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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- White Stork days
- Urban Herring Gulls
- Bonelli's Eagle breeding success
- EU directives under threat

Summer 2015

Renewal of the pair bond – White Storks at the nest "bill clacking"

The excellent cover shot of the young Bonelli's Eagle is © *Saverio Cacopardi,* the other images in this edition of the Ali are © *David Lingard*

Yellow-legged Gulls are becoming more common in urban areas - see p 17

The bad face of some charities

Editorial

David Lingard

I've just read in the papers a scathing condemnation of "charities" which harass, pressurise and even coerce people into giving money and then, having succeeded, increase the pressure to squeeze even more from their donors. I am disgusted.

Perhaps I am naïve but, to me, charity is about doing good not being aggressive and greedy, but the today's perception of "charity" was brought home to me recently when we launched an appeal in a national magazine. We had a reasonable response, perhaps not as good as I had hoped, but what surprised me was that almost a half of donations received were anonymous. Clearly people were keen to help but wanted to avoid having their details sold or passed around on dubious mailing lists.

It goes, almost without saying, that we will never lower our standards and behave in this way – to us this is unethical and completely indefensible.

LIPU-UK is remarkably successful in its prime role of raising funds to support the conservation and protection of birds in Italy – and that is entirely because of its members, but to continue we must do everything we can to preserve the membership and, indeed, to increase its strength. As you know, our numbers are slowly decreasing and we have tried all methods of recruitment we know of, and many that have been suggested by members themselves and none has been very successful.

Of course, our cause is not "mainstream" – not many nations will support bird protection in a country not their own so it will never be easy to appeal to a wide audience and that makes you all the more important. Do you know any friends, acquaintances or anyone else who might share your concern for the birds in Italy and want to do something about it?

In the months ahead I shall be mailing small recruitment packs which have been provided by member, Alan Taylor, and we both hope that these might be useful in spreading our message.

As far as I can tell the decline in our membership is not caused by a loss of interest but by the march of time – the one thing we can do nothing about so your loyalty is truly appreciated – thank you.

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A NEW WHITE STORK RECORD IN 2014 – 277 NESTING PAIRS AND 537 FLEDGLINGS

Despite being a species well loved by the Italian public, thirty years ago White Storks were extinct in Italy.

Until two years ago there were only 100 nesting pairs and now that figure has almost tripled to 277 nests in Italy in 2014, with 537 nestlings well cared for by their parents and finally flying the nest. This was announced by LIPU-BirdLife Italy on the eve of the 4th "Stork Days", an event organised by LIPU. There were seven sessions, from Saturday 6th June until Sunday 21st June, taking place in various regions of Italy from Piedmont to Sicily. Thanks to LIPU volunteers, the public was able to get close to White Stork nests and experience a glimpse of the nestlings. This is a rare and extraordinary sight, which mixes emotion with science and passion with knowledge gained from the LIPU teams.

As previously mentioned Stork Days took place from Saturday 6th June, with guided tours by volunteers from LIPU di Rende to the Crati River Valley, the Sibari Plains and the Neto Valley in Calabria. On Sunday 7th June, between 10 am and 12:30 pm, volunteers from LIPU Lodi offered guided tours of the Cerro al Lambro nests, as well as on Wednesday 10th June, Marzano, Lodi.

On the 7th of June LIPU di Alcamo, Palermo and Mazzara del vallo organised an outing (from 9 am to 12:30 pm) to the Arancio Lake in Sambuca di Sicilia. For further information email: lipualcamo@hotmail.com. The 14th June was LIPU Biella-Vercelli's turn to run the Stork Day at Rovasenda, where there was also a lunch at a local agricultural location. The White Stork group in Lombardy invited participants to join them on Saturday 20th June at three sessions in: Bornasco at 2 pm, Carbonara al Tivino at 3:30 pm, Zerbolò at 4:45 pm and finally meeting at Cascina Venara.

LIPU Stork Days 2014 came to an end on Sunday 21st June at the LIPU Sant'Elena di Silea Stork Centre in Veneto, which opened between 2 pm and 7 pm for the "Festa della Cicogna".

This year the region at the top of the leader board for the highest number of nesting pairs is Sicily with 76, closely followed by Lombardy with 67 and Piedmont with 54. Calabria, Friulia Venezia-Giulia

and Puglia also did well with 18, 21 and 15 nesting pairs respectively. White Storks also nested in Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Campania and Sardinia. The previous record for nesting pairs is held by Lombardy with 152, followed by Sicily with 93 and Calabria with 53.

White Storks spend the winter months in Africa and in spring they migrate along the Straits of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus and, as well as along the Strait of Messina but in lower numbers. They then go on to nest in Europe, especially in eastern regions. In Europe there are 220,000 nesting pairs, while after a long absence in Italy, there are now 277 nesting pairs.

White Storks are large birds and their wingspan measures more than two metres. They nest in agricultural areas which means they have easy access to marshlands, swamps, trees, buildings, ruins and artificial structures. When couples meet in the nest they let out a distinctive sound using their beaks, it can be described as a bill-clapping and can be heard clearly from some distance.

On a European level, the threat of extinction for White Storks has decreased so much so that it has been giving a rating of "Least Concern" on the recent IUCN Red List of threatened birds.

The Symbols of the White Storks

Since ancient times, the stork has always evoked strong symbolic meanings. One of these is of love within a marriage, derived from this species' loyalty to each other. Another symbol is that of piety (pietas in Latin) to their parents as they care for them when they are too old to gather food to eat. This is one reason why they were respected by the ancient Egyptians and in ancient Rome, the White Stork was a symbol on their coins alongside a bust of Pietas The symbol of the stork was used from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

In other countries, for example Japan and China, the stork symbolises longevity. Another reason for which storks have been and still are valued is because they hunt snakes. The Thessaloniki, an ancient Greek community, sentenced to death anyone who killed these birds.

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A POISON BANQUET

By Marco Gustin, LIPU head of species and research

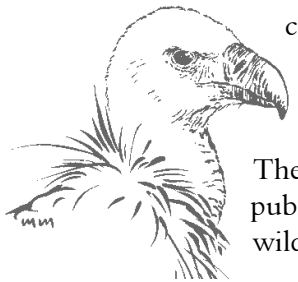
LIPU continues to campaign against Diclofenac, a drug responsible for the mass poisoning of vultures. And to encourage the opening of "vulture restaurants" to provide a safe supply of food.

A large number of vultures could die, and yet the European Union still turns a blind eye. We are talking about Diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug that is legal to use on domestic animals in Italy and Spain. This substance is extremely toxic to vultures, and in Asia has been responsible for dramatic losses of almost 99 percent in some species of these splendid birds. A few carcasses of treated livestock is all it takes to cause a slaughter. This is why LIPU has started both an awareness campaign and an online

petition at www.lipu.it/salviamogliavvoltoi, urging the Italian government and the European Commission to outlaw veterinary use of Diclofenac in favour of the non-toxic alternatives.

The grave problem of Diclofenac was highlighted in a conference held last February at the Canale Monterano nature reserve in Lazio. One discussion topic was the use of vulture "restaurants" – feeding stations – and how the supplementary feeding that they provide can significantly help the survival of scavenger species. Certainly it can increase reproductive success in individual populations as well as helping adult individuals to survive. An abundance of food also encourages an individual population to remain in an area for longer periods. However, in addition to the positive effects, the appeal of such stations is dampened by negative side effects, including a reduction in breeding success (number of chicks raised) due to increased competition among individuals, and loss of reproductive fitness (individual contributions to the gene pool).

Vulture feeding stations are not capable of resolving all the problems connected with the conservation of scavenger species, and must not be used as an excuse for avoiding more direct intervention: stopping the use of poisoned bait, the proliferation of wind turbines, and poaching. However, they are an efficient and effective tool in conserving endangered species of scavengers, which in Italy means Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture and Red Kite. They are also important in raising public awareness, and attracting wildlife photographers and tourists.



They both publicise environmental issues, in this case the problem of Diclofenac, and ensure the continued survival of these animals by providing clean carcasses.
In Italy there are currently ten or so authorised vulture feeding stations, a much smaller number than the 200 active in Spain. One important idea to come out of the Canale Monterano conference was proposed by Davide Brugnone from Sardinia: the creation of individual farm feeding stations to help protect and conserve the residual Griffon Vulture population around Bosa in Sardinia. These feeding stations would provide mutton scraps to guarantee safe "natural" food, geographically well distributed in the target area. In short a good number of small, lightweight feeding stations, spread throughout the last breeding area of Griffon Vultures in Sardinia, would help to increase numbers. For this to work, farmers must not put out any food which has been treated with antibiotics or anti-inflammatory drugs in general, and especially not containing Diclofenac. A supply of safe food will be an important step forward in achieving effective and efficient protection for these fascinating inhabitants of the sky.

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NATURE – THANKS TO LIPU-UK

By Claudio Celada, LIPU Conservation Director

There are Bitterns, Kingfishers, Great Reed Warblers and various colonially nesting heron species. All species that now, thanks to a partnership between LIPU and Burchvif, the Borgolavezzaro Cultural Association, can be seen chez nous, or rather at the Boverio Reedbed, a wetland situated

alongside the Torrente Agogna, in the rice-growing plains of Pavia, in the commune of Nicorvo. Yes, because with the help of a donation from our British branch LIPU-UK, and funds made available by Burchvif, the whole area has become the property of the two associations. Through this combined operation the associations have secured a precious sliver of nature, that hosts, as well as the birds mentioned above, the Large Copper, a rare butterfly protected under that Habitats Directive. With this we have completed the protection of an outstanding system of wetlands within the rice plains, that stretch across Piedmont and Lombardy. As this is being written comes news of the first breeding success here of the Bittern – a true milestone.

Investment in nature in the context of ever more intensive agriculture is of fundamental importance for the future of our most threatened biodiversity. For this reason, LIPU and Burchvif made the strategic decision of uniting their objectives, thus setting forth a highly intriguing model for cooperation. The objective now in hand is to take on the management of the state-owned oxbow lake that loops round the reedbed and protects it.

An important donation meanwhile came last December at Cuneo, at the Crava Morozzo Nature Reserve. Here over time a plot of land of about a hectare, the property of Luigi Bertaro, a LIPU Cuneo member, has been transformed, thanks to the support of regional funding, into a splendid pond that had quickly attracted the attention of Black-winged Stilt, which then had settled in numbers. Now thanks to an act of great generosity from Signor Bertero, the pond has been donated to LIPU, that now can speak of the property as the heart of the reserve, of these three hectares and more of wetland, home to stilts, Coots and Little Grebes, for the joy of so many enthusiasts and visitors to this LIPU reserve.

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FOCUS

By Giorgia Gaibani, LIPU officer for IBAs and Natura 2000 sites

The European Commission evaluates the state of health of the Birds and Habitats Directives. And BirdLife is mobilising to defend them:

Fitness check for the Birds and Habitats Directives. Opaque words to say something simple and important at the same time: the carrying out of an evaluation, set in motion a few months ago by the EU, of the state of health of the two directives of greatest importance for the defence of nature. It is a period however that some might take as an opportunity for an attack on the directives in order to water them down.

The Birds and Habitats Directives are the most complete and important normative instruments for the protection of biodiversity at the European level: the first safeguards all wild birds, while the second is concerned with the protection of habitats and species other than birds. It is at the heart of European policy for the preservation of biodiversity that led to the creation of the Natura 2000 network.

In the case of Italy the two directives are the foundation for the provisions for the protection of biodiversity contained in laws 157 from 1992 and 357 in 1997, that among their articles introduced the requirement to carry out Environmental Impact Assessments for all projects with the potential for having a significant negative effect on Natura 2000 sites.

The European Commission has now deemed it necessary to open a phase of assessment of the directives in order to evaluate whether they are still adequate and effective enough to carry out the objectives for which they were approved, and to decide on their future.

The danger however is that there will be those who will seek to profit from this by modifying and weakening them, thus taking a dangerous step backwards in terms of the objectives gained up to now.

It is thanks to these directives that it is possible throughout the EU to protect habitats and species, to halt projects damaging to nature, to restore sites important for biodiversity, and to create and improve connections between them.

There is no lack of positive outcomes. Many Natura 2000 sites have been the subject of effective management plans which have led to measures for conservation being put in at ground level. For example, there is in Piemonte the Special Protection Area of the San Genuario Marshes, where steps were taken (such as reedbed management and the elimination of disturbance) which increased the population of Purple Herons from 18-20 pairs

in 2005 to 49-54 in 2012 (see the Ornithological Reports for the Piemonte-Valle d' Aosta region for those years in the Rivista Piemontese di Storia Naturale for 2007 and 2013). There were also increased numbers of Bittern, Little Bittern and Marsh Harrier.

Furthermore, many Life projects contributed to increasing populations of endangered species, such as the Gypaete project which saw an increase in numbers of both individuals and breeding pairs of Lammergeiers in the Alps, in Italy not least.

The correct use of impact assessments has indeed stopped development from harming habitats and species. In the project for the moving of a pipeline that took place at Saline di Priolo, a Site of Community Interest and a Special Protection Area as well as a LIPU reserve, provisions were made, within the context of those already planned for the reduction of any negative impacts from the project as a whole, for the creation of nest sites for various bird species, thanks to which the population of Little Tern has increased in the years following the project, going from a maximum of 38 pairs, nesting on an irregular basis prior to 2004, to 162 pairs in 2013.

But the European directives do much more for our quality of life: as well as conserving biodiversity they make an essential contribution to the preservation of the natural resources on which we depend, such as water and air quality, the soil and the basic materials that ecosystems provide.

These are only a few of the positive examples which demonstrate the when the Birds and Habitats Directives are correctly applied they can lead to

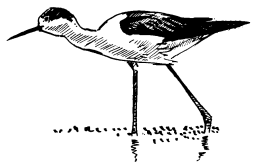
major successes in the protection of biodiversity. It is therefore important that people at large give their support to the environmental directives throughout the progress of the Fitness Check by signing the LIPU appeal which can be found at: http://www.lipu.it/allarmenatura/

allarmenatura: 29 countries mobilised

Over 100,000 signatures were collected in the first two weeks of the campaign, including those of Fiorello and Gianni Morandi, and nearly 200,000 when Ali went to press. There is still time to sign, up to July 21st, at www.lipu.it/allarmenatura. Make haste!

A message from Rome

During the 50th anniversary celebrations, LIPU sent out an impassioned call for the future of European biodiversity: " We ask that the institutions of the EU listen to the voice of civil society, and based on the evidence that European laws are the foundation of truly sustainable development, that they bring their powers to bear on the correct and decisive implementation of existing laws, and avoid the damage caused by putting them in question. It would be better by far to look to increasing respect for European legislation, and to enforce fully the Directives for Nature, and to make available at all levels the necessary resources for this to come about"



PO DELTA SPECIAL EVENT

By Danilo Selvaggi, Director General, LIPU

LIPU is celebrating the naming of Comacchio as a Birdwatching City and is launching the challenge of promoting tourism which would have nature at its centre.

A special municipal council meeting which convened in the afternoon of 20 March at the end of a day of festivities welcomed LIPU's suggestion and declared Comacchio as a Birdwatching City. This was a symbolic act which had the aim of stimulating the Adriatic community at the heart of one of the most important areas in Europe for migrating birds to make biodiversity and especially birdwatching the real treasure of the local community.

Proclaiming the Birdwatching City is in a certain sense the end of a long journey which, over so many years, has seen LIPU team up with Comacchio and the whole area of the Po Delta. It was in 1984 when in Comacchio itself, LIPU held the 19th National Assembly, organized to promote the creation of the Delta Park, which would come into being a few years later. Ten years later, in 1994, LIPU produced a great action plan for the area, a project which combined nature conservation, local culture and tourism plans which remained as plans but which, when put into action, would represent a great springboard for the development of the area.

Twenty years on in 2014, the reports were relaunched with a new LIPU National Assembly and with BirdWilDestination, which is a project aiming to publicise throughout Europe the potential for

birdwatching and ecotourism in the Po Delta as well as giving serious consideration to the current problems.

Now in the spring of 2015 the President and the Director General of LIPU have written a letter to the Mayor of Comacchio, inviting the city to become the Italian Birdwatching capital. This invitation was enthusiastically welcomed by the town council and greeted with two days of festivities in the form of "guerrilla" meetings and actions which involved the young people of Comacchio decorating the streets, starting from the Three Bridges, with banners, installations and hundreds of little models of migratory birds.

Nevertheless, the aim is above all a new point of departure, so that the title of Birdwatching City can provide the incentive for better conserving and valuing the marvels of nature of these places, starting by solving the problems that afflict them. In order to do this LIPU has made up a detailed dossier, with the title L'occasione del Delta (Delta Special Event), which comprises an initial general analysis of the situation of the region and suggests steps that could be taken.

The next months and even years will be very important for making the most of this great opportunity for the nature of the Po Delta.

Po Delta: the promised land for wild birds

- More than 370 species of wild birds observed
- 11 wet zones of international importance under the terms of the Ramsar Convention
- 34 protected European zones of which 18 SCIs – Sites of Community Interest and 16 SPAs – Special Protection Areas
- A large IBA (Important Bird Area), established because of the importance of the birds accommodated and of their habitat, and especially because of the presence of Purple Herons, Marsh Harriers, Sandwich Terns, Mediterranean Gulls, Spoonbills
- almost 200,000 individual overwintering wild birds observed each year
- 30 species present in numbers over the national threshold
- 12 species which surpass the international threshold

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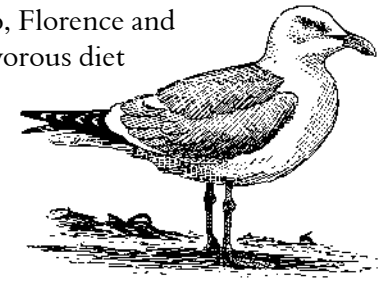
NEIGHBOURS WITH WINGS

By Marco Dinetti, LIPU's Urban Ecology Officer

With a significant growth in the numbers of Herring gulls in many Italian cities, there have been growing problems with getting on with their human neighbours. But solutions there are.

They swoop through the skies across the world, the symbol of flight, of the sea and of freedom. Not so many people know, however, that there are some 43 species of them distributed across Europe, Asia and North America. In Italy there are some rare

ones, restricted to the sea, such as the Corsican (Audouin's) gull which nests in Sardinia and in the islands off Tuscany. The most frequently seen is, however, the Herring Gull (*Larus michahellis* – the Yellow-legged Herring gull). A master of flight, who, from being a hunter-gatherer and "street sweeper" of the sea, began by following fishermen and ending up occupying inland habitats as well. Today, in fact, it nests in the greater part of the coastal cities: from Genoa to La Spezia, from Leghorn to Naples, from Trapani to Cagliari as far as Venice and Trieste but also Turin, Bolzano, Florence and Rome. It has an omnivorous diet and will happily take other animals, from pigeons to starlings and even swallows and pipistrelle bats.



Adaptability is the secret of its success which in Italy has taken the current population to between 90 and 100 thousand individuals through recent growth. This is thanks to the open rubbish tips which we leave entirely at their disposal.

What is new in the last 20 years is that the gulls have taken the roofs of our houses for little islets raised up and undisturbed where they can make their nest.

In the months of May and June, the young hatch from the egg and begin to wander around and about the nest. The parents keep a close guard on them and chase off all "intruders" from the roofs, terraces and sun verandahs. It is above all at this point that the problem of living with them emerges, a difficulty which can be resolved particularly with the

installation in the period which precedes nesting of special dissuaders.

There are two projects in force. The first at the Old Fort of Leghorn, on behalf of the local Port Authority, with the installation of fixed discouragement and the development of an educational programme aimed at townsfolk and tourists. In Naples, on the other hand, a project is already up and running, "SOS sea-gull" run by volunteers from LIPU Naples and supported by the Hunting Authority of Naples.

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NEWS RELEASE; 12 JUNE 2015

Approved yesterday in the Chamber of Deputies, regulations which forbid the use of nets for the capture of live decoys.

"It is the end of a detestable practice. Thanks to all the deputies who campaigned for it. Now we must have the law confirmed in the Senate and work for the complete abolition of live lures."

With the approval by the Chamber of Deputies of Article 19 of the European Law of 2014, Italy forbids categorically all possible captures of wild birds as live bait and makes a start to put right its own community violation of the European Directive 2009/147/CE (Directive on birds).

The violation had already been made public in 2010 following an investigation (EU-pilot procedure 1611/10/ENVI) through which the European Commission reported how Italy, by using nets to trap wild birds to use as bait in hunting activities, had

broken Article 8 of the Birds Directive.

As we had foreseen and stated, the legislative measures, adopted last year by the government and Parliament, turned out not to be fit for purpose in responding to the challenge of the European Commission. The Commission was not limiting itself to asking for a halt to the capture by forbidden means (and thus, in fact, by all means) but was also bringing to the attention of Italy the opportunity of banning the use of live birds as bait for hunting. Hunting , as the European Commission maintains, can continue perfectly well without the use of live lures.

The ongoing action against the violation pursued by Europe (2014.2006) has finally forced Italy to adopt a timely solution which has lead yesterday to the approval of Article 19 of the European Law which forbids the use of nets for the trapping of wild birds and, basically, puts an end to all forms of trapping for bait.

" It is a very important step, decades overdue, for which we thank the deputies who have fought for it and even the Government which, after the hesitations of the last few years, has finally been convinced to do the right thing – the Associations will confirm it. Now the text comes to the Senate, which will have to confirm it without any changes and by a single command turn it into law, thus finally consigning to history the sad chapter of the trapping of wild birds and so making it possible to work for the complete abolition of live bait.

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OASI

Ugo Faralli, responsible for LIPU Oasi and reserves

The "Red" Heron

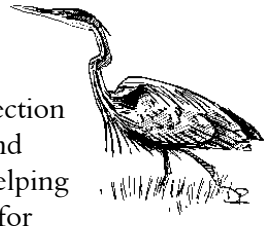
It is the less familiar "cousin" of the white and grey heron, and is not always to be seen in Italy - the Purple Heron migrates to Africa for the winter and back to Italy in the spring to nest.

Let's look at this less well known heron; not the heron that we see all over the country and throughout the year, cold and motionless in the plains in the winter and then in the summer in flight over the forests where it nests. That's the main difference, the "Red" is a migratory bird and when we see the herons on Christmas Day along roadsides, along ditches and canals, ours is in Africa, always close to the water, but enjoying temperatures of 30 degrees or more. The presence of water, wetlands is the link between the two. To nest, the Grey Heron needs forests of willows, alders, poplars, the red cousin id happier with thick reeds and quiet areas at the edge of ponds, swamps or lakes.

The Purple Heron, then, needs reedbeds and among the places that 2000 pairs of *Ardea purpurea* every year choose to nest in Italian are LIPU reserves. From north to south: the nature reserve of the Brabbia Marsh near Lake Varese; the marshes of Ostiglia between Lombardy and Veneto; Cave Gaggio near Venice; the Chiarone-Massaciuccoli oasis on the shores of the lake and the Saline di Priolo near Syracuse in Sicily. More scattered groups, and sometimes just a single pair, occur in Santa Luce, in Torrile, and Pantanello, where there have been irregular signs of the start of colonisation in recent

years. The colonies, the real ones, are mentioned in the five nature reserves and in the reeds of the Centre of Mediterranean habitat, Ostia.

Here are the data of 2014: five couples at Brabbia Marsh, between 25 and 30 at Ostiglia, seven at Cave Gaggio, seven at Ostia. For a total of 49 pairs, these data were collected by our staff and by researchers on site. A very small percentage of the total 2000 couples throughout Italy, but with the interesting fact of a positive trend in recent years. We have seen increases in Ostiglia, Cave Gaggio and Massaciuccoli, where the protection of the areas on the one hand and reedbed management is also helping other species. At Cave Gaggio for example, the Purple Heron was present with only two pairs in 2004 and then, thanks to our "battles" (expansion of the oasis and recognition of the nature reserve and fishing ban in the extended zone) increased to seven in 2014 and it seems, from the first data this summer, 2015, to nine.



The work of staff and volunteers will be devoted, in the future, to ensure the best possible conditions for our herons. Their presence, along with our volunteers, in these areas of oases and nature reserves will be a warning to any attackers. Sure, the reserves are protected areas and our being there, as LIPU, is certainly a guarantee of protection from those who still today, want to reclaim wetlands, clear ponds and swamps and burning reeds. So that thousands and thousands of blue-green eggshells can continue to break in our oasis.

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ROUNDUP - FROM THE WORLD OF LIPU

From Andrea Mazza, LIPU press officer

Common and farmland birds still in decline

The new report on the status of common birds in Italy for 2014 has just been published, produced by Lipu and the countryside Network. The list assesses 104 common birds, 97 of which are found in the previous edition, and are subdivided mainly between those included in the farmland bird index (agricultural environments, under the code Fbi), the Farmland bird index for mountain pastures, (Fbi pm), and the Woodland bird index, Wbi. The species most in decline, according to the variation in annual averages, are for the Fbi pm, the Garden Warbler, down 8.5%, Redpoll (6.1%), and Whinchat (5.1%), while in the Fbi are found Wryneck (6.2%), Stonechat (5.5%), Short-toed Lark (4.8%), Red-backed Shrike (4.5%) and Skylark (5.2%), as well as the Italian, Tree and Spanish Sparrows. Woodland birds are doing slightly better, with increases in Marsh Tit, Firecrest, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Chaffinch and Nuthatch, though there have been declines in Bullfinch and Goldcrest.

European Red List, one in five birds at risk of extinction

18% of European birds, 67 species out of 451, or nearly one in five, are threatened with extinction. After three years of work, a consortium headed by BirdLife International, represented by Lipu in Italy, and financed by the European Commission, has published the new edition of the European Red List for birds. The new list follows the methodology of the IUCN, the International Union for the

Conservation of Nature, that is widely recognised as the most authoritative and objective for the evaluation of the risk of extinction to species. In the Critically Endangered group, those most at risk, are found ten species, including Balearic Shearwater, Slender-billed Curlew (which may indeed already be extinct, there having been no sightings since 1999), Sociable Plover, and Yellow-Breasted Bunting. Another 29 species have left the safety zone and entered the list of those under threat, among which are Oystercatcher, Razorbill, Ptarmigan, Kittiwake and Pochard. There are a few bright spots: 20 species have improved their conservation status, including some on the Italian list in the shape of Ferruginous Duck, Stone Curlew, Black Kite and Lesser Kestrel.

100 Bonelli's Eagles in Sicilian Skies

Over a hundred young Bonelli's Eagles have taken to the air in recent years. New pairs are holding territories never before used, or that had been abandoned for decades. These are the extraordinary results of a massive conservation project undertaken by Lipu and other organisations such as the WWF, the Committee Against Bird Slaughter and the Silene Cooperative, pooling their resources in Sicily to watch over the nest sites in greatest danger of depredation, and to monitor every breeding pair of Bonelli's Eagles on the island. A species put at risk by poachers who plunder the nests of eggs and young to sell into the illicit falconry trade. Thanks to the many volunteers in place from mid-March to the end of May in the most strategic areas, one may talk in terms of a highly positive balance sheet. A project with a happy ending? Let us hope so. Meanwhile, however, we must keep up our guard, and we would also like to see increased surveillance from the forces of law and order to overcome this menace.

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LEAVING IS LIVING

Migrating birds have no option; they have to face the challenges and dangers of migration in order to survive. And they do in their millions between their nesting and wintering grounds, twice every year. The EU Birds Directive protects all migratory species and only a few of them can be hunted, under certain conditions of timing and methods.

Sadly, the illegal killing of birds in the Mediterranean is widespread, representing a significant threat to the conservation of bird populations. Furthermore, most of the illegally killed birds are migratory, belonging to the group of birds that, during the last 40 years, has shown a marked downward population trend. While, in the distant past, the birds, appearing every year in large numbers during migration, were an important source of protein for the people in the Mediterranean, this is hardly the case nowadays. Particularly on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the killing of birds protected by the Birds Directive and by national legislation is mostly motivated as a 'cultural tradition'.

While traditions are important, human culture evolves and many 'traditions', such as public executions or physical punishments, have been abandoned because they became unacceptable. Unsustainable and illegal, the killing of protected migratory birds is no longer an acceptable 'tradition'.

A co-ordinated programme of activities

The BirdLife partners in Italy (LIPU), Greece (HOS) and Spain (SEO) have decided that coordinated actions and a common approach are required, and have obtained the financial support of the European Union through a LIFE + Information and Communication project. The project aims at changing the attitude of local communities at three hotspots: Sulcis (SW Sardinia), Ionian Islands (Western Greece), and the East of Spain (Catalonia, Valencia and SE Aragon). The BirdLife partners have launched the 'Leaving is Living' campaign, , which is aimed at explaining that migratory birds have the right to migrate, as this is a crucial part of their life cycle, and that illegal killing of birds must stop. The campaign tools include a website in the national languages and English a set of press advertisements, a radio spot, a number of videos and a documentary and a strong presence on social media. The campaign is also supported by national celebrities, such as TV personalities, singers, actors and writers.

Trapping and spring hunting are illegal

There are good reasons why these activities are illegal:
Snares, nets and lime sticks are indiscriminate in that they capture not only the target species (thrushes, some species of which are legally hunted with guns) but also birds which belong to protected species. Shooting birds during their migration toward their breeding grounds is unsustainable as the populations are at their lowest level, having suffered mortality during the two migration trips and winter, and are composed of potentially breeding birds: killing them directly affects the survival of the species.

Sardinia

The Sulcis is an area of vast forests in the SW of Sardinia: it's the largest surviving patch of continuous maquis in the Mediterranean basin. Each autumn and winter the area hosts hundreds of thousands of migrating birds, mostly Song Thrush that stop by during migration or overwinter here. The capture of migrating birds is a tradition which, until 1968, was regulated by the Regional government which issued a number of licenses for capturing wild passerines that were used for a local typical dish called 'Grive'. After the total ban of the activity, many continued to trap the wild birds to supply illegally the local restaurants of the main ingredient for the illegal 'delicacy'. The birds are trapped by special traps, placed among the woods, both on the ground or between branches. The traps consist of a snare and a bait. Those on the ground are powered by a spring, those on branches are composed by several snares that catch birds as they hop from branch to branch searching for food; in both cases the birds are strangled to a slow death.

Since 2005 LIPU has held an antipoaching camp each winter. The volunteers, coming from all parts of Italy, walk the hills surrounding the towns of Capoterra, Uta, Santadi and Assemini, removing traps and nets and working alongside the Law Enforcement Agencies to identify and report any poacher caught in the act of setting the traps or removing the birds. So far the volunteers have removed over 100,000 traps and have reported to the police a dozen people. Two restaurants offering the illegal 'Grive' have been identified and reported to the authorities. The Sulcis area suffers from high level of unemployment and the main employers are two oil refineries which are having an impact on the local environment. Because of the socio-economical situation some

consider poaching as a minor issue or as a legitimate source of alternative income, whatever the law says. Increasingly though, most people consider poaching unacceptable and believe it must be stopped.

Ionian Islands, Greece

Illegal killing during spring migration has taken place for decades in the Ionian Islands (more intensely in Zakynthos, Strofadia, Corfu, Paxoi and Othonoi), as these are situated along a major bird migratory route. This illegal activity is deeply ingrained in the local culture. It also represents an economic benefit for the local community, as land in the "best spots" is rented out during about three weeks between end of March and the early April. The illegal activity in the Ionian Islands is particularly severe: HOS surveys indicate that gunshot numbers may reach up to 15,000 per day during a day with "good" south winds.

The main species targeted is the Turtle Dove, whose conservation status is classified as 'Unfavourable' in the EU. According to BirdLife International its population has declined by 66% since 1980.

During the illegal spring killing, several other species of migratory raptors and herons are shot as well such as Hen and Marsh Harriers, Red-footed Falcon, Kestrel and Grey Heron. Killing of migratory birds takes place during the return of the birds from Africa to the breeding grounds in Europe. The Ionian Islands are the first stopover for rest and food en route towards Northern Europe for the arriving birds. Recent research has shown that Turtle Doves that land in the Ionian Islands have lower body masses compared to those occurring in other parts of the Mediterranean in the same period, due to the longer distance they have to cover to reach the east Mediterranean. The main problem this campaign is tackling is the almost total lack of awareness among the general public, the authorities and the younger generation regarding the EU's spring hunting ban, which was imposed in the 1980s. Even though three decades have passed, Greece is not implementing the ban properly. Following HOS work, in 2015 six poachers were arrested!

Mediterranean coast, Spain

Each autumn, up to 1.5 million birds are illegally killed - among them hundreds of thousands are protected birds - in more than 2,000 illegal 'paranys' distributed throughout along the Mediterranean coast of Spain and particularly in the regions of Castellon, north of Valencia, Tarragona and south and southeast of Aragon. The 'parany' is a method of trapping birds when they land in trees specially pruned and covered with lime. The birds get glued and cannot fly and eventually fall to the ground, where they are collected by the trappers. The species affected are mainly Thrushes but some 30% of the birds caught belong to protected species.

This activity is therefore illegal twice: it uses a non selective method and kills protected species. The traps, attract bird by playing their recorded calls all night long, during the autumn migration. In these regions up to 1.5 million birds are killed in just over one month. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of paranys, but the penalties for illegal trappers have declined and local authorities do not intervene as it is considered a 'traditional' activity. The activity has a strong local support and local authorities have attempted, so far in vain thanks

to SEO's activities, to 'legalize' an activity which is illegal according to European and national laws.

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I am grateful, as always, to my team of translators who do such sterling work in changing the Italian text to English. For this edition they were: Barbara Avery, Abigail Cummings, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

This work would be very different without email and the Internet; Abigail is currently working in China and regular translators, currently on holiday, are Giuseppina Fazzina who lives in Trinidad and Tony Harris who is in Sicily.

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TAIL FEATHERS

Another plea to anyone who might fancy the challenge and pleasure of taking over the role of UK Delegate - please get in touch without any sort of commitment. If we can find a successor I would envisage a long hand over period to make the transition as easy as possible. I am content to continue in the role for the foreseeable future but I can't go on for ever and wouldn't want to see the work of LIPU-UK come to an end.

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Silent killers are hard to see - traps near Capoterra, Sardinia - see p 27 below: The Purple Heron, described on p 21

Lammergeier breeds in the Alps.
Will they be threatened by a
Fitness Review of the Birds and
Habitats Directives?