OSME Conservation and Research Fund report for 2015 and 2016

Dr Maxim Koshkin, Chairman of OSME CRF Committee

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ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA
OSME

Introduction

The OSME Conservation and Research Fund (CRF) was established at the 14th Council meeting in 1982 and awarded its first grant in 1983. Since then, the fund has continued to support a wide range of projects annually and a total of £92,499 has been awarded to date (up to the end of 2016). Encouragingly, the CRF has provided record annual amounts to projects in both 2015 and 2016 awarding £10450 and £14000 respectively. We are currently forecasting continued growth with record expenditure expected in 2017 and 2018.

The criteria for funding have been consistent over the years with a focus on the following areas:

- Investigating the status of Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable or Near-threatened bird species
- Attempting to further the knowledge of existing IBAs, for example by undertaking breeding censuses and conducting systematic counts
- Investigating potential new IBAs or ornithologically little known areas
- Conducting ecological studies of little-known species
- Studies related to illegal bird killing and unsustainable hunting
- Educational programmes, especially aimed at school children and youth.

The addition of educational programmes was agreed by OSME Council in 2015 and has become a focus of many of the projects that we have supported in recent years, and some excellent examples can be seen in this report. Given the increasing emphasis in education programmes, OSME Council took the decision to change the name of the 'Conservation and Research Fund' to just 'Conservation Fund'.

An analysis of expenditure to date has shown that by the end of 2016 there were six OSME region countries where we have not provided any project funding (Afghanistan, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), and in the coming years we aim to support applications from these countries where we can.

There are three application windows throughout the calendar year and we nearly always receive more applications than we can support. In 2015 and 2016 the following projects were recommended by the CRF Committee and approved by OSME Council:

- Returning Rollers to Mesarya Plain, Cyprus
- Trends and strongholds of migrating waterbirds at a key stopover site on the Central Asian Flyway, Kazakhstan
- Egyptian Vulture monitoring, Turkey
- Monitoring key sites for White-headed Duck in Kazakhstan
- Monitoring of illegal shooting of raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck, Georgia
- Developing a National Conservation Action Plan (NCAP) for White-headed Duck in Uzbekistan
- Habitat requirements of the Semi-collared Flycatcher *(Ficedula semitorquata)* in the best-known habitats in Armenia
- Identifying the magnitude of illegal waterfowl killing at key sites in Turkey
- Monitoring of illegal shooting of raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck, Georgia (follow up)
- Distribution and abundance of Eurasian steppe birds at the western border of their range
- Monitoring of IBA 'Oygaing Valley' and the adjoining territories, Uzbekistan
- International youth bird migration project in Azerbaijan

- Sun Child Eco Clubs, Armenia
- Eco-club for wildlife and forests, Degh Visitor Centre, Armenia
- Mid-winter waterfowl surveys, Turkey

OSME Council increasingly recognise the value in making larger grants and have been increasing the amount we offer to projects. Whilst there is no upper limit for grants we usually award between £1000-2000 and we are able to consider applications over these typical amounts. Follow-up applications are also welcome where other sources of funding are unavailable. In 2016 thanks to a generous anonymous donor we were able to make our largest single project grant of £5000 to the SunChild Eco Club project run by the Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC) in Armenia.

CRF committee

All applications are considered by an independent sub-committee who recommend which projects should be supported. The final decision is approved by OSME Council and formally acknowledged in the official minutes.

As of the end of 2016, the members of the Conservation Fund sub-committee are Maxim Koshkin (Conservation Fund Chairman), Nabegh Ghazal Asswad, Mick Green, Sharif Jbour and Richard Porter

Acknowledgements

OSME Council would like to acknowledge the significant time and effort that members of the sub-committee contribute to ensure the professional running of the Conservation Fund. This is reflected in the high quality of the applications and the positive outcomes of the supported projects.

We are able to continue to grow the Conservation Fund due to the ongoing support of our members and corporate supporters, both through their annual subscription fees but also from the increasing amount of donations received. An anonymous donor provided additional funds in 2016 that has enabled expenditure to grow faster than OSME Council initially envisaged. Additional funds were received from AviFauna Nature Tours to support work in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

For further information about the OSME Conservation Fund please consult the OSME website: https://osme.org/conservation

Or contact the Conservation Fund Chairman, Dr Maxim Koshkin via: crf@osme.org



Projects supported by OSME CRF grants in 2015

Project title: **Returning Rollers to Mesarya Plain, Cyprus.**

Grant recipient: **KUŞKOR, Cyprus**

Grant value: **£650**

European Roller *Coracias garrulus* is a summer visitor to much of Europe where over half of its breeding range lies. Here the Roller population is thought to have declined leading to its designation as Vulnerable by the IUCN. Distribution of this cavity nester is largely tied to availability of nest sites within its range. In north Cyprus, Rollers are typically associated with the Kapaz Peninsula and the North Coast where habitats are favourable for their nesting due to the availability of cavities in old trees. The once forested Mesaoria Plain is the most productive agricultural area of the island and despite relatively intense farming practices here Rollers regularly breed around waterways where they occupy burrows of the European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster*.

Recent studies have shown that where nest boxes are provided in somewhat atypical habitats, such as grasslands, reproductive output of Roller can equal or even exceed that observed at more typical sites. Through this project, a total of 44 nest boxes were erected in two IBAs on the Mesaoria Plain, strengthening commitment of local researchers to long-term monitoring of Roller communities in Cyprus. Boxes were built and erected with help of local volunteers, which both helped to reduce the cost and increase number of people involved in conservation of the species.

For further information please follow the links here:

http://www.kuskor.org/news-detail.php?lang=en&newsId=41

http://www.kuskor.org/news-detail.php?lang=en&newsId=25

Project title: **Trends and strongholds of migrating waterbirds at a key stopover site on the Central Asian Flyway, Kazakhstan**

Grant recipient: **Holger Shielzeth, Bielefeld University, Germany**

Grant value: **£1,300**

Tengiz-Korgalzhyn region in Central Kazakhstan is a wetland of outstanding importance to both breeding and migrating waterbirds. Large proportions of the Central Asian flyway population aggregate in the regions, because refuelling opportunities are scarce in the dry biomes of Central Asia. Key species with very high abundance and a large share of the total flyway population in spring are Red-necked Phalarope (41% of flyway population), Ruff (13%), Little Stint, Dunlin, Pallas's Gull, Spotted Redshank (each ≥5%) and important numbers of vulnerable (Dalmatian Pelican 8%), near-threatened (Ferruginous Duck <1%, Black-winged Pratincole 6%) and endangered species (White-headed Duck 3%). These numbers are based on intense waterbird counts conducted in 1999-2004, but almost nothing is known about any trends in numbers.

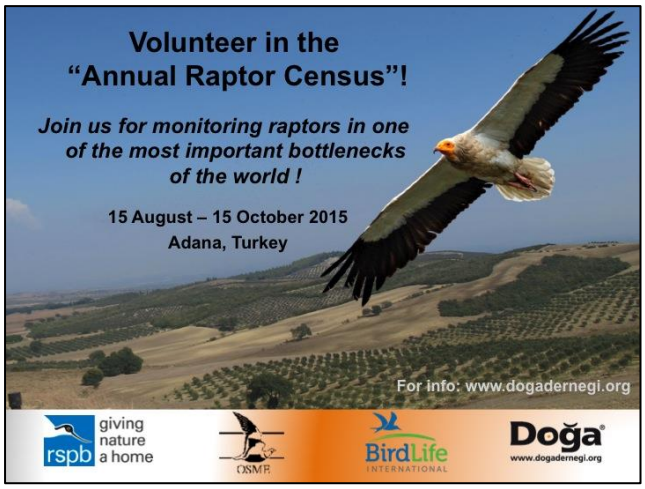
In 2015 a team of ornithologists, with support of the local Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) surveyed the key sites in the region during spring migration. Surveys were conducted on predefined points that maximized the opportunity for comparison with earlier numbers. Furthermore, excursions to not yet surveyed sites during the peak migration season were conducted to identify additional important strongholds of migratory waterbirds.

Data analysis is still ongoing and a report and publication will be available on the OSME website in the future.

Project title: **Egyptian Vulture monitoring, Turkey**

Grant recipient: **Doğa Derneği, Turkey**

Grant value: **£1,000**



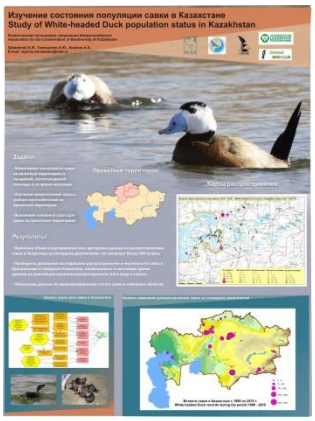
Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is an endangered raptor that is widespread across southern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Birds from south-eastern Europe migrate around the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and pilot work in 2013 identified suitable raptor migration monitoring stations to count Egyptian Vultures and other raptors in southern Turkey. In autumn 2014 during two months a team led by Doğa Derneği (BirdLife Turkey) with the support of Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and OSME, conducted the first full fall migration census in Adana province, Turkey, counting all migrating raptors, Including Egyptian Vultures. Season's total number of migrating raptors was over 130.347 with an amazing figure of 47.594 Lesser Spotted Eagles, more than 95 % of the world population.

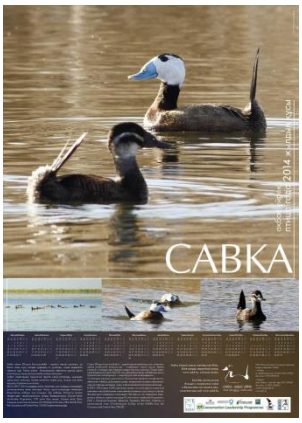
In autumn 2015 another census was successfully conducted with support from OSME's CRF grant and continuing such annual censuses will allow to model population trends for many species, particularly for the western Turkish Egyptian Vulture population and will serve as the basis to justify conservation measures.

Project title: **Monitoring key sites for White-headed Duck in Kazakhstan**

Grant recipient: **Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan *(*ACBK)**

Grant value: **£1,000**





This project, which started in 2013 with funding from Conservation Leadership Program (CLP) and was supported by OSME in 2015, has been focusing on identification of the conservation status and threats for the endangered White-headed Duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*) within its core breeding sites in central and northern Kazakhstan. A team of young ornithologists, supported by local NGO "Association for the conservation of biodiversity in Kazakhstan" (ACBK), established a long-term monitoring programme, covering breeding, post-breeding and migration stop-over sites. As a result, comprehensive data on distribution, habitat quality and key threats was collected and analysed. This data enables planning further conservation actions and the census will be continued on the established monitoring points in order to investigate population dynamics, conduct protected area gap analysis and study habitat preferences of the Central Asian sub-population of White-headed Duck.

As a result of the project more than 1,000 people were informed about the important status of this species. Through participation in monitoring activities 10 students and volunteers were trained in waterbird identification and census techniques, as well as in communication and promotion of conservation goals.

https://www.osme.org/content/monitoring-white-headed-duck-kazakhstan

Project title: **Monitoring of illegal shooting of raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck, Georgia**

Grant recipient: **Society for Nature Conservation (SABUKO), Georgia**

Grant value: **£2,000**

SABUKO is an NGO working to promote conservation of birds and their habitats in Georgia. It closely co-operates with Batumi Raptor Count in monitoring and conservation activities covering over 1,000,000 migratory raptors passing through the Batumi Bottleneck every autumn. This project uses a standardised monitoring methodology in order to establish trends in numbers of shot raptors through number of gunshots as a proxy indicator, recorded from fixed counting points. Direct observation of the ongoing hunting activity from these points is used as a control method to assess the number of shots versus hitting success and the proportion of raptor targets compared to species which can be hunted legally. To obtain an approximation to the species composition of the birds shot, a standardized transect is conducted at the end of the season to count and identify bird remains.

The OSME CRF grant will help the team to implement this well-structured protocol to collect data which can be used to study trends in the illegal shooting of birds of prey along the most important raptor flyway in the Western Palearctic. This project is crucially important for assessing the impact of shooting on migratory populations of several species of special conservation interest such as Montagu's and Pallid Harrier *Circus pygargus* and *C. macrourus*, Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*, Lesser and Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* and *A. clanga.*

Project title: **Developing a National Conservation Action Plan (NCAP) for White-headed Duck in Uzbekistan**

Grant recipient: **Uzbekistan Society for the Protection of Birds (UZSPB)**

Grant value: **£1,500**

White-headed Duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*) is listed as Endangered by IUCN. Starting from 1999 ornithologists of Uzbekistan have been collecting data on migration, wintering and breeding of the species on 14 water bodies, with more than 5,000 individuals recorded by 2006. There have been major changes in state of many wetlands in the region in recent years. A reduction of water flow to the Aral Sea has led to a reduction of water bodies in the Amudarya river delta. At the same time, intensive irrigation of many desert areas has led to development of a large number of artificial lakes. While some natural sites have been lost or degraded, newly created artificial lakes became important for migrating, wintering and breeding waterbirds, including White-headed Duck.

During the first stage of the project all accessible data on the species has been collected and a database and a distribution map based on data collected during 1999 – 2013 was prepared. The second stage included surveys of the sites where updated information about habitats and threats was needed. The National Species Action Plan (NSAP) will later be developed and submitted to the State Committee for Nature Protection and the project data will be entered into WBDB and AviCa databases. The NSAP is planned to be published with support from the National University of Uzbekistan, alongside with NSAPs for Saker Falcon, Egyptian Vulture and Sociable Lapwing and will be widely distributed among conservation bodies and local communities.

Project title: **Habitat requirements of the Semi-collared Flycatcher *(Ficedula semitorquata)* in the best-known habitats in Armenia**

Grant recipient: **Towards Sustainable Ecosystems (TSE), Armenia**

Grant value: **£1,000**

Semi-collared Flycatcher (*Ficedula semitorquata*) is a forest bird lacking information about its habitat requirements and with declining population trend. The project aimed to determine the most important characteristics of forest habitats related to the abundance of breeding Semi-collared Flycatchers within 3 forest areas in Armenia and to use spatial models to estimate the species' abundance for forest areas outside the area of current study, based on remote-sensing imagery.

Counts of Semi-collared Flycatchers have been undertaken at 150 plots in Dilijan National Park, Sevkar Forestry, and Ijevan Sanctuary. The analysis of possible correlation between density of Semi-collared Flycatcher and characteristics of the forest showed a significant correlation between density of Semi-collared Flycatchers and tree width, number of dead standing and dead fallen trees with some effect of shrub cover. Also a negative correlation was found with the factors of human disturbance, particularly – number of fresh tree stumps. Number of bogs and ponds in vicinity of counting areas was too low to have any influence on bird abundance. There was no correlation between the abundance of flycatchers and the density of Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted, Black and Green Woodpeckers. However, a correlation was found with the density of Middle Spotted Woodpecker. In addition, a workshop was organized for the Protected Area specialists Armenia and Forestry Enterprises of Armenia.

Project title: **Identifying the magnitude of illegal waterfowl killing at key sites in Turkey**

Grant recipient: **Süreyya Isfendiyaroglu, Istanbul University, Turkey**

Grant value: **£2,000**

The Mediterranean Basin lies at the heart of the African-Eurasian Migration Flyway, with hundreds of millions of migratory birds passing twice-yearly. However, many key stop-over sites in the region are seriously threatened by uncontrolled hunting and are poorly protected. The project focuses on covering the knowledge gap on illegal killing of waterfowl in Turkey, using a questionnaire to collect data on illegally killed birds by interviewing hunters, birdwatchers, fishermen and local landowners. The project field activities are planned for 17 wetlands that hold significant numbers of water birds. Additional quantitative data will also be collected during field work when feasible. The project outcomes will be presented in a Turkish report planned for distribution among relevant stakeholders. An English final report will also be compiled for OSME and a communication will be published in *Sandgrouse*.

Projects supported by OSME CF grants in 2016

Project title: **Monitoring of illegal shooting of raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck, Georgia (follow up)**

Grant recipient: **Batumi Raptor Count, Georgia**

Grant value: **£1,000**

Batumi Raptor Count has been working on monitoring and conserving over 1 mln. migratory raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck every autumn since 2008. Current project is a continuation of the monitoring which started in 2015 with the help of the OSME CF grant. In 2016 this project was focusing mainly on awareness-raising and capacity building activities in the Batumi Bottleneck.

The majority of the funding was used to produce two short documentaries about the Batumi Bottleneck, showing mass bird migration and illegal shooting of raptors. These two movies are filmed by Oropendola Productions (www.oropendolaproductions.com) and Yuval Dax - Production and New Media (https://www.facebook.com/yuvaldax/). We hope the publication of these films nationally and internationally, including international nature film festivals, will be highly valuable for sharing information about the Batumi Bottleneck and the conservation work of Batumi Raptor Count.

The remaining funding was used to cover costs of a Georgian participant, Dachi Shotashvili, during the 2016 bottleneck migration counts. This promising young birder volunteered for the Imperial Eagle project in spring, and was eager to improve his bird identification skills. This is a significant achievement we are very proud of, as this was the first time a Georgian volunteer took part in the count for a full two week stay and we are confident more Georgians will follow his example.

Useful links:

Link to "Worlds collide" documentary teaser:

http://www.oropendolaproductions.com/upcoming-projects/

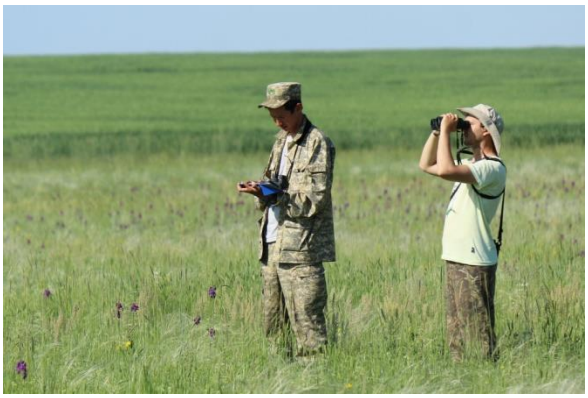
Publication in Sandgrouse:

Sándor, A., J. Jansen, & W. M. Vansteelant (2017). Understanding hunters' habits and motivations for shooting raptors in the Batumi raptor-migration bottleneck, Black Sea coast Georgia. *Sandgrouse* 39 (1): 2-15

Project title: **Distribution and abundance of Eurasian steppe birds at the western border of their range**

Grant recipient: **Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan (ACBK); University of Münster, Germany**

Grant value: **£1950**



In Kazakhstan, increasing international collaboration and large-scale capacity building have resulted in a tremendous increase in knowledge on the distribution and numbers of birds. This resulted in better status assessments and site-based conservation of the unique steppe and semi-desert bird fauna of the region. However, due to the size and the sparse human population of the country, massive knowledge gaps remain surprisingly also across the European part of the country. This is unfortunate, as a lack of data hampers the development of effective conservation strategies.

During this project the team: i) ground-truthed modelled maps of bird distribution and abundance using field surveys, ii) collected data for the forthcoming European breeding bird atlas (EBBA2) from a region without records, iii) estimated the population size of Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis* and Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* in Europe. Field surveys were conducted using standard methodology tested across Kazakhstan (Distance Sampling along walked and car transects). In spring 2016 a total of 141 km of transects (each 500m long) were walked within 25 50x50km grid cells. The gathered data helped to improve EBBA2-maps and provided extra data for re-evaluation of the red list status of the mentioned species. It also improved maps of modelled bird distributions to be used as a basis for an assessment of Protected Area effectiveness and representativeness. Two local biology students received intensive training in bird census and identification.

Pilot species maps of the European Breeding Bird Atlas (EBBA2):

http://www.ebba2.info/results/download-ebba-pilot-maps/

Project title: **Monitoring of IBA 'Oygaing Valley' and the adjoining territories, Uzbekistan**

Grant recipient: **UzSPB, Uzbekistan**

Grant value: **£2000**

During fieldwork 74 bird species were recorded, including threatened Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*, Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* and Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis.* The team was also lucky to record multiple observations of 16 species restricted to Eurasian High Mountain biome, including Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana,* Himalayan Rubythroat *Calliope pectoralis,* Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus* and Plain Mountain-finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*.

The team was able to collect anecdotal information on threats affecting biodiversity and ecosystem health of the "Oygaing valley". First of all, overgrazing degrades the alpine meadow habitat, with additional negative effect of competition for pastures between domestic and wild ungulates. Depredation of nests and rodents by shepherds' dogs, nest trampling by sheep and cattle and transmission of diseases from domestic cattle to local populations of Siberian Ibex *Capra sibirica* were listed as other potential serious threats. Through a series of meetings, main findings were communicated to regional administration, local people and the administration of the Ugam-Chatkal national park which protects part of the valley.

An issue of trash pollution of the local Urungach Lake by recreational tourists was tackled at the end of the project by means of large-scale campaign which involved installation of signs, work with local population and wide dissemination of information through social networks and mass media.

Useful links:

Guest blog on the OSME website:

https://www.osme.org/content/how-make-urungoch-lake-cleaner-decision-found

http://review.uz/novosti-main/item/11473-fotoreportazh-startovala-aktsiya-po-spaseniyu-ozera-urungoch-ot-musora 21.06.2017

Project title: **International youth bird migration project in Azerbaijan**

Grant recipient: **BirdLife Sweden Youth Committee, Sweden/Azerbaijan**

Grant value: **£1500**

Since 2015 an international group of bird enthusiasts organizes a Bird Camp at Besh Barmag, a spectacular bird migration "bottle neck" 90km north of Baku, bringing young birdwatchers together to learn about bird migration, bird identification skills and conservation issues. In September 2016 there were 30 young people from Azerbaijan, Sweden and Germany taking part in a 5 days camp, with a day visit from another 60 biology students from Baku.

The 2016 camp was such a success, that it was followed by three more similar events in 2017. Second camp took place in April 2017 and a German-run bird ringing session was taking place during entire autumn 2017 with several Azeri and Swedish volunteers assisting and learning. Recently, 4-18 November another Bird Camp focused on the importance of the bottle neck and almost 20 volunteers counted nearly 1.5 million birds heading south. Similar activities are planned for 2018.

These camps got a substantial mass –media coverage and a short documentary about the 2017 camp is currently being made (please see links below).

Useful links:

An article about Besh Barmag bird camp in 2016 in BirdLife Europe Newsletter, by Tomas Axén Haraldson

http://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/news/bird-camp-besh-2016-%E2%80%93-engaging-young-people-conservation-azerbaijan

An article by James Parry in "Baku" magazine on Besh Barmag bird camp published in 2017 (EN):

https://baku-magazine.com/conservation/wings-across-caspian/

A short documentary about bird camp which took place in Besh Barmag in spring 2017:

https://youtu.be/zZf6-mPuXDs

Total numbers of birds counted in Besh Barmag in 2017:

http://www.trektellen.org/site/totals/1533/2017

Project title: **Sun Child Eco Clubs**

Grant recipient: **Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC), Armenia**

Grant value: **£5000**

The SunChild Eco Club project is aimed at raising children's awareness for environmental issues, at the same time providing them with tools to tackle those. Working with professional filmmakers, photographers, journalists and environmentalists, who appear as mentors rather than trainers, children identify environmental and social issues specific to their communities, and learn to make visual stories out of them. The students learn the importance of civic voice, and start to believe in their ability to make a change. They are grounding their study of large-scale issues in a solid and personal understanding of how things work in their own community.

More than 40 documentaries were authored by the "sunchildren" since 2006. Many of them have won honourable awards at international environmental film festivals.

More than 80 children from two districts participated in the SunChild Eco Clubs project, co-funded in 2017 by OSME and the US Forest Service. The 6-month curriculum comprised workshops on environmental photography and filmmaking, citizen reporting and social media, and sustainable lifestyle. For the first time since SunChild Eco Clubs creation, Project Development course was integrated in the curriculum, and mini-grants were allocated for implementation of the projects developed by children.

The peak point of the course was the Summer School on August 8-15, organized in the Eco Lodge in the Caucasus Wildlife Refuge for 20 students having showcased the best achievements throughout the year. For seven days of fun and learning the students participated in interactive workshops and games, green talks, film screenings and discussions, as well as an exciting scavenger hunt hiking trip.

Useful links:

A video summary of the project can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwnwUm7cHDg&list=PLoJF49ticCxy7on1T4trKJ13hXI8PE5CQ

Link to a Facebook page with photos illustrating Sun Child summer school:

https://www.facebook.com/pg/fpwc.arm/photos/?tab=album&album_id=908936492598551

An example documentary by one of the eco-club members:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95TGmj7_1cU&list=PLoJF49ticCxz_r-eJwsGcatId5zDH8PXC

Project title: **Eco-club for wildlife and forests, Degh Visitor Centre.**

Grant recipient: **ASPB, Armenia**

Grant value: **£2150**

Report to follow

Project title: **Mid-winter waterfowl Surveys, Turkey.**

Grant recipient: **Ibrahim Kaan Özgencil, Turkey**

Grant value: **£400**

Report to follow