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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- Protection of herons
- Raptor protection at Messina
- Proposals to the Government
- Cycling for the environment

Summer 2013

above: LIPU volunteers on watch at the messina Strait, page 10.

Cycling for health and for the environment - LIPU takes the lead, page 17.

Another good year – but where now?

Editorial

David Lingard

I write this at the end of our financial year, full details of which will appear in our Annual Report in due course, and I can confirm that we have had another very successful year thanks to the support of all our supporters.

However, there is a question mark over the future of this success, as we still have no definite way forward from the day when I can no longer carry out the role of delegate for the British section. We have appealed for anyone with an interest in, perhaps, taking over the role to come forward and discover what is involved but, so far, have had no response.

The last fifteen years have been enjoyable as well as challenging and, above all, satisfying but, at some point, the time must come to hand over the reins to another and that point must surely be in sight. LIPU-UK has been registered as a charity since 2001 and has been run on a voluntary basis and there seems to be no need to change this.

The charity is in good health and although recruitment is always a challenge I am now ready to hand over to someone with a little more energy and, probably, lots of fresh ideas of how to take LIPU-UK forward.

I am therefore asking any person who thinks they might have the time to take on this rewarding job / hobby / pastime (delete as applicable) to get in touch and I will be happy to provide a more detailed description of what is involved. There is no immediate rush, and I would expect to ease the new

From the Director of LIPU

Danilo Selvaggi

delegate into the routine gradually so please don't worry about being thrown in the deep end.

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PARLIAMENT: HERE IS OUR PROPOSAL

by Danilo Selvaggi, Director General, LIPU

Nature Network 2000, parks, hunting and poaching, renewable energy, the sea and rescue centres for wild animals. LIPU asks the politicians for greater protection for nature and biodiversity.

"The next parliament will have to face up to the challenge of national renewal. It must be a wide-ranging renewal which does not limit itself just to the serious economic and financial questions but which includes the totality of those problems which afflict our society. Among these, without doubt, there are the issues of nature and the environment."

Thus begins the document which over the last few weeks, in the name of LIPU, our President, Fulvio Mamone Capria, has been putting before the powers that be, with the opening of the new parliamentary session. This will represent our point of view because the choices made in politics can and must take into account the demands of nature.

"The destruction of biodiversity", continues LIPU's President, "the depletion of green space and the natural world, the abusive development of regions and cities, the frequent infringement of rules and procedures for the protection of environment, the not yet sufficient attention to any awkward themes

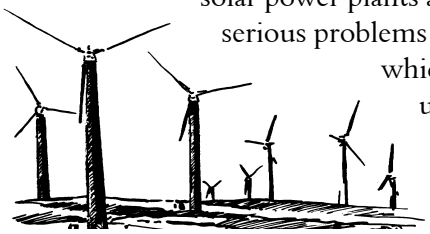
such as environmental education and the voluntary sector, are placing the collective heritage of the country in grave danger. All of which, when reduced to economic, cultural and social terms, have become ever more obvious. It is already evident that the crisis through which we are living is in many forms and that the growth of the country must come through a capacity to respect and preserve all its riches and all its values."

Twelve proposals for nature

The document delivered to the parliamentary authorities is laid out under 12 headings, which cover a broad range across the Italian environmental horizon and touches on several of the greater concerns. One of these is Network 2000, the European network for the protection of biodiversity, already the subject of poor management and, at times, of outright destruction, and for which it is necessary to reinforce the protection measures in place starting with a General Review.

Secondly, there are the parks whose role in the natural world and in environmental culture is beyond argument but which need a new approach to their management as well as economic support and a development plan. What is there to say about the destruction of green space? One of the major national emergencies, with stretches of natural and agricultural land which every day we are losing under yet more concrete. A law stopping the destruction of open space and a reform of the political control of large-scale developments, conducted with intelligence and respect for nature, are two aspects, which brook no delay, of what we have requested of Parliament.

Closely tied to the destruction of land is, next, the issue of **renewable energy**, essential in ridding ourselves of the use of fossil fuels and for a proper response to the question of climate change. But the worst possible siting of land-based wind farms and solar power plants are causing really serious problems across the country, which is calling for urgent review of planning and a decisive stop to speculation.



And then there is the hoary problem of **hunting** and its nastier cousin, **poaching**. Despite the successes of LIPU we are facing another hunting season with a list of "game" species yet longer still, not to speak of various unacceptable practices such as the use of live birds as bait and the absence of any national anti-poaching plan.

One other point, just as important, which the document focusses on are the difficulties faced by the **Rescue Centres for Wild Animals** which carry out the important role of conservation and raising awareness but which cannot be left only to LIPU to shoulder with the help of its members and volunteers but which are going finally to be supported in law and with finance.

The sea is yet one more theme in the document with its request that Italy accepts the European Plan for the protection of marine bird species, a matter of considerable importance as well and, in our view, **the relationship with people**. Encouraging environmental education, supporting voluntary work, making our cities greener are some of the

ways by which our lives can be changed to a more peaceful, more natural level.

The proper values

Anyone who thinks that the problems which are smothering Italy (and many other countries) are purely economic in nature, is only looking at one side, however dramatic, of the matter. Even worse, are those who are thinking of a renewed attack on the environment, in the belief that the only hope is yet more consumption, the obliteration of yet more land, the exploitation of all possible resources.

Linked to the serious economic crisis, there is a crisis in society and in human relations in our ever more dehumanised cities, with nature ever more debased and mistreated. The theme of our document, of LIPU's message to the Italian Parliament is just this: let us face up to the problems from the right side, let us put back in the centre the true values and perhaps a future, a better future will be possible.

The following is a Press Release given to the news media in Italy in April.

STRAIT OF MESSINA: TOMORROW IS THE START OF LIPU'S CAMP ON MIGRATORY RAPTORS

Two groups of volunteers, supported by LIPU-UK, will be present on the Strait of Messina until mid-May in "a garrison of knowledge and

conservation in one of Europe's most important sites for migration".

"This morning, six Booted Eagles, two Black Kites, five Lesser Kestrels and 500 Honey Buzzards flew by. The sun is shining and luckily we haven't heard any gun shots". This is an example of the diary of sightings kept by LIPU volunteers from the camp on the Strait of Messina where they will be observing migratory birds from tomorrow until the middle of May.

The Strait of Messina, together with those at the Bosphorus and Gibraltar, is one of the most important bottlenecks for birds migrating into Europe. Around 30,000 birds of prey cross the Strait every year on their journey from Africa to their breeding grounds in Italy or the rest of Europe. However, it is this sheer volume of birds passing through the Strait of Messina that makes it a very dangerous place to cross due to a persistent poaching pressure, especially on the Calabrian side.

This is one of the reasons behind the LIPU camp, which aims not only to observe and monitor migration, but also to carry out the essential role of spotting poaching activities and report them to the authorities. The camp on the Strait will also liaise with LIPU staff involved, since 20 April, with the Migratory Raptors Project on the small islands off Sicily, from Pantelleria to Marettimo, from Ustica to Panarea and as far as the Sicilian coast of the Strait. Furthermore, the passage of falcons and other migrants will also be communicated to the activists on the Calabrian side of the Strait, with the aim of identifying the migratory route towards the peninsula and protecting their passage.

Fulvio Mamone Capria, LIPU President, announced: "As for the past 30 years, LIPU will be present in the most important sites for the extraordinary migration into Europe. The first camp of our Association took place in 1984. Since then, we have never missed a year, contributing to fight poaching which, also thanks to you, is a declining practice, although not entirely extirpated. This year we will have, in addition, a group of LIPU volunteer guards specialised in hunting practices. They come from different parts of Italy and will contribute their knowledge and professional expertise on animal welfare laws. I, as a LIPU volunteer rather than President, will also take part in the camp on the Strait, to share the responsibility and the extraordinary emotions that it brings".

Among the species, not only raptors, that are targeted by poachers on the Strait of Messina, there are Storks, Hen Harriers, Marsh Harriers but especially Honey Buzzards, locally called 'adorni', which, for superstitious folklore, remain the main target of Calabrian poachers.

Mamone Capria explains: "Killing an 'adorno' is supposed to prevent infidelity by your partner. It is a superstition that, probably, nobody believes in any more, but it has turned into an empty and violent habit, which greatly damages biodiversity and offends the values commonly accepted by society. Over many years, LIPU has managed to push this habit into small areas, which now are, however, the angry pinnacles of this practice, as it is typical of the worst traditions in decline. For this reason we need to continue the fight against poaching, which LIPU will continue to do also thanks to the essential contribution of our English branch, directed by

David Lingard, to whom we send our most heart-felt thanks. We also need to thank the fantastic work of the Italian Forestry Department, which, once more, will be present this year with a contingent of Anti-poaching Operatives".

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.. and here is the diary:

THE WATCH

by Emiliano, Luca, Marco, Giovanni, Fabrizio, Fulvio, Giovanni, Marco, Stefania, LIPU volunteers

Diary of the LIPU watch for the protection of raptors over the Straits of Messina, Calabrian side. Falcons, eagles and storks and a special meeting with Alessio, the youngest member of LIPU in Calabria.

29th April
A strong sirocco wind today. The birds have moved to the north but we did manage to see 4 Booted Eagles. Michele, from the Sicilian raptor migration project, told us he had seen 140 White Storks. We, in Bagnara, to the south-east of Scilla, saw some Honey Buzzards and an Eleonora's Falcon. From Pantelleria and Ustica they tell us that the sirocco is there too and is blocking the migration.

2nd May
Third day of the watch. Sirocco again today. Just a few falcons, but in the evening the wind changed and we saw two flocks of Honey Buzzards, around 50 to 60 individuals, above Scilla.

3rd May
Sirocco again. Very few raptors again, but luckily the

long wait was worth it when we had wonderful views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle passing overhead. Things are looking up.

4th May
Not a bad first week: The sirocco winds have pushed the migration to the north of the areas where the hunters usually find their victims. News from Sicily informs us that thousands of migratory birds have passed through in the last few days and thanks to the winds have avoided the hunters. Another Lesser Spotted Eagle seen today.

9th May
Another beautiful day at the watch. Less activity from our feathered friends meant that we spent more time on the road. Not much to speak of except a little tension with hunters in a bar on the outskirts. Unfortunately when our friend Michele, based in Sicily, told us of the presence of an Egyptian Vulture we were travelling from one observation site to another. This gave us the chance, however, to meet wonderful Alessio, the youngest LIPU member of Reggio Calabria! He was bird watching with his dad Nino. Anyone who knows the state of things in this area will understand how unusual this is. It's thanks to you Alessio and to your dad and other people like you that your region can hope in a better future.

13th May
An intense day today! Little movement in the morning, but in the afternoon Michele in Sicily told us of larger numbers. We rushed towards the Orti area where the raptors would be entering Calabria. When we arrived we quickly became aware of a number of suspicious looking people. We took up position and warned the Forestry Corps who

promptly intervened. In the distance we heard two shots but they fortunately missed the target. All in all a successful day with more than 500 raptors recorded.

14th May
Our watch has come to an end. Our presence, alongside that of the Forestry Corps guards, along the coast of Calabria serves as a deterrent to the hunters. It has been wonderful to meet some really great and like-minded people. There have been some difficult moments but these have been few, far and between. Our activity will help one day to guarantee 100% protection for migratory birds.

The Raptor Count.
Volunteers' observations at the watch

Volunteers at the Straits of Messina watch, (29 April - 12 May) recorded 5,000 Honey Buzzards and a further thousand raptors including Marsh Harriers, Black Kites, Montagu's Harriers, Kestrels and Lesser Kestrels, as well as Hobbies, Lesser Spotted Eagles, Red-footed Falcons, a Pallid Harrier, an Osprey, an Eleonora's Falcon, a White Stork and ten Black Storks. In all, the LIPU raptor migration protection project from 20th April to 20th May at Pantelleria, Marettimo, Ustica, Panarea and the Straits of Messina (Sicilian side), recorded c 28,000 migratory raptors of 24 species.

BITTER RICE

by Mauro Fasola, Natural and Environmental Sciences Department, University of Pavia

After decades of population growth and having become very widespread among rice fields over the past few years, herons in Italy are facing a new threat: upland rice cultivation. The strong economic interests in the farming world threaten to deprive these birds of the prey on which they feed.

We started monitoring the colonies of Grey Herons, Little Egrets and Night Herons over 40 years ago, in 1972. It happened a little by chance, as one of my University friends had taken me to visit a big and beautiful colony; but it was almost inevitable because it was impossible not to see these spectacular birds around Pavia.

Indeed, the western side of the Padan Plain, with its 2,000 sq km of rice fields, soon became one of the areas with the highest concentration of these birds at a European level.

Since then, we have monitored the nesting populations by organising censuses throughout the entire country: the first time, in 1981, then with LIPU in 1986 and finally in collaboration with local ornithological groups in 2002.

In the years in between, we have managed to count the nests in the majority of the colonies in Lombardy, Piedmont and in the provinces of Piacenza, Parma and Reggio, thanks to the voluntary collaboration of the dedicated members of the Gruppo Garzaie-Italia (Heronries-Italy Group).

This challenging but satisfying experience in the midst of nature has revealed, over the years, a very interesting evolution of the nesting populations. When the sites that were hosting the colonies began being protected thanks to small nature reserves and parks established by the Italian regions and in collaboration with LIPU, the number of nesting birds started increasing.

Another factor that has led to the increase of this species has certainly been the reduction in killing by men, as we have noticed from the analysis of herons that have been ringed and recaptured throughout Europe since the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the year 2000 the number of Grey Herons had increased by 20 times and these birds were more easily seen in the cultivated areas also because they gradually began to lose their fear of man.

A similar trend has been noticed with the Purple Heron, the Little Egret and the Squacco Heron, and, in a slightly different way, with the Night Heron. Moreover, Cattle Egrets started nesting in 1989 and the Great White Egret in 1994, thus making up the seven species present in Italy.

However, things changed after 2005. After registering such high figures, it seems that the populations started decreasing again, possibly due to a change in the cultivation style of the rice fields in northwest Italy, these being the main environment in which Herons feed themselves during the breeding season. Until the Nineties, rice fields were submerged from

May to July and this allowed the development of invertebrates and amphibians that offered more feeding opportunities than those offered by rivers and swamps. However, over the past few years, upland rice fields have become more and more widespread over greater areas.

While in the Eighties rice fields supplied nesting Herons with 75-90% of their food, today it is fair to assume that rice cultivation without the use of water may have led to a reduction in this proportion. We will be able to test this hypothesis from this year, by using the same methods used in the Eighties and Nineties in order to quantify the changes in an objective way. We will carry out some research on the prey taken during the nesting period, on their abundance in the rice fields and on the actual rice fields' areas that are submerged.

The protection of heronries is very satisfying, thanks to the presence of parks and nature reserves, but as far as the protection of rice fields is concerned, strong commercial interests challenge the measures that are aimed at maintaining the food supply at an adequate level. Nevertheless, there exist some cultivation techniques that would maintain the fauna present in the area without compromising the agricultural production.

Protecting heronries means forbidding urban development on these sites, thus allowing, year after year, the return of herons in the colonies. Herons show great loyalty to a site where breeding has been successful in the past, so much so that some existing heronries had been identified in the surroundings of Novara at the beginning of the twentieth century and around Bologna even in the sixteenth century.

Besides protecting the heron population, protecting heronries located in the wetlands untouched by land reclamation and urban development helps maintain intact the few corners of nature left in Northern Italy.

In this way, herons play an "umbrella" role to protect the wildlife of many wetlands, but they also offer a chance to embrace nature in those reserves that are equipped for visits, such as the Torrile Trecasali Nature Reserve, where the spectacle of hundreds of nesting couples and their chicks occurs every spring.

Heronries in LIPU oases and reserves

The connection between herons and LIPU oases and reserves has become closer and closer. The most important example is the Torrile Trecasali Nature Reserve, where many records have been set: in 2012, there were 202 couples of Cattle Egrets, 112 couples of Grey Herons, 67 couples of Night Herons, 7 pairs of Squacco Herons and one pair of Great White Egrets.

The Brabbia Marsh Nature Reserve has hosted 28 nesting couples of Night Herons, 71 couples of Grey Herons and one couple of the rare Purple Heron.

Important figures have also been recorded at the Gaggio Caves Oasis: 43 couples of Night Herons, 22 couples of Little Egrets and 53 couples of Cattle Egrets.

Finally, the Bosco Negri Nature Reserve has recorded the presence of 31 couples of Grey Herons.

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VENTO: PROGRESS BY BICYCLE

by Paolo Pileri - Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan Polytechnic

From Venice to Turin, by bicycle, following Italy's largest river. A project to showcase the countryside, sustain the local economy and create jobs.

How do you see the future? I hope more on two wheels than at the present, and for various reasons: travel by bicycle is both more efficient (car travel is becoming increasingly expensive) and more enjoyable ('slow' travel, taking in the sights from the saddle, is becoming increasingly popular). Travel on two wheels is still the smartest option we have, says Ivan Illich in his "Praise of the Bicycle". However, Italy has a severe shortage of cycle paths. No less a person than the President of the Republic has expressed his concern publicly over this issue, in a speech delivered to the Bicycle Convention of Reggio Emilia last October, but aimed squarely at the ears of central and local government.

Cycle tourism in Italy fares even worse, with a few regional exceptions (curiously enough in mountainous regions, with Trentino Alto Adige in the lead). It seems we are paying the price of our culture gap, condemned forever to lag behind. And yet cycle paths are an important infrastructure investment that brings economic benefits and facilitates the development of a country, more so than many roads or motorways, whose real value is often questionable, while the environmental damage they cause is beyond doubt. Cycle paths are instead a smart and a sound way to connect the country,

and to help its inhabitants live well. Such cycling backbones are an intelligent way to encourage people to discover nature and history and go deep into the beautiful countryside, including the river valleys. In short, they promote a type of tourism which is still little developed. Let's also keep in mind that cycle tourism can be a terrific economic stimulus. The river Danube has a cycle path which, with a length of 320 kilometres and a shorter season compared with Italy, generates 76 million euros a year. The river Elbe generates over 90 million. The river Po generates? Nothing.

The Vento project offers itself as an alternative, promoting different values from the usual concrete in the usual places; an alternative which encourages innovation and employment by using our rich heritage. This project could create, indirectly, thousands of new jobs and deliver a boost to the local economy: supporting not only the countryside, but also the natural environment, parks, villages, historic buildings, agricultural produce, local food, and more. Vento means all of the above, but its physical shape takes the form of a cycle path along the river Po, connecting Venice to Turin with a diversion towards Milan along the Naviglio canal system. The name comes from a fusion of Venezia and Torino, and translates as "wind". It is the culmination of a feasibility study, drawn up by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan Polytechnic (www.progetto.vento.polimi.it), following thorough preparation: surveying over 1000 kilometres of possible route; taking over 7000 photographs; studying a wide variety of materials and local projects (including the Bicitalia network of Fiab, and the Eurovelo project). The end result is a trail of 679 kilometres of which 632 are along the Po.

The study considered all the possible alternatives before arriving at a route which is safe (car-free), easy (no lifting of bicycles to overcome obstacles) well-connected (railway stations are, on average, only eight kilometres away), recognisable and low cost. The plan relies on simple solutions, repeated over and over again, and uses as much as possible of the existing infrastructure; river embankments alone would allow 40 percent of the whole route to be realised (see the web site for further details). Vento has a cost of around 80 million euros, equal to only 1 or 2 kilometres of motorway, but with the additional returns and extraordinary advantages expected from cycle tourism, that would deliver a boost to the local economy. Cycling would offer a wonderful opportunity to visit the region, as well as becoming a platform from which to enjoy the rich diversity of the countryside, and the great variety of birds that live in the damp and river bank areas, meanders and ox-bow lakes, woodland and scrub.

But, and it is a big but, Vento only exists on paper. The project has many supporters, including LIPU, who see it as a cultural challenge with which to spur the government. We must believe in it. We must commit to final plans and to oversight which is capable of guaranteeing total respect for the natural environment and the countryside. To turn away now would be to forfeit a chance of giving the country a realistic, low-cost answer, and to refuse support for the most important shared resource that we have, the landscape, all too often sacrificed in the name of costly projects that produce no wider benefit. We must show respect for nature, and promote a positive attitude towards the environment, seeing it more as an opportunity than a hindrance. For all these reasons, Vento is much more than a path for bicycles;

it is a path to the future.

Vento in Numbers

Length of path: 679 kilometres, from Venice to Turin
Length of path along the river Po: 632 kilometres
Length of path which can be safely cycled today: 102 kilometres (15% of the total)
Investment needed to complete work: 80 million euros (118 euros per metre)
Supporting organisations: 522
Website: www.progetto.vento.polimi.it

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LIFE TIB PROJECTS

by Elena Rossini, Life TIB communication manager

Nature's network, the Trans Insubria Bionet

For biodiversity to survive, there must be freedom of movement. The Life TIB project aims to ensure this freedom by interventions with regard to habitat and crucial strips of land near roads, motorways and railways, which bring the Alps and the Lombardy plain closer together.

Connecting and connections: terms which are by now very widespread, and have come to be part of our daily language. They immediately make us think of our mobile phone or tablet, with which just by touching a key it is possible to link up with the world. In this way everything becomes extraordinarily close and familiar, but at the same time virtual and almost unreal.

But if connecting has a double significance, both material and virtual, for us human beings, connecting can only have a concrete meaning for the other living things such as animals and plants which inhabit planet Earth. Animals and plants in fact need to move around in order to survive: wild animals move around to look for food, water, a better habitat, to migrate and reproduce, whilst vegetation increases or decreases from season to season, according to climate and other factors. These movements are fundamental for the survival of biodiversity and the richness of life on Earth. Many studies have in fact found that small isolated natural fragments of territory have a very low probability of being able to support rich biodiversity; it is therefore necessary to maintain or, where a situation may have become irremediably compromised by human activity, reconstruct or mend those separated strips of nature which constitute the ecological network, just as an expert dressmaker would stitch fabric together.

In this respect LIPU's efforts continue with two active projects in Lombardy, more precisely in the Province of Varese, to improve the ecological connections across the Alps and the Lombardy plain, across the river Ticino and the main provincial sites of the Natura 2000 network. The arrival of spring heralds the resumption of monitoring of flora and fauna planned by the Life TIB (Trans Insubria Bionet) Project, supported by the European Commission and the Cariplo Foundation and managed by the Province of Varese and by the Lombardy Region. These studies introduce the start of substantial interventions for the improvement of habitat and of essential passageways, or to be precise those points in which the ecological corridor undergoes considerable restrictions in dimensions:

already next summer actions to remove exotic vegetation species (Lotus Flower and Ludwigia) on the Lake of Varese and in the Brabbia marsh will start, whilst next autumn work will probably also be started on the creation of drystone walls and small wetlands for amphibians.

By spring of this year the season of field monitoring of flora and fauna planned by the project had already taken place, and will be repeated periodically until summer 2015. The monitoring project for 2012 produced interesting results, confirming the strategic importance of the area from the massif of Campo dei Fiori and the river Ticino for many species of animals. In particular it confirmed the widespread presence of amphibians such as the European common frog and the frog species *Rana latastei*, this latter species being endemic in the Lombardy Plain: in other words it occurs only in this region and in no other place in the world. This means that the state of health of the area is still good, in spite of the major human influences. In the project area volunteers are fundamental elements in the preservation of fauna heritage, especially of amphibians: from February onwards they are involved with saving these animals from vehicular traffic. Toads are helped to cross the roads which separate them from breeding areas which are usually small humid areas, and are moved from one side of the roads to the other. The creation of small humid areas and of special underpasses planned by the Life TIB project helps to prevent these animals invading the carriageway and thus endangering their lives as they get to an ideal place to lay their eggs.

All information is available on the website of www.lifetib.it

The TIB Project extended to Switzerland

In parallel and continuing from TIB, "The ecological corridors of the mountain community of the Verbano Valleys" Project seeks to enlarge understanding and improve, where necessary, the ecological corridor from the northern part of the province of Varese, from the Park of Campo dei Fiori as far as Switzerland. This part of the territory is certainly a lot less affected by human intervention than the area in the TIB study a little further south, but like all parts of the valley floors it has "bottlenecks" restricting the continuity of the habitat mainly because of the presence of road infrastructure.

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BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

from Marco Gustin, LIPU Species and Research Director

Vultures saved from extinction

Good news for nature in India. The government ban on Diclofenac has allowed the precipitous decline in vulture numbers to be halted, in particular

that of the three species whose losses were greatest

In the last decade of the 20th century several of the vulture species of Southern Asia suffered a dramatic decline. Particularly affected were the White-rumped, Slender-billed and Indian Vultures (*Gyps bengalensis, tenuirostris and indicus*), the populations of which were reduced by over 99 per cent. The cause of this decline was identified as the veterinary use of the anti-inflammatory Diclofenac. Vultures which fed on the carcasses of livestock which had been treated with it succumbed to its toxic effects.

But now there comes good news. According to an article published on PloS One, various researchers have reported that the results of long-term monitoring show that the decline of vultures in India and Nepal is flattening out, thanks to the ban on Diclofenac, and that the population of the three most under threat is stabilising. They warn even so that the reduction in numbers of the three still renders them vulnerable.

Before the ban, vulture populations had been declining by in excess of 40 per cent annually.

"The slowing-down of the decline in vulture numbers in both India and Nepal", says Khadananda Paudel of Bcn (BirdLife Nepal), one of the authors of the study, "is the first sign that the government ban on Diclofenac, along with local initiatives to prevent its use, is having the desired effect. However, we must still keep up and strengthen the ban to ensure that the whole of Nepal can become a safe place for vultures".

The forces deployed to reverse the decline of the

three vulture species were coordinated by a team of vulture experts alongside a consortium of national and international conservation organisations. This initiative, dubbed SAVE, or Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction, was launched in 2011 to bring research and the politics of conservation together in the implementation of the actions necessary for preventing these three species, even now at risk of extinction, from disappearing forever.

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SWALLOWS – PROJECTS IN FRANCE TOO

Italy is not the only country to have projects for the study and protection of swallows (See last Ali issue on: 'The effects of climatic change on bird migration: the swallow as a model of scientific study in the Regional Park of Parco Adda Sud with LIPU, with the co-financing of the Cariplo Foundation'). In France the LPO - League pour la Protection des Oiseaux, the French equivalent of LIPU has launched an enquiry into swallow populations in various national parks and is encouraging the public to take an active part in the survey. The aim is to learn more about swallow populations and to make the public aware of the importance of their nesting habits. The regional parks of the Camargue and Alpilles (PACA) have a programme of awareness that includes the possibility to download an information leaflet, figures relating to the first year of study, press handouts and details on the internet site. People of all ages are encouraged to take part in the survey to try and count the number of birds in their area. Details can be found on www.lpo.fr

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It is always a pleasure to receive items from readers and I am always keen to receive more. Tony Harris is one of our translators and he teaches at the University of Messina. Because of the notoriety of the area it is doubly interesting to read of his life in the "top right" of Sicily.

MY BIRDS OF SICILY

Tony Harris

Our family holidays in the nineteen seventies always involved touring Britain or Europe in a camper van. Six of us would pile into an old Commer which Dad would drive or occasionally push, through the Pennines, through the Yorkshire Moors and dales, to John o' Groats and to the Scottish islands and from Liechtenstein to the Camargue and from the Black Forest to what was then Yugoslavia. While travelling, my nose was always either glued to the window or inside my faithful, rapidly disintegrating Mountfort-Hollom or Collins guide. I was always getting Dad to stop the car, even on the most dangerous of bends, to try and identify some or other brown thing as it disappeared behind trees. Once stopped, while my siblings were diving into swimming pools or having various adventures in the woods, I would be off with my binoculars.

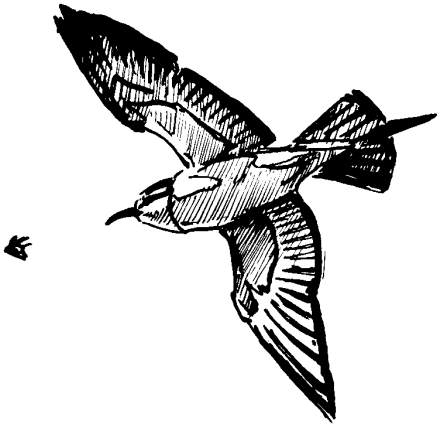
When I first arrived in Sicily in 1987, I was disappointed by the apparent lack of wildlife. Urban Messina offered nothing but pigeons and starlings. But once I got my first car, an old Fiat 500, I took to the hills. And that, indeed, was a different world, by no means teeming, but the scenery is spectacular, the woods uninhabited. The very first time I drove up, I came across two Sicilian Rock Partridges and imagined they were common here but have never

seen them since. I soon discovered that the area is one of Europe's most important migration points and in April and May I spent, and still spend, hours watching flocks of storks and Honey Buzzards, groups of Black Kites or the occasional Spotted or Booted Eagle. In 1995 I moved down the coast to Milazzo. My house on the peninsula is a haven of peace and bird calls, in spring I wake to the sound of orioles and Bee-eaters, Sardinian Warblers nest in the asparagus, small groups of Night Heron occasionally fly over and at the end of the cape I have seen flocks of Crane, storks, Spoonbills, a variety of warblers, Eleonora's Falcon, Woodchat Shrikes, Wrynecks, a Nightjar… the list is almost endless.

On the downside, however, after twenty six years of teaching classes of up to 100, I have only once met a student interested in birds. The others can at best identify a 'seagull' or a 'falcon'. One of Italy's best loved poets, Leopardi, wrote a well-known poem called "Il passero solitario" which in fact means a Blue Rock Thrush but is interpreted as a lonely sparrow (its literal translation) and that, in fact, changes the meaning of the poem. At times, though, the ignorance of birds can be comical. I have heard Hoopoes referred to as parrots and a Common Sandpiper as a baby stork! Despite my attempts (I have even, on occasion, used passages from Ali as translation exercises) it's a struggle to stimulate any real interest. The only people here who seem to know anything about birds are the hunters (thankfully in rapid decline). There is, however, a group of people here who have done a great deal for bird protection especially in their often, quite literal, fight against the hunters.

Sicily is beautiful and so are her birds. Behind the

chaos, the bureaucracy, the corruption and the ignorance, there are temples, traditions, dignity and always the flutter of wings.



SPRING ALIVE! MAY 21ST 2013

by Ugo Faralli, Reserves Manager

A day of festival on LIPU'S reserves.

This year's festival on 21 May should have been an occasion for the staff of LIPU reserves to welcome returning migrants and for the enthusiast and the merely curious to see them; sadly the, main feature of the day was the bad weather Although our staff and volunteers did run the various planned activities some programmes had to be curtailed and four cancelled altogether.

Let us tell you, then about May 21st. Making our way from south to north, just as the Swallows, Bee-eaters, White and Black Storks and Little Bitterns do, this is what our people have tell us about what happened on their reserves.

We begin in Puglia at the Oasis Gravina di Laterza. Vittorio Giacoia and Manuel Marra wrote:

The weather was fine. At 10 20 people, including four children arrived and after a short talk we took them along the main path, seeing black kite, buzzards, a peregrine, kestrels and lesser kestrel

We gained five new members and during the rest of the day forty more people came and were taken round the reserve.

Now to Stivale very near Rome and the Castel di Guido Reserve: Alessia De Lorenzis wrote:

We had a sunny day and some 70 people including more than 40 children came. Just as we have done for the last 13 years we gave a 10 minute talk about the reserve and then, before the guided visit we released a fox and a barn owl that had been cared for at the Recuperation Centre in Rome. You can imagine how much this meant to such a group - total joy! Thanks to a real spring day - sunny but fresh - to stimulate the senses the guided walk was well attended. The sky was full of swifts, kites, bee eaters and the call of the cuckoo. There were tits, serins , nightingales and butterflies of every colour. We ended with a tasting of produce from the farm

Leaving Rome we come to Venice and, between the sea and the lagoon, Ca' Roman. It became (thanks to us) a nature reserve not long ago. Michele Pegorer writes:

It was a memorable festival day for us. Over 120 visitors were met by four helpers who managed the stall under the gazebo. Also there were Paulo and Pierpaulo who work for the city of Venice and are

responsible for the protection and cleanliness of the beach. The visits were run by Silvia, our education officer, Fedirico, the previous reserve manager, and by me. The weather held all day and although only one family joined we had many compliments and promises of donations. There was a cherry on the cake! We saw a Kentish Plover nest building in an area intentionally left unfenced near the public path to the beach. A group of volunteers quickly put a fence around the nest and, despite their haste, the female was not disturbed at all.

To all those who took part in our festival - here's to 2014!

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I am indebted to the hard work of our team of translators who were, for this edition, Barbara Avery, Joanna Bazen, Abigail Cummings, Daria Dadam, Giuseppina Fazzina, Tony Harris, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

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Line drawings are used courtesy of the RSPB.

The photographs used in this issue are © Marco di Silvi for the Messina pictures, Fabio Cilea for the Marsh Harrier, Alessia De Lorenzis for the festival day at Castel di Guido where she is the warden and the Squacco Heron is © David Lingard.

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above: Marsh Harrier migrating through Calabria.

below: Plenty for the children at LIPU Oasis, Castel di Guido near Rome, page 28.

A fearsome crew.

Four of the team of volunteers at the Messina camp, which is funded by LIPU-UK every year, with a message for us.