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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- Hunting in the modern world
- Invasive Species
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- Lead shot still in use

Autumn 2018

This family of swans could be at risk of lead poisoning if the use of lead shot is not banned.

© David Lingard

The stuff of nightmares for native wildlife – the Louisiana Crayfish

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Hunting in Italy

Editorial

David Lingard

The subject of Danilo Selvaggi's opening article is that of hunting – an activity which has been at the very heart of LIPU's work since its foundation over fifty years ago. I have to echo Danilo's question here, "Why do some people get pleasure from killing animals?". No longer is it a question of avoiding starvation, certainly not in Europe, no – it is a "sport" or a "hobby" and is defended, by those who practise it, as a tradition handed down from the days when it was necessary to put a meal on the table.

However, Italy is not alone in this practice. Most, if not all, European nations have hunters and the greatest numbers seem to live around the Mediterranean Sea – an area which is critically important to the annual migration of many species of birds. So often the birds are merely targets and are left where they fall, but if skill in handling a shotgun is what the hunter seeks then why not take up the sport of clay-pigeon shooting?

LIPU will continue its opposition to illegal killing and we will always help in any way we can – and there are definite signs of improvement. Danilo points to a steady reduction in the number of hunters in Italy and the fact that their average age is rising all the time. The youth of Italy are showing less interest in going into the field with a shotgun – long may this trend continue. Avanti LIPU!

HUNTING

by Danilo Selvaggi, Director General, LIPU

With the reopening of the hunting season (and the possibility of a return to the killing of bears and wolves), we take the opportunity to reflect on a practice that may be in decline but continues to inflict damage on nature. And meanwhile the debate goes on: why, in the twenty-first century, is there still such enthusiasm for shooting at animals?

It was an episode in the life of the American naturalist Aldo Leopold. Considered one of the forefathers of world environmentalism, he had long been a keen hunter and had even written essays on ways of killing 'vermin' An episode that transformed his way of thinking about nature and helped open the way to a revolution in the thinking of our time. He called it the ' Fire' incident, which he relates in Sand County Almanac,his masterpiece, published posthumously in 1949.

But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view

'We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realised our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the centre of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping

lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy; how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable side-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realised then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes— known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.'

The Green Fire of Understanding

In that moment of green fire, at least two important things came to Aldo Leopold. The first was of an intimate, personal nature. The creature that had died in front of him provoked in him an unexpected disturbance, an emotional shock. The man who was quick on the trigger, a man of practical, useful knowledge, was struck by the light that shone from the wolf's eyes before death. A fierce light, full of anguish and anger. The second was something wider, something cultural. The appearance of a different idea of the relationship between humans and nature, one in which 'the role of Homo sapiens changes from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it' This seemingly minor incident was in reality the beginning of what Leopold would call 'land ethics' which would from then on be at the centre of his thinking.

'The land ethic' Leopold writes, ' enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, in a word: the land.' The green fire in the eyes of the wolf was therefore a sad but salutary message of enlightenment. Learn that you are not the lord and master. You are an ordinary member of the community of the Earth, as am I.

It is in this way that the struggles of Leopold' dying wolf speak to us of understanding. Understanding, or more accurately, awareness, is the most powerful means by which to say farewell to the traditions of violence and rebuild relationships with nature, with others, with the world. Because of that awareness, and an understanding of things, or rather of the meaning of things, our presence in the world takes on a new modality, one in which the violence and abuse that were there before, blindly leading us on, become ever more out of place.

any raptors, diurnal or nocturnal, were considered 'noxious beasts', whether due to the damage they caused or as bringers of misfortune to humanity.

Death to Noxious Beasts!

The birth of LIPU in 1965, and its original struggle against the massacres of hunting, were inspired by the same philosophy. In those days, hunting in Italy had massive support and was engaged in by almost two million people, still partially for sustenance, as in many rural areas of the country, but generally as a leisure pursuit. Governing its practices, with regulations that were to say the least lenient if not archaic, was Royal Decree 1016 of 1939, ' through the grace of God and the will of the nation by Vittorio Emanuele III'.

The Decree authorised hunting for the majority of the year and for a huge number of species,

dividing fauna into two groups: game, to be shot, and vermin, to be exterminated. The latter, named in Article 4, included wolves, foxes, herons, eagles, kites, Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, the Eagle Owl, and effectively any raptor – whether diurnal or nocturnal. These were considered essentially as 'noxious beasts' whether because they caused damage to domestic stock or to crops, or even, incredible as it may seem in Europe of the twentieth century, because they were bringers of misfortune to humanity.

Knowledge and Persuasion

LIPU's efforts to change this situation were soon politicised, with the first battles in parliament aiming to change the law, and most of the culture. The association's first magazine, *Pro Avibus* – subtitled *Anti-hunting Bi-monthly* – was dedicated to a large extent to condemning the damage done to the environment by the practice of hunting, but also to promoting scientific knowledge, informing people about birds and shining a light on the contrast between a lust for shooting and the beauty and importance of what they attempt to kill. Little migrants who had crossed half a world flying high over deserts and seas found themselves brought down by a rain of lead, or imprisoned in the mesh of a net. An unacceptable situation.

At the same time, the language used by LIPU's early activists, taking its cue from its founder Giorgio Punzo, never descended into invective or aggression. Punzo was above all profoundly convinced that the way forward lay through persuasion, and through the power of language and reason, convinced – as we stated at the outset – that awareness changes the world; that it has the power of the water droplet:

little by little it affects everyone, even the most bellicose of opponents.

The Conservation of Nature

The actions of LIPU and other organisations rapidly led to results. In a few years, spring hunts were abolished and trapping greatly reduced. Public opinion took heed, and there were extensive changes to the law. First there was Law 968 of 1977, which introduced the concept of wildlife as the patrimony of the State; then the attempt to abolish hunting with the 1990 referendum; then Law 157 of 1992, which shortened the hunting season and shortened the list of huntable species, imposing stricter regulations on hunting organisations and their methods.

Meanwhile, Europe had issued the Birds and Habitats Directives of 1979 and 1991, as a minimum standard for conservation legislation in member states – probably the decisive blow to contemporary hunting. The general principle affirmed in the community directives and international agreements was clear, that henceforth the conservation of nature must be considered to be of greater importance than the practice of hunting, and only hunting that was compatible with the maintenance of the conservation status of a species was to be allowed. This is what the Italian law now states in its very first article – that hunting is only permitted to the extent that it does not conflict with the needs of conservation. Bound up in the traditions of another age, hunters found themselves catapulted into a new world, for many of them it was strange and incomprehensible. A world in which they found themselves up against science and public opinion; no longer one that consented to the killing of wolves and owls as 'bearers of

misfortune' It is a challenge that the hunting world has not been able to take on, opening up its road into the sunset.

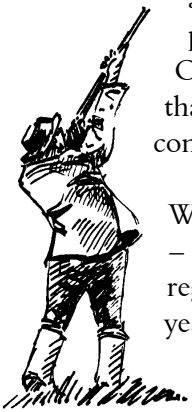
Hunting Today

And today? What is the status of hunting, today in Italy? The question is a complex one because of the complex and many-faceted nature of the hunting world, and the specialisations, the differences and even the outright oppositions within it: the distinction between 'migratory' and 'resident' those gunning for wild boar or for woodcock; the progressives and the traditionalists; those staying within the law and those outside it (the trapping and the huge numbers of small birds caught illegally); those who claim to be environmentalists and those who dream of a return to old ways.

At all events, we are dealing with a phenomenon still capable of generating a large amount of business, with significant influence especially at the local level and a tremendous impact on wildlife and the environment. In this context, beyond the animals killed outright, one thinks also of the enormous amount of lead scattered throughout the environment, and the disturbance caused to many valuable species not hunted themselves.

The law as it stands (cited here as Law 157/1992) provides for a general opening in the third week of September, to close on 31 January (with the possibility of a pre-opening from 1 September and an extension for some species until 10 February). Then there is the hunting for 'management' and selective culling, with potential derogations on the grounds of damage to crops.

There are 48 huntable species (still too many), among which are seven birds that are under severe pressure and for whose protection LIPU is currently campaigning. The most important datum though is the number of hunters. From almost two million in the sixties the number fell to one and a half million by 1990, to 880 thousand in 2002 and to around 700 thousand now, with the average age of those registered having risen greatly, and hunting experiencing difficulties of every kind. An unstoppable decline, in the face of which the hunting community has tried to counter-attack, with two attempts at changing the law, led in parliament by Onnis in 2002 and Orsi in 2008, both of which failed thanks to the opposition of LIPU and of conservationists as a whole.



What these efforts really demonstrate – in their attempts to relax hunting regulations and to allow sixteen-year-olds to bear arms in order that they replace the ageing hunters and staunch the ebbing away–is that public opinion is no longer in favour of a practice that now seems remote, of another age, and out of step with contemporary culture. On both the aforementioned occasions LIPU alone gathered over 300 thousand signatories against the hunting of wildlife, which tells of the forces that can be mobilised in spite of every attack from hunters.

The Great Editing Out

And now, it seems, the strategy adopted by a section of the hunting lobby is a different one; given that

public opinion has changed, and that people now love nature and despise those who would do it harm, the image of the hunter has had to be adapted from that of one who kills nature to that of a guardian of nature.

A phenomenon in decline but still with the power to wield an influence as a bringer of ills to nature and wild things.

The key feature of this tactic consists above all in the editing out of the picture of the very heart of the hunt, of the bringing down of the animal, the moment of killing. The images, the narratives and the publicity materials show and speak of everything - the dawn vigil of the hunter, the pathways through the woods, the guarding against wildfires, the life in the heart of nature – while the fatal moment itself is expunged from the discussion, painted out of the iconography. The guns themselves, which once the hunters bore like sceptres, now appear in the background, fading in the soft light of the dusk or the dawn. It is the strategy of the Great Editing Out, a weighty and almost inevitable consequence of the reimagining of the hunt. 'We are living the paradox that in order to continue to be hunters we must no longer seem like them' one national executive said some time ago, thus making the point precisely.

And at any rate, not all are in agreement. Not those of Trento and Bolzano who want to be authorised to kill bears and wolves. Not those of the Veneto or Lombardy who maintain their embarrassing demand for a derogation to shoot songbirds and to be able to use live decoys. Nor is F.R., a shameless hunter who sent me a document on 'the modernity of hunting' and quoted Karen Blixen: 'Anyone who sees a magnificent wild animal and does not want to kill it, is not a human at heart' Pardon me, F.R., but this too is a great editing out. The editing out of humanity.

The Green Fire Still Burns

As the hunting season begins again, the conflicts, the confrontations and the legal arguments start over again. Let us conclude this piece with a few suggestions for further reading. First of all, there is *Above all, there must be no ill-treatment*, a work by Giulia Guazzaloca on the history of animal welfare in Italy, from the 1800s to the present. Then, a reprint of a 1953 classic by Eveline Lot-Falck, *TheHunting Rites of the Siberian Peoples*,in which this French anthropologist underlines how modern hunting, having lost its primitive magical and religious aspects, has declined into mere industrialised slaughter. Then there is *Hunting in Italy*,a difficult though not impossible text to find, by Francesco Bassilana, who while talking solely of hunting in Italy in the 1980s, still sheds light on current issues. *The Weight of a Butterfly*,on the other hand, is the short, poignant tale by Erri De Luca of a poacher of the mountains on the trail of '*King of the Ibexes*'. Who will prevail?

And finally Aldo Leopold himself, with his *Sand County Almanac*,which contains the tale of the green fire. A narrative of ecology, agronomy, ornithology, the philosophy of nature, and a vision of what it is to be human in which Leopold proclaims his credo – that is to say, Land Ethics. A text full of signposts, but also of questions, for a human being who has to think again, to rise to a higher level of consciousness, responsibility and care. 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'

A HOUSE IN ABRUZZO

by Rebecca Coombes, LIPU member

The palm trees along the seafront in Pescara are bent double and rain lashes down from grey skies. It is March 21st but winter has Abruzzo in its grip this morning not that the Italian drivers are taking any notice of the storm conditions and I receive quite a few rebukes from them as I drive along at 30 mph and avoid soaking pedestrians!

Our little stone house on the edge of the Maiella Park has no central heating yet so I stay in a hotel at this time of year when I first arrive, until the single electric radiator can be plugged in and will give enough warmth to make sleeping in the house possible.

Driving through the rain to the house from Pescara I have to avoid the small land slips and rock slides caused by the storm but once I arrive the sun suddenly appears and the temperature doubles in an hour. I even manage to get some washing on the line.

Last year we repointed the old limestone walls with a mixture of clay, lime and sand making them look beautiful and keeping out the winter rains. When it came to a certain part of the wall we left a small square gap open as every year a pair of Nuthatches make their nest here and raise at least 7 young who flop out of the hole and land on the clay tiles of our bread oven where hungry cats eye them as a potential meal. We carefully carry the nestlings and leave them in the olive trees where they are out of the way of cats and within an hour the parents are busy flying from tree to tree with beaks full of food. By the end

of the day they have herded the little nestlings to a safe place for the night.

In March the only trees in leaf are elder and small Hornbeam saplings. Oaks, Figs and Cherries are dark and glisten with rain, buds tightly closed until the sun shines more frequently. The sounds of Blackcaps (who can raise two broods in Italy if they start early) and Chiffchaffs are everywhere but it is too early for the melodious tones from the Golden Oriole to be heard coming up from the ravine.

One of the plum trees has died so I drive to the Brico store and buy a replacement. The store has some fat balls for sale! The first time I have ever seen wild bird food in a shop in Italy. So I buy some and distribute them among the Olive trees.

Will the birds know what they are? We will see in May and then if they have eaten them perhaps I can persuade some of my Italian neighbours to start feeding the birds! Maybe.

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A SILENT KILLER

by Umberto Gallo-Orsi, and Claudio Celada, Conservation Director

In the European Union, in a single year, hunters leave a trail of 21,000 tons of lead shot scattered throughout the countryside. This leads to the death of a million wild birds across wetland areas. LIPU is campaigning for a ban on lead shot, since it poses such a serious threat, not just to animals, but also mankind.

The use of lead by mankind dates back several millennia. Used by the ancient Romans for water pipes, it has in more recent times been used for many other purposes, including the production of cosmetics, paints and (in the 20th century) as an additive for petrol. However, as is well known, lead is a metal which is very harmful to the health of anyone who ingests it or comes into contact with it. It enters organisms through inhalation, ingestion or simply through the skin. It is then carried in the bloodstream, and eventually reaches the kidneys, liver and bones, causing significant harm (especially in children) to the central nervous system.

Today the use of lead is largely prohibited, one notable exception being its use in hunting. Nowadays, the use of lead shot in hunting is the largest cause of pollution from this metal. Of the 21,000 tonnes of shot which is annually fired from shotguns within Europe, between 1,500 and 7,800 tonnes end up in wetland areas, where waterfowl and waders ingest lead shot instead of the small pebbles which their digestive systems require to crush their food. This lead shot poses a serious threat to their health and many birds die directly due to lead poisoning. The figures are staggering: we are talking about a million waterfowl deaths every year in Europe from lead shot (sometimes even a single pellet can be fatal). Added to that are the approximately three million waterfowl who suffer ill effects which do not kill them, but which weaken them to such a point as to expose them to predators or other causes of death. We know that millions of birds are killed (legally or illegally) by hunters, but in counting the cost of the total harm caused to birds by hunting, it is necessary to add a million waterfowl who perish as a result of lead poisoning.

... the 21,000 tonnes of shot which is annually fired from shotguns within Europe ...

The species at risk

A great many species are at risk of lead poisoning, indeed the number of species understood to be affected only increases as we understand more about the problem. Among waterbirds bottom-feeders such as Pintail and Pochard are most affected, whereas birds that graze out of water such as Geese or Wigeon are less vulnerable. Interestingly, Broad-billed Sandpipers often fall victim to lead poisoning and there are also documented cases of such deaths in Flamingo populations.

But the silent carnage of lead shot is not limited to waterfowl, since it causes great harm in other species. These include animals which have been wounded by hunting, killed but not yet collected, or the carcasses of deer and other hoofed animals which are contaminated with lead and abandoned by hunters. These carcases in turn pose a risk of poisoning to vultures, eagles, other birds of prey, foxes, rats and every predator that eats any part of the carcass. About 70% of the carcasses of dead eagles collected in Lombardy had levels of lead well above the threshold value, while a recent study in Spain has highlighted that the Bonelli's Eagle (which eats partridges and hares) also suffers significantly from lead poisoning. In addition, the presence of lead has been found to lower breeding success in Bonelli's Eagles.

Research surrounding a project to reintroduce the charismatic California Condor has thrown up some eye-opening results. It had been known that the decline of this species was closely linked to lead poisoning (from the hunting of deer, etc.), but in 2008 the use of lead shot was banned in California, and this has been shown to have removed a

significant cause of low reproductive success in the population of the California Condor.

Humans, too, can suffer in a similar way. Lead remains in the flesh of wild game which is then eaten by hunters, their families and their friends. Some studies indicate how, despite great care having been taken to remove all the lead shot, up to 80% of the packages of deer for sale in the USA may contain small splinters of lead. Other studies highlight how lead poisoning can affect families who regularly eat game, significantly affecting the central nervous system of children.

An invitation to save Nature

There is indeed a very simple solution to overcome the enormity of this problem, and that is the total prohibition of lead shot in hunting. This has already happened in the Netherlands and Denmark, where hunters themselves are now at the forefront of backing these changes. For decades there has been an ongoing debate about the prohibition of the use of lead shot in hunting, at least in wetland areas. In the USA it has been banned since 1991. In Europe the progress towards a ban on lead shot has been slow and tedious. However the currently-proposed prohibition will only apply in the wetland areas of the Natura 2000 network, where controls are limited and there is little respect for the law. A total ban, as demonstrated elsewhere, would be more effective and less costly, and would do more to protect both the environment and public health. The estimated cost involved for the European Chemicals Agency would in fact be approximately 40 million euros per year. This compares with over 150 million euros required for the maintenance of the status

quo. So there is no justification in continuing to postpone a decision that now seems necessary in the interests of all. But so far the hunting equipment industry has been able to block any change. This irresponsible and short-sighted position is no longer defensible on the basis of unjustifiable party interests. In the meantime, the level of indignation on the part of people of good sense continues to grow. They are calling for a reduction in the level of hunting, of ammunition used, of pollution, and for the protection of natural habitat which can be allowed to regenerate, free from contamination. The trend is for people to want to be able to enjoy the countryside, and to enjoy watching and getting to know all forms of wildlife with which we share our precious planet.

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A FUTILE WAIT IN FRONT OF THAT WALL

by Andrea Corso

Populations of Lanner falcons in Italy have collapsed dramatically, and sightings are becoming rarer. Urgent measures to avoid extinction are needed against the illegal use of falcons, destruction of habitat and disturbance of nests.

Shade is as precious as water in the long days of late spring and early summer in the south of Italy. Around me, parched yellow stubble fields. In the long, futile wait for a hoped-for sighting, I found shelter from the burning heat under the foliage of olives and almonds. A

little way away from me the rocky walls, reminding me as in a dream of times when every year I used to see the birds flying with pointed wings, a flash of blue, heads crowned with rusty red, and narrow black moustaches. And above all, that brilliant white body, in the intense southern light, as if cut in half by blackish strips under the wings. It was one of so many pairs of Lanners that I followed, approached, watched. I always found them there, above those dazzling walls, present over who knows how many decades. But now they are no longer there. Waiting, eyes eager to spot the elusive falcons, aware of the love calls of cicadas or the buzzing of a bee. Then, like friends who come back together again after years of wandering, I see a pair appear. There they are, Lanners. But the empty space around them is obvious and worrying. Where are all the others?

The cause of the decline

Some ornithologists say that pairs of birds move on, that Lanners go on "pilgrimages" After forty years in the same site, at a certain point, who knows why, the Lanners decided to abandon their usual home and go somewhere else, even more hidden away, which no-one has found. What causes this disappearance? One opinion follows another: some people working on this think the cause is pathological – a virus or parasites. Others blame glyphosate, whilst for others the blame lies at the feet of nature photographers or competition with the Peregrine falcon. A *Tricomonas* bacterial infection? But surely the cause must be in the loss of habitat, especially the steppe or semi-steppe habitat. And what if, as I suggest, several of these causes were linked? It would be a good idea to undertake some action to limit at least some of these, working immediately on those that are feasible:

firstly, stopping illegal falconry as far as possible (see below for more details); secondly, limiting any direct disturbance to nests by photographers, climbers and rock-climbers, as well as by heedless ornithologists and birdwatchers; next trying to protect as many areas as possible where the species nests, limiting the loss of habitat and destruction of sites; finally fighting hard against the use of glyphosate. As for studying the effects of viruses or bacteria, the difficult relationships between pairs of Lanners, and their wanderings, there's always time, and it would certainly be good to study these factors to see if some intervention can be carried out.

The last pairs

Current estimates using numbers to hand suggest there are at best 200-250 pairs. There are possibly 300-400 pairs of *feldeggii* (the subspecies of Lanner found in Europe) in the whole area where they have been found over the period 2007-2015, or even 400-800 pairs according to the 2015 monograph by Allavena and other researchers. It is certain that more pairs exist, even though I don't know how many. However as these figures faithfully represent the number of sites where over decades one could walk and find Lanners nesting, always the same ones, they therefore show what is happening in which sites. With regard to the table shown here unedited, I want to limit it strictly to the sites which I personally have studied since 1992, when I started following them thanks to my instructors Andrea Ciaccio (to whom I owe the discovery of Lanners) and Carmelo Iapichino (to whom I owe more than I can say). These are pairs which have been individually followed and this data is not likely to be estimates or interpretations. And the collapse in numbers is more than evident.

2,544 falcons (mainly Lanner and Peregrine) captured in the Middle East in 2015 alone.

As for falconry, I will only note a few figures, extrapolated from official publications of the falconry associations of Saudi Arabia. According to data published by Bä in 1997 and by Dixon and other researchers in 2009, 700-1200 falcons (Saker, Lanner, Peregrine) were captured each year in Turkey and Syria alone in the 1980s and 1990s by hundreds of trappers. Binothman Albara officially studied the Saudi falconers each year for a doctoral thesis published in 2016: 2,544 falcons (mainly Lanner and Peregrine) captured in the Middle East in 2015 alone. In 2014, in the Middle East and North Africa a further 4,027 were taken. In the same year in Libya, 800 Lanners were captured by another 200 trappers paid by Saudis, and 300 were captured in Egypt in the same year. And these are just the official figures, so imagine how many more birds are captured clandestinely. If we then add to all this the fact that all the trappers and nest robbers in Italy are clandestine and illegal, and so do not appear in statistics or publications, the size of the phenomenon becomes even more worrying.

It would be good therefore to realise the gravity of the problem that is developing and adopt urgent measures to stop the decline or even, especially for the *feldeggii* subspecies, extinction. May we not wait in vain at the rocky wall any more, but may we be delighted once more by the appearance of this useful, beautiful and precious species.

Lanner Falcon *(Falco biarmicus)*

The Lanner is a falcon of medium dimensions found in five subspecies: the main subspecies *biarmicus* has the largest range and the most stable population (southern Africa), whereas *erlangeri* and *tanypeterus*

found in North Africa and the Middle East have experienced the most evident and clearest signs of steep decline over the last ten years. Data relating to the subspecies *abyssinicus* typical of central and eastern Africa have not yet been organised and analysed.
The fifth subspecies, the rarest at present, is *feldeggii*, nesting in Italy, south-eastern Europe (especially Greece) and Asia Minor (Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, etc). This looks almost more like a Greek gyrfalcon than other Lanners: it has long broad wings, with blunt trailing edge, long wide tail, powerful body, upper parts ashy grey-blue, often dark (especially females), weight about the usual for a Lanner. So if this species were to disappear it would be a real loss for biodiversity.

Number of Lanner falcon pairs observed in Sicily from 1992 to 2018 by Andrea Corso

Year	Pairs	Breeding
1992-1998	20	18
1999-2004	19	18
2005-2008	16	15
2009-2012	15	14
2013-2014	9-11	6
2015	8	4
2016	6	1
2017	3	0
2018	1	0

INVADERS OR GUESTS?

by Claudio Celada, Conservation Director

From Louisiana Crayfish to island rats, alien species present a dramatically-growing threat to conservation and biodiversity, especially for birds. Action is urgently needed.

World experts and international organisations have no doubts: invasive species have become one of the most serious threats to biodiversity. The Convention on Biological Diversity declares it, the scientific literature confirms it, and it's clear from first-hand experience. We need to act, but how? Let us frame the problem and analyse the causes, so that we can better understand the possible solutions.

Species and their distribution

The natural distribution of animal and vegetable species, in other words the geographical areas in which species are found, is shaped by long-term evolution. As biogeographers point out, this distribution is also shaped by a number of fast-changing natural factors, including climate change. On the other hand, when we talk of exotic species in this context (also known as *allochthonous* or alien species), we are referring to a number of different phenomena, all caused by human activity. Homo sapiens has played a key role in the introduction and spread of species to geographical areas, different from and separate from their native range. This introduction has been both accidental and deliberate. The spread of the Black Rat across islands, from the docking of commercial shipping, is one of the best-known and oft-repeated cases of accidental

introduction. However thousands of species, both flora and fauna, have been deliberately introduced, whether for horticultural or ornamental purposes. This list includes citrus fruit, Cedar of Lebanon, peacocks, pheasants, oriental partridge … and the Louisiana Crayfish, now infamous for escalating damage to native species.

From guests to invaders

In most cases, the arrival of an exotic or alien species, whether animal, vegetable, fungus or micro-organism, presents no risk or threat to biodiversity simply because it is doomed to fail. The host ecosystem keeps most alien species in check at a modest demographic level, with numbers that the other species can support. Often the new colonisation fails completely. Occasionally, one or more populations of an exotic species can explode demographically, and become invasive, that is cause damage to the host environment. There can be many reasons for this: a lack of competition, an abundance of food (often species of prey), and especially favourable ecological conditions.

Official: invasive species threaten biodiversity

And here the problems for biodiversity begin: problems for some native species, and even for man. Remember Ambrosia, the plant of American origin, only recently introduced to Europe and which many people are allergic to? And travelling the other way, let's not forget how diseases introduced by European colonisers to the New World devastated the native Amerindian populations.

For animals, and particularly birds, the impact of

invasive species can be huge. It is no coincidence that major international institutions, including BirdLife International itself, consider this impact "catastrophic", second only to habitat destruction. Whenever ecosystems are geographically and evolutionarily isolated, invasive species represent one of the most serious biological threats to native species. It is a well-known fact that island fauna are most at risk of extinction because of invasive species. However the threat is just as real for continental-terrestrial ecosystems, especially those that are relatively isolated.

112 of the 153 species that have become extinct over the last 500 years have been wiped out by invasive species.

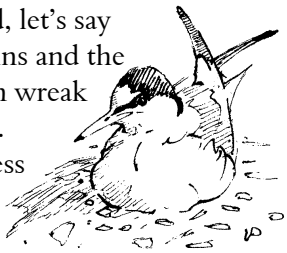
Because of this, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on Migratory Species, the Bern Convention on the Conservation of Nature, and the European Union have all adopted resolutions and regulations to control invasive species; regulations that individual states are turning into national and sometimes regional laws.

The size of the problem

The figures do not lie. In the European Union there are around 12 thousand native species. On a global scale, 112 of the 153 species that have become extinct over the last 500 years have been wiped out by invasive species. As things stand, 21 species of bird are at risk of extinction within Europe for this very reason. On a global scale, some 250 species of bird are threatened with global extinction by rats. Another 202 species are threatened by domestic cats, and 50 by *Mustelidae* (such as American Mink) first imported into Europe for its fur, and now present in the wild over large parts of the old continent. The consequences are devastating because most species of bird are defenceless against this formidable predator.

Ecological balance: the basis for co-existence

Birds are generally the victims of invasive species who predate their eggs and their young. Island fauna is particularly vulnerable because these species have evolved without the need to defend themselves against predatory and competitor species, and so have no way to fight back. But the problem is not unique to islands. To use a metaphor, we can compare the native species of prey to a regiment of cavalry, sabres drawn, trying to contain the advance of armoured tanks (the invasive species). An ecological balance is key to the successful coexistence of predator and prey. If the balance is disturbed, let's say because the predator always wins and the prey always loses, the upset can wreak havoc on the whole ecosystem. The image of young, defenceless chicks eaten alive by rats is unfortunately all too real.



Strategic measures

Reducing the impact of invasive species, whether vegetable or animal, is essential. Both international conventions and European regulations prescribe a comprehensive strategy:

1. Preventative measures to minimise the possibility of introducing new, exotic species (whether deliberate or accidental).
2. Monitoring the presence of invasive species in the wild, with eradication or control wherever possible.
3. Education to improve awareness of the problem of invasive species.

A thorny, and unavoidable problem

Management of invasive species has become a critical issue, both for biodiversity conservation and for the wellbeing (or suffering) of animals. It poses a complex set of problems, which should be tackled sensibly. LIPU is following the issue closely, believing it is important to leave no stone unturned and to draw on all available knowledge and expertise in order to find an effective solution to this problem. To be as effective as possible, while still avoiding cruelty. European regulations are clear on this too, referring directly to the guiding principles on animal welfare established by the World Organisation for Animal Health.

Looking ahead, the impact of invasive species on biodiversity is bound to increase, and it is essential that we act, for the preservation of biodiversity, and for the welfare of all living creatures. LIPU will play its part, by sharing information, by keeping informed, by engaging in the debate, rising to this new and complex challenge, to the best of our knowledge and judgment, for the future of the planet.

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THE DIFFICULTIES OF CARING

Wildlife rescue centres are going through a difficult moment what with cuts in funding, poor regulatory control and growing numbers of requests for help. The support of members and donors is fundamental. Meanwhile LIPU is working to develop a real rescue 'system' in Italy as well as calling on the public administration to meet its responsibilities.

The telephone rings again and again throughout the humid Italian summer. A swallow with a broken wing, a fledgling found by the road, a young owl looking surprised. Hundreds of telephone calls from every corner of Italy, with every sort of request and ever-growing pressure. Inevitably, as people become more aware the number of calls for help is increasing.

And this is how the operators respond, calm or excited but all of them focused on conveying the right information. Meanwhile, in the 'nursery' the production line is in operation: the nestlings (most numerous of which are the swallows) eat every hour and are so numerous that one round of feeding is immediately followed by the next. And then the medical inspections, the flight training, procuring medicines and food, cleaning up, the release of animals ready to go, the administrative duties, communications activities, accidents. All of this and one worry as well: what will become of the centre? Public funds are becoming scarce; the region and the commune are not responding.

This is the life of the centre in a time of crisis. Wonderful and arduous as always but marked by a new element: the sharp reduction in support from the authorities. It is a serious problem, and one that is bringing these centres to their knees and, in some cases, pushing them into closure.

A White Book of Animal Rescue in Italy

It is in this context that LIPU has launched a special initiative. With a study carried out over recent months, an ad hoc working group has analysed the rescue situation in Italy, collected information on the scattered centres around the country (LIPU centres

and others), reflected on the regulatory deficiencies, and identified the principal problem areas and the most recent aggravating factors.

The study will be completed within the year with a series of proposals for action, internal and external to the associations. The objective: not only to save our centres (in only these last few years three have had to close) but also to contribute to the creation of a real and appropriate system of wildlife care in Italy, one that involves the local authorities, goes beyond the current limits of the regulations; one that favours a better functioning (from the care of animals to the collection of scientific data) and leads, finally, to public support that is economic, adequate and properly structured. A sort of 'white book' for the rescue of animals in difficulty, so that finally the care of wild animals in Italy can become less of an 'impossible' endeavour.

Among the tools that LIPU is considering is one that the association has been working on for some time and that is already complete and on the way to being realised: a national law for the rescue centres, one that lays down uniform guidelines and regularises rescue activities with appropriate financing. This would be an important step forward, one that would encourage the regions and, as a result, help the organisations active in this field. We shall be working on it with great care in the coming months.

TAIL FEATHERS

As you know we ask for financial support only twice a year – in the spring we have our annual appeal and with this edition we invite you to take part in our annual draw. You will find tickets unless you

have asked not to receive them and I encourage you to buy a few because all funds raised will, as ever, be dedicated to the welfare of birds in Italy. The prizes are simple and should have a universal appeal – who wouldn't like the chance of a useful cheque before Christmas? The chances of winning are very much better than most other lotteries and the draw usually produces a surplus of about £2000 – but if more of our supporters were to buy tickets that could easily be £3000. Please support us if you can.

I said in the last issue that the increase in subscription has been well received – well, I've had no complaints! There is always the option for members to adopt the labour-saving method of renewal by means of a Bankers' Order and this can be set up either annually or monthly. If this appeals then please let me know and I'll send a simple form to be signed and sent to your bank.

Postage costs continue to rise and we do achieve a worthwhile saving by using a franking machine, but simple letters such as renewal reminders can be sent by email and this is offers even greater savings. If you would be happy for me to contact you in this way please send me an email and we will both save time and money – I will not share your email address with anyone.

★★★

I am grateful, as I am for every edition of the Ali, for the work of the production team who, this time, were: Barbara Avery, Betty and Andy Marrick, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

★★★

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Above, a typical nesting site for Lanner falcons – remote but still threatened. Its location is, for obvious reasons, a well-guarded secret.

LIPU members of the Florence branch recently joined an anti-hunting march in the city. Daniela Burrini took this picture and said that they may not have been many, but the LIPU logo was very prominent on the tabards and flags.

A Reed Warbler seen at the LIPU reserve of Saline di Priolo, Sicily

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