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Clarifying the Status of the Caucasian Black Grouse: Workshop Report

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IUCN/SSC/BirdLife/WPA Grouse Specialist Group

Clarifying the Status of the Caucasian Black Grouse

Workshop report

The Caucasian Black Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi* occurs between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the Great and Little Caucasus mountains in Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, east into north-eastern Turkey and south into north-western Iran; the major part of the range is in Russia and Georgia. The species has the smallest distribution of all Eurasian grouse species. Estimates of total population size are vague and vary between 10-100,000 birds. The species probably has been declining at least since the 1980s and has disappeared from parts of its range. Habitat degradation due to cattle grazing and shepherding, predation by feral and shepherd-dogs, and illegal hunting are assumed to be major threats to the species.

The conservation status of the Caucasian Black Grouse is insufficiently clarified. Up-to-date information on distribution, abundance, and population trends are lacking. This is reflected in the international red data books, that list the species as data deficient (IUCN 2000) and insufficiently known (Red Data Book of European Vertebrates 1997). However, the species is listed as endangered in the national red data books throughout its range (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, Turkey, Russia). Some local naturalists believe that the species is rapidly declining and threatened by extinction.

In the IUCN/SSC Grouse Action Plan (Storch 2000), the IUCN/SSC/BirdLife/WPA Grouse Specialist Group (GSG) has reviewed information available on the Caucasian Black grouse, and has sketched project proposals to clarify the status and reduce the threats to the species. To date, however, none of these projects has been implemented. The major difficulties appear to be the socio-economic situation in the range countries, and thus, a lack of funding, logistics, and other support for local researchers.

CBG Workshop in Beijing

The GSG held a workshop on the Caucasian Black Grouse (CBG) on 21 August 2002 during the 9th International Grouse Symposium (IGS) in Beijing, China. The workshop's objectives were:

- to bring together scientists from the CBG's range countries, to enable them to meet with international grouse experts, and to strengthen their contacts with the GSG;
- to increase awareness and interest regarding the CBG in the international scientific community and among GSG members;
- to initiate concrete steps towards field surveys and research studies on the CBG to clarify status and threats according to IUCN criteria.

The GSG invited scientists from 5 of the 6 range countries to participate in the IGS and the CBG workshop, and offered financial assistance with travel expenses. Unfortunately, WPA funding did not become available until about two months before the IGS, and thus, invitations came at too short notice. As a result, Sagdan Baskaya from Turkey participated in the IGS as the only representative of the CBG's range who is presently conducting field work on the species. Further workshop participants with their own experience of the species were Roald Potapov (Russia) and Siegfried Klaus (Germany). The workshop on 21 August 2002 was attended by 13 GSG members.

- GSG Chair Ilse Storch gave an introduction on the species, its range, unclarified conservation status, and the workshop goals.
- Siegfried Klaus showed slides reporting on the ecology of the species in Russia and Azerbaijan, and briefly introduced the new BirdLife/NABU project that has been started in Azerbaijan (see below).

- Sagdan Baskaya, who had given a lecture on his studies on the CBG in Turkey in the IGS Sessions on 20 August, sketched a project proposal in order to clarify the distribution and abundance of the species in Turkey, and to identify its major threats. The proposal was based on the Conservation recommendations outlined in the IUCN Grouse Action Plan.
- The proposal by Baskaya was discussed and approved by the workshop participants.
- Suggestions were made to extend the scope of the project (collect feathers for genetic analyses of population differentiation and gene flow) and to extend activities into other range countries (GIS analysis of vegetation types and topography from satellite images to produce a map of potential habitats as a basis for field surveys).
- Workshop participants concluded that there is a need to systematically collect data for a range-wide analysis of factors affecting the distribution and abundance of the CBG in different parts of its past and present range.

The following concrete steps were agreed:

- Sagdan Baskaya will revise his project proposal according to workshop discussions, and submit it to GSG Chair Ilse Storch for review.
- Ilse Storch will send the draft proposal to those seven workshop participants and GSG members who volunteered as reviewers.
- Based on the comments received from reviewers, Sagdan Baskaya will produce a final version.
- The proposal will then be approved by the GSG and submitted to WPA for funding.
- If WPA are unable to support the proposal, the GSG will approach other potential donors.

Workshop participants agreed that the high motivation and exceptional field skills of Sagdan Baskaya, the high scientific quality of his work, and his good contacts to the GSG, justify priority implementation of his project with the help of the GSG. Further projects in other range countries should be supported as opportunities arise. Interest has been expressed by GSG members in Georgia (A. Gavashelishvili) and Russia (A. Mezhnev), and also by GSG contacts in Armenia (V. Ananian).

CBG project underway in Azerbaijan

A first step to tackle the research needs outlined in the Grouse Action Plan is under way in Azerbaijan. The German BirdLife-Partner NABU and the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society (AOS) started work on the species in spring 2002, financed by NABU, RSPB and the Dutch Ministry of Environment through the BirdLife European Division.. The main objectives are:

- to re-initiate scientific work on the species in Azerbaijan. Over the last decades no surveys have been conducted, and knowledge and experience of the CBG are disappearing. In spring 2002 GSG member Siegfried Klaus Siegfried.Klaus@gmx.de was appointed to train locals on field methods. Efforts will continue.
- to start developing a method based on remote sensing and GIS-analysis to create a potential distribution map that covers all range countries. Work has been started but further funding is needed to continue.
- to develop conservation strategies for the high mountain areas of the Caucasus with a strong focus on the CBG but also for other components of this fragile ecosystem

First plans are being discussed by NABU to extend the activities into other range countries; in particular in cooperation with the BirdLife partners in Georgia and Turkey. The GSG is not directly involved in these activities. GSG and BirdLife/NABU however agreed that activities on the CBG should be coordinated whenever possible.

Contacts: Michael Brombacher, Elchin Sultanov (see below)

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