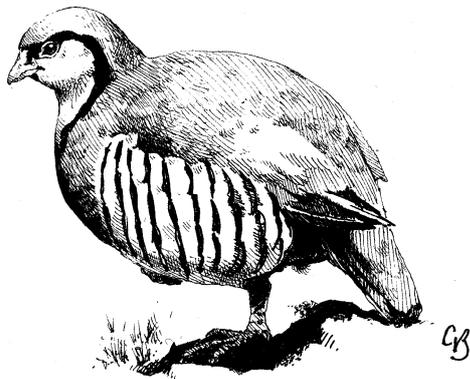


Management Statement

Sicilian Rock Partridge *Alectoris graeca whitakeri*



Final Draft, December 1999

**Prepared by BirdLife International on behalf of the
European Commission**

Management Statement for Sicilian Rock Partridge *Alectoris graeca whitakeri*

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Timetable

Date of first draft 15th July 1999

Date of submission of final draft: 31st December 1999

Reviews

This management statement should be reviewed and updated every five years. An emergency review will be undertaken if sudden major environmental changes, liable to affect the population, occur within the species range.

Geographical scope

The action plan needs active implementation in Sicily (Italy)

Current status

1.1 Distribution

The Rock Partridge *Alectoris graeca* is distributed in Italy in three main ranges: Alps (ssp. *saxatilis*), Apennines (ssp. *graeca*, recently described as a separate subspecies *orlandoi* by Priolo (1984)) and Sicily (ssp. *whitakeri*). The subspecies *whitakeri* and the possible *orlandoi*, are endemic to Italy.

1.2 Population and trend

The distribution range of the population has decreased by more than 34% since World War II. A large part of the decline has taken place since the 1970's. The Sicilian population is around 1500 breeding pairs (1993). A small increase is apparently taking place inside protected areas.

1.3 Habitat requirements

The subspecies lives on open grassy, dry and rock slope areas from sea level to 2,000 meters asl. It can be also found on arable land and vineyards yet avoids woods and abandoned non-grazed grasslands.

1.4 Conservation status

Alectoris graeca is listed in Annex II/1 of the Birds Directive and in Annex III of the Bern Convention. It is considered vulnerable due to a large decline and is classified SPEC 2 (Tucker & Heath, 1994). The subspecies *A. g. whitakeri* is listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive, but it is hunted in Sicily.

1.5 Record key sites for the sub-species by country

Of the 4 IBAs for which the sub-species is mentioned (Heath & Evans, 2000), three overlap largely with protected areas, one only partially.

Threats and limiting factors

Unsustainable hunting pressure

No reliable figures are available on the annual hunting of this subspecies. The fact that the range has decreased outside protected areas and that the population is locally increasing where hunting is not allowed are clear indications that the current pressure on the population is not sustainable.

Importance: critical

Illegal hunting (poaching)

Poaching is still common in Sicily mainly because the lack of adequate control.

Importance: medium/high

Habitat fragmentation and loss by fires, re-forestation and incorrect grazing pressure.

Every year in Sicily large areas of dry grasslands and scattered scrubs are lost by fires. Burnt areas are no longer suitable for the species at least for that year. In certain circumstances the fire on grassland may not represent a major problem in the long term, but if this event takes place often it may result in habitat loss. Furthermore, fire is likely to kill all chicks under the age of 2-4 weeks.

Re-forestation schemes if performed in the last strongholds of the subspecies, may lead to a loss of suitable habitat.

Habitat loss is also caused by abandonment of traditional land use, such as grazing which prevent the invasion of bushes on grasslands; also overgrazing may lead to habitat loss.

Importance: high

Pesticide use

A dramatic decrease took place when chemicals were massively introduced in agriculture in the 1960's and 1970's. Since then many areas have been deserted and never re-occupied.

Importance: locally high, at least in the past

Genetic pollution

The illegal release for hunting purposes of Rock Partridges belonging to other subspecies and of Chukar *A. chukar* may lead to hybridisation between the subspecies or species and threaten the genetic integrity of the *whitakeri* subspecies.

Importance: high

Diseases introduced by other game bird

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* and Chukar *Alectoris chukar* are released for hunting purposes in Sicily, the latter illegally. They might introduce diseases that can affect the Sicilian Rock Partridge. Also the birds reared in captivity and released may carry diseases.

Importance: unknown

Climate changes

Climate changes have been claimed to be partially responsible, in the observed decrease of the species in the Alps.

Importance: unknown

Current Actions

The sub species is included in the regional list of game birds and is hunted. The regional hunting regulations forbid the release of Chukar or release of Pheasant outside of hunting estates. There is a bag limit for the Rock Partridge, but controls are insufficient. The local authorities carry out a restocking program.

Aims and objectives

Aims

In the short term the aim is to maintain the current population and distribution of *Alectoris graeca whitackeri*.

In the long term the aim is to promote an increase in population size and a range within the island.

Objectives:

1. Policy and legislation

1.1. To develop and implement land uses which are compatible with the conservation of the species.

1.1.1 To review the forestry planning

Forestry program should ensure that valuable habitat for the subspecies is not lost.

Priority: Medium

Time-scale: Medium

1.1.2. To maintain grazing pressure to a level which can control the spreading of bushes and woods

Poor planning is resulting in lack of adequate grazing pressure in some areas while in other areas there is a problem of overgrazing.

Priority; High

Time-scale: Short

1.1.3. To reduce the negative impact of agriculture.

Pesticide use should be forbidden in those areas holding significant population of the subspecies. This can be achieved by the Agro-environmental Scheme (Reg.CEE 2078/92)

Priority; High

Time-scale: Short

1.2. To develop and implement a scientifically based management of the species

1.2.1. The Sicilian Rock Partridge should be removed from the game list until further information is collected on population size, distribution and trends.

Priority: Essential

Time-scale: Medium

1.2.2 The restocking of the species carried out in Sicily needs to be carefully planned.
Introduction of diseases in the wild population must be absolutely avoided.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

1.3. To reduce the impact of fires

Priority: Medium
Time-scale: Ongoing

2. Species and habitat protection

2.1. To ensure legal protection to the subspecies in Sicily

2.1.1 To ban hunting of the Sicilian Rock Partridge

Priority: Essential
Time-scale: Short

2.1.2. To increase the number of wildlife wardens

The lack of manpower is one of the reasons for the poor enforcement of the hunting laws in Sicily

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.2. To protect all IBAs which hold important population of the species.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.3. To stop the introduction of Phasianidae species which are non-native in Sicily.

Priority: Medium
Time-scale: Medium

3. Monitoring and research

3.1. To carry out research to increase our understanding on the species biology and conservation needs

Priority: Essential
Time-scale: immediate

4. Public awareness

4.1. To increase public awareness among decision makers, hunters and the general public

Decision-makers and hunters largely misunderstand the importance of this subspecies. Their involvement is essential for the conservation of this species.

Priority: High
Time-scale: short

References

- Heath M. F. & Evans M. I., 2000 Important Bird areas in Europe: Priority sites for conservation. 2 vols. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife Conservation series no. 8),
- Priolo A. 1984 Variabilità in *Alectoris graeca* e descrizione di *A. graeca orlandoi* subsp. nova in Appennino. Riv. Ital. Ornit. 54: 45-76
- Tucker, G.M. & Heath, M.F. 1994: Birds in Europe. Their conservation status. – BirdLife International, Cambridge.