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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- The Ecological Wonder
- Eleonora's Falcon
- New Breeding Atlas
- Annual appeal

Spring 2023

Three birds of prey mentioned in this issue: Eleonora's Falcon, Bonelli's Eagle and Montagu's Harrier – all helped by LIPU.

A SENSE OF ECOLOGICAL WONDER

by
Danilo Selvaggi
LIPU Director General

A feeling as old as humanity itself, wonder is assuming new significance thanks to the culture of ecology and the necessity of acting in defence of the planet. LIPU is contributing to the great European project for the renewal of nature and for the protection of the miniature marvels that are birds.

On a night of storms in autumn, Rachel Carson took her 20-month-old great-nephew Roger, and went out of her cottage on the coast of Maine to go down to the beach. 'Out there – she wrote – just on the edge of where-we-couldn't-see, big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that boomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy – he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult of Oceanus, I with the salt of half a lifetime of sea love in me. But I think we felt the same spine-tingling response…' When he was bigger they would repeat the adventure, as lit by a single torch, Rachel and Roger would walk along the edge of the sea, accompanied by the rumble of the waves, and small set beside a greater and more primordial nature, go looking for other small creatures on the strand line, especially for ghost crabs, 'without any fear of the singing of the wind, the darkness, or the roaring of the waves'. I am happy here, said Roger to his aunt.

Seeing in the Dark

Rachel Carson wrote 'The Sense of Wonder' in 1956 for an American magazine to bring attention to the formative power that comes from experience of nature. In reality, the article went beyond this.

It spoke not only of an encounter with nature, but of the emotion of one that was special, one outside the accepted canons of learning, underlining the importance that these encounters have for children lucky enough to experience them. An appointment with the storm in the gloom of nightfall, with only a little torch to give light.

... underlining the importance that these encounters have for children lucky enough to experience them.

The original title of the article, 'Help Your Child to Wonder', gives us a still better sense of the message she intended to put out. It is hugely important for children to be given the opportunity to wonder. Which is to say that it is important for them regularly to encounter nature and to know it, but above all for that experience to leave them shaken, for it to affect them deeply, living it as something that changes their personal journey. For Rachel Carson then, the significance of this sense of wonder, as she termed it, resides not only in the amazement that is manifested when confronted with something unlooked for but in the feeling of finding oneself in the midst of a process of change. A change that is risky, as are all rites of passage, and beneficial, because it gives the ability to open one's heart and eyes to the world. That allows one, in a sense, to be able to see in the dark.

A Lack of Knowledge?

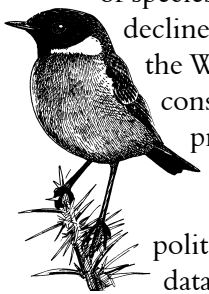
Wonder is a feeling that has been part of human culture from the first awestruck visions of the arch of the sky or of natural phenomena (a volcanic eruption, an eclipse of the sun, the rainbow) to the birth of philosophy and science and their evolution through history. 'Philosophy (the love of wisdom) – wrote Aristotle – arose then, as it arises still, from wonder. At first men wondered about the more obvious problems, then gradually their enquiries spread farther afield into more difficult areas… now a man labouring under astonishment and perplexity is conscious of his own lack of knowledge, therefore men philosophised in order to escape from ignorance'. This last point is critical. Aristotle maintained that wonder was suggestive of an immaturity, of a lack of development. We feel wonder through simple lack of knowledge, the implication of which is that as soon as we gain knowledge, wonder disappears, and that it is like night that dissolves in the moment of knowledge's sunrise. But is it really so? Is this the only possible way in which the phrase 'a sense of wonder' can be used? A simple lack of information? Is there no middle ground between knowledge and the wonder it has supposedly replaced? It is a stark choice that the culture of ecology can help us resolve, as because of it we can have recourse to a different concept of wonder that does not inhabit the opposite side of a divide from knowledge, but has a different emphasis entirely. To understand this we should start from the many ecological challenges we are facing, and the damage we are inflicting on the planet.

... and a million out of a total of eight million species are at risk of extinction.

The Anthropocene, or the Omnipresence of Humans

Reports by IPBES (the International Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) assess that 75% of terrestrial habitats and 65% of the seas have been modified by human activity; in addition to this, over 30% of the land's surface has been exploited and over exploited for crops and stock rearing, for the most part intensively, and a million out of a total of eight million species are at risk of extinction. In the case of Italy, the new Red List for vertebrates (2022) has 42% of the 600

species present here categorised as having a negative outlook, with 10% endangered and 7% critically so. Data from ISPRA (the Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research) in turn bears witness to the unstoppable consumption of the soils of the country, which is losing 19 hectares of fertile land per day, and of which 21,000 square kilometres is now covered in concrete. Fewer hedges, flowering meadows, natural rivers; more roads, industrial buildings, infrastructure. LIPU's studies too – including the Farmland Bird Index, on the presence of birds in agricultural areas – have revealed a collapse in the population of a number of species in the last 20 years, with dramatic declines of over 70% for the Stonechat, the Wryneck and the Calandra Lark, as a consequence of aggressive agricultural practices that sweep biodiversity away. But beyond these individual cases, and the related technical and political implications they lead to, the data also lends support to the notion that we should now be thinking in terms of a new geological period, of the Anthropocene – a voguish word though it is when talking about the ecological crisis. The Anthropocene signifies the omnipresence of man, the occupation of the planet. It means a world completely, or nearly, anthropomorphised, one we have remade in our image.



,,, the unstoppable consumption of the soils of the country, which is losing 19 hectares of fertile land per day,

Go to the Mirror

The question is then, if we humans are everywhere, if there is nowhere that does not bear our imprint, where is there a place in our lives for a feeling such as that of wonder? How can we express wonder at something that is in large part the product of our tinkering and manipulation? In light of the ecological question, the problem of the loss of wonder is changed. It no longer appears due to the casting off of ignorance but to the loss of difference, to the loss of nature. We are no longer able to feel wonder because the wonderful, and a perception of the space between us and something other than ourselves, comes less often to us. Wonder is altruistic, in the sense that to express it we have to acknowledge the existence and the autonomy of another. Increasingly, when we look at an increasingly modified environment, it is as if we are looking at our own reflection in a mirror. We do not see the other, but only ourselves, the manipulators. We see what we have done to the planet, and in a vicious psychological circle are compelled to amend it further, to leave our mark even more. To fill in any remaining spaces. In this way, by eliminating any space for nature, we remove the possibility for wonder, save for leaving ourselves the occasional chance of an artificial, second-hand version, a plastic imitation: a tourist menu of wonder typical of those who see nature as a curiosity, a child-like Sunday diversion before returning to the serious business of the week. It is a far distant thing from the visionary experience had by Rachel Carson with her nephew in the darkness of a beach in Maine, and which she was to regard as truly transformative. The sense of astonishment and wonder, she wrote, came out of 'the knowledge of something which went beyond the confines of human existence', and this is the key point in the whole discourse: the existence of the other is the (obvious but not completely so) condition for the chance of an authentic experience to be realised.

For Fulfilment in Our Lives

We come in this way to a double correspondence. On the one hand there is the parallel between the loss of natural landscapes and the impoverishment of our own internal landscapes, because once we trivialise the natural world outside us, we degrade the spiritual world within. On the other, the positive, is the correlation between the renewal of nature and the re-enrichment of our internal ecology, which has an absolute need of the richness of nature. To this end, a measure such as the Nature Restoration Law, the European statute for the renewal of the continent's natural habitats being discussed in Brussels in recent months, acquires critical importance of a character that is cultural as well as environmental, enough to impel the highest authorities of the Union, from Ursula Von der Leyen to Frans Timmermans, to place enormous stress on the existential side of the question, for a politic of nature that is for the benefit not only of biodiversity and the struggle against climate change but also 'for our physical and mental well-being'. For our lives in the fullest and widest sense.

... the Restoration Law is a fundamental contribution to halting the dramatic decline in biodiversity now in progress,

Habitat, Science, Emotion

'From the point of view of nature – says Georgia Gaibani, Head of Land and Nature Protection at LIPU – the Restoration Law is a fundamental contribution to halting the dramatic decline in biodiversity now in progress, and specifically in Europe. The restoration of damaged habitats helps the recovery of those natural equilibria that have become unstable through being compromised by the impacts of human activity. There are certain habitats that need active intervention, as for example with rivers having their courses released from their canalised prisons, while with others, such as marine habitats, the intervention consists of not intervening further, to let nature find its own way again, for humans to take a step backwards.' Gaibani is part of the LIPU team that is working intensively for the approval of the Restoration Law, a piece of legislation that began its journey last year and should reach its destination in the summer, opposition permitting. It is an essential measure for biodiversity, but also, as we have said, for a resetting of human society, which in its turn is in desperate need of restoration. 'I associate wonder with childhood, of course, and with amazement and joy – adds Gaibani – but also with scientific experiences in nature, especially the ethnological ones that have given me intellectual satisfaction and emotional reward in equal measure. I believe that there are forms of wonder that are friends of science, just as I believe that we are at a stage in history in which all who have nature in their heart and the experience of wonder that it gives us must stand up and fight for its defence.'

A New Sense of Wonder

In effect, the ecological crisis and ecological culture are giving shape to a new form of wonder, one particular to our time. We can define it this way: ecological wonder. Ecological wonder is the feeling of active amazement sparked by the diversity of nature. Amazement, because nature's variety is so great that the power it has within it to inspire wonder is inexhaustible. There will always be something new, to bring us new surprise and joy. Active, because it must be more than just a contemplative amazement. It has to contribute to the preservation and enlightened use of nature, in the knowledge that

we have a true need of nature. We are losing wonder not through an excess of knowledge but through an existential and environmental narcissism that is preventing us from listening, or from orienting ourselves meaningfully towards what is other than me, other than us, other than human, so that any hypothesis of a sense of wonder is effectively made null. We are losing wonder through patterns of social organisation tied to the blindly functional and to productivity at any price, and through the mania for making, getting, and spending, which is inevitably a destructive one.

After having written her article on helping children to wonder in 1956, Rachel Carson had decided to make wonder the theme of her next book. Then came the scandal over DDT, and the news that birds were dying because of pesticide abuse, so that she changed course and began working on what was to become Silent Spring. 'A thoughtless love for nature is no longer possible', she would reply to those asking her not to abandon the book on wonder. Today, she would reflect that the things that give cause for wonder are in danger. We can no longer just stand looking. We have to take action, with the twin objectives of defending nature and the pleasure it gives us along with all its other benefits. Sixty years later, that message still stands, immediate and urgent.

Beauty in Miniature

The first rays of the sun spread over an almost deserted beach. There are soft colours in a thin breeze. At the end of a laborious brooding, the first of the eggs cracks open and a Kentish Plover sees its first light. After a few days the micro-creature has gained a little weight and, it seems, a little courage, as bold as it is small. It scurries, falls, gets up again and shakes itself. It is beautiful out of tiny still-downy beauty, extraordinary. 'Some of nature's most exquisite work – wrote Carson – is on a miniature scale.' And such is the Kentish Plover, soaring beauty in miniature. 'How wonderful!' says little Andrea to her parents, who, alongside the area fenced off to give space to the plovers, are watching over the scene with her, sharing in her fascination. 'We have to look after it – she adds – I will stay here all summer till it is safe.' Perhaps on that morning of Kentish Plovers, her eyes were shining as brightly as those of Roger did on the night of ghost crabs. The same enchanted look, the same feeling of finding yourself living through a potentially life-changing event. Ecological wonder is wonder made new, an experience that unites us with science and poetry alike, the dark and the light, the inside and outside, the sense of community and private emotion, and it tells us we cannot remain indifferent. And to be ourselves, to come out of ourselves, to open ourselves up to the world, and to act for the good of all.

'We have to look after it – she adds – I will stay here all summer till it is safe.'

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HEROES OF THE NORTH AND SOUTH

David Lingard

I want to salute two of the most committed people in LIPU's constant struggle to stop the poaching of birds in Italy. I mean no disrespect to the many others who give their time and effort to help, but I choose Gigliola and Mario as examples of what is being done and what has been achieved.

Their work has been relentless for more than twenty years, and although much has been achieved the battle is still far from over.

Gigliola first, and it is she who graces the cover of this edition:

The manager of LIPU's reserve at Torrile near Parma, she studied environmental science and her introduction to the anti-poaching patrols was on the Strait of Messina, where she was horrified to see birds of prey shot down.

"taccula" is a skewer of eight birds, all protected species, and are sold, depending on the season, at around 100 euros each.

Determined to get involved, she focussed on the south, and in particular on Sardinia, where thousands of thrushes and starlings feed and roost in the winter. Poachers use snares indiscriminately and nets are set around reed beds, before the roosting Starlings are scared into flight, hundreds being caught in the nets.

She has been threatened, stoned, and her car has been damaged. She is sometimes exhausted and feels despondent while picking up snares and traps by the hundred, but 'the desire not to look the other way is stronger'.

The risk is managed by never patrolling alone and always having the authorisation of the police – working for LIPU means that they are classified as voluntary hunting guards.

Why are thrushes targeted? Gigliola explains: 'We start from the historical context, when birds were a primary source of protein: in Sardinia until the late 1970s having thrushes and passerines on the plate was a tradition. Now it is a delicacy that many do not want to give up: "taccula" is a skewer of eight birds, all protected species, and are sold, depending on the season, at around 100 euros each. Restaurants and individuals who buy from poachers do not realise that not only are they doing something illegal, but it is also dangerous, because the meat has a high toxicity and bacterial load.'

Mario was in the area around Brescia, in the north, last autumn and wrote a diary that was circulated throughout LIPU and can be read on our own blog.

The message was of overpowering fatigue, of patrolling through the night, working with little more than three hours sleep each night for weeks on end. I quote a few of his entries:

'Hello everyone, just found one person with 20 chaffinches and bramblings, 15 live blackbirds, 200 birds in the freezer, and 300 bow traps in the house, and am now going to search other properties.'

'Returning to base at midnight we were back on operations at 4 am in the heart of the Val Sabbia. More traps of all kinds, weapons, dead animals and more seized. Onward!

Unfortunately the number plate of the car used by LIPU volunteers was reported on various hunters'

The message was of overpowering fatigue, of patrolling through the night, working with little more than three hours sleep each night for weeks on end.

WhatsApp chats. We will have to be more careful when moving from valley to valley.'

'The Anti-poaching Camp Pettirosso in the Brescia area ended yesterday.
If anyone has ever thought "it's not like it used to be", I am sad to report that it is probably "worse than it used to be".
The Brescia area remains, by far, the worst Italian blackspot. It has no equal.'

'I will summarise, with a few concise numbers:
– 130 poachers reported
– 500 metres of nets seized
– 10,000 rounds of ammunition seized
– hundreds of traps seized
– thousands of decoy (capture) birds with counterfeit rings seized
– thousands of dead birds hidden in hiding places and freezers seized
Some personal numbers:

- 35 uninterrupted days on site
- 3 hours of sleep per night on average
- More than 7,000 km travelled by car
- 377 km walked (from the marshes to the mountains)
- 354 hours of lurking under camouflage sheets and leaves

You might think I'm a little tired…. Yes, I am.'

Two brave and dedicated people; we are privileged to be able to help them in their work.

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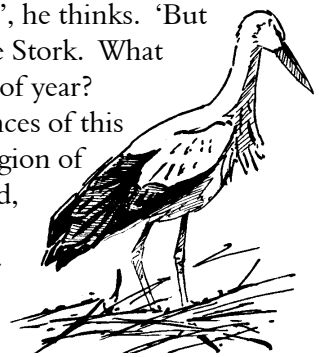
THE REBIRTH OF SOGLITELLE

Rino Esposito, LIPU coordinator Soglitelle Free Flight project

From pools for poachers to a protected oasis.

Following the Free Flight project involving the Fondazione con il Sud, this wetland, north of Naples, is to host new conservation and educational activities, and will perhaps even join LIPU's prestigious network of oases and reserves.

It was the final surprise for 2022: a White Stork in the Soglitelle wetlands, in the area of Villa Literno along the Domitio shoreline in the province of Caserta. Alessio Usai, coordinator of the Monitoring Station for Variconi and Soglitelle, LIPU's partner in the management of this by now well-known Campanian wetland gives a moving testimony. During one of many observations, he notes the presence of a large, impressive individual among the Lapwings and Golden Plovers that winter in the area in which he had almost completed his daily count. 'Paying a little more attention, the one in the middle of them all was clearly bigger', Alessio explains –'It'll be the usual Marsh Harrier', he thinks. 'But no. It was a splendid White Stork. What is it doing here at this time of year? Occasional winter occurrences of this species are known in the region of Campania but are rare. And, as if it was coming to say hello, after a few turns over our heads it carried on its way to who knows where.'



Bringing Back Nature

The following year the Region of Campania declared it a protected regional area.

Without a doubt this sighting augurs well for 2023, the year of the Nature Restoration Law – the proposed new regulation the European Commission adopted on 22 June last and has now put forward for the approval of the European Parliament and Council. The Law aims at restoring, by 2030, at least 20 per cent of the surface area – both land and water – of the European Union, and by 2050 is to be extended to all ecosystems that require recovery. Particular attention will have to be paid to wetlands, which since the 1970s have been reduced throughout Europe by half, and to all species at risk of extinction.

The Soglitelle site is a semi-natural wetland zone formed by a complex of artificial flooding measures employed for hunting purposes in the 1970s – the so-called pools. The site was used in this way right up until 2005 when, following an anti-poaching campaign promoted by LIPU, it was sequestrated by the anti-Mafia police. The following year the Region of Campania declared it a protected regional area. A decade later still, and thanks to the financial backing of the Ministry of the Environment, an area of 100 hectares was expropriated in favour of the communal domain and re-enclosed, thus preventing access and putting a brake on illegal poaching and the illegal dumping of waste.

Free Flight Continues

Much has changed from 2019 to today thanks to an ambitious programme of interventions regarding access, research, and protection of the area brought about thanks to the Free Flight (Volo Libero) project, co-financed by the Fondazione con il Sud and the local authority reserves of Foce Volturno, Costa di Licola and Lago di Falciano. The project – put together by the Commune of Villa Literno, the local authority nature reserves, the Institute for Wildlife Management, LIPU, the Consortium for Agrorenewal, and the Ministry of Agriculture Police – has set up a permanent nature protection unit to stop the environmental destruction and the loss of biodiversity caused mainly by the dumping of waste and by poaching. The project will, moreover, return the area to the local authority, and there will be guided tours, birdwatching lessons, and workshops for schools. So as not to waste the exceptional results achieved thus far or risk allowing the wetlands of Soglitelle either to slip back into the hands of criminals or to suffer dereliction and ruin, the local reserves of Foce Volturno and Costa di Licola – directed by President Giovanni Sabatino, with administrative support from official Vittorio Fusco – together with LIPU and under the aegis of the Museum of Wildlife Migration have decided that the plans for access and enhancement are to go ahead. The guided tours and environmental education projects have thus been resumed, including for the students of a school in Villa Literno thanks to the invaluable work of LIPU wildlife guide Mimmo Cristofari. What's more, the area is watched closely by police from the Ministry of Agriculture as well as by volunteer guards from LIPU, lead by Maurizio Paolella.

The New Soglitelle Oases

Wetlands are important in many ways. First, they are a reservoir of biodiversity: marshes, river deltas, peat bogs, and environments of the greatest biological diversity. Second, they fulfil an important

hydrogeological function, as a regulating reservoir during floods. Finally, they are important places for education, the study of the environment, and birdwatching, as are all of LIPU's oases and reserves. Our objective is to make Soglitelle a LIPU oasis, and one with a dual significance given that it is not only an area of notable ornithological and environmental importance, but also a place where – thanks to great effort and sacrifice – the rule of law has been restored. A place that will continue, we hope, to bring us many wonderful surprises.

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BREEDING BIRDS OF ITALY

Marco Gustin, Species and Research Manager
Chiara Spallino, Department of Volunteering, Social Budget and Projects

The second edition of the Atlas of Breeding Birds has been published, and is fundamental to an understanding of trends regarding the presence and of wild birds in Italy.

The first edition of the Atlas of Italian Breeding Birds was published in 1993. So, thirty years later, a second edition was somewhat overdue. But it has now been published.

Firstly, the number of breeding species has increased by 13 per cent (from 240 to 269).

The Atlas will be a fundamental tool for ornithologists studying the distribution of birds in Italy. The volume, published by Edizioni Belvedere, was compiled by 17 of the country's most expert ornithologists, including Marco Gustin and LIPU's Nature Conservation Director, Claudio Celada.

The result of much effort and fieldwork, the new Atlas looks at the breeding seasons from 2010 to 2016, the previous edition having analysed data collected between 1983 and 1986.

Historically, Italy is the European country with the most regional, provincial and municipal ornithological atlases. But efforts to pull all this information together into a national publication have always been hindered by a lack of funds and by difficulties in coordinating regions and various agencies. This makes the publication of this veritable encyclopaedia a truly special event.

Breeding Species up 13 per cent

The new Atlas tells us about the changes that avifauna has undergone in the last 30 years. Firstly, the number of breeding species has increased by 13 per cent (from 240 to 269). Each species is illustrated, typically on a 2-page spread, with the text accompanying a photo of the species providing a description of its characteristics and current distribution, alongside an environmental suitability map and an altitudinal distribution graph.

It is interesting how some species – including Goosander, Black-necked Grebe, Gannet and Common Rosefinch – have spontaneously colonised some parts of Italy (although still in limited numbers). This has happened in a number of ways. For example, one of these 'new' Italian species, the Red-footed Falcon, began to breed in Italy only at the end of 1990s, initially in the province of Parma, then expanding into the lowland areas of the provinces of Modena, Ferrara, and Mantua (helped by the provision of numerous man-made nesting boxes).

Meanwhile, Lammergeier, Osprey and Greylag Goose have returned to breed in Italy thanks to reintroduction initiatives and conservation projects.

Increases in Non-indigenous Species

To these are added nine non-indigenous species, absent from the previous edition but now widespread: the Chukar, Black Swan, Egyptian Goose, Sacred Ibis, Monk Parakeet, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Vinous-throated Parrotbill, Red-billed Leiothrix and Red Avadavat. Two previously indigenous species, meanwhile, no longer breed in Italy: the Common Snipe and Lesser Crested Tern (whose breeding ranges are now centred far from Italy).

Selected Excerpts

Browsing the records for the 269 species contained in the Atlas, one's eyes are often opened to the effects of land over-exploitation and climate change. Unfortunately, direct and indirect human pressure has led to big reductions in numbers or even to the local extinction of some species. This is the fate of passerines linked to wetlands, such as the Bearded Reedling, Penduline Tit and Savi's Warbler.

The increase in temperatures and the availability of food in urban centres has favoured other species, such as the Woodpigeon, Blackbird and Magpie, but not sparrows. The change in the habits of the Herring Gull is emblematic: in many areas it has abandoned its fish-based diet to become an urban scavenger and a predator of rats and pigeons.

Citizen science and volunteering have certainly been the driving forces behind this important and complex work.

The Role of ornitho.it

This Atlas brings with it another great novelty: the role of the web and citizen science in data collection. The Atlas has the major objective of creating cartographic material capable of displaying the current distribution of all birds breeding in Italy. The launch of the ornitho.it portal has proven crucial to efforts to achieve this goal. Ornitho came into being in Switzerland in 2007, and came to Italy in 2009. The platform quickly became the country's main ornithological data archiving tool. Many national associations – including the Italian Centre for Ornithological Studies (CISO), EuroBirdNet (EBN) Italia, and LIPU – plus certain regional Italian agencies have all signed up to the portal.

Some of these associations later contributed members to the management group that would begin working on the production the new national Atlas. A panel of experts was established to validate the observations reported via ornitho.it and the associated NaturaList app. The group also combined these data sets with those of other platforms, and identified a series of local coordinators to whom various tasks were entrusted – from the implementation of a scheme to research breeding species in the area to drawing up the list of rare species and of those of conservation concern. Local associations and organisations have been involved, organising surveys and training those carrying them out. The number of contributors to the latest Atlas has thus tripled compared to the first edition, reaching 3,075. Citizen science and volunteering have certainly been the driving forces behind this important and complex work.

Statistical Distribution Models

Unlike 30 years ago, particular importance and emphasis has also been given to distribution models. Today's elaborate statistical techniques allow us to see a clearer picture of the relationships between environmental variables, and the effect of land use and consumption in the long term. They also help us to assess current distributions and predict future variations in relation to climate change. This is achieved through 'species distribution models' (SDMs), which are used, in particular, in conservation biology to evaluate the areas of greatest importance for species and to study demographic trends.

This Atlas updates the current state of knowledge on Italy's avifauna and contributes to scientific knowledge and conservation policy in the country.

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ELEONORA'S FALCON FLIES NO MORE

Marco Gustin, Head of Species and Research

Bad news from a new survey conducted by LIPU: The population of Eleonora's Falcon in Sardinia and Sicily has shrunk by 15 per cent. In the Aeolian Islands, the figure is an alarming 25 per cent.

It launches itself from the cliffs and, in a nosedive, hunts migrating passerines. Anyone who has been lucky enough to witness this will not forget it so easily. We are talking here about Eleonora's Falcon, a raptor that – sadly, according to the latest survey carried out by LIPU – is in decline.

In both colorations the sexes can be distinguished by the eye-ring which in the male is yellow and in the female sky blue.

Eleonora's Falcon owes its name to the Sardinian judge Eleonora D'Arborea, who – as long ago as 1392 – established a code of local laws, the Carta de Logu, that prohibited the removal of Goshawks and falcons from the nest, thus constituting the first example of protection for birds of prey.

Biology

Rather than constructing a nest, the species exploits natural cavities in the rock. The eggs, incubated mainly by the female, hatch after 30–35 days, the young birds taking their first flight a month later. The birds' diet is very specific, and is composed especially of passerines that migrate in autumn and are preyed upon over the open sea, and large insects such as dragonflies, and beetles.

The species breeds between July and October, late compared to other falcons, and is present in countries of the Mediterranean basin, including Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. In autumn Eleonora's Falcon moves to Africa, overwintering in Madagascar and Tanzania.

Guide to birdwatching

Eleonora's falcon is a slim falcon, with two different forms; a light one and a dark one which is rarer. In both colorations the sexes can be distinguished by the eye-ring which in the male is yellow and in the female sky blue.

Falling Population Numbers

Seventeen years after the last survey, which took place back in the by now distant year of 2005, last

year LIPU again monitored all the colonies of this fantastic species on the islands and islets of the only two Italian regions in which it breeds: Sardinia and Sicily. The census – made possible thanks to a fundraising campaign – highlighted an overall drop in population numbers, which now stand at 541–618 pairs: with respect to 2005, a fall of 15 per cent, with the worst figure, of 25 per cent, coming from the Aeolian Islands.

The Threats in Sicily

The state of conservation of the Aeolian colonies appears worrying, with a general – albeit limited – decrease in the number of pairs counted, coupled with a reduction in breeding success. The colony on Salina has recorded the greatest fall: in the course of the last 10–15 years ithas more than halved, and breeding success is among the lowest recorded in Italy.

In the Aeolians, the major threat to the colonies takes the form of human pressure linked to the islands' strong tourist industry. Every summer dozens upon dozens of motorboats, rowdy bathers, and jet skis frequent the sea beneath the cliffs where the species nests, causing alarm to all the pairs present.

On Lampedusa in August, motorboats that stopped within 100 metres of the cliffs on which the majority of the nests are concentrated were monitored hourly. This 2022 figure – 39 per hour – was double that of 2012, revealing a total disrespect for the marine reserve protection zone, Site of Community Interest (SIC), and Zone of Special Protection (ZSP). The presence of the high numbers of hunters who are active daily in October is another major concern.

Although no direct attacks on the falcons have been observed, it is undeniable that – intentionally or accidentally – several birds have been shot and injured.

Sardinia: A Less Serious Situation

The situation in Sardinia is less serious than that of the Sicilian colonies. This is either because of only relatively minor human impact – as the islands in question are inaccessible to non-permit holders – or the fact that the colonies are monitored and managed by LIPU (San Pietro) or are located along a cliff stretching for many kilometres.

In the Bay of Orosei, which is home to the country's most important colony, there are no particular threats to the species' reproduction. On Toro, meanwhile, the presence of a pair of crows could be a critical factor. Until recently this species had never been observed on the islet. It will be necessary to establish whether we are dealing with a sporadic observation or if the species will frequent Toro when food availability will be raised by the presence of eggs and/or chicks of the Yellow-legged Gull, Cory's Shearwater, and Eleonora's Falcon.

A further limiting factor for reproductive success – even in a site that is potentially suitable for the falcon, the island of Vacca – is the presence of the Black Rat. And on San Pietro the major problem of the last few years seems to consist of a reduction in passerines in transit from Europe to Africa and an increase in Ravens, whose core numbers have doubled in the last few years.

What can we do to reverse this trend?

The census conducted by LIPU can be the foundation on which strict protection of the few reproductive colonies still in existence can be built. Then, perhaps we can continue to admire this wonderful raptor – and pearl of the Mediterranean.

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LIPU IN ACTION

The new 'Stefano Bottazzo' hide

The observation hide recently inaugurated in the Oasis of the Ex-Polveriera di Albignasego in the province of Padova is dedicated to Stefano Bottazzo, a long-time supporter of the Padova section of Lipu. A beautiful day that saw the presence of many friends, the mayor of Albignasego Filippo Giacinti, and the Environment councillor, Valentina Luise. The hut, built entirely with section funds and cared for by our volunteers, stands in place of the original that was destroyed by the 2010 storm.
This small oasis, consisting of a series of wetlands and a lowland forest, was subjected to several speculative projects in the past but now, thanks to the long work of LIPU and in particular of Stefano himself, who lived a short distance away, we can finally say that it is safe.

The Vico beech forests are safe

"We have won the appeal!" The news comes from Giorgia from the national office with a message on my phone. It is 1 February 2023. My eyes fill with tears. The beech forests of Lake Vico are saved. It took more than 10 years of opposition and an appeal to the TAR promoted by LIPU and WWF, with the support of the Viglione law firm and thanks also to the support and fund-raising of the Amici della Faggeta (Friends of the Beech Forest), to have the 'experimental cuts' rejected. This in one of Italy's most beautiful beech forests, an area rightly protected as a protected area and included in the Natura 2000 network. It was precisely the existence of this felling plan that prevented its candidature as a Unesco Heritage Site. It is a unique ecosystem, not only because of the age of the trees, but because man has left it almost undisturbed for over 50 years, allowing the natural dynamics of virgin forests to be reactivated. *(Enzo Calevi, Viterbo delegate)*

... we recruited 20 volunteers, covering around 10,000 kilometres in a year, searching for the species in all suitable environments.

Pesaro and the Montagu's Harrier

In February 2021, the Pesaro section of LIPU launched an ambitious scientific project: a census of the Montagu's Harrier and the possible protection of nests on crops throughout the Foglia river valley in the province of Pesaro Urbino. With the indispensable help of Massimo Pandolfi, an expert on the species, and the training provided by LIPU of Viterbo, we recruited 20 volunteers, covering around 10,000 kilometres in a year, searching for the species in all suitable environments. Over the two years of the project, we have ascertained that in this area, Montagu's Harriers now nest almost exclusively in scrub lands and uncultivated areas. One interesting case saw a pair make three nesting attempts on a cultivated area for a replacement brood in the late breeding season. They finally chose to build the nest in an area with natural vegetation on the edge of a gully, successfully raising two young. *(Lucia Cherubini, Pesaro Urbino delegate)*

Citizen science on swifts

Common Swift, Alpine Swift and Pallid Swift. These are the species covered by a citizen science survey to monitor colonies and map their presence in the provinces of Varese and Bergamo (2021 and 2022) and, in addition, Como and Lecco (2023). The project, which has surveyed about a thousand colonies so far, was selected by BiodiverCities, an initiative of the European Commission in the context of the European Union Biodiversity Strategy. Varese was selected with 13 other European cities. Among the protection plans developed is the increase in nesting sites and the delivery of data to the technical offices of the municipalities. A number of information panels have also been placed near the main colonies in the municipalities *(Costante Cavallaro, Gallarate delegate)*.

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NEWS FROM LIPU-UK

Annual Appeal 2023

As in previous years we have discussed with Claudio Celada, the Conservation Director of LIPU how we can help by funding LIPU's conservation work. Some, like the anti-poaching remain stubbornly necessary but there is much more of a more positive nature.

Unlike some charities we make only one appeal each year for funds to suppport this work and this year we have said we aim to raise €108,000 to enable the following work to go ahead:
This is an ambitious target and I hope that our friends and members will be as generous as in past years. Please give what you can to help the following work:

- Consumables for the Recovery Centre, Livorno
- Co-financing of year two of the prevention of marine bycatch work
- Protection of Bonelli's Eagle nesting sites
- Anti-poaching, the rangers' expenses at Messina, Calabria and Brescia
- The annual monitoring of raptor migration through Sicily
- Study of the habitat used by Red-footed Falcons nesting in the Parma area
- Protection of Kentish Plover nests on the beaches of Sardinia and Calabria
- The support of new Local Conservation Groups
- Research into Climate Refuges and the threats to birds in the Alps
- Continued protection of Collared Praticole in Gela, Sicily
- Similar protection of Montagu's Harrier nests in Marche and Viterbo
- Survey of Ortolan Bunting in the breeding season – NEW

• Education – "Green Future Citizens"

• Monitoring the relict population of Little Bustard in Sicily – NEW

Since the foundation of LIPU-UK your financial support has been truly exceptional – I'm sure you will agree with the importance of these projects and I hope you will help us with your usual generosity – Thank You.

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LIPU ELECTIONS

Elections to the LIPU Council are held every four years and, as we are full members of LIPU, we are entitled to cast our vote in these. This year we are trying to simplify the process and reduce printing and postage costs without affecting your right to vote. To that end, would you please tell me (by post, email or telephone) if you wish to receive voting papers and I will ensure that these are sent only to those who want them. The papers will be explained in English and will have a pen picture of the candidates also in English. This is now on our blog at www.lipu-uk.org. Votes must be returned to me by 15 May.

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Thanks to the production team for this issue: Barbara Avery, Dave Brooks, Betty Merrick, Peter Rafferty, Lesley Tompkins and John Walder.

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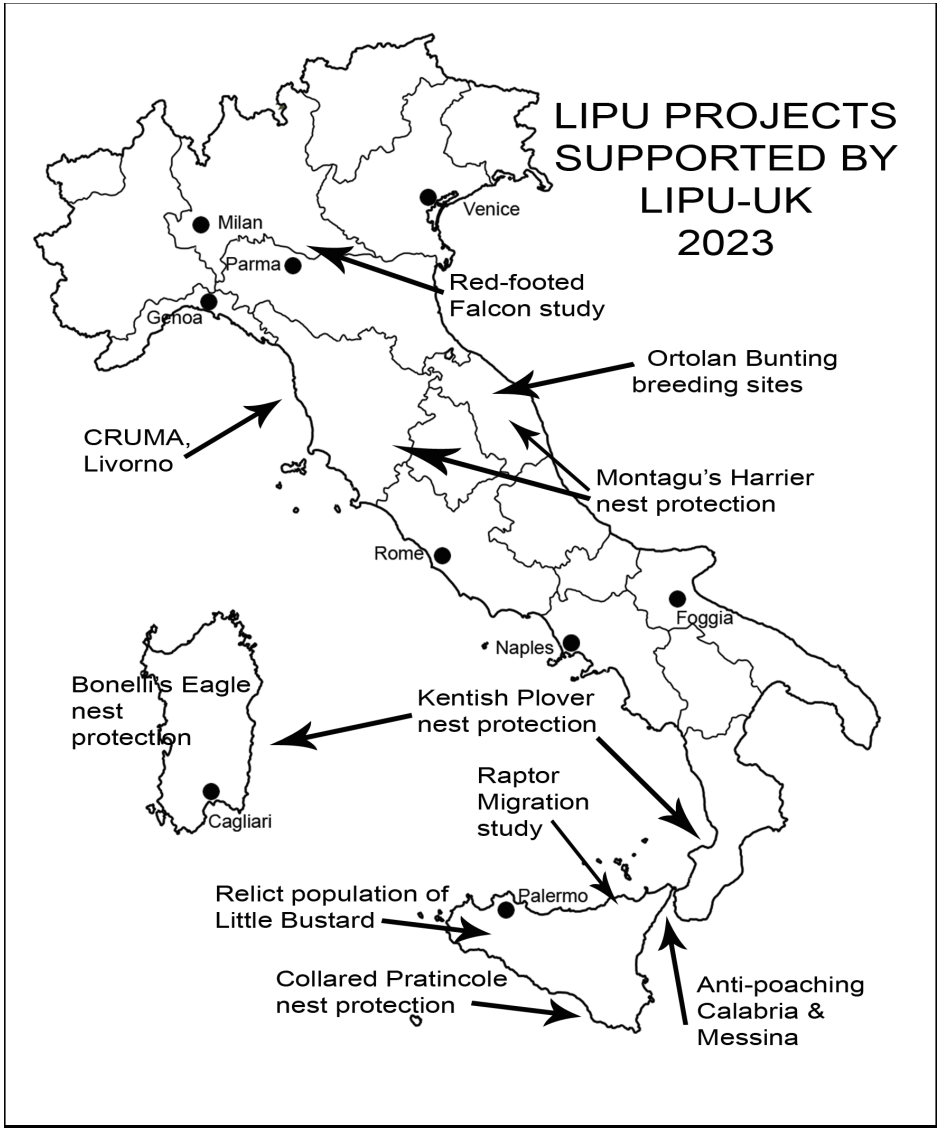

A map showing the location of projects; others such as marine by-catch and local defence volunteers are more wide ranging.

STOP THE MASSACRE
APPEAL 2023
Please help us