



*Championing UK's most special species:  
the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and  
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FACT-SHEET ON:

**Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora***  
**UK Overseas Territory: Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas**

Eleonora's Falcons is one of the most impressive and rare falcons. They breed only in relatively few locations around the Mediterranean Sea and off NW Africa. The total population is estimated as fewer than 15,000 pairs (>95% in the European Mediterranean). Breeding is primarily on islands. In Cyprus, this is primarily in the Western Sovereign Base Area, at Akrotiri, Episkopi and Cape Gata (or Zevgari). The species is fully migratory, leaving its breeding grounds in October and November to winter in Madagascar, East Africa and the Mascarene Islands, mainly in open woodland. They are generally gregarious (though sometimes solitary), tending to move in small and loose flocks, and on migration often associating with other birds of prey flying at high altitudes. They feed on large flying insects and small birds

In Cyprus, these birds return in April and stay until November. They breed in autumn (in contrast to all other birds that breed in spring). Clefts and holes in inaccessible cliffs are chosen for a nest, a number of pairs breeding on the same cliff. The clutch is 2-3 eggs, incubation lasting 28 days and the fledging period about 35 days.

They rear young in September because, at that time of the year, large numbers of migratory birds pass over Akrotiri and, being exhausted after the long journey, they are an easy prey to catch. The way Eleonora's Falcons hunt is quite impressive: often, 3 falcons fly over the sea at a short distance from the coast, at three different heights: one low over the waves, a second high up (at least 1,000 m having been recorded) above the coast cliffs, and a third somewhere in between, leaving little chance for their prey to escape. They plummet down or shoot up catching the birds in the air. Their flight is fast and powerful, allowing them to change direction quickly.

The species has historically suffered from exploitation and persecution, including collecting chicks for food. Human disturbance associated with tourism development has also been shown to reduce birds' breeding success. Predation by rats is also possibly important on some breeding islands. Accidental pesticide poisoning was thought to be responsible for a decline in the breeding population on Crete. The species appears to require very peaceful or uninhabited islands on which to breed, with direct exploitation and development both shown to be negative consequences of close proximity to people; effective protection has led to strong recoveries where implemented.

During the Middle Ages, Eleonora's Falcons were coveted possessions, greatly sought after to be trained and used for hunting. The bird was named after Eleonora, the wife of Peter I, the Lusignan King who reigned in Cyprus from 1359 to 1369. Among the retinue of a sovereign, the falconer was held in high esteem. Mediaeval vessels bear witness of this custom depicting young men engaged in the sport of falconry. Among the exterior sculptures of Ayia Sophia Cathedral in Nicosia, there is the figure of a prince holding a falcon on his left hand and the hood,



Above: *Eleonora's Falcon* Cyprus, © Glyn Sellors, Surfbirds Galleries

Left: Like the world animal speed record holder, the related *Peregrine Falcon*, *Eleonora's Falcon* hunts in a high-speed dive over the sea, as here at Akrotiri. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Below: Nesting cliffs at Akrotiri, Cyprus Western SBA, © Eleonora Survey Episkopi



which was used to cover its head, in his right hand.

Over the centuries, the importance of falconry did not decline. From Seigneur de Villamont of Brittany, who visited Cyprus in 1589, we learn that it was the practice for the Turkish Pasha of Cyprus, on behalf of the Sultan and under death penalty, to take charge of all falcons caught by the peasantry on the cliffs of Cape Gata. The villagers lured the hawks by means of pigeon decoys and captured them in net entanglements. In return for three services, the peasants lived rent- and tax-free.

In Cypriot folk poetry the beautiful eyes of a maiden are often compared to the black, piercing eyes of the falcon: "Of all the things about her, I like her eyes best for they are black like the falcon and full of love."