UN environment programme

Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals

CMS RAPTORS MOU

Sooty Falcon: A Regional Knowledge Exchange for Collaborative Conservation

(Online, 19 November 2025)

UNEP/CMS/RAPTORS/SFKECC Report

MEETING REPORT

(Prepared by the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU)

1. Welcome and introductions

The meeting marked the first coordinated session under the newly adopted *International Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP) for the Sooty Falcon (2024–2036)*. Participants from across the species' breeding, migration, and wintering range shared current knowledge and research insights, with a focus on improving understanding of population trends, threats, and opportunities for coordinated conservation of Sooty Falcon.

Ms. Rouba Abou Atieh, (Coordinating Unit), opened the meeting emphasising the importance of collaboration, as Sooty Falcon conservation requires range-wide coordination across Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean islands.

2. The International Sooty Falcon Action Plan

Mr. Umberto Gallo-Orsi, (Coordinating Unit), provided a brief overview of the ISSAP development process, noting its adoption by CMS in 2024 and the Plan's role in guiding 12 years of coordinated conservation. The Plan prioritises legal protection, reduction of key threats, and expanding research to address major knowledge gaps on demography, migration, and drivers of decline.

3. National updates

Bahrain

- Historic breeding on Hawar Islands since the 1950s; decline observed in recent years.
- Recent surveys found only ~7 nests; population likely reduced.
- Plan to initiate tagging in 2026 to understand movements and threats.

Egypt

- Research on Red Sea islands indicates Egypt a major global stronghold.
- Diet overwhelmingly migratory passerines; strong synchrony with autumn migration.
- Disturbance, predation, and lack of funding are major challenges.

Israel

- The pelvic (leg-loop) harness appears to perform well, with no evidence of impaired solar charging or device malfunction.
- Potential breeding or summering detected outside known areas; need for larger sample sizes highlighted.

Jordan

- Preliminary 2024 survey revealed 18 sites (16 new), suggesting >20 pairs; likely continuous with Saudi inland populations.
- More structured surveys needed; species probably nationally threatened.

Madagascar / Migration (MBZRCF & Peregrine Fund)

- 9 birds tagged at Alley of the Baobabs, confirming the site as a key wintering area.
- Several transmitter failures occurred in the Horn of Africa region; potential exposure to pesticides or conflict areas.
- All individuals measured and blood sampled for future genomic work.

Saudi Arabia – Northern Red Sea (KAUST Beacon Development)

- Capture success improved through pre-tagging nest monitoring; refurbished tags found unreliable. Several tags ceased in Madagascar (possible cyclones or tag failure).
- Strong recommendations for standardised tagging protocols and coordinated monitoring.
- Shifting some resources from tagging to colour-ringing and ecological studies (e.g., foraging, prey analysis) to fill key knowledge gaps.

Saudi Arabia – Red Sea Global (Al Wajh Bank & AMAALA)

- Long-term monitoring across 92 islands; population appears to be declining.
- Threats include invasive species illegal hunting, and possibly low juvenile recruitment.
- Ringing proving valuable (239 chicks ringed; first evidence of movement between regions).
- Satellite tracking of adults and juveniles underway; further analysis needed to identify mortality hotspots.

Saudi Arabia – Royal Commission for AlUla

- Inland population discovered in 2024; detailed 2025 survey identified 50–70 breeding pairs (~4% of global population).
- Birds nest on cliffs and inselbergs; loose colonies present.
- Clear avoidance of Pharaoh Eagle Owl suggests predator-driven nest placement.

4. Guest Presentation: The Eleonora's Falcon – Parallels and Lessons Learned

a) Strong site fidelity to breeding cliffs in Cyprus and wintering areas in Madagascar
b) Wind and vegetation shape routes, speed and stopovers
c) Wintering movements repeat yearly, yet disturbed habitats and threats in Madagascar signal conservation pressure

5. Research priorities and Next steps

During the open discussion, participants emphasised the need for stronger coordination and shared research approaches across the Sooty Falcon range.

Mohammad Habib expressed concern about the ecological risks of artificial nest boxes, particularly extreme heat exposure and predation by invasive species on islands. Drawing on decades of field experience, he emphasised the need for temperature sensors at artificial nest sites and highlighted high transmitter-failure rates that complicate the interpretation of juvenile and adult mortality. Mike McGrady added that, when designed appropriately, nest boxes can also serve as a tool to create new nesting opportunities for island populations, especially where natural sites are threatened or declining.

Building on the nest-box discussion, Licia Calabrese explained that her team conducted detailed

temperature-testing of prototype boxes to ensure they remain within natural thermal conditions, while stressing that artificial nests must never be deployed without rigorous ecological assessment and careful site selection. She added that ringing remains one of the most reliable tools for understanding population dynamics.

Alexa Foster then reflected on the challenges of fragmented research efforts within Saudi Arabia, noting uncertainty around data-sharing permissions. She stressed the need for a nationally coordinated platform and reiterated her team's willingness to collaborate and contribute to joint publications. From a broader perspective, Wed Abdou advocated for a well-structured, multi-year national monitoring programme to avoid the information gaps created by project-based funding cycles. He highlighted the importance of coordinated surveys, especially in newly discovered inland regions.

Discussion then turned to ecological drivers, where Mohammad Shobrak stressed that food availability as a likely factor shaping breeding-site selection and may explain some regional declines. He also emphasised the significance of seabird chicks as prey and the impact of invasive species.
These points were reinforced by Munir Virani, who noted that climate change, particularly increasing heat and shifting timing of migratory prey, may be affecting chick survival. Genetic sampling was also flagged as a priority, with population structure and juvenile recruitment, as critical factors for assessing long-term viability. Concerns were raised regarding potential threats along migration routes, stressing the need for coordinated analysis of mortality hotspots and environmental threats affecting migration survival. and encouraged for a systematic examination of transmitter last- locations.

Munir also proposed an inspiring idea: documenting the diverse field experiences of Sooty Falcon researchers (akin to *The Eagle Watcher*) into a collective book. He noted that such a publication, focused not on data but on the realities of fieldwork in extreme conditions, could motivate and inspire young biologists.

Returning to population monitoring, Mike McGrady highlighted the continued decline observed in Oman and drew attention to an ecological bottleneck: returning adults often face food scarcity on arrival and must travel long distances inland to build body condition before breeding. This underscored the importance of researching prey availability both on islands and inland desert habitats. Borut Rubinic added that major knowledge gaps remain regarding inland colonies and asked for clarification on predator avoidance and inland movement patterns, prompting further discussion from Red Sea researchers who confirmed that coastal breeders frequently forage inland and may travel substantial distances during the pre-laying period.

The dialogue concluded with a shared recognition that **coordinated action**, particularly on **migration ecology**, **tagging standards**, and **data transparency**, will be essential for addressing the specie's ongoing decline.

6. Closure of the meeting

Mr. Umberto Gallo-Orsi thanked all participants for their active engagement and contributions to the meeting.

Action Points:

A) CU to host a meeting with the Working Group (Composed by Range States and Experts) and share recommendations.
B) Circulate information and updates about the meeting to range states, both CMS focal points and Raptor MOU contact points.

ANNEX 1

Participant List

Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU	
Rouba Abou Atieh	Konika Jangir
Umberto Gallo-Orsi	Dronashish Goswami
Speakers	
Bahrain	Abdulla Al Kaabi
Egypt	Mohamed Habib
Israel	Meidad Goren Ohad Hatzofe Asaf Mayrose
Jordan	Fares Khoury
Madagascar	Munir Virani
Saudi Arabia – Norther Red Sea	Roxanne Whelan
Saudi Arabia – Red Sea Global	Licia Calabrese
Saudi Arabia – RC Al Ula	Borut Rubinic
Saudi Arabia – Other areas	Mohammed Shorak
Guest Presentation – The Eleonora's Falcon	Thomas Hadjikyriakou
Attendees	
Abdulaziz Alkaboor	Kevin Webb
Abdullah Almutairi	Laith El-Moghrabi
Alexa Foster	Laszlo Patko
Andrew Dixon	Mike McGrady
Christina Kassara	Mohammed Shobrak
Darcy Ogada	Simon Thomsett
Essam Bouras	Suhaim Alasmari
Fahad Algethami	Wed Abdou