

# Saving the Eleonora's falcon

Greece holds about 70% of the world breeding population of Eleonora's falcons, but the species suffers from multiple threats throughout the country, such as habitat degradation, poisoning by agrochemicals, human disturbance and egg/chick predation by introduced rats.

The Hellenic Ornithological Society (HOS, BirdLife Partner in Greece), together with a number of partners including the RSPB, is implementing an EU LIFE Nature project for the conservation of this species. The project involves assessment of the population status of the Eleonora's falcon in Greece and the other Mediterranean breeding range states. It also involves implementation of priority management measures at nine Special Protection Areas (SPAs). These measures are aimed at improving the breeding success of the species as well as supporting the administrative and operational capability of regional and local authorities responsible for SPA conservation. In addition, these measures evaluate causes of mortality (notably from exposure to agro-chemical uptake), increase public awareness and appreciation of the species, and promote eco-tourism activities at project sites.

A population census of the Eleonora's falcon was initiated in 2004 in Greece (coordinated by HOS) and all other Mediterranean countries hosting breeding colonies (led by the RSPB). Once completed in 2006, the census will provide updated data to be used for the revision of the conservation status and distribution of the species. In Greece, seven field teams, comprising 46 fieldworkers, surveyed several areas of the Aegean and most islands and islets of Crete. A total of 4,000 individuals were counted in all these areas.

Surveys were also initiated in Croatia (99 individuals), Tunisia (150 pairs), Turkey (4 pairs) and Cyprus (151 pairs). The remaining Mediterranean countries that host breeding colonies (Morocco, Italy, Spain and Algeria) are expected to cover breeding colonies in their regions this year and in 2006.

A monitoring programme is also being implemented in nine SPAs. In total, 179 nests were marked and monitored during the breeding period, providing data on breeding performance. In addition, many chicks were ringed, morphometric measurements were taken and blood samples were collected in order to perform genetic and toxicological analyses to enable evaluation of the main causes of mortality.

The RSPB is also carrying out a pilot project for the eradication of the invasive rat population in one colony on two islets in the Sporades – the first such project in Greece, where there is no expertise in this valuable technique. Egg and nestling losses through rat predation are estimated to reach up to 25%. Rat-specific poison has been spread throughout spring, before the arrival of falcons. Poison pellets pose no danger to aerial feeding falcons such as Eleonora's falcons, and are not a threat to other over-flying birds of prey. Repeated field visits have found no evidence of rats at the colony, but monitoring will continue for a further year. Results and technical knowledge are being shared with the relevant Greek authorities, to help them in future management plans for the island SPAs.

