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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

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Winter 2018

No apologies for another dramatic image of one of my favourite birds, Eleonora's Falcon, this one is by Ciro De Simone and the cover picture is by Richard Tyler, see p22.

Below is a superb image of a high-altitude bird, the Ptarmigan, see p 17.

A Time to be Better

From the President of LIPU

Fulvio Mamone Capria

Dear members,

Torrential rain, violent gusts of wind, hydrological disorders, climate change – nature's way of coping with our attacks on it, putting safety everywhere at risk now and for the foreseeable future. We must redress the balance. LIPU and the great BirdLife International family know what to do: bring those people with scientific knowledge and a strength of conviction, those who have global and local-level decision-making powers together so that they can convince industrialised countries to bring an end to this terrible nightmare, which is afflicting the whole planet.

We lament the human victims, we watch pictures of destroyed forests, and feel for the thousands of animals overwhelmed by calamity. How should we respond? We need to care for the land, practise biological engineering, respect agronomist techniques. We need to understand how intervention affects ecology, so that the management of rivers, woods and wet areas can be conducted correctly without devastating the banks of rivers or vegetation. We should be acting in the same way as urban ecological experts like our Marco Dinetti try to do, respecting ourselves and nature (with regard to this, read the opening article by our Director General on the beautiful theme of trees).

Autumn has become the time when a huge number of protected birds, including rare raptors, are killed as the hunting season opens. I can see two contrasting images: the Egyptian vulture brought down in

Sicily by a cowardly hunter's pellets, and Greta and Stefania's smiles as they explain in a video why they had chosen to become LIPU volunteers. The two opposites, good and bad, killing nature and battling to defend it. We have chosen the side of the just, those who respect life and hope. Others choose illegality and violence. And against the latter, LIPU offers a suggestion supported by a great petition: an environmental 'Daspo' (a Daspo is an Italian law prohibiting violence at sporting events). It is an innovative proposal, which – if approved – could change the situation of illegal hunting in Italy. You can help with this by supporting the petition. It's essential.

But help and support LIPU in general too. We have done great things in 2018. We want to do even more in 2019, especially as the elections next spring represent a fundamental opportunity to renew our organisation. We are asking members and volunteers to participate fully in the official election through our website (www.lipu.it).

Meanwhile it's time for festivities. Time to take to the streets for Christmas with LIPU and its special 'parcels', to give to friends and relatives. Time for loading up the bird feeders with bread crumbs, seeds and fruit, because our little friends are hungry. Time for being better in reality and not just in words. There's always time to become better. It's never too late.

Happy Christmas and Happy New Year 2019, from nature, from life, from joy, from LIPU. With all our hearts.

★★★

THE SPIRIT OF THE TREES

by Danilo Selvaggi, LIPU Director General

Imposing, silent and proud, trees are the background to our lives, often receiving indifference or ill-treatment in return. Yet they are an essential part of our natural patrimony and perhaps the key to changing the world. LIPU is working to gain greater appreciation for them and to protect them.

The first frosts have arrived. Little Luca looks out through the window, counting the days till the moment when the fir tree, now growing in the big planter on the terrace, will be taken into the house as a Christmas tree. Even when one lacks nothing, the desire for more still persists.

Then, one morning, something appears there. It perches on the railings, then hops over onto the tree, flitting from branch to branch. Luca looks at it open-mouthed. What is it? A Robin, says his father, One who the tree is a friend to. And that one? A Blue Tit, another of the tree's friends. And that one too? Yes, they and all the little birds that live around us, all of them depend on the trees. On the trees, like islands of life among dead seas of concrete.

On Luca's terrace, the fir and the Robin continue their dialogue, greeting each other. Luca keeps looking at them and from that moment will have nothing else: the tree remains there on the terrace, in the open air, and becomes our Christmas tree now every year, with lights, baubles, decorations, colour, and above all, birds.

To Bring Down the Sky

There is an old alliance between humans and trees, an alliance that takes us back to humanity's infancy, when trees were our refuge and great forests covered the Earth. We saw in the trees a home, shelter, shade and the breath we take; mother, father, the fulcrum of the world, the form of the divine. Trees were at the heart of human communities.

In The Golden Bough, one of the most important works in the history of anthropology, James Frazer traced the course of this alliance across the millennia, setting out – under the aspect of ancestral culture, founded above all on magical thinking – the close links that united humans to the green world, links of such importance that 'were all plants to perish, humanity would not long survive'.

At the central point of the grove, among the tribes of the Volga, was the sacred tree, before which the worshippers assembled and beside which everything else sank into insignificance. In Celtic communities oaks were cult centres and foretellers of the future. In England it was said that a squirrel could hop from tree to tree through all the length of Warwickshire. The Lithuanians thought it sacrilege to break a single branch from a tree, while the punishment inflicted by the ancient Germans for stripping the bark from a tree was so ferocious it could not even be written down. And so it is everywhere, whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia or the Americas. Sacred trees, sacred respect for the trees. It is the trees that support the sky, say the Iroquois, and if the trees are cut down the sky will fall.

Through Belief in Magic to Knowledge

Time has dismissed magical thinking but not erased its best effects. In effect it has sublimated it, while retaining its positive content. What Frazer and other leading anthropologists have shown is that while magic is without doubt an assemblage of absurd concepts and erroneous ideas, it is to those ideas that human culture owes a great debt. Magical thinking has not only been a field for fantasy and superstition, it has also contributed to the development of society: it has promoted the bringing of order to communities, has guided interaction between people, created and consolidated the notion of private property, has reinforced respect for human life, and moreover – the thing that is of most interest to us – has given a primal and profound significance to our relationship with nature, which passing down through the generations has prepared the ground for rational knowledge.

And so, from being the abode of the sacred, trees have become an environmental presence and the object of science and understanding, in this way becoming true companions – real, concrete and living – of our great adventure on Planet Earth.

The Plant Revolution

It goes further: according to an ever more widespread theory, in trees we can recognise sentient beings, capable of experiencing at a level previously only attributed to the animal realm.

'Plants', according to neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso, who applies the principles of his own field to plant kingdom, 'do not simply exist but are equipped with a capacity for sense-perception

at times perhaps more sophisticated than that of the animals. To give just one example, the tip of each individual root is able to sense and to monitor simultaneously and continuously at least 15 different chemical and physical parameters. Plants are able to demonstrate and reveal behaviours so well-formed and complex that they can rightly be defined by the use of the term "intelligent"'.

So here then is intelligent behaviour. Trees and plants are not mere mute and unmoving ornaments to our streets or obedient pieces of garden furniture, but active presences with will and intelligence.

The theory of Mancuso, much discussed and often attacked, is nevertheless one of many in the field of science that is hailing a plant revolution, a renewal of their centrality to the life of humanity, this time based on science, biology, knowledge and even technology.

'When we have succeeded in doing what plants do', Mancuso maintains, 'for example by reproducing photosynthesis, we will have resolved many of the problems of mankind, including that of energy.' A green revolution, yes, in the truest sense of the word.

War on the Trees

In the face of new global environmental threats and the worsening of our social and existential conditions, plants and trees are more than ever assuming a crucial role. There is their capacity to reduce atmospheric pollution (thanks mostly to the biggest trees) and their amelioration of the climate, hydrogeological protection and noise reduction, and obviously their safeguarding of biodiversity. And that is before we consider the benefits to people in terms of aesthetics,

recreation, the economy and health – in the case of the last of these, with regard to respiratory ailments most of all. How many thanks do we owe the trees? Yet never before have plants and trees come under such a siege, as if humanity had declared war on them.

And do not be deceived by the figures for re-afforestation. A study by the University of Maryland may well have shown that the global area covered by trees has risen greatly in comparison to that of the last decades of the previous century (over two million square kilometres, or about 7 per cent more), yet this is a gain that makes up for a loss in numbers of trees while masking the loss in the quality of the global forest patrimony: on the one hand, we are gaining forests of young trees, useful in the fight against climate change, but on the other we are losing primary forests, with their patrimony of animal and vegetable species that is unequalled in terms of the biodiversity that they contain.

Tree Houses in the Forest

At one time the problem was the sadly well-known case of Amazonia. Now there are also Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar, the Congo and half of the rest of the world, with the great power exerted by interests such as the palm oil industry, timber, and even the world of fashion. There is the Bialowieza Forest in Poland, or that of Hambach in Germany – the latter among the greatest of the ancient mixed forests of Europe, where for many years a battle has been fought to stop the forest being felled to expand an adjacent coal-mining area. The authorities and the electricity generator RWE are pushing to clear the forest, while environmentalists have been physically

occupying it, taking up residence there.
'If they want to cut down a tree, they'll have to cut us down with it', said an activist when it was announced that houses would be built in the trees as high as 20 metres up, and that the activists would live there. To become as one with the trees. A desperate gambit, because nothing seems able to stand in the way of development, this time in the shape of a chainsaw.

Closer to Home

But it is not only the vicissitudes of the great forests that is of concern today, the situation close at hand – that of the green spaces around us, in our cities and their surrounding areas and along river banks – is also disturbing. 'Urban greenery', notes LIPU's Urban Ecology Officer Marco Dinetti 'is the victim of a radically flawed system of management consisting of badly done pruning, unjustified felling and ecologically hostile planning decisions such as those that wipe out natural islands for new buildings, commercial centres and so on. Then there is the philosophy that wants to substitute trees considered past their best with young ones, based on the idea that urban trees grow old more quickly and must be replaced. Meanwhile, in front of the Tribunale in Trento stand three superb plane trees planted during the reign of Franz Joseph and still in perfect health. Trees may well fall, especially in times of extreme weather, and there may be fatal consequences, but they can also live long and well. It depends completely on their management.'

But why do we have this anti-tree culture? What is at the foundation of its driving force? 'There are vested

economic interests at work', adds Marco, 'among which lurks the worrying influence of centres for biomass, where the prunings and cuttings end up. These interests often play on safety concerns, which interpreted negatively lead to excessive and senseless actions on the ground. It is fundamentally a cultural question, an old and slip-shod way of viewing the green and growing.'

Trees, Birds and Robert MacArthur

One of the fathers of modern ecology, Robert MacArthur, has dedicated one of the most important of his lines of research to the relationships between birds and trees. Claudio Celada, LIPU's Conservation Director, speaks of this while highlighting the great and 'simple' ecological importance of a tree. 'In a study conducted in the pine forests of Vermont and Maine, MacArthur showed how different species of small songbirds (the so-called warblers) with an apparently similar ecology can coexist in a single pine thanks to a differentiation in their diet and also their methods of foraging. In this way we can have in the same tree insectivores that find their prey in the bark, others that take theirs from the surface of the leaves as well as those that swoop on it like miniature birds of prey and so on.'

Some sort of picture emerges from this, a real-life natural Christmas tree, with birds scattered on and under it , each with their own niche and beauty. 'And in fact there are graphics', adds Claudio, 'that represent MacArthur's tree in exactly this manner: as a natural Christmas tree full of birds'.

And MacArthur's studies together with Edward O. Wilson have demonstrated that trees and woods can be vital natural islands in a sea of inhospitable environments, such as those created by intensive agriculture, becoming a precious and sometimes the only refuge for many species of birds.

In a certain sense, MacArthur has given a scientific basis to what little Luca gained through his emotions. Tree–Island, Tree–Oasis. Tree–Home. Trees for shelter and safety. Perhaps one day Luca himself will be a scientist. Perhaps in the magic and enchantment of his gaze of today will be born the Robert MacArthur of tomorrow.

At Least for Now

A destructive wind can lay whole woods low. Rivers in concrete channels explode in fury. Houses thrown up in places where they stand in harm's way are overwhelmed. Storms. Everything seems hopeless and out of control. Yet it would not take much to change things. We have the knowledge, the intelligence and the technology to do it. We know where we must stand up to it and meet it head on. We have the wisdom of the plants and their quiet advice. We have the spirit of the trees. It would take so little.

In the meantime, the Court of Munster has suspended the cutting down of the Hambach Forest. Time gained to strengthen the case. There needs to be a better understanding. The trees, the falcons, the Tawny Owls and fifty thousand protesters have breathed a sigh of relief. At least for now, the forest is saved.

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SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Marco Gustin, Head of Species and Research

Not migrations but 'irruptions'. Millions of birds move thousands of kilometres in the search of food. An extraordinary spectacle that can be admired – particularly in autumn and winter

Val Vigezzo; the border between Italy and Switzerland. Some birdwatchers alert me to an ornithological spectacle. I decide to go and check it out in person. Having just arrived at the site, I find myself facing an indescribable, unimaginable event: an endless river of birds, spread out over an

extensive area, in a continuous rustling of wings and movement. There were millions of Bramblings. Which gave me a special thrill. Ornithologists call them invasions, or better still, irruptions. They occur mainly during the winter months; their appearance is unpredictable, unregulated and completely unexpected – thousands of individuals of a same species.

They are not migratory birds in transit to their breeding grounds, or taking a break with annual regularity from one region to another, or one continent to another. Nor are they the so-called accidental species that arrive occasionally in a specific area situated a very long way from their normal territory, usually in small numbers and often following unfavourable meteorological events. In these cases, either the movements are expected or they are repeated each breeding cycle, year after year.

However, in the case of irruptions, things are very different. Because with these movements the birds take advantage of different geographical areas as an answer to seasonal changes in the environment, the availability of food and the density of their population. Not all the individuals of a particular species take part, but only a fraction. And the direction of their movement, which covers many thousands of kilometres, varies from one year to another. The stars of this fascinating phenomenon are the grain eating birds from the north of Europe, like the Nutcracker, Brambling – like those of Val Vigezzo, Waxwing and Crossbill, the last of which eat conifer seeds. Indeed, in the northern forests fewer seeds are produced annually, with notable fluctuations over vast areas covering millions of square kilometres.

The Brambling as an Example

The irruptive species are all characterised by a clear food specialisation: Crossbills like conifer seeds, Waxwings and Bullfinches berries, whilst Coal Tits like the seeds of the beech trees of the forests of central and northern Europe. In some cases, the irruptive phenomenon also occurs among Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a normally sedentary species. These species can invade southern Europe cyclically every three, four, five or more years, mostly in autumn and winter after a good breeding season resulting in increased numbers of birds. At the end of the poor season, many individuals will try to return to their area of origin where they were born. But in some cases they can decide to stay in the 'invaded' ('occupied') zone and nest in these new territories.

One of the most documented cases is that of that of the Brambling, a migratory species and widespread as a nesting bird in northern Europe, extensively spread in the Western Palearctic on the Scandinavian Peninsula, in Finland, in northern Russia, whilst the wintering locations are found to the south of the breeding area up to the Mediterranean basin. The extension of post-breeding movements of this species is strongly influenced by the availability of food, as in some years there is a sizeable variation in numbers and wintering areas differ. In central and southern Europe mainly, they settle cyclically in winter, an invasive phenomenon that can concentrate millions of individuals at one site.

Nomadic Birds

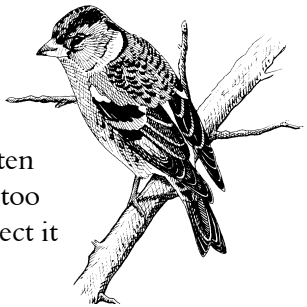
Other forms of bird invasions can be found, always however tied to the availability of food. As with

dispersion, it's a movement that involves some or the majority of the individuals of a population. Also in this case, the individuals move in several directions and the centre of distribution is not altered.

Disorganised movements are mostly characterised by young birds, which – following take-off – stray from their parents' territory.

Instead, nomadism is a type of irruptive movement in which nearly all the population of a certain species finish by moving in response to unforeseeable situations, in general in search of conditions more adapted to nesting. The nomadic species, as a norm, do not return to their original territories of nesting areas or non-nesting areas. Nomadism is typical, for example, of the species that live in arid regions, that frequent open zones covered by stony terrains or semi-arid zones on the edge of deserts or treeless plains. Many of these species are grain eating and for them the ability to find food depends on rain. We know that in these semi-desert areas it is unpredictable when and how much it will rain. So, consequently, the movement of these species is not predicable either.

The wonder of that evening comes to my mind at times like a dream. I recall the day passed in Val Vigezzo, that 'river' of birds that spreads across the sky. And think of the complexity and of the beauty of nature, which too often is not fully known, and which too often does not receive the respect it deserves.



Claudio Celada, Director of Nature Conservation
Marco Gustin, Head of Species and Research

No Room for Birds

New research reveals worrying data on climate change and biodiversity. At a local level there is a high risk of extinction for species such as the Snowfinch and Water Pipit.

The effect of climate change on biodiversity, and particularly on birds, is becoming more and more clear, and more and more worrying. Researchers, environmental associations and the media are reporting this news with ever increasing frequency. According to the Red List of endangered species, produced by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), almost half of the mammal species being studied and almost a quarter of species of bird will, or could, see negative effects from climate change within the forthcoming decades.

In 2008 BirdLife International, and LIPU launched the Climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds. This tells us that many species will move further and further north, seeking higher latitudes in the pursuit of favourable habitat, while other arctic and subarctic species are at risk of being wiped out because they have no alternative space to move into. Even moving may not be enough. The seasons are shifting and the breeding period may no longer coincide with the availability of food. This is especially a problem for migratory species, such as the trans-Saharan species that migrate furthest from their breeding areas in northern Europe. Regionally, the Mediterranean

basin is particularly vulnerable to climate change, with some areas at risk of desertification, a trend already noticeable in the south of Italy.

Within this alarming context, it is probable, though not certain, that only populations of flora and fauna in a good state of conservation will be able to adapt to change. One more reason to protect nature, before it is too late.

In the Alps

Changes to the climate have hit the north of Italy hard, up in the Alps. Various species, all typical of cold, mountainous habitat, have seen a more marked reduction of their breeding range when compared with species typical of warmer areas, even allowing for our limited understanding of the ecology and biology of high-altitude species.

The risk is that many species of bird living in the Italian Alps will see a significant decline, as rising temperatures reduce their breeding areas, particularly grassland and other high-altitude habitats. The decline becomes even worse when combined with threats caused by human activity, such as forestry, recreation and the construction of new ski facilities, each competing with the birds for land. According to Mattia Brambilla, one of the most important Italian experts in the field, areas suitable for birds adapted to an alpine environment will shrink, for the most part, and become isolated from each other, increasing the risk of decline or even of local extinction. He adds that two-thirds of priority areas, important for the conservation of high-altitude species, are also suited, topographically and climatically, to the construction of ski slopes, setting up strong tensions between the

forces of economic development and the forces of habitat conservation. Brambilla and his colleagues in the alpine sector have carried out research based on the two climate scenarios for 2050 designed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The first forecasts a temperature increase that is large but contained (around 1.8 degrees Celsius increase in global temperature for the last two decades of this century); the second a more significant increase (3.7 degrees). If the situation does not change, some alpine species will face irreversible collapse. In the meadows, Water Pipits will decline by between 57 and 70 percent, Alpine Accentors by between 57 and 69 percent, Black Redstarts by between 24 and 31 percent, and Snowfinches – dramatically – by between 91 and 97 percent. In the woodlands, there will be a decline in Pygmy Owls and Boreal Owls, which in Italy are found only in alpine forests.

Project Nivalis

Changes in the climate have already affected habitats and species, all along the alpine arc. The Snowfinch, a species that nests exclusively above two thousand metres, is amongst the worst hit. As one of the few vertebrates capable of surviving in this environment for most of the year, it is especially vulnerable to climate change.

The Snowfinch has been chosen as the indicator species for Project Nivalis, a collaboration between the Trento Science Museum, the Natural Park of Paneveggio - Pale di San Martino, Stelvio National Park, the Italian Centre for Ornithological Research, the Tridentine Alpine Society and the Universities of Pavia and Milan. Project Nivalis focuses on the

effect of climate and environmental change on an alpine scale. Preliminary results confirm that Snowfinches prefer areas characterised by patches of snow and short grass, with rocks and bare ground, where adults can find a high density of prey, such as invertebrates (which are particularly sensitive to climate change).

To understand better how the Snowfinch is responding to climate change, agents of Project Nivalis have installed nest boxes on the alpine arc, in the Natural Park of Paneveggio - Pale di San Martino and the Stelvio National Park. These nest boxes offer alternative nesting sites, allowing easier collection of demographic data, such as number of eggs, number of chicks, and fledging time in relation to climate change.

Water Pipits and the Apennines

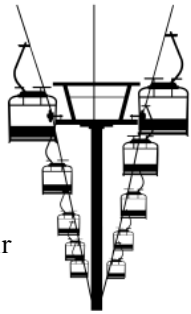
Other species are in danger too. Over the last two years, LIPU has produced a detailed study, supported by funding from the Mava Foundation, using models that predict the effect of climate change on bird populations of the Apennine grasslands. This study shows the serious problems that rising temperatures cause for one particular species, the Water Pipit, which is in danger of disappearing completely from the central area of the Apennines as its habitat becomes less and less favourable to its survival. Currently, Water Pipit are found only on the Majella massif, in the Park of Gran Sasso - Monti della Laga and on the Sibylline range. For an extreme climate scenario, with an increase in temperature of 8.5 degrees, this species will become extinct.

The Water Pipit is far from being the only victim of

climate change. The trend for trees and shrubs to expand at the expense of grassland will certainly have adverse impact on other species, such as the Red-backed Shrike, Northern Wheatear, and Skylark.

How To Manage Mountain Grassland?

These results show the importance of maintaining a traditional, non-intensive use of mountain grassland, particularly below the tree line – practice that should include the careful management of grazing land and avoid disturbance to potentially sensitive species, all within an environment still shaped and maintained by extensive grazing. Projections on a larger scale highlight the importance of keeping contiguous grassland ecosystems intact and protecting them from threats of destruction or degradation (such as urbanisation, the development of infrastructure and the construction of ski facilities). This is especially important within areas that act as "shelter" for key species, for the conservation both of grassland avifauna and, on a broader level, of their habitats.



Snowfinch and Water Pipit

Slightly bigger than a common sparrow, the White-winged Snowfinch is easily recognised in flight thanks to large white panels on tail and wings. On the ground it appears grey-brown. The beak is yellow in winter and blackish during the breeding season. Male and female are similar in appearance. They can be seen during the spring–summer season, usually in a dry mountain habitat, near to shelters, alpine huts, and ski resorts.

The Water Pipit is the largest species of genus Anthus. It is about 16 centimetres in length with black feet, grey plumage and a lighter belly. It feeds on insects, which it catches while walking among low rocks, which become nesting places in summer, or among mudflats. In winter it can be found among algae beds and water meadows.

MY VISIT TO ISOLA DI SAN PIETRO 11TH - 13TH SEPTEMBER 2018

by Richard Tyler, LIPU-UK member

On the first part of a Sardinian holiday with my wife this year I decided to visit Isola di San Pietro (with her consent!) to see and photograph Eleonora's Falcons (*Falco eleonorae*).

Isola di San Pietro lies off the south-western tip of Sardinia and the LIPU reserve, Oasi Carloforte on the western limit of the island supports a stable breeding colony of approximately 120 pairs of this magnificent falcon. San Pietro has been known since ancient times and the Romans knew it as Accipitrum Insula (Sparrowhawk Island) presumably derived from the presence of Eleonora's Falcons. Eleonora's Falcon is named after Eleanor of Arborea. She was born in Oristano in 1340 and was one of the most important and powerful and last judges of Sardinia. She is Sardinia's most famous heroine and granted protection of these birds against illegal hunters in

1392. We could do with some more forces like her working for conservation nowadays!

The Eleonora's Falcon has similarities to our more familiar Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) and Sooty Falcon (*Falco concolor*) further east but is the most ecologically fine tuned of all falcons. Specialised in breeding season in terms of time and location, to rear young on Autumn migrant birds. Concentrated within about a hundred nesting colonies along a band of only six degrees of latitude, nearly all on Mediterranean islets or islands on sea cliffs or adjoining rocky land. During the breeding season the birds primarily uses coastal airspace extending only a few kms seaward and inland. The birds arrive on their breeding grounds in May and depart in October to winter in Madagascar. The total population is thought to be about 4,500 pairs. The fact that there are dark and light morphs adds to their allure.

Following some useful logistical advice from David Lingard (LIPU-UK) and having been in touch with Luciano Durante (the warden at Oasi Carloforte) we made it onto the reserve on our first afternoon. I then spent the following afternoon and next morning around the rocky headlands near the visitor centre. It was good to meet Luciano who was a great advocate for the reserve, enthusiastic and committed to conservation. Of course he had great knowledge about the birds. Luciano informed me that the breeding population at San Pietro is stable at 100 to 120 pairs per annum and had been so since the 1980s. He showed me a nest site where there was a light phase female and a superb black male. According to BWP the ratio of light to dark phase birds is about 3:1 but I got the impression at San Pietro than this ratio was higher (ie even more of the light morph).

Luciano was kind enough to lend me a bag hide so that I could sit on the edge of the cliff and watch this pair without disturbing them. Watching these birds' aerobatics was mesmerising. Vertical dives and ascents at the same speed, sometimes three or four birds together calling, chasing each other plummeting down the cliff faces towards the sea. All with dramatic cliff top scenery. As there were several nesting pairs in the vicinity there was much calling and interaction. After a while I could recognise the male I was watching just by his call (very similar to a parrot!)

The female spent much of her time on a prominent rocky perch preening just a few yards from the nest site waiting for the male to return with prey. She would go for small forays but would soon return. She would call for him and become very excited when he returned. When hunting he would fly straight and fast out to sea. This pair had two chicks which were on a ledge under a small overhang. They didn't show well until my last visit when they walked further out onto the ledge and soaked up the morning sun. They were about three weeks old. To my surprise, on my second visit during the afternoon, five prey items were brought into the young (more than you would see with Hobbies). All were birds and when the male returned with the prey they were nearly always partially plucked. The female didn't let the male feed the chicks. She would take the prey from him with much calling, fanning of wings and tail. At times he was reluctant to surrender his catch. She would continue with the plucking if there had been insufficient feather removal. The only prey item I could identify with certainty was a swift. I did see the female bring prey in on one occasion but she may have taken that from the male whilst out at sea.

I could have spent a week with those falcons. Fantastic to watch and great photo opportunities. At some point I will have to return but a little later, at the very end of September when some of the young should have just fledged. I do have a favourite bird and it is the Hobby but now I am having second thoughts!

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PROJECT LIFE NET PRO NET

by Giovanni Soldato, National Coordinator of Local Conservation Groups

Where Owls Fly

The Life Net pro Net project is over: 18 groups of young volunteers working for the protection of important bird species in sites of the Natura 2000 scheme

A light mist lingers among the dark branches of the mountain pines, which together with a few larches grow here on the steep slopes of the Mount Avic wildlife park in the Val d'Aosta.

We are at the end of November; there is less than an hour before sunset. The cold is starting to make itself felt and the first flakes of snow are beginning to fall. Before retracing our tracks in pursuit of a well-earned hot drink, we still have time to achieve our objectives. Following the usual methodology, we broadcast the call with the mini portable loudspeaker for the maximum of one minute, then listen for another three. After only ten seconds, however, we get a reply. About a hundred metres above us

appears the unmistakeable outline for which we were hoping. It is the Pygmy owl – the smallest European owl, perfectly adapted to survive in the fierce alpine winters, despite its distinctive outline in flight it does not exceed 16 centimetres in length. It is a very skilful predator, the terror of the titmice and finches with which it shares its habitat.

For us, it is the confirmation of its presence in this part of the forest. Now we can go back satisfied towards the valley, struggling somewhat in the darkness, to reach the car now covered in snow.

Bonelli's Eagle

About six months later, we find ourselves more than a thousand kilometres away, in a setting very different from where we were before: that of the heights that surround the Plain of Gela, where – to depict the scene – there is but the sun overhead and the hot wind. With a telescope we are looking for one of the last, most precious nests of Bonelli's eagle that can still be seen in Italy.

Not one bird will show a sign of life throughout the whole afternoon but the volunteers from the local conservation group assure me that the pair present, with close and necessarily discreet supervision, have brought a young bird to fledging over the last few months: it wouldn't surprise me that it was perhaps he, from some sheltered perch, who had been watching us for hours.

Up and Down the Peninsula

Between the Val d'Aosta and Sicily lies a journey of discovery of the marvels of nature. From the rice

paddies of Vercelli, in a straight line following the sun looking for the last pairs of Black Tern to the reed beds of Lombardy, which hide the elusive Little Bittern; from the plain of Emilia, with its 'pioneer' colonies of Red-footed Falcons and Lesser Kestrels, to the slopes of the Euganean hills, characterized by a fascinating geological history and host to breeding Peregrine Falcons. And again, the Moustached Warbler, whose song we had captured from the marvellously rocking boat in the reedbeds of Lake Massaciuccoli; the camouflaged Stone Curlew, which can be found among the rocks of the Magnisi peninsula, in Sicily; the Black Stork that flies above the stunning countryside of Gravina di Laterza, near Taranto; and its white cousin that adorns the pylons of the Plain of Sibari with its enormous nests.

Two things are common to all these species: firstly, that these, together with many others, are part of the first appendix of the Bird Directive, which affords them particular protection; secondly, that their populations, at least in 27 natural sites in Italy, have just been surveyed by almost 200 volunteers who, meanwhile, are collecting precious information on their conservation status.

The Volunteers and Network Nature

These are the volunteers from the local conservation groups created under the auspices of the project Life Net pro Net, who in the last two years have contributed to the monitoring of some of the most threatened species in our country, increasing vigilance and the prevention of illicit damage to the environment. They have organised more than 40 events thanks to which more than 1,600 people have been able to discover the richness, often unexpected,

that they are seeking to look after through the designation of SICs (Sites of Community importance) and of Zones of Special Conservation (ZSCs), which, together go to make up the Network Natura 2000, the most important element in the safeguarding of habitats and species in the EU.

Raising the level of awareness and understanding among local communities is one of the principal objectives of Net pro Net. And, to judge from the crowds of people who came to the educational evenings, to the photo exhibitions and to the outings organised and guided by the volunteers under the auspices of the Nature Day 2000 last May, one can hope that the seeds of awareness have been sown and – who knows – that they might germinate as soon as possible.

Of course, the activities of the volunteers do not cease with the actual conclusion of the project, because the agreements signed with the greater part of the responsible authorities for the sites involved will also guarantee collaboration with the local conservation groups in future years. We hope that in this way we shall see other groups coming into being, groups that will be able to concentrate on dozens of new sites of Natura 2000 in Italy. All this, let us remember, is made possible by the efforts of people who give up a part of their free time to look after the world in which we live, with clear and positive benefits for the whole community. These are volunteers whom, personally and on behalf of LIPU, I cannot thank enough – for their commitment first of all, and for having given me the opportunity to share that unforgettable journey through the marvels of nature, and let me say it, humanity in this country. If – as I think – that well-known conservation

biologist Thomas Lovejoy was right when he stated that 'if we take care of the birds then we shall be taking care of most of the great problems of the world', then I believe that one more small step in the right direction and it will be done.

Project numbers

- 18 Local conservation groups active throughout Italy
- 27 sites being monitored in 12 regions of Italy
- 33 species of bird under special protection being monitored
- 209,869 hectares of land being supervised by the volunteers
- 192 active volunteers
- More than 1,600 people taking part in events
- 41,000 maps of Natura 2000 sites distributed
- 72 Information panels installed, illustrating the biodiversity of the Natura 2000 sites
- 19 authorities responsible for the sites involved

* * *

TAIL FEATHERS

The **Annual Report** by your trustees and the inspected accounts have been filed with the Charity Commission. The may also be read on the blog at www.lipu-uk.org. I will be happy to send a paper copy if requested as I realise that not all have access to the Internet.

The LIPU-UK **Annual Draw** was another success, my thanks to those who bought tickets. The prize winners have received their cheques and are:

1st: Nigel Bowie from Devon
2nd: Daphne Palmer of Surrey and
3rd Susan Sutton of Leicestershire.

Amazon shopping – if you buy anything from the Amazon website, please consider logging in to "**Amazon Smile**". It is identical to the normal way of shopping but we have registered, and if you choose to do so then LIPU-UK will benefit from a donation from Amazon – the prices to the customer are the same! Drop me a line if you want to know more.

Gift Membership for LIPU-UK. Please let me know if you would like to pay for a year's membership of LIPU for a friend or relative. I am confident that after a year many of these new members will be happy to continue with us. Thanks to Mary Winterbotham for this very good idea – let's reverse the downward trend in our membership.

★★★

My thanks go to my loyal production team who, for this edition, were: Barbara Avery, Gill Hood, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

Thanks also to Richard Tyler for his contribution, items from members are always welcome.

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Above: Eurasian Pygmy Owl. see p25,

Reading of the threat to Hambach Forest brings back memories of living in Germany when this was one of my favourite places to see birds. That was thirty years ago and the brown coal is still being excavated by colossal machines and sent directly by conveyor belt to the power station at Elsdorf. This is the view from space.

White-winged Snowfinch – a high-altitude species under threat in the Alps.

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