# ali

Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- Lammergeiers in the Alps
- Rice and the Night Heron
- Natura 2000 sites threatened
- Brabbia Marsh nature reserve

*Autumn 2017*

Photo © Ciro De Simone

Some of the heron species which are dependent on rice fields in Italy; Black-crowned Night Heron, above, and Little and Great White Egrets below. see page 17.

Photo © Alessio Caria



## Editorial

*David Lingard*

# The Lammergeier

This Autumn edition of the Ali is a little later than usual but the reason has much in common with one of the items in this issue. We have just returned from another holiday in one of our favourite places in Europe – the French Pyrenees, where the bird watching can be spectacular. Raptors are particularly numerous in September which is the tail end of the autumn migration and we joined the French group who monitor and record the passage of these birds through the Col de Soulor. On a busy day it is easy to become blasé after counting Egyptian Vultures, Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Black Storks, Booted and Short-toed Eagles as well as various harriers. There are also the common resident Griffon Vultures which hardly cause a stir but, then, there is a cry and the group all turn to see the bird just found – a majestic Lammergeier, or Bearded Vulture, not difficult to find in these mountains but every sighting is a special event.

It is heartening to read the account of the reintroduction of this wonderful bird into the Alps and I'm sure that all in LIPU will wish this project every success.

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## FROM THE FIRST FLOOR

*Danilo Selvaggi, LIPU Director General*

### (Real) fantastic beasts and where to find them

Fantasy worlds and imaginary zoology: a deception that disconnects us from science – or an invitation to discover nature and to take better care of it?

"So you save these creatures?" The aspiring baker, Jacob Kowalski, recovers from the initial shock of the adventure he finds himself part of, and puts a question to the young Newt Scamander. "Yes, that's correct", replies Scamander. "I save them, I feed them, and I protect them".

*"I save them, I feed them, and I protect them".*

As if by magic, animals never before seen emerge from Scamander's suitcase: the Mooncalf with large face-filling eyes, the Occamy whose silver nests are hunted for plunder, the Diricawl, small, plump birds resembling a dodo, and so on. A whirlwind of colour, light, and fanciful shapes, right down to the Graphorn, large, with horns and a hump, of which only a single breeding pair remains. "If I hadn't been able to save this pair", says Newt Scamander, "it would have been the end of the Graphorn, for good".

This same reasoning pushes Scamander into action. Animals have become lost, and even though they belong to a supernatural dimension, they are in danger too. "I must find them before they are hurt. They are in an unfamiliar country, surrounded by the most ferocious species on the planet – man".



### Fantasy zoology, ancient roots

"Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them" is a novel by J K Rowling, a spin-off from the Harry Potter saga, and now a very successful film. Newt Scamander is the protagonist: a young wizard who arrives in New York from England with a suitcase full of worlds, a suitcase from which several animals have escaped. And not just any kind of animals – fantastic animals.

J K Rowling's writing is a work of fantasy, the most successful literary genre today. In films and books, watched and read by the hundreds of millions, this is a frenzy which has left no-one untouched. In science and education this has become a hot topic – is this really a good way to look at the world? Do we risk the muddying of facts and the corruption of knowledge?

In truth, the human desire for fantasy tales, and in particular for fantastic creatures, is centuries old, spanning history, crossing cultures, attracting writers, artists and scholars, scientists included. Starting with Aristotle, philosopher and "investigator" of nature, to whom we owe the first zoological treatise (the fourth-century BC *"Parts of Animals and History of Animals"*), a large number of naturalists have, over the centuries, entered the world of imaginary animals, creating new zoologies as well as studying the traditional ones.

And so, alongside eagles and foxes, alongside whales and nightingales, exists an imaginary zoo of phoenix, gorgons, chimera that occupy a significant place in our cultural history.

## I saw a crow with many heads

Every era has its stories of imaginary beasts. The Old Testament describes Leviathan, a gigantic fish-reptile, half-way between a whale and a crocodile, Ziz, a large raptor that also appears in the Jewish Kabbalah, and Behemoth, part elephant, part hippopotamus, also the first animal created by God.

Greek and Latin literature, from Aesop, through Pliny the Elder, to the all-important anonymous work known as the Physiologus, is filled with unicorns, hydra, basilisks and other fantasy-fauna. Often borrowed from ancient Babylonian, Egyptian or Indian traditions, these animals have been re-shaped to suit the needs of the time, including their use in moral allegory.

*The fantastic is certainly not out of fashion, and is, if anything, undergoing a new golden age of popularity*

The Middle Ages are particularly rich in the symbolic use of fantastic beasts and animals in general. Mediaeval culture is permeated by a vision of nature in which the human body, the earth, and matter in general represent the kingdom of evil. In this light animals inevitably embody the baser part of nature, if not of evil itself (the cockerel and the black cat), whereas fantastic beasts amplify the negative characteristics of beasts in general. “I saw a crow with many heads” – recalls one of the mediaeval bestiaries – “of such a black that does not exist in nature, and with eyes so cruel that only the devil could have painted them”.

The 17th and 18th century moved this fantastical universe to a secondary plane, marginalised by the technical-scientific revolutions of the age. But this was only a passing phase. The 19th century saw a resurgence of magic (in gothic literature for instance), expanding its application to the wider world.

And what of the present, the here and now? What of this age of global communication and pervasive technology? The fantastic is certainly not out of fashion, and is, if anything, undergoing a new golden age of popularity, especially in the form of fantasy. Why this popularity, and what does fantasy mean for our perception of real-world nature?

## The case against fantasy

The geneticist Edoardo Boncinelli, and before him the mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi, has been a heavy critic of the world of fantasy. The problem, according to Boncinelli, arises from our exaggerated need to escape and avoid responsibility when faced with the real world. Whenever reality becomes difficult to deal with, or seems to overwhelm us, we take refuge in the magical. Whenever we are forced to grapple with the complexity of nature, we turn our backs on science, knowledge, responsibility, and take refuge in the metaphysical. Fantasy, in the form of books, stories, films, becomes a safe hideaway, and an irresistible temptation.

Boncinelli’s criticism is not new (see the earliest studies of magical thought) however it is widely shared in the scientific community, which remains doubtful of the educational value of the “fantastic” approach to reality. “This is not a helpful way to explain nature” writes a biology teacher on his blog. “We confuse children when we let them believe in impossible worlds and imaginary animals, and we create distance between them and the real world”. This is a serious criticism, made more serious by

concern at the spread of anti-scientific and anti-rational thought (especially through the internet).

But is this judgement of fantasy too harsh perhaps, or too one-sided? Is there not positive energy arising from these fantastic narratives? Are fantasy and science necessarily enemies? Does the construction of alternative worlds and imaginary zoologies not also encourage us to look at the real world through new eyes, embarking on journeys full of surprise, and may this not ultimately help the development of science?

## The virtue of the fantastic

We have already observed how many scholars combine the fantastic with proper scientific investigation, in some cases (particularly in ancient times) because they were truly convinced of the existence of supernatural animals, and in other cases because the creative possibilities of magical zoology helped to fuel scientific reasoning. Fantasy answers not only to the human need for evasion, but also becomes a sort of mental gymnastics, a special entry into the real world: by creating non-existent animals we prepare ourselves better for the understanding of those that do in fact exist.

The great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, who has made the metaphysical story his trademark (as well as writing an informative manual of zoological fantasy), has stressed the formative power of fantasy tales as an exercise in logic; terrain where creativity is always tempered by rules and reasoning. The stories of Borges lead us into a universe of impossible libraries and cities of immortals, but also into worlds that respond to a rigorous internal logic. Borges believed that the fantastic can only fascinate us for a



short time, after which its cold distance will scare us, causing us to return to the real world with renewed desire. This is the other virtue of fantasy – its secret exaltation of reality.

Amongst the most beautiful pages of Borges are those which describe life: the rustling of leaves blown by the wind, the casual shape of clouds, the smell of earth after rain, a certain type of light at sunset, the sudden bursting into song of a little bird, the amazement at discovering – every time that we forget – that a rose has indeed the scent of a rose. Fantasy leads to reality; the point of aim, the destination.

"So we should not be surprised", says Borges, "if something which we imagine in our wildest dreams, an endless book, an impossible creature, or one we thought to be impossible, is indeed found in real life, and possibly even more seductive than the dream".

## Fantastic for real

Fantastic animals exist outside books, outside films. They populate the real world. Like the Club-winged Manakin *(Machaeropterus deliciosus)*, whose wings sound notes like a violin in the misty forests of Ecuador. Or the birds of paradise with their incredible dances, amazing plumage and extraordinary nests. Or the beak and majestic colours of a toucan. Or the tens of thousands of breeding birds – Fulmars, Guillemots, the marvellous Razorbills – on the rocks of Northern latitudes. Or the harmonious steps of Flamingoes in the Italian, European and African wetlands. Or the nocturnal emergence of badgers and hedgehogs, bizarre, almost alien mammals. Or the uncountable variety of insects, or the dark depths of the sea which hold

*Paradise is not elsewhere. It is here, on this earth. Hell is when we fail to see it.*

who-knows-what zoological oddities. Or the sudden appearance of an animal never seen before. “Come and look, there is a strange bird in the garden. With an orange body and a black-and-white crest”. “Oh, that must be a hoopoe, the symbol of LIPU”. Or the daily discovery of small, natural marvels in the LIPU Oases, a stone’s throw from the bustle and concrete of our towns. Or the account of a primary-school child who, years ago, entered a LIPU competition to “Describe Nature” by recalling the bird he would sometimes see fly outside his window, amongst the roofs of the village, but which couldn’t possibly exist because blue birds do not exist. And so he thought he was dreaming. Scientific name: *Monticola solitairius*; Italian name: Passero solitario (solitary sparrow); common name: Blue Rock Thrush

Yes, these are our phoenixes, our chimeras. Real fantastic beasts, creations of nature. A suitcase called biodiversity, full of reality in flesh and blood and bone and antennae and scales and feathers and plumes and feet and shapes and colours. Which we should not abuse, which we must not lose.

## Paradise on earth

The idea that nature will forever be a garden for the use of man is centuries old, stimulating our inventive spirit and pushing us to create an alternative nature with its own imaginary animals. Today the situation has changed. The ongoing loss of biodiversity, ongoing deforestation (which has taken an enormous expanse of primeval forest), ongoing damage to the Nature 2000 network, its sites and its habitats (which you can read about in the next article), ongoing changes to the climate, which alter the balance between land, rivers, lakes and seas, unstoppable urbanisation and the consequent loss of fertile and natural soil, our excesses in producing, consuming, and cultivating the land. All this is a real-life film, frequently alarming, calling us to take action. Not to daydream, but to act. For many years both fantasy tales and animated films have had this moral core. Let us protect this world; let us protect nature.

The protagonist of Fantastic Beasts, Newt Scamander, although a wizard, is first and foremost a young man worried by the fate of animals, and the results that our lack of attention, and our too-invasive ways have inflicted on them. “Yes, I save these creatures, I feed them, and I protect them.” There is no distinction between the real and the imaginary in the face of the only great principle worth embracing: we must take care of this world, and protect the treasures which surround us.

Protecting also from another form of fantasy, more concrete and more worrying. The fantasy of hyper-technology that in saving the planet Earth ends up transforming it to its very core. Cloned animals, laboratory-created clouds, glaciers protected by plastic sheeting and much, much more. A future that goes beyond the real-fantastic opposition, and perhaps beyond good versus evil.

We leave the last word to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, who having become completely blind, had to remember the world in order to see it, reconstructing it in his dreams. “Paradise is not elsewhere. It is here, on this earth. Hell is when we fail to see it.”

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*Giorgia Gaibani, Head of IBAs and Natura 2000 Network*

## May Nature Prevail

The European Commission continues to be notified of violations of the regulations concerning Natura 2000 sites. Meanwhile, we look forward to the launch of the long-awaited infringement proceedings against Italy for poor application of 'Environmental Impact Assessments'.

*... human activity is not forbidden within these sites, but it must be carried out with respect for nature.*

Is it possible to combine man's presence and actions and nature and biodiversity conservation? When we look at our excessive land consumption and the frequent destruction of precious natural habitats, it seems that the answer is no. Yet, we have the instruments necessary to protect precious nature. Europe has been providing them for years, in the form of directives that have been adopted into Italian law, and it is thanks to these directives that – many years ago – the Natura 2000 network was born and other sites were designated to be protected by the EU due to their precious flora and fauna. The aim of the network was not only to protect biodiversity, but also to guarantee a synergy between the conservation of these sites and man's presence. Indeed, human activity is not forbidden within these sites, but it must be carried out with respect for nature. And the EU identified an instrument that would ensure that this would be the case – the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), a preventative measure with which to evaluate all plans, projects and human activity that could potentially damage habitats and protected species within Natura 2000 network sites. The aim of Environmental Impact Assessments is, then, to preclude human intervention from having a negative impact on biodiversity.

## 2013: LIPU and the WWF's Complaint

The Environmental Impact Assessment is not an optional instrument; it is a mandatory requirement of the Habitats Directive that all EU Member States have included in their own national regulatory schemes.

Despite its binding nature, Italy does not use it properly – or at all, thus leading to the decline, or in some cases even the destruction, of many Natura 2000 sites. This very serious problem was documented in a report that LIPU drew up in 2013 together with the WWF, a report that was submitted to the European Commission, denouncing non-compliance with EU law in all Italian regions (see *Ali*, September 2013).

The European Commission subsequently opened an investigation – entitled 'EU Pilot' (EU Pilot 6730/14/ENVI) – in July 2014, with the aim of verifying whether Italy was systematically breaching the Habitats Directive articles that regulate Environmental Impact Assessments.

In the December 2014 issue of *Ali*, LIPU praised the European Commission for the Pilot initiative, but also announced that it would continue to submit complaints. Thus, the monitoring of Natura 2000 sites continued, as did data collection and the reporting to the Commission of new cases of destroyed habitats and affected bird species.

## The Commission Answers, the Government Does Not

In March 2015, the Commission took a firmer stand and asked the Italian government to improve the implementation of Environmental Impact Assessments, in line with what LIPU and the WWF had reported. For example, it asked for Assessments to have more public tendering/public exposure, that no waivers be granted, and that Assessments be based on clearer and more coherent regional laws and adhere to maximum validity periods. The last of these points would prevent projects from being approved and carried out based on Assessments conducted many years prior.

Unfortunately, since March 2015 the concrete action taken by the Ministry of the Environment and the regions to improve the implementation of Environmental Impact Assessments has been scarce, while the decline of Natura 2000 sites has continued. Habitats and species are sometimes endangered by big projects with no adequate mitigation measures. But most of the time the conservation status of Natura 2000 sites is undermined by many small interventions that cumulatively create very serious damage for the conservation of species and their habitats.

The acknowledgement of this state of affairs should be a key factor in Environmental Impact Assessments; instead, it is one of the major flaws that LIPU has reported and continues to report.

Although this situation is frustrating, and may lead some to give up the struggle, LIPU continues to report new cases to the Commission, in the process

*LIPU is asking the Commission to launch infringement proceedings against Italy for incorrect implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment process ...*

supplying substantial and detailed information that shows that nothing is changing. Furthermore, LIPU is asking the Commission to launch infringement proceedings against Italy for incorrect implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment process, maintaining that the four years since the launch of EU Pilot should have been ample time for the Ministry of the Environment and the regions to implement concrete actions for the correct application of national and EU legislation.

Man and nature can coexist, as long as regulations are meticulously observed. We do not want to see any more habitats destroyed or species disappear because of financial speculation, the lure of easy financial gain, or bureaucratic incompetence. We want nature to be in good health, for our good and for that of the generations to come.

## The Case of the Tirreno–Brennero Highway

Among the most recent cases that LIPU has reported to the European Commission is that of the first operational section of the Tirreno–Brennero highway corridor, which was built in Parma province by cutting through one of the SCI and SPA sites in the Emilia-Romagna region (SCI-SPA Aree delle Risorgive di Viarolo, BacinidiTorrile, Fascia Golenale del Po), one with one of the highest numbers of bird species and characterised by springs, canals, Po floodplains, wetlands, permanent pastures, hedges and tree rows.

Moreover, the highway is located less than 100 metres from a most important breeding colony of Red-footed Falcons. The Environmental Impact Assessment that should have examined the effects

of the highway on the SCI-SPA area was conducted in a highly superficial manner, with no accurate evaluation of the potential of damaging the habitats and species present in this area. Furthermore, the Assessment of the area was carried out eleven years prior to the launch of the highway project, when its environmental status was rather different. As the second operational section of the highway is unlikely to be financed and built (the current section ends in the middle of crops), the damage inflicted on biodiversity is even more unnecessary.

### Gargano: The Decline of the SPA

Recently, LIPU also notified the European Commission about the decline of the SPA Promontorio del Gargano in Foggia province, caused by interventions that have impacted the environment and by the transformation of the area for commercial purposes. Environmental Impact Assessments of these interventions have been scarce (leading to an underestimation of the real damage potentially caused) or were never carried out at all.

*The Night Heron has suffered a serious decline in numbers ...*

The portion of the SPA located on the Amendola military airport has faced, over the years, constant degradation due to the destruction of the steppes (protected by the Habitats Directive) present on the military base to make room for cereal crops and other structures erected adjacent to the airport. This portion of the SPA was the last nesting stronghold of Little Bustards on the Italian peninsula; now, the species is only present in Sardinia, with only a few couples surviving.

And the remaining portions of the SPA have also seen hundreds of hectares of steppe destroyed for economic purposes, with consequences for the protected bird species that breed and feed in these dry fields; among them, the Short-toed Eagle, Lesser Kestrel, Lesser Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Calandra Lark and Short-toed Lark.

This approach, which places importance only on financial gain, is far from the synergy between the conservation of biodiversity and human activity that is a required in Natura 2000 network sites.

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## CONSERVATION

*Claudio Celada, Director of Nature Conservation*

### Hands on the Countryside

The industrialisation of rice production has caused a serious decline in the population of Night Herons. Only a clear cultural change can restore to the paddy fields their former role as strongholds of biodiversity.

Not so long ago, the Night Heron, a small heron that nests in wetland areas, inhabited, in large numbers, the paddy fields of a vast geographic area situated within the provinces of Pavia, Novara, and Vercelli. They would arrive in spring from Africa and, after nesting, would return to that great continent to spend the winter. Today, however, the data on the presence of the species in this habitat in northern Italy are alarming: the Night Heron has suffered a serious decline in numbers, the causes of which are principally related to changes in the methods used to grow rice. These new methods have been applied

ever more intensively, with the wide use of pesticides and herbicides, intensive use of machinery and, more recently, the practice of 'dry bed' cultivation. An environment, therefore, hardly conducive to any form of life at all.

But let us take things one step at a time, and let us try to trace an overall picture of the agricultural question so as then to analyse in detail the relationship between the paddy fields and biodiversity. A good part of biodiversity's future (including environmental sustainability), along with the quality of our own lives, depends, and will depend more and more, on our capacity to carry forwards a vision of an agriculture that is respectful of the environment. A total of 47 per cent of European Union territory is agricultural and more than a third of the EU's output goes to support the Common Agricultural Policy (known as the CAP).

## 'Farmland' Birds

Agricultural ecosystems are fundamental to the life cycle of at least 3,600 of the approximately 10,000 bird species known worldwide. In reality, those species that today occupy agro-ecosystems come from already disappearing habitats such as pasture, steppe and savanna, wetlands and forest. This is why LIPU has long been fighting for the protection of those agricultural ecosystems that are of particular significance for wild birds. And among these ecosystems paddy fields occupy a role of special importance.
In Italy, around 90 per cent of the rice produced has been grown within the so-called triangle, a geographical area encompassing parts of Pavia, Novara, and Vercelli. In this area, rice production

*... important colonies of herons (Purple Heron, Night Heron, Little Egret, Squacco Heron, Grey Heron and, more recently, Cattle Egret and Great White Egret).*

dates back to the 15th century, and over time – thanks to the Sforza family – has led to the development of a network of dykes and canals that guarantee the irrigation of a vast section of the plain of Padua. The paddy fields, then, began to develop an important role as a 'surrogate' for marshland habitats, allowing large numbers of aquatic life forms to spread throughout them.

## Lomellina: from Important Bird Area to Special Protection Zone

Let us now jump forward to the last decade, when the European Union recognised the important environmental value of the paddy fields and put at their disposition, by means of the Rural Development Plan, considerable finances in order to maintain their agreed natural characteristics. In the meantime, LIPU obtained the status of Special Protection Zone (SPZ) for the Important Bird Area 'Lomellina and Garzaie of Pavia' under the terms of the Bird Directive. This enormous SPZ is known above all for the presence of important colonies of herons (Purple Heron, Night Heron, Little Egret, Squacco Heron, Grey Heron and, more recently, Cattle Egret and Great White Egret). This important recognition, despite the conspicuous financial support made available to the rice farmers, gave rise to a powerful campaign of disinformation on the part of various lobbies linked to farming and hunting interests, which ended by blocking in many different ways the approval of a management plan for the SPZ. An opportunity to enhance the high environmental value of the Italian rice fields has, therefore, and most unfortunately, been lost. And this despite the existence a monitoring network, coordinated by Mauro Fasola of the University of Pavia, that had

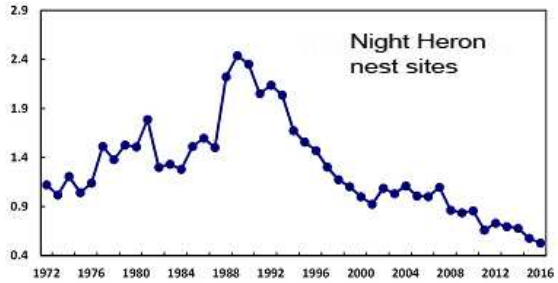
made available a – very long, accurate and complete – continuous series of demographic data concerning the heron colonies.

### The decline of the Night Heron

The history of the rice fields over these last years could be told by the Night Heron itself – the species most tied to this environment for its own food supply. In recent decades, the cultivation of the paddy fields has become mechanised and increasingly based on the elimination of all vegetal and animal organisms. Laser control permits the reduction of water depth to just a few centimetres; huge use is made of herbicides to keep the banks 'clean'; while pesticides are heavily used within the rice fields themselves. More recently, the dry cultivation of rice has begun, a process that limits the flooding of the fields to brief periods in summer and leads to them frequently drying out – which in turn renders impossible the survival of the majority of aquatic life, including amphibians. Thus, the collapse in the populations of invertebrates, amphibians and of the Night Herons themselves proceed in parallel.

### The paddy field, Biodiversity's 'watchdog'

But how are we to reverse this tendency, which has seen the environmental role of the paddy field become so critical ? It is likely that the cultivation of rice will remain both industrial and intensive. Despite this, the paddy fields could, however, once again sustain a rich, biodiverse network similar to that they supported in the past. It is essential to change the cultivation model, recreating, for example, rich vegetation on the banks rather than wiping it out: this could constitute the best defence against those species that invade the lagoons in which the rice is grown. We must, then, focus our research on an ecology for these banks that will take into account all demands, both agricultural and ecological. Further, could the submersion method actually enable water saving because that water will then flow more slowly to the sea? The repeated periodic flooding of the area could, indeed, be raising water consumption as so much is lost through evaporation. Some of these hypotheses are yet to be tested, but one thing is certain: the future of agriculture, our future, and that of biodiversity are intimately linked one to the other. It is up to us to find the best solutions.




Graph: Prof. Mauro Fasola, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences (DSTA) of the University of Pavia – coordinator of Garzaie Italia.

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## OASES AND RESERVES

*Barbara Ravasio, Manager of the Palude Brabbia Natural Wetland Reserve*

### A Wetland Worthy of Preservation

Situated between two lakes at the gateway to the town of Varese, framed by the Monte Rosa

chain, the reserve exhibits the characteristics typical of a pre-alpine wetland environment. Once a major supplier of peat, but no longer used for that purpose, the reserve owes its present structure to the excavations that, at one time, dredged mud from the water and to the many hands that cut the reeds and heads of sedge to make thin canes and material for stuffing chairs.

Over the decades, and until recently, the hand of man transformed this treasure chest of precious habitats, creating a very complex ecosystem thanks to the ecological link with the adjacent lake of Varese. From the latter, fish used to swim upstream – along a canal that crossed the reserve – to lay their eggs in the tranquil reeds of the marshes, where they were protected from the open waters of the lake. This nursery, which acted as an incubator for many species of fish, at the same time fed the rich bird life of the marsh. All this was possible thanks to a temporary enlargement that increased the ecological correlation of the whole lake system.

Today, because of environmental and climatic changes, this balance is partly broken. The land is drying out quickly and the wetland will one day become woodland. At the beginning of the eighties LIPU succeeded in establishing the Brabbia Wetland as a regional reserve to protect it from misuse.. But today we find ourselves at a crossroads: leave nature to follow its natural course or intervene to study the balance that makes the marsh so rich in species?

The answer is neither easy nor predictable given the present economic conditions. The fascination of this bewitching landscape is that it is still unique of its type and populated by many species of birds that find



*These projects and their beneficial results have set an example for similar initiatives in other provinces in the north of Italy ...*

a green corridor between the Padano plain and the Alps.

## Reconnect the ecological link

LIPU's initial response to this example of environmental impoverishment has been the development of various projects directed at the creation of ecological corridors between certain protected areas in the province of Varese, including the Brabbia Wetland and adjacent lakes. Uncontrolled building blocks off all passage for fauna, heightening the risk of a loss of biodiversity. These projects and their beneficial results have set an example for similar initiatives in other provinces in the north of Italy. Further info at: www.lifetib.it

## Alder and the nesting colony

In the alders in the southern part of the reserve is a nesting colony of about 150 pairs of Grey and Night Heron – a busy, multistorey affair that in the spring months is enlivened by the comings and goings of adults feeding their chicks. Much less obvious are two camouflage experts: the Purple Heron, an elusive migrant that nests in the reeds, and the Great Bittern, an occasional winter visitor. Each has a plumage that renders it invisible among the reed stems.

## Location of the Brabbia Reserve

The reserve's visitor centre and car park are situated at Inarzo, Via Patriotti 22, 10 kilometres from the town of Varese. The oasis is open all year round. For information, call 0332/964028 or email oasi.brabbia@lipu.it.

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*Enrico Bassi, freelance ornithologist, consultant to the Stelvio National Park and scientist in charge of the Lammergeier reintroduction and monitoring project*

## The rebirth of the Lammergeier

Entirely absent at the beginning of the 20th century, this majestic vulture has been successfully reintroduced into the Alps thanks to a project dating back to 1978

*"They're the ones who are killing the lambs, everyone knows they are wicked!"*

A broad-brimmed hat, twisted in the gnarled hands of a native of the Alps. The mute anger at the loss of yet another lamb in the Alpine pastures. 'It's the third time in a week', exclaims the tired shepherd as he descends from the hut towards the footpath to exchange a few words with a passing hunter. 'It was the Lammergeier for sure, and it happened the other day at Cogne as well. They're the ones who are killing the lambs, everyone knows they are wicked!' A month later, an impact. The sound, not of a block of stone fallen from the top of the waterfall, or of a deer that has slipped on a greasy rock slab. There is a smell of gunpowder, and human tension. A bird with a broken wing falls onto the moraine to be despatched with cudgels amid curses and jubilation. Gathered up, it is put in front of a photographer from the city – dragged up the mountain in haste by the hunters to immortalise the event, just as soon as they had put on their Sunday best.

The baneful Lammergeier was dead, the mountain was reborn, and its people began to dream of a better future again. A few months later, the countries of the Alpine chain first railed, then took up arms against each other. The First World War broke out; then, less than thirty years later, came the second great conflict. The heavy wingbeats of the Lammergeier had not been heard for decades, but it caused no concern. In the chilly Alpine valleys, deeply marked by poverty, the only thoughts were for how to find food for the table and wood for the stove. It was only the increasing prosperity of the post-war years that brought the glimmer of a new era, driven by an awareness that there might be something beyond the self-interest of humans.

By the seventies, indeed, biologists and environmentalists had begun to look at joint projects, and were warming to the idea of reintroducing the great lost vulture: the 'bone breaker' that forged a vital link in the cycle of birth and death. And the dream became reality: in 1978, at Morges in Switzerland, the launch of a project supported by the IUCN, the WWF and the Frankfurt Zoological Society was approved, and that project reached a watershed in 1986 with the initiation of a long series of releases into the wild, which have continued to the present day. It was about that time that Nina, one of the first of the Lammergeiers, took flight, only to be brought down by a poacher in Alta Savoia in 1993.

But the way ahead was already clear: the number of breeding age vultures in captivity was increased in order to guarantee, year on year, the release of their offspring into the wild. It was established that the adults should all be captive bred so as not ultimately to threaten wild populations already in a critical state of conservation. To this end there was an intensive search for breeding stock from zoos and private collectors throughout the world. A restricted but consistent number of young were released

into the major national parks of France, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. An ambitious project had become reality, and expanded into an increasingly international, pan-European context.

In 1997, the first French fledgling took to the air, and in 1998 Italy's first – at Valdidentro in the Valtellina, by the road going up to the Stelvio Pass. An emotive and breathtaking journey, marked by the passion burning in the eyes of Paul Geroudet, Martin Bijleveld, Peter Jackson, Francesco Framarin and Philippe Roch, or by the infectious enthusiasm of the Terrasse brothers, who even today seem to take flight without saying a word. Think too of the steadfastness and methodical approach of Prof. Hans Frey, the father of the project, who in the nineteen seventies telephoned the zoo at Helsinki to obtain a Lammergeier he could raise, while writing letters to Kabul and Moscow, in that world before the Internet, faxes or mobile phones.

This then is a summary of the work for the reintroduction of the Lammergeier that each year is celebrated A project that seems the very emblem of conservation may stand at the meeting place of, and in the dialogue between, generations. Like pioneers or early migrants that arrive first at the destination after many days' journey, the fathers of the project have always laboured willingly along the Alpine watershed with those who populate its heights, meeting people old and young. To correct a human misapprehension that is always waiting to occur. Seen from above, this process of restoration might even make a Lammergeier happy – imagine that if you will.

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## NEWS FROM LIPU-UK

### Membership subscription

The new century was still young when LIPU-UK last increased its subscription fees almost fifteen years ago. This quite remarkable feat has been possible largely thanks to the fidelity of individual members, but also because, on renewal, members have been asked to consider the £15 subscription fee as a minimum, and the great majority have chosen to do so.

Much has changed in those almost fifteen years. Costs, of course, have risen (they have for us all), but the challenges faced by LIPU have also changed. As Director General Danilo Selvaggi wrote in the pages of Ali earlier this year, speaking of the progress of the environmentalist cause, 'can no longer protect a single stretch of coastline, preserve a single site, come to the aid of one injured swallow'

With the above in mind, our trustees have decided to increase the membership fee to £20 from the beginning of next year, and once more we are encouraging members to view this fee as a minimum if they are able.

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### Financial Reserves for Nature Reserves

A recent caller asked LIPU-UK "why it is necessary to hold in reserve in excess of £200,000 for a charity which has no employees and no fixed assets?". It's a good question and I'll try to repeat my answer here.

It is a measure of the generosity of our supporters that soon after we became a charity we had to address the matter of our income exceeding our annual commitments to projects in Italy. The trustees felt that the surplus should be held in this country and allowed to accumulate and the aim was agreed that we should help fund the purchase of a nature reserve to be owned by LIPU in Italy.

Our friends in Parma were happy with this but we agreed two criteria; firstly that any such reserve must be ecologically important and, secondly, that it would not incur unsustainable maintenance costs.

The fund grew, even though we increased the level of annual project support, from about £39,000 to around £70,000, until a few years ago it had reached over £300,000 and the discussion of how to spend this money took up ever more time in successive trustees' meetings.

We failed because a series of candidates was found and then rejected for various reasons which ranged from greedy land owners wanting unaffordable sums to a very faint whiff of Mafia influence. Then in 2008 the "perfect candidate" was found – a wetland in Sicily, *Pantano Cuba*, of undoubted importance, the negotiations were started but the rug was pulled from under us when the authorities in Sicily decided to designate it as a Regional Nature Reserve!

We made enquiries about a nearby wetland but, as yet, there is no sign of progress and since that time we have reduced the size of our designated fund by almost a third by extra spending on the annual projects in Italy.



Your trustees are constantly seeking a suitable way to invest this money to the benefit of the birds in Italy, which is our charitable objective, and at the moment there is a suitable candidate in the north of the country, but the owner is asking a great deal of money and no progress has yet been made. Rest assured, there is still the same determination to spend the funds so generously given, but we are equally determined that all spending will be wisely and carefully considered.

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## LIPU-UK Annual Draw

We ask our members and friends for funds only twice a year, in the spring we have our annual appeal and at this time of the year we have a draw which usually raises a little more than £2,000 for the projects in Italy in the coming year. We realise that this is not to everyone's taste and if you have notified me there should be no tickets with this copy of the Ali. If you do have a book of tickets, please take part if you are able – we've made it as simple as possible with three cash prizes which will be posted before Christmas. If just another hundred people took part it would make a big difference and the chances of winning are still much better than the National Lottery. Please give us your support if you can. Thank you.

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## LIPU-UK Trustees

Could you be a trustee of LIPU-UK? Tony Gdula has served on our board for six years and is ready to stand down although he will continue to support

LIPU as a member. He has agreed to remain in post until a successor has been appointed.

Trustees are ultimately responsible for the operation of the charity but the duties are not onerous and or time consuming. If you would like to be involved in LIPU-UK and would like to know more please contact David Lingard for more information. Currently trustees meet three times a year, once, in June, is a face to face meeting and the other two are now by means of video-conferencing so access to a computer would be a great help, but if this is impossible we can look for other options.

Trustees are just ordinary people but each brings his or her experience and the breadth of that combined experience is the strength of the board.

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The *Ali* could not be brought to you without the work of my team of translators and helpers and, for this edition I thank, Dave Brooks, Abigail Cummings, Giuseppina Fazzina, Gill Hood, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

The photographs are by courtesy of the respective photographers and the front and rear covers are © David Lingard.

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29 October 1913 - one of the last Lammergeiers of the Alps before their disappearance. (Photo: J Brocherel) and, below a more modern photograph of the bird as it should be seen.

A Purple Heron as seen in the Brabbia Marsh Nature Reserve