STUDY AREA

In 2008, BirdLife International and the Wildlife Science and Conservation Center led a project with the support from the World Bank to identify key sites for conservation in Mongolia based on global avian importance. During the selection process the Galba Gobi, a desert landscape with sparsely vegetated rolling hills, sand dunes, Saxaul stands and dry river beds with elm trees, was chosen as an Important Bird Area in the Mongolian Gobi. It stretches between, and partly overlaps with the Small Gobi A and Small Gobi B Special Protected Areas and covers an area of 828,328 ha. It supports important breeding populations of three globally threatened bird species (Saker Falcon, Houbara Bustard and the Lesser Kestrel, the later considered Vulnerable), as well as two globally threatened mammals, Asian Wild Ass or Khulan Equus hemionus (Endangered) and Goitered or Black-tailed Gazelle Gazella subgutturosa (Vulnerable).

IMPLEMENTED BY:

The Wildlife Science and Conservation Center (WSCC) is a Mongolian non-profit organization, working on wildlife research and conservation in Mongolia. WSCC’s activities include research, education, conservation of wildlife species and addressing associated environmental problems.

BirdLife International is a partnership of non-governmental conservation organizations with a special focus on birds. It is a global authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the issues and problems affecting bird life throughout the world. BirdLife International works in more than 100 countries, and promotes sustainable living as a means of conserving birds and all other forms of biodiversity.

THE PROBLEMS

A number of infrastructure facilities including roads, rail and power transmission lines will be developed to support mining activities. Some of these could have negative impacts on the Galba Gobi Important Bird Area (IBA). To address those, there is a need for detailed data on the nesting distribution and seasonal movements of Saker Falcon Falco cherrug and Asian Houbara Bustard Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii within the IBA. Such data would enable a full assessment of the environmental impacts of the different routing options for both transport and power infrastructure and facilitate the selection of alignment options that could minimize negative impacts on nesting territories of these globally threatened bird species.

ASIAN HOUBARA BUSTARD Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii

The Asian subspecies macqueenii of Houbara Bustard Chlamydotis undulata is sometimes considered a separate species, McQueen’s Bustard. Its plumage is brown above and white below, with a black stripe down the sides of the neck. In flight, the long wings show large areas of black, white and brown. Like other bustards, it has a spectacular display, raising the white feathers of the head and throat and withdrawing the head. The range of C. u. macqueenii extents from the Arabian Peninsula across Central Asia to Mongolia. The Houbara Bustard is considered globally threatened (Red List Category: Vulnerable), with the main causes for decline loss, fragmentation and degradation of habitat and hunting pressure by falconers at migration stop-over sites and on the wintering grounds.

SAKER FALCON Falco cherrug

The Saker Falcon occurs across a wide area ranging from eastern Europe to north-eastern China. It is a large falcon with 115 cm wing span and 840-1100 g body weight. It nests in trees, rock crevices, ledges, using nests of other birds such as Upland Buzzards, Common Ravens and others. Saker Falcon also uses nests located on artificial structures such as electric poles, buildings, bridges and towers. The globally threatened (Red List Category: Endangered) Saker Falcon is declining due to loss, fragmentation and degradation of its habitat, factors which are causing a decline in key prey species. The off take for falconry is a major problem, which has caused sharp declines and local extinction in many range countries including Mongolia.

THREATS AND PROJECT DELIVERABLES

Data from initial work indicates that the Galba Gobi IBA holds important numbers of breeding Asian Houbara Bustards and Saker Falcons. It further shows that the roads being used to transport coal and other minerals from the Tavan Tolgoi Mines to the Chinese border have some indirect negative effects on the breeding populations of the Houbara Bustard and Saker Falcon. Without adequate impact assessment and planning, such impacts could be significantly exacerbated should further infrastructural development occur as a result of the imminent Oyu Tolgoi copper mine project. During the summer of 2009, researchers trapped two adults and one juvenile Saker Falcon and deployed satellite transmitters to study their habitat and area use. Satellite data from these birds will help researchers to assess the potential impacts on breeding birds and their hunting areas and eventually could lead to developing guidance on alternative road routing for developers. It is additionally planned to satellite tag Houbara Bustards in 2010. Also the project prepares GIS data layers that show environmentally sensitive areas within Galba Gobi IBA with respect to critical nesting and feeding areas and migration routes of Saker Falcon and Houbara Bustard, and areas where development of transport and power infrastructure could have relatively low direct and indirect impacts. This information will be important for South Gobi developers to take into account to ensure the conservation of these globally threatened species and their habitat.
DISTRIBUTION, HABITAT USE, AND MOVEMENTS OF HOUBARA BUSTARDS AND SAKER FALCONS IN GALBA-GOBI IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES IN MONGOLIA’S SOUTH GOBI REGION

Mongolia is currently witnessing unprecedented levels of economic growth, in large part driven by growth in the extractive (mining, oil and gas) industries. Without effective environmental safeguard measures and careful strategic planning, these sectors have the potential to cause major negative impacts on both Mongolia’s natural habitats and wildlife populations. Mongolia’s South Gobi region is becoming a particular focus for the extractive industries, as it contains the largest known concentrations of mineral resources in the country. These include the Oyu Tolgoi copper-gold deposit, yet to be developed, and the existing Tavan Tolgoi coal mining area. Development of the region’s mineral resources will require the construction of transport infrastructure to facilitate regional development and for the export of surplus electricity. As a consequence both direct impacts (mine construction and operation, tailings disposal, etc.) and ancillary impacts (road and rail development, construction of high voltage power lines, etc.) the negative effects may become very significant. In addition, new transport routes and potential in-migration of people may see further indirect impacts increase, such as hunting and wildlife trade.

FUNDED BY:
The Rio Tinto – BirdLife International Programme (BirdLife International), is a strategic partnership between BirdLife and Rio Tinto, a leading multinational mining company. The Rio Tinto – BirdLife Programme’s objectives are to increase biodiversity awareness within Rio Tinto and the mining sector, to develop collaborative conservation projects of benefit to both biodiversity and business and to assist in the development of best practices aimed at minimizing the impacts of mining on biodiversity.

The World Bank provides low-interest loans, interest-free credits and grants to developing countries for a wide array of purposes that include investments in education, health, public administration, infrastructure, financial and private sector development, agriculture, and environmental and natural resource management.

SUPPORTED BY:
The Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism is a government body responsible for developing and enforcing environmental and natural resource management policies, and for managing the national protected area system in Mongolia.

PROJECT AIM

The Wildlife Science and Conservation Center (www.wscc.org.mn) and BirdLife International (www.birdlife.org) teamed up to identify the potential impacts of developments in infrastructure, transportation and mining on these two globally threatened birds by studying population, habitat use, spatial movements, and migration.

The project is co-funded by the World Bank (Netherlands-Mongolia Trust Fund for Environmental Reform - NEMO) and BirdLife (the Rio Tinto - BirdLife International Programme) and is also supported by the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism of Mongolia.

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