

Eleonora's Falcon

RULING THE AEGEAN SKIES



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Despite its small area, Greece still hosts a very rich native flora and wild fauna. This biodiversity, one of the most significant in Europe, constitutes a valuable heritage, a priceless national capital that we all have to safeguard for the next generations.

When speaking about Greek nature, our thoughts go to the dense forests of Rodopi Mountains, the extended wetlands of Macedonia and Thrace, the mythical peaks of Olympus. We are now well aware of the Brown Bear in Pindos, the Mediterranean Monk Seal in Alonnisos and the Black Vultures in Dadia Forest in Soufli. These are not all, however. Greece, from the dawn of its long-lived history, has been connected like no other country to the blue Aegean Sea. The Aegean is not only characterized by the snow-white settlements of the Cyclades, the mastic villages in Chios or the castle of Saint John's Knights in Rhodes. With more than 8,000 islands, islets, and rocks, the Aegean is also a dynamic ecosystem with numerous endemic plants and rare animal species, many of which occur only here or in very few other Mediterranean countries.

One of these important species is the Eleonora's Falcon, an "unusual" falcon, nesting colonially in barren islands and steep seaside cliffs, with the particularity of breeding not in spring, like all the other birds, but in late summer to early autumn. The Eleonora's Falcon has been classified as a "globally threatened" species, due to its small world population. The fact that more than 80% of its global population nests in the Aegean makes this species particularly valuable for us; at the same time however, it calls for a commitment on its protection.

Being fully aware of this responsibility, the Ministry of Rural Development and Food, through the General Directorate for the Development and Protection of Forests and Natural Environment and through the local Forestry Services, has been in close co-operation with the "Hellenic Ornithological Society" in the implementation of a LIFE Project specifically for the study and protection of this rare falcon.

The book you are holding in your hands is a very significant step, expanding our knowledge not only with respect to the Eleonora's Falcon but also the biodiversity of the Aegean archipelago overall. The more we learn about this valuable natural heritage the better we can try to promote and protect it.

Kostas Kiltidis

Deputy Minister of Rural Development and Food

The Eleonora's Falcon can be classified as an emblematic species of the Mediterranean, especially of the Aegean Sea. It has chosen to nest in the very poor natural environment of small islets, adopting at the same time the habit of breeding in late summer, something unique for the Northern hemisphere. It does this to exploit a rich but temporary food source that passes over the Mediterranean, the "living river" of migratory birds. Almost 85% of the global population of this migratory falcon nests in the Aegean. Therefore, Greece is very greatly responsible for its conservation.

The present publication comprises one of the actions undertaken throughout the LIFE Project for the conservation of the Eleonora's Falcon, under the framework of which the status of the species in Greece and the rest of Mediterranean was investigated. The actions of the project, in combination with results from long-term research conducted by other scientists in Greece and the Mediterranean, have allowed us to develop a rather complete notion of the Eleonora's Falcon status. This, by no means should allow us to be optimistic about the future, as the consequences of climate change for this migratory species and for the birds it preys upon, are foreseen to be very adverse if urgent measures are not applied.

This book provides a great deal of information about the ecology and the threats facing the Eleonora's Falcon, including the most recent research findings. Its final goal is to promote wider interest and support for the conservation of this charismatic species.

The Hellenic Ornithological Society, along with its partners from BirdLife International, will use the current knowledge and carry on taking initiatives in order to secure a better future for this unique species.

Tasos Dimalexis
Scientific Director of HOS

Two notes:

- 1. For security reasons, the exact locations of nesting colonies of the Eleonora's Falcon in the Aegean are not cited or pointed out. Exceptions have been made in certain islands, like Antikythira, where nests are safely located on steep cliffs.*
- 2. All photographs presented in this book have been taken in the wild, at great distances with the use of telephoto lenses, without disturbing the birds and the rest of the portrayed animals. Photographs depicting nests, eggs and nestlings have been taken during visits on islets for scientific research, with special permission.*

To our teacher Dietrich Ristow

Acknowledgements

This publication is based on knowledge acquired with a lot of effort and under complicated circumstances. Tens of people participated in actions of HOS in the Aegean, while many others completed their long-term personal research, and it's because of them and their work that we now know so much about the Eleonora's Falcon. It's not possible to thank them all individually; therefore, here we will limit ourselves to those who directly helped in the preparation of this book.

From HOS's staff, the assistance of Danae Portolou was significant, as she is very familiar with the Aegean, while Dionysia Markopoulou helped in map preparation and Georgios Karris contributed greatly during the first stages of writing. Michalis Dretakis (Natural History Museum of the University of Crete) and Panagiotis Dendrinis (MOM, Hellenic Society for the Protection of the Mediterranean Monk Seal) provided the texts for the etesian winds – "meltemia" – and seals, respectively.

Panagiotis Latsoudis was one of the basic contributors of the LIFE Project, and also prepared the Environmental Education package for Eleonora's Falcon. Another basic contributor was Dr Stavros Xirouchakis from the Natural History Museum of the University of Crete, who was responsible for much of the scientific work.

Special thanks should be given to the HOS team that prepared the english translation and to the photographers who provided their photos, whose names are shown under each photograph.

Finally, many questions regarding the Eleonora's Falcon were answered by Dr Dietrich Ristow (who also advised Paschalis Dougalis during the preparation of the drawings) and Fernando Spina.

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