

SUSLIKS (*SPERMOPHILUS CITELLUS*) IN SLOVAKIA - RECENT CONSERVATION PROJECTS

MICHAL ADAMEC, MICHAL AMBROS, ERVIN HAPL, MILAN OLEKŠÁK

State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic, Headquarters, Lazovná 10
974 01 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia; e-mail: adamec@sopsr.sk

Susliks (*Spermophilus citellus*) are one of the main food staples of the Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) and the Saker (*Falco cherrug*) in Slovakia. This rodent has seriously declined from many parts of its range. In Slovakia the most rapid decline was recorded in 1970s and 1980s especially as a result of deratization, extensive chemization and use of pesticides in agriculture. Other reasons for the decline were direct persecution of the species as a pest and for food (the factor is virtually eliminated nowadays, the only exceptions are their colonies in the vicinity the Roma people villages in the SE Slovakia), change of agricultural management of the sites (in the past a lot of the sites species were extensively used in agriculture and ploughed up). Low abundance of susliks is directly associated with *Aquila heliaca* and *Falco cherrug* population stability.

The State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic has already conducted several transfers and re-establishments of susliks. Susliks are captured in conflict areas (mostly airports and areas where susliks' colonies are threatened by building activities – roads, suburb areas, etc.). The airports were always in favour of this activity because the occurrence of this species attracts birds of prey, which are problematic regarding flight safety. In terms of the land where the species will be released, based on the long termed experience of the State Nature Conservancy, there has never been a problem. However, to avoid problems the release site: i) should be far enough from the fields, ii) should be far enough from the settlements in certain cases (especially the settlements inhabited by the Roma people who traditionally capture the species and prepare a special food from it), iii) must be grazed or regularly mowed.

Since year 2000 more than 1000 animals were captured and released at selected sites and by now a viable and reproducing population has been established there. Regarding the rate of survival, the first year is the hardest (lowest survival of the released animals). The following years are more and more successful. This is caused by the fact that the first animals are released at a site they did not know, where there were no other susliks, neither the signs of their presence. The animals coming later on came into contact with the surviving animals from the previous release action, which made them stick to the site more, they could use their burrows at least in case of emergency or could freely use the burrows of the non-surviving animals and continue to build them.

Actions were supported by project LIFE-NATURE “Conservation of *Aquila heliaca* in the Slovak part of Carpathian basin” (LIFE03NAT/SK/000098).