



In this issue:

Protecting and Studying
the Saiga Antelope

Water Bird Surveys

Western Tien-Shan – a
UNESCO World Heritage Site

Local citizens and conservation
of Important Bird Areas

Fish have arrived
in Lake Zhumay

Rescued tortoises return
to the wild

ACBK spring and summer
tours

Saiga Friends Clubs

New ACBK member clubs

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BIRD OF THE YEAR 2017 - THE EURASIAN EAGLE OWL



ACBK, together with the Kazakhstan Bird Conservation Union, have chosen the Eurasian eagle owl as Bird of Year 2017.

The eagle owl is a predatory bird of the owl family. It is large in size (weighing up to 3 kg), with large orange eyes, elongated feathers on the head - «ears» - making it an easily recognizable, and at the same time, frightening bird. In fiction, the owl has not been represented in a particularly positive or friendly light. In reality, however, the owl is not dangerous to humans, and the Kazakh and other Turkic peoples regarded it as a sacred bird and seeing an owl was considered as a sign of good luck.

The eagle owl, a nocturnal bird, is widely distributed and inhabits forests, steppes and mountains, but it is rare overall. This powerful predator feeds on rabbits, rodents, hedgehogs, birds, frogs and sometimes even fish, depending on the area.

LOCAL CITIZENS AND CONSERVATION OF IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Environmental pollution, loss of natural habitats and ecological catastrophes are no longer just in the headlines or something happening far away. We now see them very close to home. Although it might sound quite trivial, man is part of nature and therefore environmental protection is necessary for the wellbeing of the humankind. Nature can restore itself, but it takes a long time. The rate of destruction significantly exceeds the rate of recovery. However, luckily, people can give nature a helping hand. There are some simple nature conservation techniques that we were taught in our childhood, but these are no longer sufficient. We need more complex measures to preserve the environment now. One such measure is the project "Local IBA Conservation Initiative" (IBAs – Important Bird Areas). The main idea of the project is to support the people, who want to contribute to the conservation in their local IBAs. The project is funded by the Global Environment Facility





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Small Grants Programme, implemented through the United Nations Development Programme (GEF Small Grants Programme/UNDP). Initially this was a two-year project, which was extended to four years so the planned microprojects could be carried out by the local residents in their respective regions. The microprojects on the lakes Zhumay (Akmola Region) and Kyzylkol (South Kazakhstan Region) were conducted during 2012-2014. During the additional two years (2014-2016) project ideas were approved: a wetland conservation project based in the hunting reserve "Tasmuryn" (Almaty Region) and Buiratau State Nature Reserve (Karaganda region). The last two will be described in more detail.

The goal of the microproject in the hunting reserve "Tasmuryn", one of the best in Kazakhstan, is to improve the environmental conditions through conservation and habitat management. Restoration and preservation of the animal world is always a priority here. The staff at the hunting reserve are the right people to carry out the project as they know precisely what works and what does not in wildlife management. For this reason, they decided to prove with their own example that it is possible to improve the current condition of hunting reserves. The ACBK project provided the right opportunity.

Wild boar is still hunted here and water birds are not abundant. The wetland is located on the territory of the hunting reserve and attracts water birds, including rare species. Better conservation and habitat management are needed, however, to attract more birds to the area.

The GEF Small Grants Programme has funded measures like cutting reeds, creating more favourable nesting conditions for water birds, clearing rubbish from the shores of the Ili River and nearby



Tasmuryn hunting area

territories, building nest boxes for eastern stock dove (rare Red List species, nesting in Turanga forests) and clearing up dead-wood in the bottomland (?) forest (forest in the foothills?). The wetland management plan for the next three years was accepted during the realization of the microproject. In the future, the management plan for the wetland will be included in the overall management plan for the hunting reserve.

The greatest achievement of this joint work is the allocation of some areas of the wetland to nesting and stop over places for water birds. This means that hunting and any other human economic activities, including recreation activities

and tourism, are prohibited on the territory. The information boards informing visitors of the status of the area will soon be installed along the perimeter of wetland.

The microproject in Buiratau National Park was conducted by the research scientist Yeleusiz Mizembayev. The intention was to improve the conditions for water birds on the lakes Azhbay and Bozaygyr and to create favourable conditions for birdwatching. While these are the only lakes on the territory of the Buiratau National Park, they are highly important during seasonal migrations and nesting. Additionally, these lakes are the watering places for other wildlife in the park. Some of those animals are on the national and international Red Lists.

The water level in the lakes has dropped, therefore, it was important to maintain and even raise the water level. One way to do this was to increase the flow of ice-melt waters into the lake, which was achieved by a technique called snow retention. A tractor and a snowplow were used to create 100 snow retention shields that increased the snow layer on the lake and along the shoreline from 30 cm up to 80 cm, and kept it there rather than the winter winds blowing it away. This snow retention technique using shields will be employed by the state authorities of the national park on a regular basis. To attract visitors to the IBA two observation hides were installed on the lakes Azhbay and Bozaygyr. From these visitors can observe birds from a safe distance without disturbing them. In addition, two new telescopes with tripods were donated to the national park. Information leaflets are being prepared to raise awareness amongst the locals of the conservation work in the IBA. As a recommendation for a future management plan for the whole



Tasmuryn hunting area

national park, a management plan for the two lakes was written up for the next three years.

The project "Local IBA Conservation Initiative" has allowed ACBK to continue the work on network of IBA custodians: the participants of all the four microprojects joined are part of this networks. With this in mind, together with GEF Small Grants Programme/UNDP the decision was made to buy and donate the equipment (binoculars, cameras, detectors) for the support of volunteer work in nature reserves.

This is the first project in Kazakhstan for the sustainable management of IBAs carried out completely by local people. We just provided advice at the stage of proposal writing, but the ideas or all four selected and completed microprojects originally came from ordinary citizens. In fact, originally there had been more than twenty proposals from seven regions. This project has demonstrated that nature conservation in IBAs is important not just for birds but also for the people that use these natural areas (water, fish, reeds, forests). Thanks to this project, we have expanded the IBA custodian network. We express our sincere gratitude to GEF Small Grants Programme/UNDP for the project funding and hope that the experience we gained will help us to continue the IBA conservation work with the involvement of local initiative groups.

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FISH HAVE ARRIVED IN LAKE ZHUMAY

Lake Zhumay is nestled in the Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve and is part of the Important Bird Area (IBA) Zhumay-Mayshukyr Lake System, which attracts dozens of species of water birds like flamingos, white-headed ducks, Dalmatian pelicans, grey and white herons and many others.



This summer, efforts continued to restore Lake Zhumay in the Akmola Region. In July, participants of the project called "Local IBA Conservation Initiative" released into the lake about a tonne of common carp. This is the only species of fish that can survive the winter in this shallow lake when the ice is one or more metre thick. The locals have said that in the 1980s there was fish in the lake, mainly common carp.

The hope is that the restocking will support the ecosystem of the lake in a long-term and sustainable way. The fish selected for the job were not just fry, but fish of different ages, 15-10cm in size, bought from a local seller. The transportation and release were carried out by Timur Iskakov and Krykbay Tobanov, the organisers of the project.

Timur Isakov said: "We are happy to report that the restocking went smoothly. It is great to play a part in such a noble undertaking. I would like to thank ACBK and the GEF Small Grants Programme for supporting our project and helping us bring it to fruition. Once again there's life in Lake Zhumay!"

Reintroducing fish into the lake can be seen as the second stage of its restoration. In 2013 and 2014 local residents took part in a snow-retention project. Thanks to the snow gathered, water level in the lake rose to its possible maximum. Thus, the lake came to life - greater number of water birds started using the lake as nesting and stop-over places.

In its work on IBAs, ACBK collaborates with local people – IBA "custodians". Timur Iskakov is the custodian of Lake Zhumay and therefore regularly monitors its health. The success of the restocking will be measured by the presence of indicator bird species whose presence is evidence of carp in the lake. In this case, the indicator species are the Dalmatian pelican (on the Red List of Kazakhstan), the great cormorant, the great crested grebe, great black headed gull (on the Red List), the Caspian gull and other fish eating birds.



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