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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10344-015-0914-8>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-115973>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Vogler, Barbara Renate; Hoop, Richard; Sinniger, Martin; Albini, Sarah (2015). Intentional methomyl-poisoning of peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) in Switzerland. *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, 61(4):611-615.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10344-015-0914-8>

Intentional methomyl-poisoning of peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) in Switzerland

Authors: Barbara Renate Vogler¹, Richard Hoop¹, Martin Sinniger², Sarah Albin¹

¹ National Reference Centre for Poultry and Rabbit Diseases (NRGK), Institute for Bacteriology, Vetsuisse Faculty, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstr. 270, 8057 Zurich, Switzerland; vogler.vet@gmail.com, phone: +41-44-6358616, fax: +41-44-6358914

² Department for the protection of animals and the environment (SPSA-TU), Police department of Canton Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract

The present report describes two proven cases of illegal poisoning of peregrine falcons in the city of Zurich, Switzerland. Both animals died in their eyries after capturing and feeding on a methomyl-laced pigeon. Both eyries are surveillanced by cameras, and the death of one falcon was broadcasted live on the Internet. The city game warden had noticed the disappearance of a brooding female from an artificial eyrie in 2009 and had found five dead falcons at plucking posts or artificial eyries between 2009 and 2013. Owing to these reports in combination with reports on the disappearance of at least 8 pairs of peregrine falcons from traditionally used nesting sites in north-western Switzerland since the 1980s, the authors presume that there may be a high number of unreported cases of illegal killing of peregrine falcons in Switzerland. They suggest an increased surveillance, and a coordinated collection of data on wildlife crime may aid the prosecution of perpetrators.

Keywords

Pesticide, carbamate, intoxication, bait, falcon

1 Introduction

2 The killing of birds of prey is prohibited in Europe since the 1970s, according to International (e.g. CITES from
3 1973), European (e.g. Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats from
4 1979) and National laws (e.g. Swiss hunting law from 1988). Nonetheless, birds of prey are still widely
5 persecuted as perceived nuisance wildlife and competitors for human hunters, but also for illegal trade,
6 taxidermy or recreation (BirdLife International 2011). The authors found the Royal Society for the Protection of
7 Birds (RSPB) to maintain the most comprehensive and current European database on illegal persecution of birds
8 including an annual publication of bird crime incidents. For 2012, for example, they listed shooting and
9 poisoning as the main methods for illegal persecution of birds of prey and owls in the UK with 33 and 29 out of
10 102 confirmed cases (RSPB 2012). They identified farmers, gamekeepers, hunters and pigeon fanciers to be the
11 most common offenders (RSPB 2012).

12 In the current report, the authors are addressing illegal poisoning of peregrine falcons (PF, *Falco peregrinus*) in
13 Zurich, Switzerland.

14 The PF is a species with almost worldwide distribution and is widespread throughout continental Europe and the
15 British Isles (BirdLife International 2014). Due to its sensitivity towards the pesticide DDT, the European
16 populations experienced a severe decrease in the 1960s with the Swiss population becoming nearly extinct in the
17 early seventies (Schmid et al. 2001). After the prohibition of DDT and the implementation of protective
18 measures, the population of PFs has recovered over the past 40 years to an estimated 300-400 breeding pairs in
19 Switzerland in 2010 (Swiss Ornithological Station 2014). In the city of Zurich, two artificial eyries (nest boxes)
20 were mounted in 1997 as a reestablishment project for PFs. Both locations were well accepted, and the birds
21 used them continuously from 2003 until 2011 and from 2006 until 2014, respectively.

22 PFs prey mainly on medium-sized birds, with Columbiformes as the dominant prey group (White et al. 2013).
23 They usually strike and capture their prey in mid-air. If not killed by the impact, the prey is dispatched by a bite
24 through their neck. The prey is then brought to its eyrie or an established plucking area at which the preys'
25 feathers are removed prior to consumption. This behaviour is used by perpetrators to selectively poison
26 unwanted PFs: The poison (in many cases a pesticide) is blended with a sticky substance, usually honey, and
27 applied to the neck feathers of a pigeon. The pigeon, sometimes after partial clipping of the wings to impair its
28 flight, is then released in a PF territory. The PF is poisoned when its oral mucosa is exposed to the pesticide
29 during plucking. Several reports in the “grey literature” – especially from Germany and Austria – refer to this
30 procedure (e.g. Der Standard 2012; NABU 2014; Police Department Tuttlingen 2014). Usually, fanciers of
31 racing or flyer pigeons, the latter are known for their abnormal flight patterns as compared to the flying
32 behaviour of wild pigeon species, are suspected. In Switzerland, pigeon fanciers came into the focus of police
33 surveillance activities in 2009: users of pigeon fancier websites propagated the extirpation of PFs, and several
34 individuals reported that they had successfully used methomyl (*S*-methyl-*N*-[(methylcarbamyl)
35 oxythioacetamide]) to kill PFs.

36 Material and Methods

37 The animals included in this report were collected at the two artificial eyries from the Zurich reestablishment
38 project. Both eyries are located on high chimneys of waste-to-energy incineration plants. Eyrie 1 (Josefstrasse)
39 is located approximately 2 km north-west and eyrie 2 (Hagenholzstrasse) approximately 5 km north-east of the
40 city centre. Eyries are each fitted with two video cameras pointing at the inside of the eyrie and the landing
41 board, respectively. While eyrie 1 may be permanently viewed in real time by the public (webcam: [www.stadt-
42 zuerich.ch/falken](http://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/falken)), the cameras at eyrie 2 (DCS-942L and D-Link DCS-2121 from D-Link GmbH, D-65760
43 Eschborn, Germany) are motion-triggered, filming for 5-10 seconds after being set in motion, and are used for
44 police surveillance only. Video sequences are stored on a FTP-Server.

45 Video sequences are analysed daily, and deaths of PFs were readily detected. All animals were collected and
46 submitted for further analysis the day after their death. One was a female PF with its prey, collected at eyrie 1 on
47 May 9, 2011 (=case 1), and the other a male PF with its prey, collected at eyrie 2 on March 5, 2014 (=case 2).

48 The prey animal in case 1 appeared like a feral domestic pigeon (*Columbia livia* forma *domestica*) as it is
49 commonly found in cities; the prey from case 2 was a white pigeon with black tail feathers; neither of the
50 pigeons was ringed. Both PFs and the first pigeon were submitted to the National Reference Centre for Poultry
51 and Rabbit Diseases (NRGK), University of Zurich, Switzerland. The second pigeon was sent to the Forensic
52 Institute Zurich (FOR) for forensic analysis involving the possible prosecution of a suspect prior to post-mortem
53 examination at the NRGK.

54 At the NRGK, a post-mortem examination was performed in all 4 animals including gross examination,
55 parasitological examination and a histological examination of selected organs in PF1. Gizzard contents of both
56 PFs, crop content of pigeon 1 and liver tissue of PF2 were sent to Interlabor Belp AG (Interlabor Belp, CH-3123
57 Belp, Switzerland) for toxicological analysis. Samples of case 1 animals were screened for over 400 pesticides;
58 the gizzard contents of the second PF was analysed for possible methomyl contents. Analysis was performed
59 using gas chromatography-time-of-flight/mass spectrometry (GC-TOF/MS) and liquid-chromatography-mass
60 spectrometry/mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) with a detection limit of 0.1 mg/kg. In the frame of the forensic
61 analysis at the FOR, a whitish substance recovered from the wing feathers of the pigeon was analysed using a
62 general screening by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GCMS).

63 Results

64 Video footage for eyrie 1 documented the return of PF1 with a prey pigeon at 7:29 a.m., May 9, 2011. Within
65 minutes after starting to pluck its prey, the PF seemed to have balance problems and fell over at 7:43 a.m.
66 without being able to right itself. The dead body was collected the following morning. The three young
67 peregrines present in the eyrie were moved to a local wildlife rescue centre and released after fledging.

68 At eyrie 2, the first evidence of a preyed pigeon in the eyrie was recorded at 7:39 a.m. on March 4, 2013. Within
69 the next hours, the female PF was observed to occasionally pluck the pigeon. Later, the male was seen to feed
70 from it. The last feeding was recorded at 12:34 p.m. and at 17:19, the male was visible lying unmoving. The
71 camera was not triggered in between. The dead body was collected on the following day. Nine days after the
72 incident, the female laid a single egg, which she abandoned. It was removed by the city's gamekeeper.

73 At post-mortem examination, both PFs were found to be in good body condition with weights of 1060 and 557g,
74 respectively, and showed a well-tended outer appearance; PF2 had several feathers, presumably from its last
75 meal, sticking to its head. The liver of PF1 was congested, the gizzard contained skin and feathers. PF2 showed
76 dark, slightly enlarged and highly congested liver and spleen and plump kidneys. The gizzard contained a pellet
77 of feathers, one pigeon foot and a small quantity of meat. Both pigeons were in good body condition. While in
78 pigeon 1, the gastrointestinal tract, including the crop, was well filled with ingesta, the head, crop a foot and the
79 larger part of the feathers of pigeon 2 were missing. A microscopic examination of native smears of the different
80 intestinal sections (duodenum, jejunum, ileum, caeca, colon) did not reveal the presence of any endoparasites. A
81 small number of *Serratospiculum* sp. was found in the left cranial abdominal air sack (PF1) and the left caudal
82 thoracic air sack (PF2). No ectoparasites were detected. Histological examination of PF1 confirmed the
83 congestion of inner organs.

84 The combined sample of crop contents of prey pigeon 1 and gizzard contents of PF1 yielded 64mg/kg methomyl.
85 Toxicological analysis of the gizzard contents of the second PF revealed a methomyl content of 11mg/kg. The
86 GCMS analysis of the second prey pigeon by the FOR could not detect any pesticides/toxic substances. The liver
87 tissue of the PF did not contain a detectable amount of methomyl, and no pesticides were detected in the whitish
88 substance from the second pigeons' wings.

89 Discussion

90 The carbamate pesticide methomyl is highly toxic in birds with the acute oral LD₅₀ ranging from 10 to 42mg/kg
91 depending on bird species (Smith 1987). Raptor species, and within these the smaller-bodied birds, appear to be
92 more sensitive to carbamate pesticides than non-raptor species (Mineau et al. 1999). Like all carbamates,
93 methomyl acts by inhibiting the enzyme cholinesterase (ChE) that is responsible for the degradation of the
94 neurotransmitter acetylcholine (ACh) in the synaptic gap (Fairbrother 1996). The following accumulation of

95 ACh leads to an uninterrupted stimulation of postsynaptic nerves. In cases of exposure to highly toxic doses, the
96 onset of clinical signs is immediate and death - preceded by clonic-tonic convulsions and prostration (Fairbrother
97 1996) - may occur within minutes after exposure (Berny 2007).

98 In the reported cases, the good body condition, the filled stomach and the well-tended outer appearance of the
99 PFs indicate that the birds were in good health prior to their sudden death. As Samour and Naldo (2001) suggest,
100 the presence of *Serratospiculum* sp. was regarded as an incidental finding that did not present a clinical problem.
101 Congested liver, spleen and kidneys are indicative of circulatory failure. This would also be consistent with a
102 possible aetiology of acute poisoning. The detection of 64mg/kg methomyl in the mixed sample of pigeon and
103 raptor ingesta in combination with the webcam footage and the detection of 11mg/kg methomyl in the ingesta of
104 the second PF strongly suggest that acute intoxication by methomyl is responsible for the death of both PFs. The
105 authors assume that the whitish substance recovered for toxicological analysis from pigeon 2 might as well have
106 been urine. As the larger part of the pigeon carcass, including most feathers and its head, was missing, no further
107 analyses were performed. The lack of methomyl in the liver sample of PF2 does not contradict poisoning as
108 cause of death. It is known that while methomyl can be readily detected in the bait, it is difficult to trace in tissue
109 due to its low volume of distribution (Zsatsakis 1996). According to a report from the European Food Safety
110 Authority (EFSA) from 2008, methomyl is highly toxic via the oral route and Villar (2010) reported that pigeons
111 that fed on methomyl-treated corn died within minutes. Additionally, Zsatsakis (1996) found that methomyl, in
112 contrast to other ChE inhibitors, is not only due to ChE inhibition, but may cause acute cardiovascular toxicity
113 associated with only minimal inhibition of ChE activity. The survival of the methomyl-laced pigeons as live bait
114 may be explained by the low dermal toxicity of methomyl (EFSA 2008).

115 As PFs usually catch and kill birds in mid-air, it can be assumed that live pigeons were used as bait to selectively
116 target and kill the two PFs. While the plumage of the second bait pigeon suggested that the animal might have
117 been a fancy breed, the plumage of the first pigeon was suggestive of a feral pigeon. Either way, pigeon breeders
118 are the most likely culprit: they may use one of their own less valued animals or ferals that have taken residence
119 in their loft for this mission (M. Kéry, personal communication). This suspicion is also backed by data from the
120 Birdcrime report from 2009, which lists pigeon fanciers along with game wardens and egg collectors as the most
121 common offenders regarding peregrine falcons (RSPB 2009).

122 Confirmation of a poisoning event by detecting toxic compounds is in general difficult, as especially the less
123 stable responsible agents might be disintegrated by the time of sample recovery (Wobeser et al. 2004).
124 Additionally, it has to be taken into account that only a small percentage of wild animal carcasses is ever
125 detected (Berny 2007). Illegal persecution as cause of death of raptors is therefore most likely underdiagnosed
126 (RSPB Scotland 2009; Hirschfeld 2010). The awareness regarding wildlife crime suddenly increased in Zürich,
127 Switzerland, after the death of PF1 was broadcasted on the Internet via the live webcam of its eyrie. This
128 incident raised suspicion towards the cause of a previous disappearance (2009) and two deaths (2010) of PFs at
129 eyrie 2 during active brood and the incidental discovery of three PFs (2009, 2010, 2013), two of them at
130 plucking posts, in advanced states of decomposition in Zurich (table 1).

131 Based on the two confirmed poisonings as listed in this report, combined with the unexplained disappearances
132 and deaths of PFs, the authors presume that the reestablished population of PFs in Zurich has repeatedly fallen
133 victim to illegal persecution. Further, the disappearance of all 5 breeding pairs that were commonly observed on
134 their traditional breeding sites in the urban areas of the Basel metropolitan area (north-western Switzerland)
135 since 2008 and of at least 3 previously highly regular breeding pairs in the rural areas south of Basel since the
136 1980s (M. Kéry, personal communication) suggests that there may be a high number of unreported cases of
137 illegal persecution of PFs in Switzerland. The authors recommend increasing surveillance measures to identify
138 the causes of disappearances of PFs in Switzerland and should carcasses be recovered, to generally send these
139 for post-mortem examination. They further propose that the collection of all identified and suspect cases of
140 wildlife crime in a national database may aid prosecution of perpetrators.

141 **Acknowledgements**

142 The authors want to thank the following persons for making this study possible (in alphabetical order): Marc
143 Kéry (Swiss Ornithological Station, Sempach), Jacqueline Kupper (Institute of Veterinary Pharmacology and

144 Toxicology, University of Zurich), Werner Müller (SVS/BirdLife Switzerland), This Schenkel (game warden at
145 Grünstadt Zürich) and the laboratory staff of all involved institutions.

146 **Conflict of Interests**

147 The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Date	Eyrie	Breeding status	Animal	Incidence	Comment/ methomyl
2009, Apr 30	Eyrie 2	Active brood	Ad, f	Disappeared; abortion of brood	---
2009, Jun 26	Plucking area 1	n/a	Ad	Found dead with preyed pigeon in claws/fang	---
2010, Jan 27	Eyrie 2	Courting	Ad, f	Found dead below eyrie with head trauma – was dead for some time	---
2010, Mar 30	Eyrie 2	Active brood	Juv	Found dead below eyrie – was dead for some time	---
2010, Jul 06	Plucking area 2	n/a	Ad	Found dead; photo taken and body destroyed	---
2011, May 09	Eyrie 1	Active brood	Ad, f (PF 1)	Died in front of webcam after feeding on prey pigeon; juveniles raised artificially	64 mg/kg in mixed sample of contents of pigeon crop and PF stomach
2013, Jun 12	Limmattalstr.	n/a	Juv, f	Found dead	No methomyl detected
2014, Mar 04	Eyrie 2	Courting, egg formation	Ad, m (PF 2)	Found dead next to prey pigeon; egg abandoned	11mg/kg Methomyl in gizzard contents of PF; pigeon negative

Table 1: Incidents involving dead or disappearing PFs in the city of Zurich

(f = female, m = male; juv = juvenile; ad = adult; n/a = not applicable)