

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex HU.1. Examples of Success Stories in Species Conservation in Hungary

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The wild population of the Hungarian Meadow Viper (*Vipera ursinii rakosiensis*), had collapsed by the 1980s as a result of multiple threats: unsuitable grassland and water management, and increased predation and wildlife trade for pets. The populations critically shrank in their natural habitats of the Carpathian basin, resulting in the need for urgent *ex situ* measures as well as the restoration of their habitats.¹ In 2004, collaboration between Birdlife Hungary and the Kiskunság National Park Directorate led to the establishment of the Hungarian Meadow Viper Conservation and Exhibition Centre, funded by two consecutive LIFE projects.² The centre, which is located within the species' natural range, launched a breeding programme with genetic monitoring, which resulted in an *ex-situ* population of about 700 individuals. Following land purchase and habitat restoration measures (e.g. elimination of non-native forest patches and transformation of arable land to grassland), the reintroduction of captive individuals started in 2010, and resulted in the release of about 600 up until June 2020. Meanwhile, the programme successfully applied for a third LIFE grant which is providing funding until 2025.³

Increases in the populations of the Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), the Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*), and the Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) were also supported by a series of LIFE projects⁴ involving the collaboration of the National Park Directorates, Birdlife Hungary, and others. The projects involved species-specific habitat management, including appropriate farming practices, increasing key prey populations, such as the European Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus citellus*), mass installation of artificial nests, and measures to reduce electrocution. The engagement of electricity companies in the protection of raptors was also a milestone in their conservation. The 'Accessible Sky' (*Akadálymentes Égbolt*) Agreement⁵, which was endorsed in 2008, declared long-term collaboration amongst the ministry responsible for the environment, Birdlife Hungary and the electric companies. The agreement aims to identify dangerous parts of electricity infrastructure, jointly collect data on mortality, collaborate in fundraising and co-financing EU and company projects that mitigate the threats to raptors based on technical solutions (e.g. using insulated or underground wires, and bright deterrent markers on collision hazards).

The Helicon LIFE⁶ project used innovative solutions to address the illegal poisoning of raptors. This was particularly important for the protection of the Eastern Imperial Eagle, as poisoning had become its major cause of mortality by 2011.⁷ According to a project report, the loss of breeding individuals dropped from 15–25% to 6–9% by the second half of the project. An important contributor to this was the increased discovery and communication of poisoning cases through the use of search dogs, satellite tagging of birds, post-mortems and toxicological examinations. Furthermore, the project resulted in a stronger collaboration with police and judicial workers, and carried out 17 training sessions, in which 300 investigators, 150 prosecutors, as well as 50 court workers and judges participated.

Other species conservation programmes have included LIFE funded *ex situ* restoration of the strictly protected and endemic plant, Long Lasting Pink (*Dianthus diutinus*)⁸, and the relocation of

¹ www.rakosivipera.hu/en/conservation-program/

² LIFE04NAT/HU/000116; LIFE07 NAT/H/000322.

³ LIFE18NAT/HU/000799, 2019-2025.

⁴ LIFE05NAT/HU/000122; LIFE06NAT/H/000096; LIFE10NAT/HU/000019; LIFE11NAT/HU/000926; LIFE13NAT/HU/000183.

⁵ www.termeszetvedelem.hu/_user/downloads/hirek/Akadalymentes_megallapodas.pdf

⁶ LIFE15NAT/HU000902.

⁷ www.imperialeagle.hu/sites/imperialeagle.hu/files/PDFs/HELICON_D12_Laymans_report_2016_0.pdf

⁸ LIFE06NAT/H/000104

urban populations of bat species that winter and roost in the cavities of old blocks of flats or churches (e.g. in Budapest, Miskolc, Székesfehérvár and Szimpetri), which have been affected by subsidised insulation improvements over the last 10 years.

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