Sooty Falcon Knowledge Exchange Meeting – KAUST Beacon Development

Summary

KAUST Beacon Development (KBD) participants included Dr Wed Abdou, Kevin Webb, Alexa Foster, Abdulaziz Alkaboor and Roxanne Whelan. All of whom have experience with capturing and tagging Sooty Falcon (*Falco concolor*) in Saudi Arabia.

The KBD team presented findings from Sooty Falcon surveys conducted between 2022 and 2024 across northern Red Sea islands and inland sites in Saudi Arabia. The research enhances understanding of the species' breeding distribution within the region and highlights the ecological value of these habitats.

KBD also shared outcomes from its artificial nest initiative, which tested designs constructed from natural, locally sourced materials. Preliminary assessments showed encouraging success; all three deployed pottery artificial nests were used by breeding pairs in 2025, resulting in healthy juveniles fledging and departing safely for their wintering grounds in Madagascar in early November.

The team emphasized the need for carefully designed satellite tagging programs, stressing that research objectives must be clearly defined to minimize impacts on the birds. They also highlighted the importance of exploring less invasive alternatives, such as colour and metal ringing, and remote monitoring systems (i.e. camera traps and live web cameras) which provide long-term, cost-effective, and ecologically valuable data.

Additional research priorities presented included mapping the breeding population distribution throughout Saudi Arabia and initiating a population genetics study to better understand genetic diversity within the northern Red Sea population as well as globally.

KBD presented a set of recommendations that received broad support from all participants. These included:

• Promoting the exchange of best practices for tagging, monitoring, and population estimation at local, national, and regional levels. Ensuring bird capture and tagging is undertaken by trained and experienced field team.

- Using appropriate remote monitoring; cameras to observe behaviour, disturbance response, nest success.

• Strengthening genetic research to inform science-based conservation planning.

• Enhancing collaboration among Saudi stakeholders to develop a cohesive national work plan for monitoring island and inland breeding populations.

KBD also announced plans to convene a national coordination meeting with Saudi stakeholders to align future efforts and strengthen collaborative conservation actions. The team proposed holding this meeting at the earliest opportunity to discuss how the various parties working in Saudi Arabia can better support one another, enhance data sharing, and improve collective outcomes for the conservation of the species.

The initiative was warmly welcomed by the CMS Raptors MOU Coordination Unit and meeting participants, who expressed strong support for enhanced cooperation. The event reaffirmed KBD's leadership role in advancing the conservation of this iconic migratory species.