

THE FIRST BREEDING OF THE WHITE-TAILED EAGLE *Haliaeetus albicilla* IN THE ISTRIA COUNTY

Prvo gniježđenje štekavca Haliaeetus albicilla u Istri

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The White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* is a bird of prey native to Eurasia, breeding from Japan to Iceland, and in south-western Greenland (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL 2022). The first sighting of a White-tailed Eagle pair in the Istria County was recorded at the end of 2021, when two adults were chased by a Golden Eagle pair. After a displacement by Golden Eagles, the pair returned to, as it happened to be, its new territory. On 9th April 2022, the nest building was recorded and on 13th May 2022, a chick (named Jože) was observed inside the nest. On 15th July 2022, two adults and one young bird were seen flying in the surroundings of the nest, marking the first successful nesting of White-tailed Eagles in the Istria County.

The majority of the European White-tailed Eagle population breeds in Norway and Russia, with the Mediterranean population (Slovenia, and now Croatia) representing the southwest border of its breeding range (MIHELIČ *et al.*, 2019, BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL 2022). Furthermore, the Slovenian pairs nesting in the Postojna and Kočevlje region (approximately 75 km to the north-east and 95 km to the east respectively) represent the closest known active nests to this pair (MIHELIČ *et al.* 2019). Historically, there have been few sightings on the Croatian Mediterranean coast, the oldest one from 1885 when one exemplar was noticed on the northern coast of the Cres Island (VON WASHINGTON 1885). The last confirmed breeding pair

in the Croatian part of the Mediterranean basin was again on the Cres Island, close to the town of Merag, approximately 75 km south-east from the abovementioned pair. (DEPOLI 1928)

The Mirna valley is a highly modified habitat, where most of the river was channelized, and the surrounding area transformed into agricultural land. In this environment, invasive species such as Nutria *Myocastor coypus*, thrives without natural predators. This pair of White-tailed Eagles was observed feeding on this invasive species at least once (18th September 2022); thus might suggest its role in the Mirna valley ecosystem as a natural control of the Nutria population. Further research on this topic is highly recommended in order to identify the extent to which this pair contributes to the Nutria population control in the area.

In conclusion, this is an important finding for several reasons: (1) it is the first successful nesting of the White-tailed Eagle in the Mediterranean biogeographical region of Croatia in the recent history; (2) the pair breeds successfully in a highly modified habitat, atypical for the rest of the Croatian population; (3) the pair, at least partially, feeds on Nutria, serving as a potential natural population control for this invasive species.

SAŽETAK

Štekavac po prvi je puta zabilježen na gniježđenju u Istri, u dolini rijeke Mirne, 2022. godine. Ovaj par se nalazi na jugozapadnom rubu globalnog areala te vrste te ujedno predstavlja prvi recentni aktivni par u Mediteranskoj biogeografskoj regiji Hrvatske. Značajno za ovaj par je i opažanje njegovog plijena, nutrije, koja se u dolini Mirne smatra invazivnom vrstom bez prirodnog predatora te gniježđenje ovog para potencijalno ima pozitivan utjecaj u kontroli populacije ove invazivne vrste. Ovaj nalaz predstavlja značajan podatak za lokalnu, ali i nacionalnu ornitofaunu te je gniježenje štekavca u Istri potrebno detaljnije istražiti i pratiti.

Literatura

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