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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- A World against the Earth
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Summer 2023

An Environmental 1st of May

In the "Stop Pesticides" march, in Treviso province, 500 people marched demanding a stop to the planting of new vineyards and calling for the health of citizens, especially children, to be protected. This was a particularly urgent demonstration given the recent request by the Veneto region to the Ministry of Health to allow the use of two synthetic pesticides against a disease of grapevines. In 2020 the European Union voted against renewing authorisation of their use, recognising their toxicity.

My thanks to Fabrizio Moglia for the use of his superb image of the European Roller *(Coracias garrulus)* on our cover.

A WORLD AGAINST THE EARTH

Danilo Selvaggi, Director General

The most recent international studies confirm the extent of the crisis in biodiversity, and the threat to great numbers of species and habitats. But there is also a broadly based scientific and cultural movement working for a change in direction, aiming to change our relationship with the planet so that we work together with rather than against it. Meanwhile, a decision on the Restoration Law comes ever closer.

There is an image of Swedish scientist Johan Rockström in which, in order to represent the Earth, he holds a small marble above his head. Below it, slightly blurred, his face bears a bitter half-smile. What you are seeing, he seems to suggest, is our planet, a tiny fragile thing. It is here, in our hands, and we are tearing it apart.

Into the Red

Director of the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact, Rockström is especially noted for having created and led the team of researchers that defined the concept of planetary boundaries. Rockström's group identified nine biophysical processes and assigned to each numerical thresholds – the boundaries not to be exceeded in order not to find ourselves, in his terminology, out of the green zone of safety and into the yellow of insecurity and increasing peril, or worse still, into the red

zone of total unsustainability and at risk of catastrophe. The most recent data shows that as things stand today, for six of the processes (erosion of biodiversity, climate change, disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycle, soil degradation, the availability of fresh water, and pollution by synthetic chemicals), the thresholds have already been exceeded. We are diving deep into the red.

One Planet is No Longer Enough

Rockström has disseminated the information issuing from his work on planetary limits through conferences, articles in the press, and above all in a timely recent book that details what we are doing to the planet and what we must do to return to an environmentally safe place. Called *Big World, Small Planet*, it stresses a crucial and perhaps the most important element of the debate, the distinction between the Earth, as being the natural resources of the planet, and the World, the field of human action, which transforms nature into worldly goods and devours them. In this sense the image referred to above is still more telling, showing how the World, and our ordering of it and our appetites, is dwarfing the Earth. We want too much, we consume too much, we use up too many resources and thus too much of Nature.

By the end of June, at the half-way point of the year, we have already used up a whole year's worth of the Earth's resources ...

By the end of June, at the half-way point of the year, we have already used up a whole year's worth of the Earth's resources, and are storing up ecological debts for the future. A single planet is no longer enough. Don't worry, a sceptical MP said to me years ago at a convention on soil degradation, if it happens we can always get another.

A Vicious Circle

Rockström's work took its direction from a concept that has been a theme through much of the history of modern ecology, beginning with The Limits to Growth, the well-known report of the Club of Rome in 1972. Published by Boston's MIT, making use of the huge amount of data generated by the World 3 programme, the report concluded that the pace at which the consumption of natural resources was proceeding would in the twenty-first century put at risk not only the planet's natural capital but the human race itself.

The findings of the Club of Rome were inevitably met with hostility, but have been reinforced since by many works of science, ecology and economics (such as Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics* and the bioeconomics of Nicholas Georgescu) that have developed the theme of the finiteness of natural resources and the impossibility of confronting the excessive demands of this age.

But it has not only been for science to shine a light on the problem: there have been many additional contributions from art, cinema and literature, with works both visionary and sometimes dystopian, which often increases their effectiveness in relating their message. One particularly memorable case is 'Survey Team', a tale written by Philip K Dick in 1954 at the time of the nuclear panic and the first presages of the ecological crisis. *'Survey Team'* is a tale of how, with the Earth almost in ruins, a spaceship lands on Mars to see if it is possible for humanity to move there, only to find that long ages past, we had already lived there and destroyed it, before upping

sticks to the Earth and destroying it too. A vicious circle and an evolutionary dead end, as Gregory Bateson termed it.

Dead Species Walking

The figures from the latest report by IPBES, the most important global organisation for the study of ecosystems and biodiversity, confirm the scenario of the devastating loss of nature we had suspected for some time. 'Nature is shrinking at a global level at an unprecedented rate, and the extinction rate for species is accelerating. About a million species are in danger of extinction and 50% could be lost by the end of the century.' In relation to the Five. Hundred. Thousand. most threatened species, among which are birds, mammals, amphibians, insects, plants and corals, the Report uses the term 'dead species walking', a grim redefining of the phrase 'dead men walking', which came out of the Death Rows of America. People still alive but destined soon to be no more, without some new intervention; a pardon or new evidence that sets them free.

This uncompromising metaphor from IPBES suggests that the same dynamic is operating for biodiversity: if we do not do something, those species will be lost. It is a doing something that clearly entails relieving the pressure that human society, the World, is imposing on nature, the Earth, as if the Earth were not our home too, the only one we have, save for the improbable despatching of survey teams into space. To quote Bateson again: 'The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself'. In this way, to the moral aspect of the problem, to the

inherent injustice of taking resources and a place to live from other species, there is added the consideration of mere self-interest: the ecological crisis is a danger to the existence of humans as well. We ourselves could shortly become a Dead Species Walking.

The Obstacles to Change

In the light of all this the question arises: why do we not change course? What drives us to deny the evidence of the environmental crisis and to carry on the way we are going, even when we know it will lead us to disaster? It is a question we cannot easily pass over. One motivation concerns the difficulty of change: over time we have erected an enormous infrastructure composed of cities, goods, industries and economies as well as the cultural underpinnings that are the very image of our being. It is an infrastructure created in the absence of ecological knowledge, and one that to a large extent is in open conflict with nature. To dismantle it would be inordinately difficult, and looked at objectively, in the short term unachievable.

To change track could mean having to change our lifestyles, lose position or status maybe, or having to renounce acquired privilege ...

A second reaction is that of a refusal to change. To change track could mean having to change our lifestyles, lose position or status maybe, or having to renounce acquired privilege, all of which generate wide and fierce opposition. A third obstacle resides in the information relevant to the change. In spite of the reach of ecological culture, a vast swathe of people have little awareness of the problems facing the environment and the threats that are looming ahead. Knowledge and information are getting through, but not enough

and not quickly enough, and perhaps sometimes not even in the right way. Finally, a fourth response relates to the achievement of change, or specifically, in terms of what is being offered in return. We are asked to give up the patterns of daily life, but in favour of what? On what basis, and by what ways and means are we to build a new world and a new relationship with nature? This is the greatest problem of all. A problem that requires, among other things, a redefinition of the idea of well-being, and therefore an engagement with the nature of human desires and perhaps with the concept of happiness. However necessary it is, it is a delicate and complex matter.

Inheritance and Capital

According to environmental economist Robert Costanza, human well-being derives from the interaction of the four fundamental contributors to quality of life we have available to us: Built Capital, which corresponds to the infrastructure we have put up around us; Human Capital, that of human beings and their health and education; Social Capital, and therefore all the culture and interactions between people, including economic ones; and Natural Capital, the gifts of Nature. Up to now, he notes, our system has been focused overwhelmingly on Built Capital, which has to a large extent conditioned sociocultural attitudes and above all has crushed Nature, putting it completely at the beck and call of economics.

These four types of capital can, however, be reordered to form a virtuous circle and a logical relationship. This is in essence the philosophy that inspired the World Convention on Biodiversity

and the UN's seventeen objectives for sustainable development, and that today stands at the base of the work on Natural Capital carried out by many international bodies and national committees (including that of Italy, which I have the honour to be a part of, and which has produced five reports since 2017). This work consists, if one may use a voguish formulation, in taking 'economic invisibility' away from Nature. In other words, in bringing about the realisation that Nature is not an inexhaustible storehouse of resources, but a form of capital, even an inheritance, to be carefully conserved. An inheritance of goods and services, material and immaterial, on which we are totally dependent, and that at the same time is a home to others than ourselves, the dwelling of lives that are not as ours and that deserve in their turn to be appreciated, admired, respected, and sometimes to be left just to be.

In other words, in bringing about the realisation that Nature is not an inexhaustible storehouse of resources.

Positive Nature

In this sense the IPBES report produces some surprising outcomes, which are not limited to the delineation of the crisis in biodiversity, but formulate an invitation to reconsider and amplify the values of Nature, shaping them in a way that is both innovative and courageous. We, says IPBES, must live by Nature, that is, thanks to the resources it presents to us and that we must make better use of; live in Nature, recognising its importance as the framework of our senses; live like Nature, by considering the natural world as a part of ourselves, physically, mentally and spiritually; and finally, live with Nature, giving attention to other than human life forms, widening the discourse to encompass the intrinsic

right (for example) of a fish in a river to live its life independently of human demands. This means having an advanced approach that underlines the usefulness of Nature, and its capacity for redefining our existences almost completely, and at the same time broadens the approach beyond purely utilitarian considerations, and leads to a genuine politics of living beings. All are fellow citizens. We are part of the same narrative. The conflict with the Planet is paranoia. We must leave it behind us, breaking the World–Earth dualism and signing up to a Grand Alliance that allows enjoyment of the benefits of Nature, without at the same time having to destroy it.

Renewing the Outside, Renewing the Inside

For ecopsychologist Marcella Danon, recognising ourselves as part of nature implies a change of viewpoint: neither overlords nor parasites of our beautiful planet, but an integral part of the process of the evolution of life. Our role become that of active protagonists, knowledgeable and responsible, whether as a species or each of us individually. A teacher at the University of the Valle d'Aosta, and Italian representative for the International Ecopsychology Society, Danon emphasises a sense of ecological belonging as the basis for the transformative process we need, but also as the way to reorientate the demands of humans, which at the moment are to all intents compulsive. As if to say: we want it all, and we want it again. 'By reawakening the sense of belonging to nature, we activate human needs of a higher kind, those of feeling useful, a part of something and giving a purpose to our lives as a part of a wider community. If in this way

… a unique opportunity to bring Nature back into our lives and for a change in course: no more losses for Nature, but instead the renewal of habitats, for more birds, for biodiversity, for less noise and more green.

we restore an identification with the Earth, of a brother- and sisterhood with other creatures, it becomes a powerful antidote to the materialistic values so much in vogue today.' Marcella Danon also states how important the restoration of Nature is, as with the ambitious restoration of habitats envisaged by the Restoration Law, the proposed European law to be discussed in the next few weeks. 'The adoption of the law would send out a powerful signal, for a renewal of wild Nature as a recognition of the beauty and inherent wisdom of the world's ecosystems. This would also help the less buttoned-down parts of our makeup to develop and come to the fore: emotion, imagination, intuition.' More than just a renewal of Nature, it is in its way a rejuvenation of the soul. The fate of the Restoration Law, by the way, will probably be decided between June and July, in the seats of the various European institutions. It is a unique opportunity to bring Nature back into our lives and for a change in course: no more losses for Nature, but instead the renewal of habitats, for more birds, for biodiversity, for less noise and more green. For the Earth, and in this way for both Earth and World together. LIPU and all of BirdLife Europe are working to make sure this historic opportunity is not missed.

The Conscience of Mason

Let us return to Mars, and Philip K Dick's 'Survey Team'. The four astronauts have discovered the vicious circle and are overwhelmed. 'We've destroyed two worlds,' Halloway said at last. 'Not one. Mars first. Finished up here, then we moved to Terra. And we destroyed Terra as systematically as we did Mars.'

'A closed circle,' Mason said. 'We're back where we started. Back to reap the crop our ancestors sowed. They left Mars this way. Useless.' So what now? The astronauts looked at each other, perplexed. 'Tell Davidson we're going on,' Halloway ordered. We'll keep on until we find it. We're not staying on this god-forsaken junkyard.' His grey eyes glowed. 'We'll find it yet. A virgin world. A world that's unspoiled.' All agreed, or maybe not. Mason was not one of them. Two planets had already paid dearly for us. Two planets and their riches, perhaps, turned over in the mind of Mason with the sadness of lost affections. The rivers, the forests, the flowering dunes, the flight of geese and swallows, the dusks and the dawns. The faces and loves of our fellow human beings. No. Mason's conscience would not accept it. 'It's wrong!' he shouted. 'Two are enough! Let's not destroy a third world!'

We need Mason's conscience now, and quickly, not after having destroyed two planets. We need it now to save our own. In spite of everything, we still have time.

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THE BIRDS OF EUROPE

Marco Gustin, Species and Research Manager

The latest edition of the great European study Birds in Europe has just been published. The number of species regarded as 'globally threatened' has increased threefold. These include the Atlantic Puffin and the Turtle Dove. LIPU is championing data collection and conservation measures to counteract this worrying decline.

This new edition follows six years after the previous one, and is fourth in a series that began way back in 1994. Carried out by BirdLife International, with Italian data contributed by LIPU, it is the most important study of the conservation status of birds in Europe. The study

is essential to efforts to effectively employ the (few) resources available for nature conservation, to gauge the effectiveness of conservation measures, and to set priorities, ensuring that those species worst threatened by decline receive adequate attention.

How has the European ornithological panorama changed in the six years since the previous edition (which we featured at the Parma Shareholders' Meeting in 2017)? Even more importantly, what has happened since 1994, when the first edition was published? Most striking is that the number of globally threatened species (so-called Category 1 species) has tripled from 24 in 1994 to 74 today. A worrying figure, and one that confirms – as though confirmation were still needed – the crisis faced by biodiversity, and in particular by wild birds.

The First Two Editions

In 1994 BirdLife International published Birds in Europe 1, universally regarded as the foundation on which assessment of the conservation status of wild bird species occurring on the continent is based. Using a series of criteria it was decided to provide five categories in which to situate each individual species. Those falling in one of the first three categories were defined as 'Species of European interest for conservation', depending on whether they were of global interest (Category 1), concentrated in Europe and of regional interest (Category 2) or not concentrated in Europe but of regional interest (Category 3). The quantity and quality of data underlying these assessments has increased over time and the data compilation

process has evolved. For Birds in Europe 1, data on national population sizes and trends in the period 1970–90 was collected via a close collaboration between the European partnership of BirdLife International and what later became the European Bird Census Council (EBCC). A similar protocol was used for Birds in Europe 2, with BirdLife and the EBCC once again collaborating and more accurate trend data for 1990–2000.

The Latest Edition

Since 2011, each Member State of the European Union (under the provisions of Article 12 of the Birds Directive) is obliged by law to publish, every six years, estimates of the size and trend of the national populations and range of each wild species regularly present in its territory, alongside the same information for wintering species and passage migrants.

While BirdLife has revised the categorisation for the fourth edition, the same geographical area as for the three previous editions is used – that is to say, the European continental area, which extends from Greenland in the north-west to the Russian Urals in the north-east and includes the Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands, as well as Turkey, Cyprus and the Caucasus. Short-term (2007–18) and long-term (1980–2018) national population size data were collected for each species.

From Red List to 'Categories'

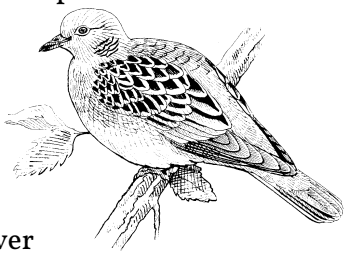
To determine the status of European populations, each species was first assessed according to

the criteria of the 'Red List' drawn up by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at the European level. The 'Least Concern' species (the lowest threat level on the Red List) were then assessed against additional criteria developed and refined in subsequent category assessments, to identify other species of regional conservation interest.

Thus, the species of most conservation concern on the Red List generally make up categories 1 to 3 in this new, European study, with other species 'uncategorised'. What is new, however, is that otherwise uncategorised species are now given special attention when they are especially concentrated in Europe, as they would quickly become species of global conservation interest in the event of a decline in their European populations.

The Numbers

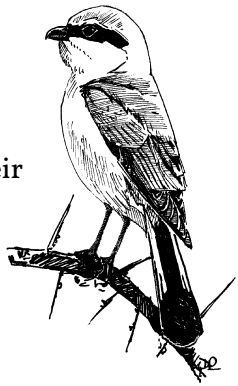
Of the 546 European bird species assessed in this review, 207 (38%) are now categorised. In sum, 74 (14%) are of global interest (Category 1), 32 (6%) of European interest and concentrated in Europe (Category 2), and 101 (18%) are of European interest but not concentrated in Europe (Category 3). In the three decades since the first publication, the percentage of categorised species has varied little (lying between 38% and 43%). But the number in Category 1 has tripled from 24 (5% of the total) in Birds in Europe 1 to 74 (14%) in this, the latest update, meaning that an ever



growing number of European species – including birds such as Puffins and Turtle Doves – are of global conservation concern.

SOS for Woodchat Shrike and Red-legged Partridge

Particularly worrying is the situation of Category 1 species – those endemic to Europe or those whose populations or global range is concentrated (50 per cent or more) in Europe. The number and percentage of Category 2 species, meanwhile, has slightly decreased compared to previous assessments. But this is due to some former Category 2 species moving into Category 1 due to their concentration in Europe. Which now makes them species of global interest . These included the Woodchat Shrike and the Red-legged Partridge.



In addition, a total of 44 species that were uncategorised in the third edition are now categorised, even though 12 of these were previously categorised in the first two editions of *Birds in Europe*. These are typically European species that breed in alpine, arctic, and boreal regions, and include the Dotterel, Turnstone, Arctic Skua, Rough-legged Buzzard and Merlin, and passerines such as the Water Pipit, Twite and Lapland Longspur. Another notable categorised group includes several declining Afro-Palearctic migratory passerines (e.g. the Wood Warbler and Black-eared Wheatear).

In relation to the EU Birds Directive, 88 categorised species (43%) are listed in Annex I (especially protected) and 39 (19%) in Annex II (species that may be hunted).

Since Birds in Europe 1 in 1994, the number of Annex I species meeting the criteria for categorisation has decreased by 33 per cent, while the number of Annex II species now categorised has increased by 56 per cent. Which surely must raise questions regarding the sustainability of hunting.

Comparison of Categorised Species by Country

Categorised species are distributed throughout Europe, but some countries and regions – such as Spain, south-western Turkey, the Caucasus and the south-eastern portion of European Russia – represent real 'hotspots' for their conservation since they host a large number of Category 1 species.

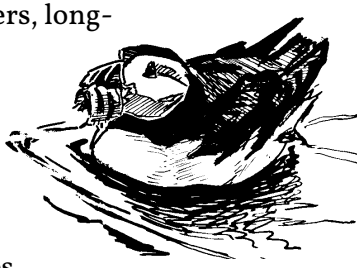
The country in which the largest number of categorised species (147) breed is made up of those parts of Russia that are considered part of Europe for the purposes of the study. Next come Turkey, France, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Norway and Ukraine (all with between 87 and 95 categorised species). If we consider only Category 1 species, we can add Italy and Greece to the eight countries already mentioned, giving us a 'top ten'.

Many coastal areas, including parts of the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Baltic and North Sea, are also important for categorised species. And the islands of Macaronesia (the island groups in

the Atlantic) are important in a special way – as there, categorised species include endemic species.

An Uncertain Future

Efforts to halt biodiversity loss in Europe have clearly been insufficient to stem the decline of many European bird populations. Numerous species of lowland birds, steppe birds, seabirds, birds of prey, waders, long-distance migrants and Macaronesian endemics have suffered (and continue to suffer) significant population declines, along with associated range reductions. The need to improve the effectiveness of current conservation efforts is therefore urgent, all of which requires adequate funding and sustained political commitment. A number of existing legal and policy instruments, including the Birds Directive, Bern Convention, Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), African–Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) and others, already provide comprehensive protection to all wild bird species in Europe. There is also ample evidence that special conservation measures taken for these species have had a significant positive impact on population sizes, especially for species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive. Birds in Europe 4 reinforces these findings, revealing that the number of Annex I species qualifying as categorised has decreased over a 30-year period, as these species' declines have eased. Conversely, the growing number of



Annex II species now categorised raises serious questions about the sustainability of hunting. LIPU will therefore be working hard to initiate adequate conservation actions.

THE NUMBERS

BIRDS IN EUROPE 4

- 546 The number of bird species studied.
- 74 Category 1 species (there were 24 in 1994)
- 32 Category 2 species
- 101 Category 3 species
- 88 Categorised birds in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive (down 33% since 1994)

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SILENT COUNTRYSIDE

Laura Silva, Farmland Bird Index project supervisor

The dramatic decline in the numbers of common birds in farmland environments is confirmed by data from the Farmland Bird Index (FBI), which LIPU has coordinated since 2009. Changing the methods of agricultural production and drastically reducing the use of pesticides will be a priority for LIPU's campaign for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Updating every year the demographic trends of a set of species of common birds and of the basic environmental indicators necessary for the appraisal of the CAP. Such is the aim of the Farmland Bird Index, coordinated since 2009 by

As an ecological index, the FBI allows the rapid and effective measurement of the state of health of the birdlife of agricultural environments.

LIPU and financed by the National Rural Network. Initially, some 320 professional and volunteer researchers from LIPU came together to monitor the common nesting species within the scope of the project; in 2000 this number reached 534. This range of personnel in the field has allowed us to obtain the most precious database on avifauna in Italy, one that today contains 1.7 million observations collected over 23 years, as well as 158,000 10-minute sound recordings for a total of 26,000 hours of listening along with thousands of visual records over an area slightly larger than 10 per cent of the entire national territory, or almost 31,000 square kilometres. The complex structure that the project has managed to update and improve over the course of time represents a unique example in Italy, in terms both of its duration and of its breadth of study. In addition to the assessment of population trends, the Farmland Bird Index is the indicator for species in upland pastures (FBI PM), which has been the primary source of data for the compilation of reporting under the Bird Directive, for the 2019 Red List of nesting birds in Italy, and for the Italian atlas of nesting European birds (EBBA2).

The FBI and Other Ecological Indices

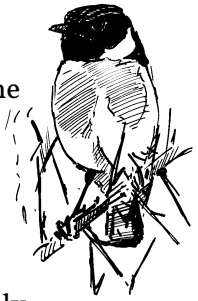
As an ecological index, the FBI allows the rapid and effective measurement of the state of health of the birdlife of agricultural environments. But its significance can easily be extended to the ecosystem in general and to the biodiversity that lives there, including humankind, particularly thanks to the representative and sensitive nature of nesting birds as indicators.

Within the last 20 years the populations of birds nesting in the plains have halved, and half of all individual birds has disappeared from our countryside.

The conclusive results, after 14 years of the project, show a value of -32 per cent with regard to the FBI index for the year 2000 – a clear sign of generalised crisis in agricultural environments, which in Italy are very diverse, stretching from the extensive monocultures of the Paduan plain via mosaic of landscapes dominated by vineyards and olive groves in the hillside ranges as far as the mountain pastures, where various processes (including the widespread abandonment of pasture and mountain farms) are leading to a situation that is extremely negative for biodiversity.

The most serious situation is really to be found in the areas of the plain, where the FBI trend displays the most worrying level of all, reaching an alarming 53 per cent fall. Proof of this can be found by looking at the FBI data on a regional scale, with population trends of individual species showing far more negative values in the region of Padua – including in Lombardy (-53%), Emilia-Romagna (-42%) and the Veneto (-53%) – compared with the regions of the south.

Millions of Birds Missing



Within the last 20 years the populations of birds nesting in the plains have halved, and half of all individual birds has disappeared from our countryside. The alarming collapse of species typical of farmland such as larks, the Red-backed Shrike, wagtails, swallows, Wrynecks and the Stonechat, whether on a national scale or on the plains is part of a long-term, practically

uninterrupted continuous decline, and is a signal that we cannot ignore. The process underway is not, in fact, just causing the disappearance of millions of birds – the same causes of decline in these species also influence the environment and biodiversity in general, and finally our own safety.

The other side of the coin is the widespread abandonment of pasture and of mountain farms, with a consequential reduction of meadowland and grazing and the progressive return of woodland at the expense of species tied to open environments, which once more gradually lose habitat and resources.

... the pursuit of maximum profit, which leads to overproduction in the "best" areas and to the abandonment of those that are less profitable.

On the one hand, the growth of a type of ever more intensive agriculture in areas of open land but also in those areas more aptly designated hilly, and on the other, the abandonment of farming practices, while diametrically opposed result in a similar loss of variety, and the transition from a mosaic of landscapes to one dominated by a single ambient (monoculture in the first case; woodland in the second). The geographic and environmental contexts in which these processes are taking place are of course diverse, but both are "children" of the same cause: the pursuit of maximum profit, which leads to overproduction in the "best" areas and to the abandonment of those that are less profitable.

Population Trends (the Worst)

Larks, swallows, wagtails and Goldfinches, species once extremely common, saw their populations more than halved between 2000 and 2022. Greenfinches and Italian and Tree Sparrows

have, in the same period, shown a decline of 60%. Red-backed Shrike, 62%. Wryneck, 67%. Stonechat, 70%. Tawny Pipit, 72%. These numbers are striking and leave no room for doubt, the more so because they are derived from the analysis of a solid database collected thanks to a census taken in the field, firstly via the project Mito2000 between 2000 and 2008, and in the following 14 years by the Farmland Bird Index project.
In quantitative terms, since 2000 the overall loss of birds – referring only to the 41 species analysed – could amount to between 19 million and 36 million individuals. The farmlands of Italy have been the scene of this dramatic and silent disappearance, one that has taken place before our very eyes. Beyond being deprived of creatures that are beautiful to see and to hear, there is the acknowledgement of what this means in terms of the degradation of the habitat and environment in which we too live: these species fill an ecological role of the greatest importance, and the loss of millions of individuals inevitably signifies the loss or the degradation of the workings of our ecosystem, to which these species contribute in a fundamental manner.

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The disappearance of the birds of our countryside, continuing even now, is the most evident and verifiable facet of an environmental degradation that is, in fact, much more widespread and complex. Birds occupy the top floors of the food chain, and serve as our best warning system thanks to their environmental sensitivity. The fact that they are suffering indicates that the entire ecosystem is in trouble: fewer birds means fewer wild plants, fewer seeds but also fewer invertebrates , including those that live in the soil

and those that fill the most precious role, that of pollinators, indispensable for the health of the soil and the success of all farming activity. Only by, together with the farmers, changing the way we currently farm shall we be able to reverse the decline in the biodiversity of these environments, places that constitute a third of the land area of our country and are home to an important fraction of the Italian human population.

An Underestimated Danger

The data from the FBI project confirms once again much of what was reported in the ISPRA report of 2021 – that agriculture is one of the principal pressure points facing Italian biodiversity, and that our use of pesticides together with the loss of natural elements of the country's landscape constitute, together, part of the greatest threat we are facing.

Pesticides act on bird populations both indirectly, by diminishing the availability of prey and habitat, and directly, causing the death of the individual bird, often via long-term poisoning and consequent damage to the endocrine or nervous systems.

This danger remains underestimated or is considered no longer a threat, since it is believed that the main active agents used today are less dangerous than those of the past. Sadly, this assertion is only partly true. Though when they are first considered for release on the market pesticides go through a process of approval that tests their impact on human health and on the environment, their indirect effects on the food

chain and on biodiversity receive scarce attention. Their cumulative effect, meanwhile, which can increase by dozens of times the toxicity of a given substance, receives barely any attention at all.

It is still possible to change direction. A study carried out by the ISPRA between 2015 and 2020 shows that in biological cultivation there are significantly higher numbers of bees, butterflies, birds and bats.

Investing in the transition to agroecological models is the right formula for conciliating production and the conservation of biodiversity.

The word 'pesticides' is known by all, but few know what is hidden behind their commercial exploitation and use, particularly on the worldwide scale. Today, 4 million tons are consumed annually and this figure is rising constantly, above all in the southern hemisphere where they are imported from Europe, where, as we know, the legislation concerning their use is more restrictive. In all, 70 per cent of the global pesticide market is in fact controlled by just four companies with headquarters in the northern hemisphere.

The absence of legislation or its non-application in countries of the southern hemisphere is reflected also in what we put on our tables, since European legislation on imported produce is currently lacking. And that's not all. Though the consequences of pesticides for the health of those who produce food are known (every year around the world around 385 million cases of acute food poisoning are confirmed), the

consequences that the massive use of these substances has on social equilibrium in rural areas – above all in developing countries, where it is creating truly serious issues with regard to social class and gender – are little known.

LIPU IN ACTION

A Strategy for the Climate

In the Verbano valley in Varese province (Lombardy), the answer to climate change comes from nature. This is the principle behind the project Forest Climate – Counteracting the Domino Effect of Climatic Change. The project began this spring in the scope of the programme of Fondazione Cariplo, F2C – Fondazione Cariplo for the Climate, and is managed by the mountain community of the Verbano valley together with LIPU, the regional park of Campi dei Fiori, the University of Insubria, the Prealpine Geophysical Centre and a local association, Cast.

With Forest Climate, an innovative strategy of climatic transition designed for the project area will be developed and implemented. Climate change is already manifesting itself here in the form of extreme weather events and hydrogeological breakdown. In the Alto Varesotto alone from 2020 to 2022 there were 16 forest fires, 37 instances of flooding, 35 landslides and 18 road blockages caused by fallen trees. The project aims to counteract these phenomena by safeguarding

Verbano's key resource – the forest. Thanks to the ecosystems that it generates, a living, biodiversity-rich wood is a potent protection with respect to climate change.

Two Goldfinches Used as Decoys Freed

Equipment for capturing small birds had been set up, with two Goldfinches used as 'decoys'. The two birds had been pinned, bound to the ground and were allowed only a small amount of movement to attract prey. The man – a 60-year-old repeat offender – was caught in the act of committing the crime of bird capture by the Carabinieri Forestale of Pozzuoli and the hunting wardens of LIPU-Naples, in the scope of controls regarding the conservation of protected animals. The equipment was dismantled and seized, and the man reported for bird capture, maltreatment of animals, and 'hunting theft'. The two Goldfinches were immediately released.

Kentish Plover in Calabria and le Marche

The Kentish Plover, an ecological indicator of the state of health of our beaches, is a species in decline and considered "endangered" on the Red List of birds which nest in Italy. And so in Calabria last March, a group of about 30 LIPU volunteers, together with the National Committee for the Conservation of the Kentish Plover, started the monitoring which will last until the middle of August. This covers a total of around 60km of coast divided between the Ionian and Tyrrhenian seas in all Calabrian provinces. They will look for this rare species to find and protect the nests and gather data on the Calabrian population.

We All Read Annual Reports – Don't We?

We in LIPU-UK have always been committed to total openness about what we do and the way we do it. That said, you do have a Yorkshire-man as your delegate and I have an old-fashioned attitude to the spending of the charity's funds: I ask myself, 'Would I spend my own money on this?' And the simple answer guides my decision.

An example could be the production of printed annual reports, which we discontinued a few years ago to save on production costs. The annual report is posted on our website and with the Charity Commission, and for those without Internet access it is available on request.

What follows will be in our formal annual report, but I thought it of sufficient importance to explain in these pages.

A measure of our success and of the generosity of our supporters has been a steadily increasing reserve – or as we called it, 'The Oasi Fund' – the aim of which was to accumulate funds to allow LIPU to buy a nature reserve in Italy. Many candidate reserves were identified, and discarded for as many reasons, and this cash reserve grew to more than £300,000, a figure that led some to question why we were holding such an amount.

It was also proving difficult to find enough banks to accept deposits, which we limited to £85,000 to fall within the FSCS protection limit. Thus, in the financial year just ended, your trustees, in

consultation with the directors of LIPU, agreed to transfer the bulk of this money to LIPU in Parma, where it is to be held in a fund dedicated only to conservation work.

Results

Late in June I sent LIPU the €118,000 raised by the 2023 Appeal for the projects described in the last edition of Ali and I can only say 'Thank You' to you – our band of supporters, over half of whom have been with us for over 25 years.

Prior to that we implemented the decision described above with regard to The Oasi Fund, transferring a total of €430,000 – or in sterling terms, £382,068 – to LIPU's bank in Milan. It has thus been a remarkable year, one in which we have been able to invest over half a million euros in the future welfare of birds in Italy.

Again, on behalf of Danilo, Claudio and all at LIPU along with your trustees in this country, please know that you have earned our sincere gratitude.

* * *

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My thanks go to the production team without whose help you could not read this, they are:

Barbara Avery, Dave Brooks, Andy Merrick, Peter Rafferty and John Walder.

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The LIPU Assemblea, or AGM, was held in the new “Casa LIPU” in Parma and in the picture are some of the members who attended.

Tawny Pipit. The Farmland Bird Index shows that the population of this bird has declined in Italy by 72% since the turn of the century.