

## Re-introduction of the Ural Owl (*Strix uralensis*) on the Austrian side of the Bohemian Forest in 2001

### Reintrodukce puštíka bělavého (*Strix uralensis*) na rakouské straně Šumavy v roce 2001

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**ABSTRACT.** The Ural Owl should again become a part of the Austrian fauna. Therefore a re-introduction programme for this rare owl has been started. In South-Bohemia and East-Bavaria such projects have been established for many years. Therefore the re-introduction of the Ural Owl in North-western Austria is important. In summer 2001 two owls were released as pioneers on the Austrian side of the Bohemian Forest near the city of Rohrbach.

The Ural Owl is extinct in Austria (GEPP et al. 1994). In the Bohemian Forest Mountains the Ural Owl is part of the original fauna and this area belongs to the most western part of this owl's occurrence (MURR 1937, KOHL 1977). However, in the last years there have been several records of the Ural Owl in SE (FREY pers. comm.) and NW Austria (ENGLEDER unpubl. data). Especially in the Austrian part of the Bohemian Forest evidence of the presence of this rare owl has repeatedly been reported (ZIMMERHACKL pers. comm.). It is probable that the individuals observed in North-western Austria are migrants from Bohemia or Bavaria.

The last known historical indication of the presence of the Ural Owl in the Austrian Bohemian Forest dates back to around 1910 – proof is given (by an exhibit) in the Bird-Museum in Aigen-Schlögl (PETZ pers. comm.).

After intensive preparations, a re-introduction project for the Ural Owl was initiated in the Austrian part of the Bohemian Forest (North-western part of Upper Austria) in summer 2001. The aim of this project is to support the Bavarian (MEBS & SCHERZINGER 2000) and Czech (KLOUBEC 1997) re-introduction projects on the Austrian side and to establish a strong owl population in the 3-country-region.

The Austrian re-introduction programme is a joint project of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, the Government of Upper Austria, and the WWF Austria. It is supported by EGS Haringsee (Protection of Owls and Birds of Prey in Haringsee), ÖNJ Haslach (Nature Protection Group in Haslach), and the Hunters Association (JAHRL 2001).

The breeding of the owls is accomplished in a special breeding station in co-operation with various zoos. The breeding-stock in Austria and Germany is based on 7 foundation stock from the subspecies *liturata* and *macroura*. The *liturata* birds are originally from Sweden, the *macroura*-birds originally are from Romania, former Czechoslovakia, and former Yugoslavia. Since there is already a problem with inbreeding, new *macroura*-breeding-lines are sought-after (FREY pers. comm.)

In summer 2001 two Ural Owls (one male born in 2000, one female born in 2001) were released as pioneers: the female on 26. 8. 2001 and the male on 21.9.2001. Both had been born in the breeding station Haringsee near Vienna and were monitored by radio-telemetry. Before their release, the young owls were kept in the aviary at the release place (4 kilometres south-west of the city of Rohrbach) together with an adult pair of Ural Owls for several weeks. The male was trained for hunting live mice, in the aviary. The owls were released at dusk.

The two owls accepted their new habitat and quickly began to hunt for themselves. The male owl found a habitat approximately 4 kilometres south of the point of release. It was absolutely independent of human feeding within 3 weeks after the release. Several times the male owl could be seen catching mice or a squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). The owl used a wooded area of approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup> as home range after emigration from the point of release and feeding place. The owl was very active – also during the day – and it intensively used the edge of the forest for hunting.

Between 30.11. and 4.12.2001 the male owl was illegally shot. Intensive investigations gave no results or suggestions concerning the offender. As the transmitter was still on the dead owl, the bird was found lying in a river (more than 3 kilometres south-west of the point of the last observation on 30. 11. 2001). The leg with the marking-ring had been cut off by the perpetrator. In the examination several shotgun pellets were found in the dead owl. The real cause of death was identified as choking (LOUPAL unpubl. data).

The female owl was dependent on human feeding until 5 months after its release. It was observed hunting several times, but it was not independent from feeding until 16. 1. 2002. The Owl was photographed by an automatic infrared camera (photo-trap) at the feeding place 14 times. On 21.2.2002 the female owl was found in bad physical condition about 7 kilometres south of the point of release. We caught the bird and provided it with intensive veterinary treatment, including a transfusion of 4 ml quail-blood (*Coturnix coturnix*). After a brief improvement in its physical condition the owl died a few days later. In the examination damage to the stomach and the intestinal mucosa were identified. No infectious agent was diagnosed (SCHMIDT unpubl. data). Perhaps there is a connection between the long period of regular presence of the owl at the feeding place and the diseases. Both birds were clinically healthy at the time of release.

It is a drawback that neither of the released owls survived the first year in the wild, but important scientific and practical experiences in releasing Ural owls were made. The re-introduction project for Ural Owls in North-western Austria will hopefully be continued in the next years.

## SOUHRN

V létě 2001 začal na rakouské straně Šumavy projekt reintrodukce puštíka bělavého (*Strix uralensis*). Cílem projektu bylo podpořit na rakouské straně Šumavy (v severozápadní části Horních Rakous) bavorské a české projekty reintrodukce této sovy, aby v této oblasti tří států vznikla její silná populace. Obě vypuštěné sovy si na nové prostředí zvykly a rychle (hned v prvních dnech po vypuštění) začaly samy lovit. Samec byl na příkrmování zcela nezávislý již tři týdny po vypuštění. Samice byla zčásti závislá na příkrmování ještě pět měsíců. V prosinci 2001 byl samec nelegálně zastřelen. Samice zemřela v únoru 2002 přirozenou smrtí. Doufejme, že projekt reintrodukce puštíka bělavého bude v severozápadním Rakousku v příštích letech pokračovat.

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