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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy



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*Summer 2021*



The Superb Bird of Paradise, surely the “Essence of Beauty” and the Turtle Dove, just as beautiful, and persecuted for no good reason.



# The Essence of Beauty

*by Danilo Selvaggi, LIPU Director General*

**T**he colours, the dances and the songs make of birds a wonder that forever amazes us. But out of beauty there comes also a moral message, of the need to love without wishing to dominate, to want without wanting to possess.

On the other side of the world, in a small clearing among the uplands of Papua New Guinea, a male Superb Bird of Paradise commences his avant-garde dance routine. All for her, for the female just arrived. The feathers on his back are elevated to create the appearance of a great black face with white eyes and sky-blue lips. Dancing and jumping from right to left with a perfect sense of rhythm, this natural performance artist seeks to convince the female, the sole witness to the event, that the greatest beauty is his. Look at my raiment and my sense of refinement. Look at the way I dance. Choose me.

## **Ten Thousand Marvels**

The Superb Bird of Paradise is just one example of the dazzling beauty with which at times we are greeted (though maybe some more than others) by the ten thousand species of birds on this planet. What to say of the circular dance of the six-plumed birds of paradise, the wing-song of the Club-winged Manakin, the nuptial display of the Great Argus, or the sparkling colours of motmots?

In terms of their beauty, the birds of paradise and tropical species in general will be near the top of most lists (see Huw Cordey's short and delightful

2019 documentary, *Dancing with Birds*). Yet we should beware of underestimating our native species, whose aesthetics employ a less showy but no less fascinating language. In recent years nature photography has helped us to gain a better knowledge and appreciation of the great display of art and design that is around us, a display that never fails to astound and leads us to ask: where has all this come from? How did it take shape, and above all, why?

## **The Origins of Song**

In *Animal Beauty: On the Evolution of Biological Aesthetics*, geneticist Christiane Nusslein-Volhard of the Max Planck Institute explains the physiological mechanisms of visual beauty. The colouration of plumage is a result of the interactions of melanin, which produces the dark tones, and the vegetable pigments ingested by the birds, which produce the reds and yellows, but also, by their interaction with various cellular layers, the tonalities of white, blue, and green. Still more complex than the genesis of colour is that of form; in other words, how the patterns through which colour is allocated come about. All of which rolls towards the overwhelming question of the objective. Why is there all this ornamentation? What is the goal of the beauty of birds and its variety? A question apparently overlooked but one that Charles Darwin himself investigated deeply, arriving at a surprising answer.

## **Eros**

‘When Darwin published the theory of natural selection,’ adds Nusslein-Volhard, ‘one of the criticisms was based on the fact that it had no explanation for natural beauty, for the showiness,

the colours and the song of birds, which gave the impression that they had been thrown in by God purely for human gratification.’ In crude outline, natural selection tells us that successful characteristics of animals are those that allow them to adapt better to their environment. For example, if the seeds available in a certain area are large and tough, the beaks of seed-eating birds in that area will be correspondingly larger and more robust. And yet, in the light of this essentially mechanistic theory of adaptation, how does one explain the ostentatious plumages, the extended tail plumes and other grandiose embellishments some of them have? Are these not useless ornaments, impractical and difficult to maintain, and even dangerous at times?

Darwin addressed the problem in 1871 with *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, in which he elaborated a theory complementary to that of natural selection: sexual selection, or a theory of aesthetics. All this ornamentation, says Darwin, is there simply to please, to court appreciation. It is pure beauty aimed at attracting a female, at the price of having to work twice as hard, an erotic and aesthetic gesture, a special gesture of love.

### **Darwin's Dangerous Idea**

It is to this, Darwin's second, aesthetic theory – following on from his first, utilitarian one of natural selection – that the American ornithologist Richard Prum has dedicated 40 years of study and travel throughout the world, doing this in full knowledge that his is a vision swimming against the tide and opposed by many in the scientific community, a dangerous idea indeed. In his splendid *The Evolution of Beauty*, Prum writes: ‘The majority of evolutionary

biologists would rather not talk about beauty and think that ornamentation and sexual display serve only to give information, the so-called honest signals, about the physical condition of a potential partner'. According to the more orthodox theory, beauty is therefore desirable 'only because accompanied by other concrete advantages such as health, strength, and good genetic material. To sum up, beauty is the handmaid of natural selection'. Prum thinks differently. 'My idea on natural beauty and its origins differs greatly. I don't deny the importance of natural selection, but it is not enough on its own to explain the variety, the complexity and the excesses of ornament in nature'. These, says Prum, in agreement with the other Darwin, answer to a different logic, one of taste and aesthetic preferences, fundamentally feminine. The decorations, the dances and the songs of birds, overwhelmingly a male phenomenon, are there to satisfy the marked aesthetic sensibility of the female and bring about that in time evolution carries within it the heredity of beauty, of essential beauty, and not only mere functionality, of strength, of energy of performance, and health. The aesthetic theory is dangerous in this sense because it sets itself against a wholly utilitarian view of life, in which all that matters consists in nature being an efficient, productive unit, never losing oneself in – how shall we put it? – poetic vagaries.

### **Art, Love, and Freedom**

The nearly 600 enthralling pages of *The Evolution of Beauty*, defined by Prum as 'a natural history of beauty and sexual attraction', open up innumerable lines of inquiry, among which some concern the culture of animals and 'biotic art' (art made not by humans but by other animals). To it, Prum brings

a multitude of examples to support an aesthetic of birds, and more generally an aesthetic conception of life, in which, to be exact, the gentleness of beauty must be added to the exigencies of life.

One instance in particular, among the examples presented by Prum, that merits us going into detail is that of the bowerbirds and the construction of their bowers, niches for the females to enter from where they can observe the nuptial dance of the males and choose the one they think is most artistic, with whom to mate. It is more than this, says Prum: the bower serves to protect the female from sexual assaults by the male. If the male decides to break the rules, (according to which it is the female, at the end of the display, who gets to choose a partner) and attack the female, she, with the protection of the bower built by that same male, will have the means and the time to escape, removing herself from the unwanted attention, and an undesirable breeding outcome. It is an extraordinary, almost moving exemplar, out of which comes the lesson that love, beauty and freedom of choice go always together. Beauty is at the service of love and both alike have an absolute need of freedom. These three things – art, love and freedom – are indivisible.

### **All to Himself**

Don Gerlando Levante has a room all to himself, in which he seeks refuge whenever possible. Here in this room, this pitiless capo of Villa Literno, this assassin and sender of assassins insensible to human suffering, regales himself with the sole pleasure of his life, the song of his Goldfinches. There are dozens, shut up in tiny cages that Don Gerlando fusses over, cleans, rearranges and opens up so as to stroke and

enjoy these little living treasures. A maimed and captive beauty, reduced to a possession. Beauty that is hoarded in private.

The fourth season of *Gomorra*, the TV drama with its theme of criminality in Naples that delves down to its deeper existential implications, opens with this image, which is instructive in displaying not only the contrast between the ruthlessness of a criminal and his almost pathological tenderness towards nature, but also the long and (dolorous) tradition that has afflicted our Neapolitan Goldfinches.

### **Captive Beauty**

‘The Goldfinch has for a long time been deeply embedded in our tradition, both in life and in literature’, says Fabio Procaccini, LIPU delegate for Naples, for thirty years involved in actions of environmental law enforcement and now working alongside LIPU’s energetic Campanian unit led by Giovanni Salzano. ‘To walk the back streets of Naples and to hear the song of the Goldfinch was one and the same thing. Every corner shop and every family had its own little cage. At San Gregorio Armeno the artists made miniature cages to adorn the grottos of the makers of Nativity scenes. In the course of our enforcement actions, in which our ex-President Fulvio Mamone Capria was then involved, we have seen so much beauty locked away, beginning with the prisons of Vincenzo Pascale, the leader of the Neapolitan bird trappers, who had his own particular passion for the goldfinch.’

With the passage of time the tradition of caging goldfinches has begun to decline, thanks to the growth of an environmental culture among younger



Neapolitans, but due also, Procaccini adds, 'to the sensibilities of the forces of order, little by little becoming more aligned with environmentalism than the old traditions, deep-rooted and spread well beyond Naples as they are'. One has only to think of the Ballaro market in Palermo and all the trafficking in songbirds and raptors alike, which from north to south is still disfiguring our country.

## **A History of Human Possessiveness**

The plight of the Goldfinches, which have suffered imprisonment by humans for centuries, arises because in addition to their compliant nature, which makes them easy to tame, is their beauty, through the melodic gifts that make them such refined singers and the objects of a possessive mania. Through the history of the captivity of wild creatures is effectively written a history of humanity and even in part of environmentalism, which also was forged to counteract these twisted relationships with nature. Our own LIPU too was born out of such a desire, that of our founder Giorgio Punzo, a Neapolitan himself, to put an end to the trapping of birds that in the 60s of the century gone was still widely pursued in Italy. In spring and autumn alike, migration routes were lined with nets to catch tens of thousands of migrants, to be caged for the private gratification of their possessors. It would be interesting to go into the underlying motives that lead one to gorge on captive beauty, or, by analogy, to acquire millions of euros worth of stolen art then keep it in an underground chamber to be venerated in secrecy and solitude, like Goldfinches in a cage, in an utterly degenerate form of the aesthetic experience.



## **Ecology of the Beautiful**

And it is this that comes out of the ecological message that beauty sends our way: the contemplative nature of the aesthetic experience. To enjoy beauty is to contemplate, to stand in the presence of the beautiful as before a temple, before the sacred, freed from the mania for possession. The ecological value of this message lies in the alternative that it offers to the ways of a society such as ours, which lives and dies by over-consumption. The spasms of consumption turn desire into compulsion, that instead of increasing, impedes our enjoyment of things, wanting always to have them, then have them again, to possess and be the lords of our possessions. It is this that gnaws away at the world, devouring nature to transform it into soon-discarded trinkets. In this life of compulsion there can be no aesthetic experience because there cannot be freedom without choice and therefore no true desire. On the contrary, to commune with beauty in all its forms – birdwatching, admiring a landscape, walking through the woods, a genuine appreciation of art – is to live out a desire that is not consumptive but contemplates, loves and preserves.

If there is significance in the over-used maxim that ‘beauty will save the world’, it lies in this: from the ecological perspective beauty will save the world because it has need of the world, for with a world destroyed, or in a world laid waste, there can be no beauty.

## **Dance**

On the twelfth of February, in his home in Naples, Paolo Isotta, musicologist, art lover of discernment, lover of nature and a prominent member of LIPU

died. In the Spring of 2018 he wrote for Ali a presentation of his Song of the Animals, an immense work on how through the course of history human artists have depicted their counterparts in nature – larks, swans, Goldfinches, Nightingales and more – and brought it to our oasis at Ostia in a memorable and magisterial lesson given by candlelight.

That night Paolo made us see all the more how fortunate we are to have what we do. Within us we have the profundity of the soul when we are able to know and express it, and without us is the beauty of nature. Our world is in need of a different vision, based on sustainability, social reorganisation and political foresight, but what it needs too is an understanding of the task that is being revealed now more than ever by the experience of the beautiful, of essential beauty. The significance of what is being born on the other side of the world, in the crazed, real, surreal and beautiful dance of a Superb Bird of Paradise.

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## FOCUS

*by Marco Gustin*

### **The Turtle Dove in Europe: The Spectre of the American Passenger Pigeon**

**I**t is now a long time since I first saw a Turtle Dove. I was a teenager, and was on the Lazio coast, with its still untouched pine forests of Castel Fusano near Rome. It was during the first warm spring days, with that Mediterranean warmth that is so welcome after the long winter.

I was enjoying using my ancient Russian binoculars to observe the first trans-Saharan migratory birds, which were silently filling up the pinewoods during those April days.

At one point my attention was caught by a little group of ‘pigeons’, which were flying close together. I hurried over, and after suddenly seeing some others realised that these little groups were in fact composed of Turtle Doves, which came from the coast, and I imagined that they had crossed the Mediterranean in one, non-stop flight.

I got closer to them when, no longer a teenager, I went to Capri some years later to ring passerines that were crossing the Mediterranean from sub-Saharan Africa. They stopped to rest before going on to their breeding grounds in northern Europe.

Seeing them again produced a mixture of emotions. Joy because they had managed to survive; disappointment and anger on hearing – in spite of it being the close season – the continuous echo of

gunshots that resounded from the most inaccessible mountainous areas of the island.

Poaching was widespread and shamefully accepted. And that was unfortunately what I observed, causing me grief in my wanderings during the 1980s all across the wonderful islands of the Tyrrhenian Sea from Lampedusa to Ustica, from Ischia to Palmarola, which incomprehensibly have been left out of the Circeo National Park.

I wondered then and I still wonder today: although poaching has lessened over time, what drives a species like ours to shoot a Turtle Dove, a bird that is especially elegant and graceful in movement, with timid behaviour that probably leads it to hide in the depths of the trees? Possibly to protect itself from predators or perhaps from people?

The Turtle Dove is in fact a legitimate victim of the Italian state, and of the main Mediterranean countries, which allow hunting even in August (Spain, Portugal, France and Greece), which means sizeable losses after the breeding season. In Italy, the species can be hunted only after the third Sunday in September, and yet the regions are allowed other pre-season days from 1 September precisely to the third Sunday in September.

### **Conservation Status, Red List**

About 30 years ago BirdLife International published *Birds in Europe*, a seminal work on the conservation status of nesting birds in the continent. For all European ornithologists, the organisation became the authority to refer to when considering the conservation status of any single species when

it produced the SPEC (Species of European Conservation Concern) list. This list classified birds according to several quantitative criteria linked to the totality of a single population and to trends, first of all in four but later reduced to three distinct categories, SPEC 1, 2 and 3. The most recent edition was published in 2017 on the occasion of the LIPU assembly in Parma.

In the first *Birds in Europe* the Turtle Dove was classified as SPEC 3, which means a species whose global population is not concentrated in Europe, but whose populations have a favourable conservation status.

This status was confirmed in the second edition, published in 2004, which began to be connected with the idea of a global “Red List”. Then, in 2015, the European Red List confirmed the worsening status of the species, classifying the Turtle Dove as Vulnerable.

However, in the third edition of *Birds in Europe*, published in 2017, the tragedy started to become evident. The Turtle Dove was classified as SPEC 1 – a globally threatened species, meaning it is Vulnerable on the world Red List.

What has caused this dramatic decline over the last 30 years? Some countries, such as Holland and Germany, have lost up to 80 – 90 per cent of their populations in that time, and others, such as France and Spain, around 30 – 40 per cent. An estimated 13 million pairs in the 1980s have now been reduced to the present 6 million.

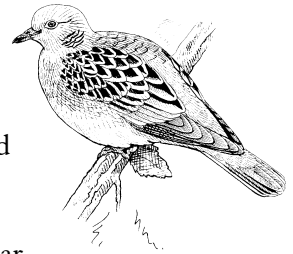
The threats to a species like this, which nests in woodland, hedges with trees, and on agricultural

land, are the usual ones: hedge trimming, the use of herbicides that destroy or inhibit the growth of seed-bearing grasses, and chemical fertilisers in hay meadows, which reduce complex diversity. Then there are the birds' African wintering grounds, where we know even less about how problems linked to events such as drought or climate change are impacting this species.

Then there is another cause, which from my perspective has a bearing today on the survival of the Turtle Dove: hunting.

This activity, practised in countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, France, Portugal and Spain, causes the disappearance through 'leisure activities' of 1 – 2 million Turtle Doves every year.

This is a huge loss, to which should be added losses through poaching and those linked to hunting in North African countries, especially Libya and Egypt.



## **EBCC Data**

In many European countries the trend for individual populations of birds is down or sharply down.

This is known thanks to the immense efforts of an international project pursued over the last 35 years by the EBCC (European Bird Census Council), called the Pan European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme (PECBMS). The aim of the project is to use common bird species as indicators of the general state of nature by using large-scale, long-term monitoring data on changes in nesting populations throughout Europe. The data for Turtle Doves is dramatic: 80 per cent down over the last 40 years.

In Italy, the data required for calculating these figures were obtained first of all thanks to the MITO project (Italian Ornithological Monitoring) and then through the FBI (Farmland Bird Index) project. Eu

The results for the Turtle Dove in Italy are not as dramatic as the European figures, with a fall for the twenty-year period 2000 – 20 of 1.38 per cent per annum, but with differing results across the regions.

In Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Tuscany numbers fell more markedly, and the figure was estimated to be around 2 or 3 per cent per annum.

## **Action Plans**

As already explained in the LIPU book *Conoscerli, Proteggerli* (Identifying and Protecting Birds), the conservation of the species in Italy must be based on maintaining and restoring those habitats suitable for breeding and feeding, starting with conservation of the traditional rural countryside, especially through the care and restoration of hedges and hedgerows, which are important nesting habitats. Reducing the use of herbicides in agricultural areas during the breeding season could also favour the species.

Further, as the species is threatened on a global level and remembering that it is in the SPEC 1 category, the Turtle Dove should be removed from the list of species that can be hunted, not only in Italy but throughout Europe.

In order to monitor and improve the status of the European populations there is both an International Action Plan and a National Management Plan for the species. The Action Plan is analysing two flyways,



western and eastern, with checks on the trend in particular countries covered by them. As already stated, the data is particularly negative in almost all European countries, and especially in western Europe. Several management objectives for the period of the Action Plan (2018–28) suggest a series of measures to conserve the Turtle Dove, among which is a proposed three-year moratorium on hunting, which is still being discussed. Even ISPRA (the Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research) itself, faced with another species that can be hunted in Italy, brought out a Management Plan in 2018 that has still not been approved by the State–Region Conference. The positive aspect of this plan, which was strongly resisted by the Regions, is the suspension of hunting activity in the pre-season period. It is paradoxical to still be discussing the hunting of a species so seriously threatened at the global level.

Hunting the Turtle Dove in Italy continues to be popular and authorised in spite of international requests for a moratorium, the opposition of the Italian Environment Minister, and the ISPRA national management plan, which recommends a pre-season period suspension.

The regions continue deliberately to ignore an incredible series of prohibitions – proof of their total cultural and political capitulation to the hunting world.

All this could entail, in the short term, the serious risk that Italy might become the object of proceedings for European infringement for hunting the Turtle Dove, as happened in the cases of France and Spain.

It also means that in the absence of the necessary Management Plan, hunting the Turtle Dove will be banned in the pre-hunting season as well as in the ordinary hunting season.

In the last few years, I have returned in spring to various islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea, especially to Capri, my favourite. The excitement, the emotion of observing groups of Turtle Doves that come in from the open sea along the island's cliffs to rest after a long journey over the Mediterranean has become rather rare.

As to what might save the species, humankind has not learned its lesson. Having been responsible for the extinction of a species of Turtle Dove – the Passenger Pigeon which once filled the skies of North America – we are running the serious risk of losing another, our elegant and graceful Turtle Dove.

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## SAFE PYLONS

*Federica Luoni Area Conservazione della natura*

**Thanks to the Life-Gestire 2020 initiative, work has begun to secure 10 kilometres of medium- and high-voltage powerlines in Lombardy, protecting the Eagle Owl and other important species.**

With the sun already shining on the waters of Lake Iseo, and birdsong announcing the arrival of spring, workers are preparing to climb high-voltage pylons. They need to get a move on, because last night yet another Eagle Owl lost its life, probably

electrocuted when it had perched in search of prey. Given just a few hours, the work of these technicians might have saved its life. Last night's fatality seems like a bad joke, as work now starts (February 2021) in Brescia. The Life Gestire 2020 project is led by the Lombardy Region, in partnership with (and co-ordinated by) LIPU. The project aims to prevent bird casualties in mountainous areas due to electrocution by, and collision with, overhead wires.

The power line on which this particular owl lost its life had been identified as one of the priorities for action during the preliminary study conducted by Enrico Bassi, ornithologist and expert on this problem. Thanks to an agreement signed with e-Distribuzione, the study has allowed us to classify – in categories of increasing danger – the entire network of medium and high-voltage power lines, along with suspended cables (cable cars and ski lifts) in the mountain areas of the provinces of Bergamo, Brescia and Sondrio.

### **The Massacre of Owls (and Other Species)**

The data available at the outset of the study was composed of an analysis of all known cases of deaths and injuries to animals due to impacts with cables suspended in the survey area. The numbers that emerged gave an idea of the severity of the problem and reinforced what had already been described in numerous scientific articles. Over 200 specimens of the seven target species analysed (Eagle Owl, Golden Eagle, Black Kite, Peregrine Falcon, Black Grouse, Hazel Grouse and Rock Ptarmigan) were found dead or injured, in a period spanning from 1960 to 2018, with causes attributable with certainty to electrocution or collision. Of the deaths in this

sample, 61 per cent appear to have been caused by overhead wires.

The Eagle Owl, the largest Italian nocturnal bird of prey, was involved in 155 cases: a shame that the major victim also happens to be less than numerous in Italy, with Lombardy hosting about 150 pairs out of a national total of between 450 and 600. The loss of even a single bird is a blow to the future of the species, because it usually concerns one of a pair of breeding adults, and this can lead to the abandonment of an otherwise potentially suitable breeding territory, causing local extinctions.

### **Insulation Saves Lives**

Happily there is a solution: the insulation of cables and conductors of medium-voltage lines. Of course, overhead cables could be replaced by underground cables, and there is also another expensive option (known as “Elicord”) of running insulated three-phase cables above ground on pylons. But in fact, simply adding an insulating sheath to existing lines, for just one metre each side of a pylon or pole, can protect these large birds from electrocution. Interventions of this type, carried out in Lombardy in recent years, have demonstrated a very high success rate in reducing fatalities.

Emboldened by this knowledge, and thanks to the funds available to the Life Gestire 2020 project, this insulation exercise was carried out between February and March of 2020 on over 10 kilometres of overhead power lines. This will secure the territories of eight pairs of Eagle Owl. Many thanks are also due to the power line operator e-Distribuzione, who made available expertise and labour.

Thanks to further funds from the Gestire 2020 project and also the commitment of the Stelvio National Park (which has allocated ad hoc sums as part of a three-party agreement between LIPU, the National Park and e-Distribuzione) almost all of the power lines present in the National Park and in the neighbouring municipalities, as well as other Eagle Owl territories in Valtellina and in the province of Brescia, will be similarly insulated to protect these birds from electrocution by 2023.

And it is therefore thanks to the Gestire 2020 project that we will be able to prevent many fatal accidents, involving not only Eagle Owls, but also many other species of bird of prey and passerines, giving safety from at least this threat for the next few years.

Other similar, large-scale and local initiatives are also underway in Italy. It is necessary to support these projects and ensure that in future the design and construction of infrastructure needed by humankind is not a threat to the other species with which we share this beautiful but little-respected planet.

## **Life Gestire 2020 Project**

Life Gestire 2020, co-financed by the European Commission under the Life+ programme, is an innovative and ambitious European project aimed at the long-term conservation of habitats and particularly threatened or rare species in Lombardy. It is led by the Lombardy Region, partnered with ERSAF (Regional Agency for Agriculture and Forestry Services), the Forestry Carabinieri, FLA (Lombardy Foundation for the Environment), LIPU, WWF, Comunità Ambiente Srl and – as an additional co-financer – the Cariplo Foundation. Its objective

is to improve the management and knowledge of the Natura 2000 network and to undertake immediate nature conservation interventions in the area, integrating the direct investments of Life funds with other European, national, regional and private funds.

### **SUMMARY of STATISTICS**

150 pairs of Eagle Owl in Lombardy

450 – 600 pairs of Eagle Owl in Italy

8 territories of Eagle Owl affected by this intervention

10 kilometres of power lines made safe

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### **POACHING: THE OGRES OF THE REEDS**

**A fascinating land rich in nature, Sardinia can become a trap with no escape for migratory birds.**

*Gigliola Magliocco, Head of the South Sardinia anti-poaching camp*

The migration of the passerines has begun. They come from northern Europe and arrive in Sardinia to spend the winter, in a critical phase of their existence and with a very specific goal: to survive winter and return in strength to their nesting areas further north. A fascinating natural cycle, but it is threatened by a hostile land. Instead of a paradise for

birds, southern Sardinia is a hell: it hides traps and other deadly devices, concealed among the reeds and other plants, waiting for small migratory birds. In this particular hell the plan is to kill the birds and deliver them to those who will turn them into ‘culinary treats’.

## **Combating Poaching**

This year I am surrounded by woods, Mediterranean scrub and swamps in southern Sardinia. Ideal, if it weren’t for the fact that this area is one of the seven Italian black spots for poaching. My job is to travel the area in search of nets and traps and to remove them. This year the health crisis is affecting our actions, and volunteers cannot leave their homes. I, however, have a permit to go into the field with the Forestry Carabinieri of the Soarda section, who specialise in combating crimes against wild animals. Let’s set specific and well-defined goals together, because this is all we can do in the year of the pandemic.

## **The Devils in the Reeds**

The starlings arrive in the autumn. They find food in abundance among olive groves and wild olive trees, with a mild climate and, importantly, large areas of reed beds. Like, for example, the Molentargius Regional Park, an ecosystem of enormous natural value but only a few kilometres from a city centre. Here, before sunset, the birds gather in their tens of thousands, first flying over the Park in marvellous murmurations, then settling on the stalks of the marsh reeds to spend the night. The poachers are active mainly in December, taking advantage of the presence of such a large number of birds. The

poaching of starlings is a very bloody business. The poachers take advantage of the vulnerable state of the animals, which, at night, settle helpless on the reed stalks. The poachers make noises to scare the starlings, which, fluttering everywhere, end up in nets or are collected using the 'coppo', a tool shaped like a ladle. Once caught in their hundreds, they are stuffed into sacks and drowned. And then sold. The price, which varies, is usually around two euros each. As up to a thousand birds can be killed at a time, the proceeds are obvious.

### **Camera Traps for Everyone**

Being close to a city, one might think that our task is easier. Instead, it is just the opposite. The reedbeds of Molentargius have many entrances and exits, directly on busy roads, in city car parks, at bus stops, in the courtyards of private homes. All this benefits the poachers. I decide to place, with the necessary authorisations, several 'eyes' (camera traps) between some barrels. I look for broken reeds, which might indicate the tracks of poachers, and for any small hidden boat. I find suspicious trails in several places. There are lots of birds and they land right where I found the trails. After a briefing with the forestry police, we decide to go into the reeds, being very careful not to move or crush the 'safety lights' that the poachers place along the path, like reeds woven or placed on the ground.

Here we are then, and they are busy trapping. We have to go and see if there are any traces beyond the channel. No clean water flows. Rather, it is sewage that ends up in this natural purifier. We put on rubber boots and move on, through the stuff. The good news is that the poachers won't seek to escape in this



particular direction, which means we won't have to cross the sewer again. Inspection, however, reveals that reinforcements are needed.

## **The Night Brings Relief, then Action**

Night falls and we wait to catch the poachers in the act. I am in the reeds together with Giovanni, a LIPU colleague, to check one possible access point. Some forestry police look out from a roof, with a thermal camera; others are stationed in another part of the reedbed, and still more agents occupy another spot. All are in constant radio contact and are ready to intervene. It's late at night now and no poacher has showed up. And so, we leave the reedbed to go to sleep in a real bed. The next morning we are up early to check a line of traps in the scrub. Fortunately, there is no trace of poaching activity. Satisfied, we return to Cagliari to dedicate ourselves once again to the protection of starlings. We slip back into the marsh reeds. The LIPU team is 18 strong. I am waiting for them to accompany them to the spot, because they don't know the capture site in the reeds. They arrive. As we go into the dark, I feel that the poachers are already trapping. We alert the forestry police, who are ready to intervene. It is the moment. 'Halt Carabinieri!'. Taken! The following evening we try again, but this time without success.

## **The Arrival of the Thrushes**

Some time later I return to Sardinia, this time alone, with only the Soarda Forestry Carabinieri for company. The goal is the starlings' roost, which is no longer so easy to find. We therefore focus on the thrushes whose migration to nesting sites has begun. We visit areas of Mediterranean scrub in

the mountains, around Sarrabus and Basso Sulcis, respectively east and west of Cagliari.

For days we lie in wait at a panoramic spot. There are also two agents of the Forestry Corps of Environmental Supervision located along the birding path. After hours of waiting, the alarm goes up. A poacher is setting his traps. He is ordered to halt. Identified, he manages to escape. We go up on foot to look for evidence, then descend once again. But we don't even find him where in the past he had placed his traps. With the Major's agreement, I go to look for him in another valley. I hide and wait. It is pitch black. And then I see a human silhouette. It's him, the poacher. I call the Carabinieri: 'Come! He's here!' This time, there's no escape for him. He has nets, traps, steel cables to catch wild boars, dead birds. Well, now I can go home to sleep. A good day; I'm satisfied.

### **In the Boar's Den**

I go with Giovanni to Gutturu Mannu, a historical poaching area where, thanks to LIPU, this crime has been greatly reduced. But this year I notice too much movement. I'm afraid they are back. The Forestry Police organise a roadblock, and stopping a suspicious car find, in the trunk, four wild boars caught with laces (snare made of steel cable). This strikes me immediately as a bad omen. Probably during the pandemic the police were engaged elsewhere, and the poachers took advantage of that. The moral of the story? Never let your guard down.

In sum, our commitment has paid off. I thank the Forestry Carabinieri, to whom the National Anti-Poaching Plan has entrusted the coordination of

activities to combat poaching in all poaching black spots, and the Forestry Corps Environmental Supervision of Sardinia. Without them, none of this would have been possible. We volunteers will also never fail in our commitment: neither in the field, nor at the institutional, technical, or operational level. Because the migration of birds is not something that belongs to just a few violent individuals. Rather, it belongs to the whole community. And above all, it must be protected if we want to pass on a living planet to our children and our grandchildren.

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## **NEWS FROM THE RESCUE CENTRES**

*Collected by Laura Silva, area Conservazione natura*

### **CRUMA: Generosity Provides an Ambulance**

(CRUMA is the Centro Recupero Uccelli Marini e Acquatici, a rescue centre in Livorno.) The need to rescue creatures in distress has grown steadily, with demands from both the public and local government. And CRUMA has responded with the recruitment of new volunteers, and now also with the provision of a vehicle that acts as an ambulance for injured wild animals. Elda, a long-time supporter of LIPU, generously donated the funds necessary for the purchase of a Fiat Doblò Cargo, a vehicle that has been appropriately modified and equipped for the transport of live animals, with cages, surfaces and ventilation that meet ASL requirements. The vehicle operates with a very low environmental impact, as the engine is powered by methane gas. Many thanks to Elda from the CRUMA volunteers.

## **Agreement with Moby over Ferry Transport**

The difficulty of transporting injured wildlife from the island of Elba to the mainland at Piombino (before being transferred to Livorno) had become a major concern. Despite the fact that over the years we had built excellent relationships with the Animal Project association and some veterinarians, and the consequent creation of a network of volunteers and collaborators who, coordinated by CRUMA, in 2020 alone helped over 150 creatures, the transfer of animals by sea presented various problems, not least the need for a volunteer to make a return trip to the mainland to accompany each injured animal. But finally, thanks to the sensitivity of Commander Giuseppe Vicidomini and the indomitable perseverance of our volunteer Giorgio, an agreement has been signed between LIPU and the ferry company Moby. Moby will now accept on board its ships birds and small mammals rescued by the island's volunteers (these will be under the direct protection of the captain), and deliver them at Piombino to volunteers who complete the transport to the rescue centre at Livorno. This represents a significant operational improvement for the CRUMA rescue and recovery network.

## **An Aviary in Memory of Elsa**

A nine-metre aviary, with beautiful green foliage, now stands in front of the entrance to the Recovery Centre in Rome. This is a gift from Elsa for many small birds, especially passerines, which from today will have more space for post-hospital rehabilitation. We named it after Elsa Peretti, the world-famous jewellery designer, who sadly died in March. We wanted to remember her love for animals and

nature, combined with her wish to leave a tangible contribution to the world. Her generosity has helped, and will continue to help, many wild birds to find freedom. Thanks to the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation, which has supported us for the past two years, this work to help the environment and wildlife will continue into the future. In the meantime, even before the opening ceremony, the aviary has its first guests: a Scops Owl and a swallow, sub-Saharan migrants in rehabilitation after window impacts. And also a Hoopoe, which has suffered predation by a cat, and a brood of small Mallards.

### **The Dangers of Tree Surgery during the Nesting Season**

Four balls of white fluff, huddled tightly together, just like when in the nest they protected each other from the cold. Only a few traces of that nest remained at the bottom of the box in which the Barn Owl chicks were brought to the rescue centre. The large tree that had housed the nest had been cut down by someone in Pontassieve (near Florence) on April 15, and the chicks had been delivered to the Vicchio recovery centre. The story of these chicks, which are still being cared for by volunteers today, is not an isolated case. The practice of pruning and felling in the breeding season is a tragedy for all tree- and hedge-nesting species. The recovery centres receive dozens of reports every day, including those relating to operations authorized by public bodies. But too often the damage is already done. This is a reminder that it is not only a harmful practice, but is also prohibited by the law that protects birds and nests. Each of us can help reduce this harmful practice by reporting such activity to the municipal police.

## News from LIPU-UK

As we approach the end of another business year I can report that despite all the problems facing us all it has been an outstanding success in many ways.

We have a small but clear net gain in members and your generous response to our annual appeal has exceeded that of any previous year.

It is easy to see nothing but problems for nature, and not just in Italy, but we can see progress in many areas. Loredana in Cagliari, Sicily, wrote to say that “there are Bonelli’s Eagles everywhere!” and even allowing for a little enthusiastic licence it is clear that our efforts to protect these eagles are succeeding. This work will continue and the proven methods will be applied to saving the Lanner falcon in Sicily and on the Italian mainland.

We can look forward with more hope than for many years but the work continues...

Thank you all for your support through the last year.

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My thanks also go the production team for this issue: Barabara Avery, Dave Brooks, Giusy Fazzina, Betty Merrick and Peter Rafferty, without them you would not be reading this.

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Gigliola Magliocco is reserve manager at Torrile near Parma when not in Sardinia leading the LIPU anti-poaching teams.

Eleonora's Falcon  
is thriving thanks to  
LIPU, Bonelli's Eagle is  
improving every year and  
next we'll help the Lanner  
Falcon.

Safety for Italian raptors  
from poachers and  
falconers.



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✓ Eagle Owl. The largest European nocturnal raptor, this bird has been saved from danger on the electricity pylons of Lombardy

*Photo © Michele Mendi*

