or nesting sites. Similarly to Prommer *et al*. (2018), we think that agricultural practices that reduce prey abundance subsequently lead to fewer breeding pairs. From the biodiversity point of view, the current state of the Czech agricultural landscape is desperate and the decrease of population size in birds of the open landscape is proven (Reif *et al.* 2014). The main reasons such as large fields with few set-aside elements among them, low diversity of the crops grown and the high level of pesticides used have been discussed.

The recent (after 2012) disapperance of Sakers from the area of floodplain forests of the lower Morava and Dyje rivers, once a very imortant breeding ground, is clearly illustrated by the fact that in the period 2011–2022, no White Stork *(Ciconia ciconia)* nest was used for breeding of Sakers, while in 1999–2005, it was the second more common origin after Common Buzzard (10 out of a total 44, Beran *et al.* 2012).

A National Action Plan for the Saker Falcon was prepared in 2017. The proposed measures do not only include installation of new nesting platforms or boxes in regions where natural nests are obviously lacking, or applying proven equipment on dangerous types of medium-voltage pylons, but the pressure for changes to recent agricultural practices is also emphasized. However, the Action Plan has not yet been approved and its objectives are not being met.

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