

## THE FIRST BREEDING RECORDS OF AVOCETS *Recurvirostra avosetta* FOR CROATIA AND KOPAČKI RIT

### Prva gnezditev sabljarke *Recurvirostra avosetta* na Hrvaškem in v Kopačkem ritu

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The Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* breeds locally in Europe from southern Sweden to southern Spain, France and Italy, and from central Europe east to southern Ukraine and the Black Sea and Caspian Lake (OSIECK 1994, GIRARD 1997). Recently, breeding has been confirmed in Slovenia on Sečovlje saltpans (GEISTER 2001). Through the temperate climatic zones, the species' main breeding habitats are sandy or muddy shores of shallow saline and brackish waters in coastal lagoons and saltmarshes, or inland salt, saline or alkaline lakes (GIRARD 1997). Numbers could fluctuate and/or increase in the presence of suitable temporary artificial habitats such as saltpans, polders, and floodplains (SNOW & PERRINS 1998). This species breeds in colonies that can vary from two or three up to several hundred pairs (GIRARD 1997).

Despite the facts that Avocets breed regularly in Central Europe, particularly in Hungary and Vojvodina (Serbia, Yugoslavia), and that they regularly migrate to the Mediterranean to spend the winter along its shores, they have been rare visitors in the Kopački rit wetland area. Over the period of a hundred years, from 1853-1964, the species has never been recorded in this area (MOJSISOVIC 1883, 1886 & 1889, NEHER 1902-1910, HORVATH 1955). Moreover, it was not even suggested that this halophilic species could occur in the Kopački rit.

The first confirmed record of Avocets in Kopački rit dates back to January 4<sup>th</sup> 1965, when Mr. J. Majić collected one bird and deposited it in the collection of the Zoological Museum in the Kopačevo village. Later that year, on October 5<sup>th</sup>, Mrs. and Mr. Rucner observed one bird (RUCNER & RUCNER 1972). The third record of this species comes from 1999 when two birds were seen at the Podunavlje fishponds on 2<sup>nd</sup> October (own data).

On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2002 Mr. Roberto Tinarelli observed one bird in the area during his bird-watching trip (R. TINARELLI *pers. comm.*). On April 6<sup>th</sup> 2002, during

our regular monitoring programme, we again observed two birds at the Podunavlje fishponds. From April until June we regularly observed from two to six Avocets, that we considered as migrating birds, using the area temporarily as a feeding and resting site. However, when Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* started breeding, also for the first time in Kopački rit, on the muddy island in the same shallow pond, it raised our expectations that Avocets would breed, too.

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002 one breeding bird was seen sitting on a nest on the muddy island. During that month, up to five adult Avocets were feeding in the pond, but only one incubating pair was clearly visible from the edge of the elevated dike. After the incubation period, on June 30<sup>th</sup> we saw a family with four small fledglings. Later during July, Avocets moved to the distant end of the pond, where we were able to observe the adults, but not the fledglings until August 10<sup>th</sup>. By that time, only one fledgling remained alive. He was subsequently observed throughout August, feeding with adults and moulting his brown feathers into the typical black-white pattern. On August 31<sup>st</sup> there were still five birds in the pond, and on September 8<sup>th</sup> four birds remained.

Up to now, in the recent ornithological literature (KRALJ 1997, LUKAČ 1998), Avocets have not been considered as a breeding species, nor have we found any published data on its breeding in Croatia. Thus, our observations are the first breeding record of Avocets, for both Croatia and Kopački rit.

It is also an interesting observation because Avocets favour smaller, more or less saline pools, lagoons, muddy arms of deltas, estuaries, and sheltered tidal mudflats, where ample loose sediment is rich in food organisms (CRAMP & SIMMONS 1983). While they are not strictly dependent on saline habitats, as long as grazing or flooding maintains sparse or low vegetation (OSIECK 1994), breeding of this species in the typical freshwater fishponds is not an everyday event.

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## Summary

Until recently, Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* were recorded in Croatia only as summer visitors and spring or fall migrants. We report the first record of successful nesting for this species for Croatia and for Kopački rit. During 2002 one pair nested and raised one fledgling on the abandoned pond at Podunavlje fishponds.

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Arrived / Prispelo: 27.11.2002

Accepted / Sprejeto: 6.3.2003

## Povzetek

Sabljarica *Recurvirostra avosetta* je imela do sedaj na Hrvaškem status poletnega gosta oziroma spomladanske in jesenske selivke. Avtorji poročajo o prvem in tudi uspešnem gnezdenju sabljark na Hrvaškem, v Kopačkem ritu. V letu 2002 je par gnezdil in uspešno vzredil enega mladiča v enem od ribnikov Podunavlje, ki je zapuščen.

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