

First documented nesting by White-tailed Sea Eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) in Eastern Slovakia

Prvé doložené hniezdenie orliaka morského (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) na východnom Slovensku

Štefan DANKO

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Abstract: The 1980's and 90's saw growth in the population and expansion of the areas occupied by White-tailed Sea Eagles over the whole territory of their occurrence in Europe. Under this influence the number of these eagles observed during the nesting period also increased in Eastern Slovakia. The most frequent occurrences have been recorded in the wetland woods along the River Latorica on the East Slovakian Plain, but so far without any documented nesting. In 2002 one pair built a nest in the Vihorlat Hills near Zemplínska širava reservoir, but they did not actually nest in it either that or the following year. Breeding by these eagles in these hills was noted over 70 years ago by Hrabar (1932) and Molnár (1933), but no nesting was documented. Nesting was documented for the first time in 2004, when one pair successfully raised two offspring. This pair successfully bred in the same nest in 2005 and 2006 too.

Abstrakt: V 80-tych a 90-tych rokoch minulého storočia nastalo narastanie populácie a rozširovanie areálu orliaka morského na celom území jeho rozšírenia v Európe. Vplyvom toho narastali počty pozorovaní orliakov v hniezdnom období aj na východnom Slovensku. Najčastejšie výskyty sa zaznamenali v lužných lesoch okolo rieky Latorica na Východoslovenskej rovine, ale zatiaľ bez doloženého hniezdenia. V r. 2002 si jeden pár postavil hniezdo vo Vihorlatských vrchoch pri Zemplínskej širave, ale v tom a nasledujúcom roku ešte v ňom nehniedil. O hniezdení orliakov v tomto pohorí písali Hrabar (1932) a Molnár (1933) v tridsiatych rokoch minulého storočia, ale hniezdenie nebolo doložené. Po prvý raz sa doložilo jeho hniezdenie v roku 2004, kedy pár úspešne vyviedol 2 mláďatá. Pár úspešne vyhniedil v tomto istom hniezde aj v roku 2005 a 2006

Key words: White-tailed Sea Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*, first documented breeding, Vihorlat Hills, Eastern Slovakia

Address for correspondence: Štefan Danko, Zemplínske múzeum, Kostolné námestie 1, SK-071 01 Michalovce, Slovakia. E-mail: danko.stefan@slovanet.sk

The White-tailed Sea Eagle is one of the rarest nesting raptors in Slovakia. The first documented instance of nesting by these birds in our territory dates back to the 1920's in the Danube Valley (Matoušek 1931). Apart from one exception the nesting of this species here has always been connected with the wetland woods along the Danube. It may be assumed that this species also lived here in the more distant past, though we lack specific data in this regard. Nesting continued in an irregular way until 1964, but it was always a matter of a single pair (Štollmann 1966). More detailed information is

given by Áč (1989), who writes that from 1946 to 1964 only 9 cases of successful nesting by these raptors were recorded in this territory. Outside this area there was only one attempt at nesting by Sea Eagles by the Orava Reservoir in 1960 (Kocian 1960). From the remainder of Slovakian territory there are only general reports of nesting by this species in earlier times in Eastern Slovakia.

Hrabar (1932) wrote that "Formerly they nested in the woodland spreading along the Latorica," and there is just one report of their nesting in the Vihorlat Hills: "They do not usually seek out higher loca-

tions, but nonetheless they are now nesting at Morské Oko (a lake named 'Eye of the Sea') below Vihorlat, where they are in safety." Slightly more detail is provided by Portenko (1950), namely that one pair was nesting on the lower slopes of the hill Veža ('Tower') near Morské Oko, and Molnár (in Matoušek et al. 2002) mentions in his notes that one pair was nesting beside the Vihorlat lake on 2nd May 1931 (but without any other more detailed information, so we cannot consider this nesting as documented, see for example also Mošanský 1974), and on 2nd June 1932 the pair was no longer observed here. In his original work Molnár (1933) states that eagles nested at this location until 1930. The credibility of this statement might be partially confirmed by the following fact: In the collection of the Zemplín Museum in Michalovce there is a large oil painting of Morské Oko showing a pair of White-tailed Sea Eagles, one sitting on an islet in the lake and the other circling above it. The painting is unfortunately not signed, and we know only that it formed part of the family collection of Count Sztáray in Michalovce.

In our neighbouring countries the greatest numbers of nesting White-tailed Sea Eagles are in Poland and Hungary. Over the whole area of occurrence of this species in Europe there was a drop in numbers of these raptors in the late 1960's and early 1970's (in Poland 50-100 pairs), and in Hungary in the late 1970's and early 1980's the population was at a minimum, with probably just 10 pairs (Haraszthy 1998). Revival and strong growth in the population occurred in the 1980's and especially the 1990's. In Norway, where White-tailed Sea Eagles are most numerous in Europe, the population minimum of 700-800 pairs was reached in 1968, and by 1993 their number had doubled to cca 1500 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). In Poland at present the figure of 450-500 nesting pairs is quoted (Tomiałojć & Stawarczyk 2003), with more than 40 in Hungary by 1996 (Haraszthy 1998) and up to 55-65 pairs in 1998 (Magyar et al. 1998). At the same time there was a shift in nesting patterns towards the east, with pairs starting to nest well up in the north-east of Hungary by the River Bodrog (Petrovics in verb.).

Increasing numbers of pairs were reported in the early 1990's by all European countries where these eagles nest. For example, in our neighbouring countries during the five years from 1991 to 1995 the numbers of nesting pairs rose from 245 to 270-280 in Poland, from 8-10 to 12 in the Czech Republic,

and from 36 to 42 in Hungary. Only in Ukraine was an unchanged figure of 50 pairs reported (Hauff 1996). In the Czech Republic in 1984 they started nesting again after 150 years in the Třeboň Basin (Ševčík 1989). The shift to the east was also confirmed by the first breeding by these eagles in Southern Moravia in 1984, and in 1988 there were already two pairs (Horák 1989). Sea Eagles settled once again in woodland by the Danube in 1991, when they also attempted breeding (Chavko in Danko 1994). From 1992 onwards further attempts at nesting were recorded, but this consisted only of carrying branches to other birds' nests, or nest-building without breeding (Bohuš 1996). It was not until 1998, the first time in 34 years, that two pairs raised broods in the Danube Valley (Chavko in Danko, Darolová & Krištín 2002, Stollmann 2004), and at present (2004) their number has risen to four pairs. Probable nesting was recorded in 1999 in the Borská lowlands, where also in 2004 one older pair attempted breeding for the first time, but unsuccessfully (Chavko in litt.). Repeated breeding by this raptor species occurred in 1999, this time in Austria (Zuna-Kratky et al. 2000). At Orava Reservoir one pair was observed courting and carrying branches in the spring of 1994 (Demko and Karaska in Danko et al. 1995).

In Eastern Slovakia outside of the nesting period the White-tailed Sea Eagles' most common habitat is in the East Slovakian Lowlands, mainly around Zemplínska šírava Reservoir, the Iňačovce-Senné fishponds or in the Medzibodrožie area, as evidenced by the results of observation since the Second World War. They can often be spotted all over the territory of Eastern Slovakia during the spring migration, especially during March. Their occurrence during the nesting period was exceptional, and involved only non-nesting young birds. One of the more interesting older spottings I can mention was that of a pair of eagles, a female with a white tail and a younger male, seen on 24th February 1974 carrying branches in their claws in the Veľký Milič nature reserve near Slanská Huta in the Slanské Hills, but this must have been some sort of birds' game, because they did not stay there for a longer time (Danko unpubl.).

The increase in numbers of nesting pairs in Europe and the eastward shift in nesting patterns during the 1990's led to the greatest expectation of their breeding again in the Medzibodrožie area in the wetland woods along the River Latorica, especially near the villages of Čičarovce and Beša, where un-

documented reports of nesting had already originated in the past.

I possess older records of sightings, one of a solitary juvenile dated 14th July 1963 above the woods near Čičarovce, and another of a single bird in the same place from 11th April 1965 (Danko unpubl.). We have managed to gain records of several further sightings from more recent times, which might be evidence of possible nesting by these eagles in this area. On 14th March 1988 I personally observed a single adult Sea Eagle in the wetland woods of the Beša polder, sitting beside the older nest of a white stork built in an oak-tree. Checking the nest later, however, we found that it was not occupied by eagles, and we only ever saw that one bird there. It remained in that area for some time though, because on 30th April 1988 it was spotted near Oborín by Balla. Since the creation of the Latorica Protected Nature Zone in 1990 the area has been under more regular observation, carried out since 1994 primarily by M. Balla. From the nesting period we have the following sightings: 25th May 1994 – Beša polder 1 ex.; 1 ad. in the Beša polder 17th March 1999, then 19th March 1999 near Hrušov (Balla); 1 immat. in the Beša polder 25th May 1999 (Danko, Balla); 1 ad. near the confluence of the Latorica and Laborec 11th May 2000; 1 ad. 12th May 2000 in the Beša polder (Balla); 2 birds with white tails in the Beša polder 24th May 2000 (Danko, Balla); 5th April 2001 – 1 ad. with food in the Beša polder, 24th May 2001 – 1 ad. near Čičarovce; 5th Feb. 2002 – 1 adult ex. flew into older woods in the Beša polder and started calling noisily (Danko, Balla), and on 14th Feb. the same happened again, but as the polder was flooded it was not possible to check the particular area (Balla). The woods were checked by Balla in April after the water receded, but he found no nest. In 2004 one pair of Sea Eagles remained near the village of Poľany during the whole of February, and 2 solitary birds were seen on 30th May 2004 near Boľ (all Balla in litt.). However, we have no specific details about nesting or even attempts at nesting (all Danko and Balla unpubl.).

There is just one claim by local hunters that in 1996 near Poľany a “large eagle” had three young in a nest in a big white poplar. A year later they showed us the place, but there was no nest there then, and after repeated observations we still had no sighting of any Sea Eagles, so we cannot accept the hunters’ claim.

Many sightings of Sea Eagles come from the fish-pool complex between Iňačovce and Senné, but

primarily from the periods of autumn or spring migration, or in winter. In the vicinity of the Senné fishponds there is one piece of woodland near Pavlovce nad Uhom, but we have not seen any Sea Eagles in this area. During the nesting period they rarely remain at the fishponds, for example 19th May 1997 – 1 ex., 1st April 1999 – 1 ex., 22nd May 2001 – 1 ex., mostly still not adult birds (Danko unpubl.). Monitoring them was important, however, because it is precisely such solitary birds which occupy new nesting territories.

Very often and in greater numbers outside the nesting period the Sea Eagles would remain in the vicinity of Zemplínska šírava Reservoir, with a maximum of 10 ex. on 3rd March 2000 at the Vinné Cove, where they usually spent the night in the poplars (Danko unpubl.). We found eagles present here during the nesting period for the first time on 11th April 2002. While watching raptors near Kusín, M. Balla and I noticed one immat. Sea Eagle flying over the reservoir at fairly low height. We considered it to be a migrating bird, but bearing in mind the lateness of the season we paid more attention to it. After a while the eagle turned and flew towards the forest of the Vihorlat Hills. It was quite far away, but with binoculars we could see it transferring food from its claws to its beak, and then it disappeared in the trees. Shortly afterwards it circled up again and flew back towards us, and then we recognized by its almost white tail that this was a different bird. The whole act looked like a pair taking turns sitting on their clutch. Even though we could not believe at that time that White-tailed Sea Eagles might nest in the Vihorlat Hills, nevertheless we checked the area of woods they were occupying. We soon found a large nest in the crown of a beech tree, which by its construction was typical for this species. On our approach, however, nothing flew from the nest. We immediately visited the local forestry office and informed the staff of our discovery, asking them to stop all kinds of forestry work in the vicinity of the nest to save it from disturbance. We checked it again later on 3rd May, but the birds were no longer there. The fact was that despite our information forestry work was still going on near the nest, which might well have disturbed the birds. Checking inside the nest itself on 10th May, we found that it did not contain a clutch of eggs or any shells from eggs which might have been damaged. It is probable that in that year no clutch was in fact laid. In 2003 I checked the nesting area and the nest itself on 10th and 27th April, but I did not see any birds there and



Fig. 1. Young Sea Eagles in the nest on 26th May 2004.
Photo: L. Šimák

Obr. 1. Mláďatá orliakov morských na hniezde 26 mája
2004. Foto: L. Šimák

the nest was not occupied. On the other hand, I did sight a pair of Sea Eagles several times in April and May in the Senné Nature Reserve.

In 2004 I visited the nesting area the first time on 13th March. While I watched it from a great distance the nest was visited twice by the male of the pair. The bird's behaviour suggested that there was a clutch of eggs, so I checked the nest again on 17th March and found the female sitting on the clutch. I did all the checking from our vehicle on one of the forest tracks, so the sitting bird never flew from the nest. Once again I brought the occupied nest to the attention of two local foresters, thanks to whom the nesting was concluded successfully because they did not allow any forestry work to be done in the vicinity until there were older offspring in the nest.

I checked the nest at regular intervals from a distance, just observing the eagles carrying food back to the nest. On 20th April at least one chick was

visible in the nest being fed by the female parent, and on 21st May two chicks were clearly to be seen. On 26th May we carried out the ringing and photographic documentation (done by L. Šimák, with our thanks). On 15th June there were still two fledglings in the nest, and on 19th July they were in the trees above the nesting area.

The nest was built in thin beech woodland in the Vihorlat Hills military training area just 2.5 km away from Zemplínska šírava Reservoir. The eagles were hunting for food most probably from the reservoir, but they were also visiting the Senné fishponds. So far though we have no direct sightings from the hunting sites. Balla even spotted one eagle with food near Vojany on 2nd March 2004, flying towards the Vihorlat Hills. It may be assumed that it flew to that area from this nesting place at a time when the Latorica is flooded and there are good feeding opportunities there (flying distance cca 35 km).



Fig. 2. View of Sea Eagles' nesting site in the Vihorlat Hills, May 2004. Photo: Š. Danko

Obr. 2. Pohľad na hniezdne prostredie vo Vihorlatských vrchoch, máj 2004. Foto: Š. Danko

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Thus in 2004 we had the first documented nesting by White-tailed Sea Eagles in Eastern Slovakia. Thanks to this undisturbed and successful nesting it may be expected that this pair will return to nest permanently in this area. In the meantime the District Environment Office in Michalovce has declared the nesting site a protected area.

Based on this finding of a White-tailed Sea Eagles' nest in hills adjacent to a reservoir, it will be necessary in future to devote more attention to this species also in the vicinity of other large reservoirs (e.g. Domaša, Ružin, Starina) where they could nest and breed in a similar way.

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