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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

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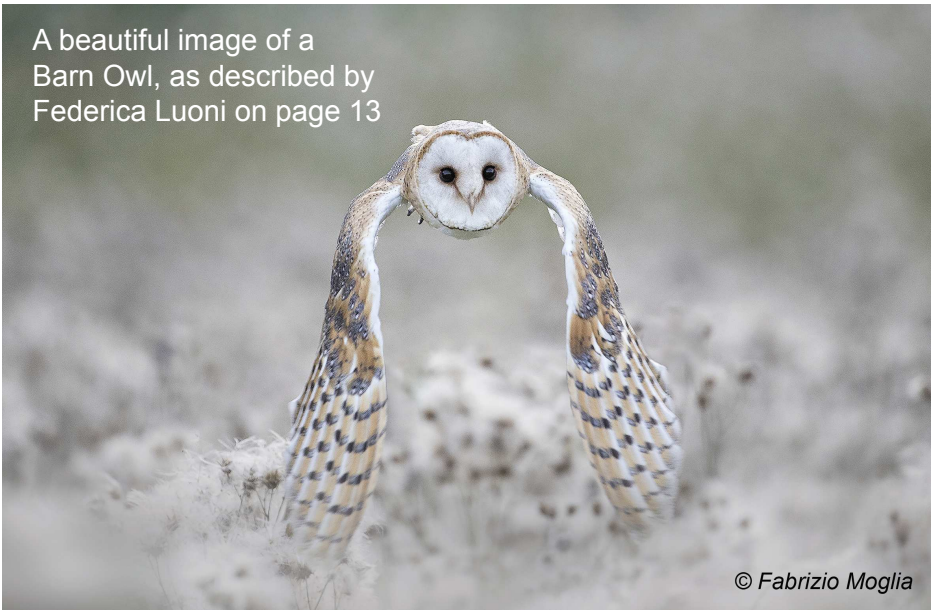
Winter 2020

An unusual way to conduct a members' meeting using technology which allowed voting and participation by all – at a distance.

L - R: Federico Del Sante, chartered accountant;
Aldo Verner, LIPU President and
Danilo Selvaggi, LIPU Director General



A beautiful image of a Barn Owl, as described by Federica Luoni on page 13

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Members, Nature, Hope?

From the President of LIPU

Aldo Verner

The Members' Assembly 2020, held by videoconference on 10 October, showed LIPU's strength even in extremely difficult times like that of the pandemic. The images that brought proceedings to a close were wonderful: migratory birds and a hope for the future.

I never thought I would lead an Assembly as the President of LIPU – an appointment that still thrills me today, a year after my election. Even less could I have imagined presiding over an Assembly like that of 10 October: by videoconference and in the stranglehold of the pandemic that has gripped the whole world for months.

And yet it was a powerful and absorbing meeting. We presented the balance sheet, reported on the activities carried out in 2019 and 2020, and described the actions put in place to cope with the pandemic. The first was the creation of a crisis unit, which has managed the complex situation very efficiently, minimising the dangers for volunteers and employees.

I highlighted in my report how much, even at the height of the crisis, LIPU was committed to further improvements. And that is how it turned out: we ensured that conservation was carried out at the most sensitive bird breeding sites, cared for animals in our recovery centres, worked on the reserves, acted to protect huntable species, and relaunched the monitoring of hunting. We went ahead with big projects and continued our activities

regarding environmental policy and the protection of the land. We handed a 180,000 signature petition to the Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, and the Environment Minister, Sergio Costa, in support of a new regulatory framework that would finally be a breakthrough in the struggle against poaching. We worked on communication, relationships with our members, environmental education, volunteering and management; all this against the backdrop of an excellent 2019 exercise and controlling the pandemic-related deficit of 2020. These are results to be proud of, and are presented in the corporate report of 2019.

There were numerous interesting stories from members and activists who attentively took part in the Assembly, reporting their experiences and contributions to LIPU.

The Assembly 2020 coincided with the World Day of Migratory Birds. Various photographers paid tribute to LIPU, sending us their work and words of hope. And so, this unique Members' Assembly ended with a display of wonderful images of wild birds, their beauty, and their will to live.

My thanks go to the Director General and all the staff for the excellent organisation, to the Governing Council for the work it does, and to all of you – valued members and volunteers who never fail, not even in such a difficult year. To the next Assembly, with the hope of a return to 'normal'.

THE ECOLOGY OF SILENCE

by Danilo Selvaggi, LIPU Director General

Put at risk by the growth in noise pollution, which harms both humans and animals, silence is a precious good of great ecological significance, to be protected, nurtured and promoted.

The score of one of the most debated compositions in contemporary music is completely blank. Not a note, not a chord, not a song to be sung. Nothing, save for a word from the standard instructions for musicians performing a piece. Tacet. To stay silent for the entire movement. Play nothing. The title, 4'33" is its duration. Four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, or rather of near silence, for while the performer who comes onto the stage to play the work may keep silent throughout, it is inevitable that the silence will be broken by the audience or by external factors – a chair being moved, a creaking floorboard, a sudden cough, the sounds of the street outside: traffic, sirens, the chiming of bells. It is the humming of the world all around that infiltrates the composition, breaking the silence. Silence is too fragile not to be broken.

In Search of Silence

Originally from Los Angeles, John Cage composed 4'33" in 1952, at a time when musicians and artists were looking to provoke and to challenge conventions. Even so, Cage was not intending to provoke on this occasion, or at least not for provocation's sake. Already attracted by oriental thinking and everything that might signify a loss of control of the overarching Ego over the world,

Cage saw in silence a central part of a new and more humane philosophy. The experience he underwent in the sound-deadened environment of an anechoic chamber at Harvard shortly before, allowed him for the first time to listen to himself, to his own body: from the high frequencies of the electricity in the nervous system to the low of the beating of the heart and the drawing of breath, the rushing of the blood in the veins. This gave Cage a new perspective on the self and on reality, a perspective he made public with 4'33". What then does the silence of 4'33" tell us? That any ordinary sound, however insignificant, has its importance and can become 'music'. That we must learn to listen to ourselves. That we must know how to make silence. That to create silence is an experience as elevating as it is difficult. That to create silence is not to create solitude. That silence is trashed by the excesses of a society of machinery, consumption and noise. Seek for silence, says Cage, and when you find it you will be closer to truth.

White Gold

If it could be said that water is like blue gold and if trees are like green, then silence is the white, an ever more scarce resource like a precious metal, a bird on the verge of extinction or the right word said at the right moment. Who is there who knows how to say it, or to stay silent when the hour to stay silent comes, however strong the urge may feel to us to speak, to put ourselves centre stage, to impose ourselves? What it is, is that silence is that dynamic between absence and presence, this proof of material and spiritual existence, a curse when coming out of rancour and resentment, but a blessing when it is a safe place to encounter another. A blessing, yes, and a precious one, that we are starting to lose nonetheless.

Ill-Health for 100 Million

The loss of silence in our lives matches exactly the omnipresence of its opposite, of noise, anthropogenic noise, the result of human activity. It is everywhere, smothering, overpowering, and harmful; a macro-noise, which spreads across all public spaces, and a micro-noise, which penetrates houses, offices, private spaces. Last April's report of the European Environment Agency, (AEA) titled Environmental Noise in Europe 2020, paints a worrying picture. Over 100 million European citizens, that is to say 20 per cent of the total population, are constantly exposed to levels of noise that are damaging to health, with pathologies such as disturbance to sleep and mood, metabolic and cardiovascular problems, and damage to the cognitive faculties of children. Looking at the details, says Eulalia Peris of the Agency, 'Two million people will suffer chronic increased irritability and 6.5 million severe chronic sleep disturbance. In addition, aircraft noise will cause a reduction in reading capacity for 12,500 children of school age'. To this should be added the 49,000 new cases per year of ischaemic cardiopathy and 12,000 premature deaths where it has been a contributory factor. The overall picture has led the World Health Organisation to categorise acoustic pollution as the greatest environmental cause of health problems after that of the air, the fact of which has not yet succeeded in making the problems understood well enough to raise levels of concern, whether among the public or administrations.

Noise Against Nature

Human societies, it need hardly be said, are not the only ones to suffer from the noise created by

them. The report of the AEA specifically dedicates a section to the impacts that acoustic pollution has on wild animals, whether terrestrial or aquatic, and the damage they suffer in terms of behaviour, reproduction, hormones, distribution, and ultimately mortality and decline. To make things worse, anthropogenic noise does not only affect the expected urban environments, but also many sites of natural importance: 'At least 19% of sites for the protection of nature as designated by the Natura 2000 network' – states the report – 'are situated in areas where noise levels from roads, railways and airports are higher than the threshold level specified in the Environmental Noise Directive'.

Communication Breakdown

LIPU's Head of Urban Ecology, Marco Dinetti, puts it this way: 'In the case of wildlife, the problem of noise comes most to the fore in the matter of communication, just as in the case of people. You are outdoors talking to someone and the noise all around smothers your words, makes it hard to understand them. So you raise your voice, than have to raise it again, and end up almost shouting. The same thing happens with animals when they are communicating with sound. If there is background noise, the contact calls are masked so that vital signals, such as alarm calls indicating the presence of a predator, can go unheard, or the mating calls forming part of the process of reproduction, or the begging of a nestling for food. All the most important forms of communication are at risk of interference'.

Speak Up, I Can't Hear You!

The literature relating to the effects of noise on birds

is already extensive and gives a detailed analysis of the problem. 'There are two principal areas of study', Dinetti continues, 'and they show us that birds have varying responses to the problem. The most drastic is that which occurs when the noise is too overpowering, such as alongside a motorway or near an airport, leading to the partial or complete abandonment of the site. Another is to change the time when they are active, with daytime singers such as the Robin and the Blackbird opting to sing at night. A third form of adaptation is what is known as the Lombard effect, after Étienne Lombard, the French doctor who discovered it, which is to raise the volume and the pitch of their songs. In this case there may be a danger of not being recognised, because if a bird alters its song beyond a certain point it becomes unintelligible to others and its message is lost. It is seen in other animals too', adds Dinetti, 'as with amphibians in the neighbourhood of airports. It is a huge and underestimated issue that has to be seriously addressed'. How? 'By making less noise and creating more silence. It can be done'.

A Quieter Europe

All of this is not irreversible. Various European governments are bringing in technical measures, such as low-noise tarmac, the adoption of low noise tyres for public transport, infrastructure for electric cars and the creation of designated quiet areas, silent places, such as urban oases, nature reserves and Community Green Corners, where both the human and non-human citizenry can retreat from the assault of noise: to escape from the deafening music present everywhere, to flee from the din of traffic, offices, aircraft and industry. And yet, warns the AEA, there must be a change in habits from people too, who as

well as being victims of noise, are at the same time its creators. Without this change in culture everything becomes harder.

Outside, Inside

It is to silence, to this rare and now revolutionary experience, that the Norwegian explorer Erling Kagge has dedicated a large part of his life. 'The Antarctic', he writes in Silence, 'has the deepest silence I have ever encountered. In the landscape which stretched all round me beyond the edge of sight the only sounds were those I made myself. Alone on the *inlandsis**, surrounded by an enormous white emptiness, I was able to feel and perceive the silence. I was completely alone. I never uttered a word. I saw no living creature. In the silence Nature spoke to me. And the silence entered into me and became part of my life'. Thus, from the South Pole to mountain ascents and sailing solo throughout the world, Kagge has made silence his natural habitat. And at the end of it he has discovered the importance of another type of silence: the interior one: the silence we have within, perhaps even harder to welcome and make lived experience. This, probably, will be an essential part of any general change in behaviour, an urgent alteration in social habits, in the sense of a greater sustainability in how we act, but most of all in an existential rethinking, which among other things assigns a proper place to the experience of silence and all it represents.

Like a Small Bird

What does silence mean? Merely the absence of noise? Not at all. Silence is a declaration of intent, a way of seeing things. It is to take a step back, to

say goodbye to what is superfluous and to recognise again the function of boundaries, and break free of production as a duty and building without a cause. It is to liberate ourselves from the cult of the protagonist that governs contemporary life, in which if you do not participate, do not network, are not an activist, you do not exist. This noisy protagonist dictatorship rules out any tendency to the contrary in us, because the only way to benefit from the presence of another, to listen to another (whether music, or a word, a lesson, the wind or the song of a Golden Oriole) is by constant striving to lead, be better, to be there. 'Silence', writes Kagge, 'rests between our hands like a small bird'. How can we hope to welcome it in if we do not stay silent ourselves? It is after all the first commandment of birdwatching and every experience of nature: do not make noise.

Silence Equals Protection

We can understand in this way the high ecological value, even a crucial one, that exists in silence. A concrete, not an abstract value. A correspondence between the more effective forms of protection and conservation of nature. A respect for silence is the equivalent of renouncing omnipresence and dismissing the imperatives of conquest and consumption over every corner of the Earth – mountains, meadows, forests, rivers and seas – that is the mark of the Anthropocene, in the end restoring to nature at least a part of what she is due. There is, then, a strong logistical and cultural correspondence between the European task of combating noise to create a quieter Europe, and the new European Strategy for Biodiversity presented at Brussels last May. Titled Bringing Nature Back Into Our Lives, the Strategy sets itself ambitious but non-negotiable

targets for halting the decline in biological diversity that today leaves a million species of plants and animals at risk of extinction. Among these objectives, the restoration of habitats, the transformation of at least 30 per cent of the region into protected areas and the creation of integral reserves, where nature is left untouched, a few spaces at least where we do not have the divine right to words and building materials, but can rather give ourselves over to watching and to listening, as long as we understand that to watch and to listen are moral, healthy, intelligent and gratifying experiences.

The Best of Company

The great masters of the past said that the human being is the creature of the *logos*, the animal who speaks. Thousands of years later we must perhaps rethink the concept, and take it one step further. The human being is the animal that knows how to keep silent. To keep silent is an even higher faculty than that of the *logos*, because it represents its major premise. It is the hall in which the concert is held, the room in which peace is made, and the forest that is home to marvels. It is the place of treasure, where white gold is found. It is, in a way, the word that will save the planet.

This winter, if circumstances permit, visit a LIPU oasis. Do it in silence. Take more than four minutes and thirty-three seconds over it. Find in nature the sound of nature, the wonders of nature, and recall quietly that we are not alone. The world is all around us. There is no company more real and more beautiful than that which has nature all around it, and the whole world looking in, when for once, there is no need for words.

⋆ *Note – inlandsis – in geomorphology, a continental ice sheet (from Icelandic)*

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SCIENCE

Federica Luoni, Nature Conservation

Barn owl family relationships reveal a social intelligence that was thought to be typical only of certain mammalian species

We so often come across photographs or films of nocturnal raptors, especially young Little Owls or Barn Owls, that seem to express affection by sharing prey brought by their parents. We tend to interpret this behaviour as a sign of fraternal love. But does it really indicate altruistic behaviour in these animals or do other factors come into play? In other words, is it

fraternal love or just a reciprocal exchange of favours? These are questions posed by a group of researchers at the University of Lausanne in a study published recently in the journal The American Naturalist – a project that monitored and studied the behaviour of young Barn Owls in 27 nests over two consecutive nights by means of audio-visual recordings.

(Almost) Always Generous Siblings

This species of nocturnal raptor lays four to six eggs in a clutch, which hatch in succession, one after the other rather than all at once. So, inside the same nest owlets of different ages live together and it has been observed that the "oldest" are usually healthier and more robust than the youngest. The researchers concentrated on two definite 'altruistic' behaviours – that is, the dividing up of prey (very rare in nestlings) and reciprocal preening or grooming, together with analysis of the vocalizations of the chicks. The objective was to find out whether these three behaviours might be linked in some way, or whether this might perhaps be a reciprocal exchange between siblings in the same nest independently of their age and size.

The recordings showed that the bigger chicks receive a larger quantity of prey from their parents, but that not every one gave a portion to the smallest chicks. This distribution was not, however, haphazard. In fact, the beneficiaries of these donations were not, as might have been expected, only the chicks that called the loudest, (and which were in turn the more robust and perhaps had a greater chance of survival), but above all those who – beforehand – had spent time grooming the bigger chicks' plumage, without regard to the calls emitted. The researchers explained

this choice as an exchange of benefits: the biggest chicks, in fact, swap part of the prey given to them for being cleaned of parasites, thus increasing their complex state of well-being. It is also interesting why the youngest tend to practise grooming preferentially towards bigger and more robust nestlings in order to find favour with possible future donors. The 'generosity' of the bigger owlets also increased as the amount of prey brought in by the adults increased, but also when the researchers themselves provided the owlets with additional prey. When prey was scarce, however, the bigger nestlings did not divide up the prey, indicating perhaps that even in this species altruistic behaviour only occurs when the appetite of the strongest individuals is satisfied.

The Intelligence of Barn Owls

The Barn Owl may be able to adapt its behaviour according to external circumstances and various social dynamics that develop inside the nest, demonstrating a sort of 'social intelligence' scientists have previously attributed only to a few species of mammals, humans included. A remarkable finding; so what does this research tell us? Apart from anything else, the complexity of behaviour in nature. And how much we still have to discover regarding the ethology of the animals that surround us. And – in fact – that we ourselves are part of the natural world with which we are closely connected.

★★★

FRAGMENTS OF NATURE

Claudio Celada, Director of Nature Conservation

The health of natural habitats is vital for the survival of wild species and humans alike. Threats to that health continue and we must act before we run out of time.

Destruction, degradation, fragmentation. For the last few decades these three frightening nouns have consistently been associated with the word 'habitat' – three concepts that have unfortunately become all too familiar to those engaged in nature conservation. Let's examine each more closely. Destruction is the clearest of all: to destroy a forest, for example, means physically removing it. Degradation is more complex. It is a loss of ecological integrity and a loss of population sustainability for the species present. Finally, there is fragmentation, often accompanied by habitat loss. This is the process where a single habitat block becomes divided into smaller, isolated fragments. With these basic definitions in mind, along with an awareness of the speed and scope of negative change, let's ask the question, how can we turn these trends around within the next decade? As habitats disappear, degrade, and fragment we put our very existence at risk. As glaciers shrink, we are not only losing extraordinary beauty, we also risk finding ourselves without water. As alpine and high-Apennine meadows disappear, we are also losing that sense of the unspoilt and pure that is evoked by high ground. As forests degrade, we are losing a sense of the 'mystic', along with the very oxygen that we breathe. Even the mighty seas and oceans are increasingly at risk, from pollution and the unsustainable exploitation of marine life. For us

humans, often living in urban environments, such pristine habitats symbolise our dearest and most radiant moments. The one true bulwark in defence of our health and the quality of our lives.

Nature Must Be the Focus

The wonderful title of the newly launched European Commission Strategy for Biodiversity springs to mind. We must 'Bring Nature Back into Our Lives' and reverse the decline of natural habitats. The EU Strategy focuses on key points that, if fully implemented, could really turn things around. On the one hand, the strict protection – by 2030 – of 10 per cent of all land, ideally free from human pressure. On the other, adequate regulation for all protected areas, with management plans and effective, efficient conservation measures. With above all a strong commitment to restore the environment on a large geographic scale. To take just one example, by 2030 at least 25,000 kilometres of river would be brought back to their natural course and state.

A Fragile and Threatened Habitat

The first stop on our trip through natural habitats is a mountain meadow, where the ecological crisis is now widely recognised. LIPU has recorded, over the last 20 years, a loss of some 26.9 per cent of birdlife in this habitat. The outlook is even more worrying. The habitat will shrink further as the climate changes and the treeline rises, and thus it is imperative that we strictly protect it and preserve it from the unsustainable effects of tourism, including new roads, new buildings, and other development. No economic issue can possibly justify further destruction. As the EU Strategy states: 'The

conservation of nature has itself an inescapable economic benefit'. A big test will be the coming 2026 Winter Olympics, scheduled to take place in Milan and Cortina, and awarded to Italy following sustainability promises made to the International Olympic Committee. Let's see what happens.

Richer, More Diverse Forests

The second stop on our trip takes us into the forest. Although Italy has seen forest cover increase in recent decades, the size of the area left 'undisturbed' by man remains insignificant. Plantations cover vast geographic areas, and are dominated by trees of low ecological value, which are unable to sustain rich biodiversity. This is why it is so important to strictly protect all remaining old-growth forests (whether primeval or not). This is why it is equally important to adopt forest management plans that are nature-based and that help resist the pressures of climate change. Such plans would improve biological diversity by improving forest structure and increasing the mix of tree species, the mix of tree ages, and the volume of deadwood. LIPU will monitor both the implementation of the 2018 Law on Forests and Forest Products) and the national forest strategy.

The Wetland Advantage

Our next stop is wetland, subject of a recent article in Ali, where we looked at the state of conservation, the dangers faced, and what needs to be done to improve the current situation. The existing network of LIPU oases and reserves, and our involvement in plans for both continental and Mediterranean eco-regions, shows our commitment to preserving these precious habitats. A significant proportion of the planned EU

restoration effort could and should be directed here, especially as lentic habitats (stationary or relatively still freshwater, such as lakes and ponds) are capable of rapid recovery. Likewise the re-greening of river habitats would bring enormous benefits, reducing the risk of flooding, protecting water resources, and put threatened species, both animal and vegetable, on the path to recovery. We should set the mountain torrents free. The great rivers of the plains, starting with the Po, should also become the focus of large-scale re-naturalisation programs, making the ideas of the green economy and positive transformation reality on the ground. Let's not underestimate the importance of our small wetlands, which – with better management – could become a widespread network for biodiversity.

Sand and Sea

Among the Mediterranean habitats most affected or most disrupted by human activity, we must include low-lying coasts. Here, the overall conservation status can improve rather quickly through targeted measures of protection and restoration. The strategies applied by some local communities have delivered very encouraging results and are now being followed in other coastal locations across Italy. And then there is the sea. Seemingly untouched and impervious to the threat from man, we are becoming increasingly aware that the situation here is in rapid decline, with pollution from plastics and hydrocarbons, over-exploitation of fishing resources and the collapse of fish stocks, destruction of breeding habitats such as coral and seagrass, excessive marine traffic, and geological prospecting. This last remaining symbol of freedom is becoming an obstacle course for the species that live in it. At LIPU, we are increasing our

commitment to the conservation of marine birdlife and all marine biodiversity, with a special focus on the problem of by-catch, including the accidental hooking and netting of marine birds.

Town and Country

The intensification of agriculture, especially on the plains, has transformed farmland habitat into a kind of desert with no room for nature. The main drivers of diversity loss are extreme mechanisation, mass use of pesticides, and the removal of all 'natural' features (such as hedgerows and vine rows). Yet agriculture also carries in it the seeds of enormous opportunities for recovery. With this in mind, LIPU is closely following the final phases of Common Agricultural Policy reform – a change that would have an enormous impact on that half of our land under cultivation. An important objective here is to return at least 10 per cent of agricultural land to nature. And let us not overlook urban habitats, from city edge to city centre, each brimming with potential for recovery, for introducing nature to the city, and for improving our quality of life. In fact, it is here in the urban habitat, dynamic by definition, that people show the greatest willingness to become actively involved in finding ways to improve the local environment.

Biodiverse and Secure

There has been much talk of how this period of lockdown has allowed nature to reclaim 'our' spaces. Some have seen this novelty as a pleasant surprise; others see it as a form of threat. The proposals of the EU biodiversity strategy seem wisest. Let's give at least 10 per cent of our country back to

nature, as a wilderness, without management or disturbance from man. Let's increase the area under protection until we reach 30 per cent. Let's commit to environmental improvements, for natural habitats and for farmland, and not overlook our cities. This is what many call 'rewilding', and it would bring enormous benefits in terms of the economy, security, the maintenance of natural resources, protection from epidemics, and quality of life. Perhaps we really are faced with our last chance to make sensible changes and defend both wild and human life.

The Wetlands of Trentino

A recent study, carried out by Muse and published in Biological Conservation, analysed the effectiveness of 30 years of protection (1989–2019) for waterbirds in the last remaining wetlands of Trentino. In the 26 protected areas studied, 43 per cent of recorded species have increased, while 26 per cent have declined. On the whole a positive result, but the headline figures mask important details. It is mainly common species that have expanded, adapting easily to differing types of wetlands, and these species have done well both in Italy and in the rest of Europe. By contrast, the species in decline have an unfavourable conservation status nationally, and are tied to specific types of habitat within wetlands themselves. These differences suggest that without a plan aimed at the needs of these more 'specialised' species, the conservation of isolated wetlands will not be enough to save them.

Who has seen them?

Laura Silva, Regional Nature Conservation

The decline of wild bird species that typically frequent agricultural environments has shown us the terrible state of health of our countryside. We know this thanks to the Farmland Bird Index, which has been assembling – for more than 20 years – data on species such as sparrows, Goldfinches and Skylarks, all of which are ever more difficult to see.

The state of health of our countryside is getting worse from year to year from north to south. This bitter conclusion can be drawn from the results of the survey of birds in agricultural areas that LIPU has been carrying out at a national level since 2009 in the form of the Farmland Bird Index (FBI). The changes taking place in large parts of the country's agricultural areas are seeing many traditional landscapes threatened by profound upheavals, with serious repercussions for birdlife. Populations of Skylarks, Goldfinches and sparrows, species once extremely common, halved between 2000 and 2019. In the same period, Wryneck numbers declined by 71%, those of Tawny Pipits by 72%, the Stonechat by 73%, and the Red-backed Shrike by 62%. Striking figures that leave no room for doubt. These numbers are derived from an analysis of the data assembled thanks to field surveys carried out from 2000 to 2009 under the aegis of the project Mito2000 – work that was taken up for the twelve subsequent years by the FBI. Today the database contains 1.6 million field observations – covering almost 10 percent of the national territory – made by 526 observers over a period of 21 years,

and includes more than 130,000 listening records and a total of 21,670 hours of listening and direct observation.

The Farmland Bird Index

The FBI is based on the population indices of a group of 28 species that live principally in agricultural areas, including the Turtle Dove, the Nightingale, the Yellow Wagtail and the Common Starling, in addition to those species already cited. These indices are used to calculate a composite indicator that combines twenty-first century variations in these individual indicator species to create one unique tendency that expresses the complex trends of farmland birds over the course of time. These ecological indicators, together with those required by the European Union, now go together to make up what we call the Farmland Bird Index. LIPU, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, updates this indicator yearly. And in 2019 it stood at -26 per cent, illustrating the constant decline since 2000 in birds in agricultural environments. Of the 28 species covered by the index, 16 have demonstrated a downwards or steeply downwards trend, with a further seven regarded as stable and only five (Golden Oriole, Magpie, Hooded Crow, Spotless Starling and Corn Bunting) showing an increase in numbers.

The Song of the Plains

The picture that emerges is one of a state of general crisis in agricultural environments, which in Italy are very varied indeed: from the extensive plain of the Po Valley to the mosaic of landscapes dominated by the vineyards and olive groves of hillside areas rising to

montane pastures, where various, at times opposing, processes are creating a situation that is extremely negative for biodiversity. One of the most important factors at play is the ever more intensive grip of industrialised agriculture, which is spreading over a sizeable part of the fertile plain as well as of the more famous of the hill areas, reducing – for wild birds – the availability of food and suitable habitats and thus possible sites for shelter and nesting. The situation is at its most serious, though, in parts of the plain itself, where the trend shows a significantly worse (-46%) tendency compared to that at the national level or to that of hill or mountain areas. Confirmation of this finding comes in the form of the values of the FBI calculated at a regional level, and thus also from the trends for the populations of individual species, which show values that are much more negative in the Po Valley (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and the Veneto) than in the regions of the south. The widespread abandonment of pasture and mountain agriculture, meanwhile, has led to a reduction in meadow and pastureland, with woodland returning at an increasing rate and at the expense of those species that depend on open ground.

Widespread Decline

The disappearance of the birds of our countryside – continuing at the time of writing – is the most evident and most tangible, observable proof of environmental degradation that in reality is even more widespread and much more complex. The FBI trend expresses not only the state of health of the species of which it is composed, but also, and more generally, the quality of agricultural habitats – habitats that are required to support biodiversity, including human beings. Birds occupy the 'high levels' of

the food chain and, thanks to their sensitivity with regard to their environment, function as the best indicators. The fact that they are suffering tells us that the entire ecosystem is suffering: fewer birds means fewer wild plants, fewer seeds, and also fewer insects, including those that live in the soil and that are indispensable for the health of the land and the success of agricultural endeavours. In 2017, a group of German researchers quantified, for the first time, the decline of invertebrates: in Germany, from the early 1990s on, these have diminished by 75 – 80 per cent. In Italy, equivalent data are not available, but scientists and specialists agree that the situation is similar to that in all industrialised countries.

The decline expressed in the FBI tells us of a collapse of biodiversity very much more generalised and even more worrying. These numbers are frightening, and we hope they will be taken into due consideration in the "construction" of the next model of the European Common Agricultural Policy. Only by changing the existing agricultural model, together with the agriculturists, will we be able to reverse the decline in biodiversity seen in environments that constitute a third of the land area of our country and are home to an important "slice" of the Italian population.

The Numbers

28	Target species in the study
1.6 million	Observations
526	Researchers across 21 years of study
130,000	Listening sessions of 10 minutes' duration
21, 670	Hours of listening and direct observation

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THE IMPOSSIBLE INTERVIEW

Common name: Great Spotted Woodpecker.
Scientific name: *Dendrocopos major*.

Why "major"?

They are the largest of the red woodpeckers living in Italy.

Which species are you related to?

I have many "cousins" in Italy: with the smaller one, the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, we often meet, while with the White-backed Woodpecker and the Middle Spotted Woodpecker much less common because they live in more remote and wild areas.

They say you don't like to migrate?

True, I live in forest environments all year round. Some of our young people make erratic journeys of several hundreds of kilometres.

What do you feed on?

Usually on insects that live in the bark of trees. Unlike my distant cousin, the Green Woodpecker, I don't venture out onto the ground to hunt for ants.

How are your populations?

Quite well, we are widespread everywhere in the woods and increasingly also in city parks or agricultural areas. We need very little, just an isolated tree of a certain size.

How did you adapt to living in trees?

We have unique feet in the world of birds, with a zygodactyl structure, with two toes pointing forward and two backward. The tail is also different: ours is made up of stiff feathers that we use as a prop against the trunk.

How can we help you?

Avoiding cutting down trees, especially dead or perishable ones, which have no value for you, but which for us represent the place to reproduce and raise offspring, the only element that allows us to survive by feeding on their insect guests.

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IN BRIEF

Swallows have a mayor as a friend

LIPU and Lac applauded the initiative of the mayor of Sirmione, on Lake Garda, Luisa Lavelli, who wrote to the owners of condominiums where the destruction of about twenty swallow's nests had occurred, intervening to avoid further destruction and showing herself willing to care for the protection of the precious migrants.

More good news for the swallows, from Sardinia. LIPU Sassari announces that after the meeting with the city planning and territorial planning councilor, the Municipality of Siniscola (province of Nuoro) approved the Salvarondini (Save the Swallows) resolution, the first city in Sardinia to take this important step.

The wolves of Rome

Installation of camera traps, study of traces, collection of biological samples, photographic and video documentation. This is what the volunteers of the Rome LIPU delegation will do thanks to a memorandum of understanding signed last October with the Parco di Veio for wolf – monitoring activities. The collaboration, which the volunteers of the Association will carry out in agreement with the LIPU Castel di Guido Oasis, will take place in the territory of the Veio Park, a large protected area of almost 15 thousand hectares, north of the capital. The wolf will be studied by volunteers within the Metropolitan Area of Rome with the coordination of the naturalist and surveillance services of the Park Authority. Methodologies and scientific approaches will be shared between the LIPU and the Park Authority, with a view to enhancing, without risk, the return of the great predator symbol of Rome.

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A MESSAGE FROM YOUR TRUSTEES

Your board of trustees has, over the years, seen clearly that the recruitment of new members is our greatest challenge. Matt Hines, our Chairman writes the following:

I would first like to thank each and every one of you, for your continued support in making LIPU-UK one of the most important sources of funding for LIPU Conservation Projects. I know David marvels at the loyalty of our membership each time he writes to one of the nearly three hundred members qualifying for their 25-year membership badge.

I make no apology for repeating David's mantra; LIPU-UK is nothing without its members. That is why I am writing to you today; let me put you in the picture.

If we look back to 2000, LIPU-UK had just over 1,000 members, including many of you reading this. Since 2000, many more (including myself) have been welcomed to our ranks. Sadly, time's winged chariot proceeds and our losses have outweighed these gains. Membership numbers have steadily declined by around 20-30 per year and we recently dipped under the 650 member mark. In the last couple of years, the Trustees have tried a number of approaches to halt this decline. The most successful has been advertising inserts in Birdwatch Magazine. However, overall success has been modest, cost not insignificant and the decline slowed, rather than halted, or reversed.

The Trustees have decided to appeal to you, the members, to help out with some direct action. If, on average, each of us could recruit one new member, our problem would be solved overnight. In a world where cash is tight and charitable good causes compete for our attention, asking others to commit is not always easy. I fully understand that for a variety of reasons, some of you will be unable to assist. In this case, please be assured that your own continued membership is of the first importance to us. For those of you who do feel able to help, I would ask that you consider setting yourself a goal of finding two new members. Anything beyond that would be positively heroic!

Let me emphasise that our financial status is healthy and we have again been able to meet all of LIPU's

project funding requests this year. There is no covert message here to contribute more money. This is about returning our membership to a healthy level in order to secure our future and relevance in the longer term.

I know, from your past collective generosity, that you will need no further encouragement to assist us if you can. Do make sure though, that any new members let us know who invited them to join. In 2021, our most successful recruiter (Trustees aside!) will have the opportunity, if they wish, to talk directly with Claudio Celada, LIPU's Conservation Director to get the inside track on some of the projects that we have all helped to fund.

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TAIL FEATHERS

Our annual accounts and Trustees' Annual Report have been approved by Wright-Vigar, accountants of Lincoln, and accepted by the Charity Commission. They may be seen on our web site or that of the Commission at: https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/3971438
If anyone would like a paper copy please let me know and it will be done.

I have to thank my production team again for their excellent work in bringing this issue to you. They were: Barbara Avery, Dave Brooks, Caterina Paone, Peter Rafferty, Lesley Tompkins and John Walder. Line drawings are used by permission of the RSPB, photographs are the copyright of the credited photographers.

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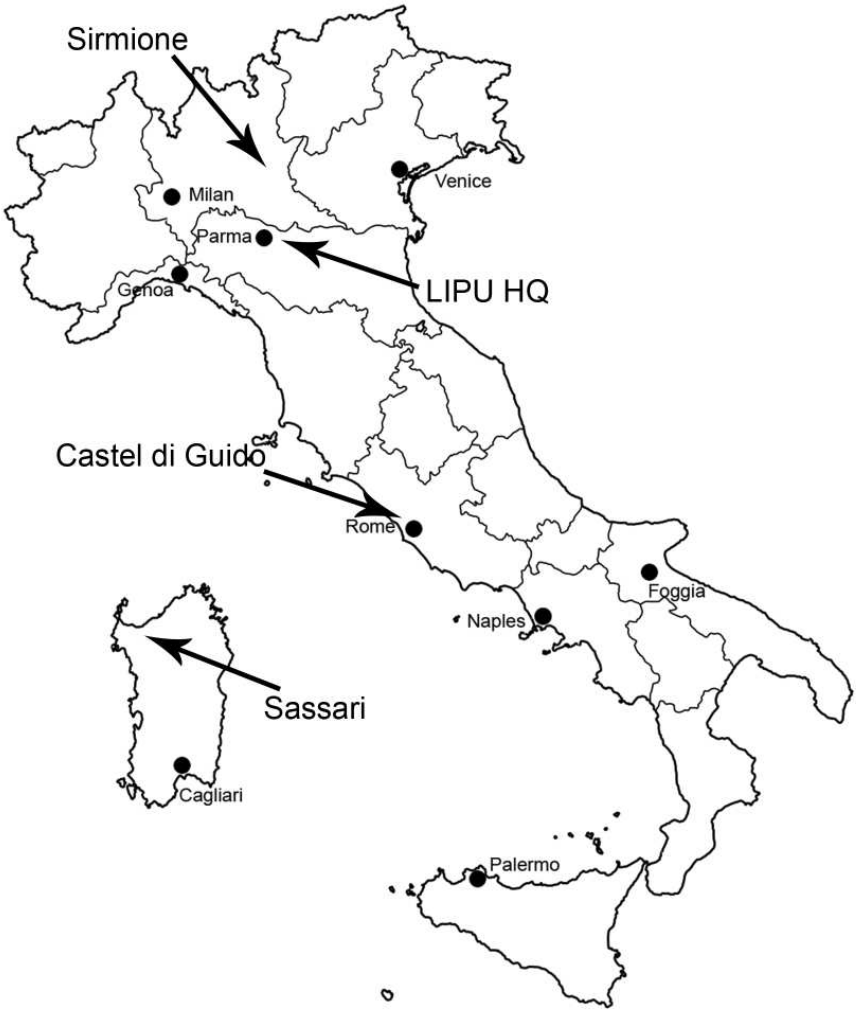

I've been asked to show the places in Italy our articles refer to and the map above will start a series which I hope will add relevance and interest. The location of the wolves and swallows articles are shown above.

Great Spotted Woodpecker,
a fairly common sight in British woodland and gardens. It is becoming more common in Italy as more people offer food to the birds as in this picture.

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