

Project proposal: Avifauna and Field Guide Georgia vs 6/2017

Context:

Georgia¹ is situated at the border of SE-Europe in the W- Palearctic and belongs to the Caucasus Biodiversity Hotspot². The natural history of the country is related to two aspects: being part of the Mid Latitude Belt³ with great diversity of landscapes, and having a SW-position to the immense Eurasian landmass. The latter implies importance to migration of raptors and in broader perspective to long distance migrants in the West Asia – East Africa flyway. Since the independancy of Georgia in 1991 there is a development process going on in search of new stability. Government priorities are economic growth, import reduction and agricultural reforms. Initiatives in the field of nature conservation are facilitated by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection. The International Convention on Biological Diversity has been subscribed. But for operational costs of nature conservation there is hardly any government budget. Positive results are obtained in small steps.

- Since 2013 the board of the Dutch Avifaunistic Circle (AKN), section of the Netherlands Ornithologists Union, took its bearings on the chances for Dutch-Georgian collaboration in avifaunistic fieldwork. That process resulted in 2015 in an agreement with SABUKO (the Georgian Society for Nature Conservation) and BirdLife International⁴.
- In the specific field of raptor monitoring Batumi Raptor Count (BRC) is active since 2008.
- In 2015 it was intended to integrate BRC in SABUKO. But that idea was ultimately cancelled.
- In 2016 the AKN made contact with the ornithological research group of Ilia State University. There was a meeting in Tbilisi with Alexandre Abuladze, Zura Javakhishvili and Andrei Kandaurov. The results of that meeting led to the current proposal: broad collaboration of Ilia State University, SABUKO, BRC and AKN, supported by BirdLife International (in line with their Caucasus Programme), and in Georgia by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection.
- In 2017 the ambitions of AKN and BRC in Georgia are integrated in the Dutch-Georgian Ornithological Foundation (DuGOF)

The problems underlying this proposal

Problems in Georgia in the field of education and conservation, are:

1. Lack of an Avifauna giving insight in status, distribution and ecology of bird species. The Ilia State University has many data but not the means for adequate publication;
2. Lack of a Field Guide on the Birds of Georgia;
3. As a consequence knowledge building and awareness of nature are being hampered.
4. This makes the ambitions for long-term monitoring doubtful.

Objectives of the current proposal

This proposal is meant to give an answer to the underlying problems. And to do this now, is the right timing. Ilia State University is completing a series of avifaunistic research projects and is ready to start a process leading to publication of an Avifauna of Georgia. In addition their vision is that the

¹ Area 1,7 times The Netherlands; population density is about six times lower than in The Netherlands.

² Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, 2003 (updated September 2004).

³ See Clive Finlayson, 2011: Avian Survivors, the history and biogeography of Palearctic Birds.

⁴ On request confidentially available.

preparation of this Avifauna will give the basic information for a Field Guide regarding status information, distribution of (sub-)species, habitat description and relevant ecological information. Therefore the Georgian ornithologists plead for an approach in two parallel tracks: Avifauna and Field Guide. The AKN has the ambition and experience to coördinate the complete project in collaboration with Ilia State University, BRC and SABUKO. Input of BRC is well-timed because their raptor monitoring has started nearly ten years ago and this means they are ready for analysis and publication⁵. Furthermore the project will stimulate collaboration between Ilia State University, SABUKO and BRC. Both BRC and SABUKO work on developing a sustainable conduct-code for hunting and trapping raptors. This is probably an important topic in the Field Guide.

Essentials of the current proposal

The proposal comprises the publication of the first Avifauna of Georgia and the publication of a Field Guide on the Birds of Georgia in a period of 3 years. We prefer to select the publisher in consultation with WWF and/or BirdLife International.

Proposed content of the Avifauna:

1. Introduction (incl. awareness and education);
2. Georgian history of ornithology;
3. Ecology of the birds of Georgia;
4. Annotated checklist;
5. Species essays (description; status; distribution; breeding biology; food; threats; mortality)
6. Special topics on bird migration;
7. Conservation priorities;
8. Gap analysis and aims of future research;
9. Bibliography of the birds of Georgia

Appendix: IBA's in Georgia: importance, criteria and species)

Basic texts for chapters 2 – 5 will be produced by Ilia State University; for chapter 6 by BRC and others; for chapter 7 by SABUKO and Ilia State University; for chapters 8 and 9 by Ilia State University.

SABUKO will contribute to chapter 1 specifically on awareness and education and to the appendix.. Each chapter will end with a summary in Georgian.

Proposed content of the Field Guide:

The target group is non-experts/ starters in birdwatching. Treatment in relation to the different habitats. The Field Guide will have all contents in both English and Georgian. These contents focus per species on identification and distribution. The description of the distribution of species could follow the approach of A.L. Spaans in *Field Guide to the Birds of Suriname, 2016*. In addition the guide will contain a selection of special topics which are of interest in field work.

General comments

We expect that the project will strengthen the knowledge infrastructure on bird research and fieldwork in Georgia. This is crucial as a step towards improved education on awareness and practical skills. In this respect the project will benefit from additional collaboration with Sovon⁶ and the European Centre for Nature Conservation, both situated in the Netherlands.

⁵ Fifteen years ago Erwin van Maanen c.s. published their findings and suggestions in a Dutch-Georgian collaboration: Bird Conservation International 11-2. The importance of Batumi as raptor migration bottleneck was first documented by Fedor V. Vikonsky (1894;1897) and studied by Aleksandre Abuladze since 1970.

⁶ Sovon coördinates all bird-monitoring programmes in the Netherlands.