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Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli

Conservation News from Italy

LIPU

- Alien
- Protest against Hunting Proposals
- Raptors - most are doing well
- Swallows and Farming

Summer 2024

Raptors are the news in this edition and the news of vultures is mixed.

LIPU has reintroduced the Griffon into Sicily and that project is doing well.

The Lammergeier or Bearded Vulture is steadily expanding in the Alps and Pyrénées.

However, the Egyptian Vulture is struggling to hold on to its refuge in the LIPU Gravina di Laterza oasis.

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ALIEN

Danilo Selvaggi, Director General, LIPU

Unique in the world of birds, their special characteristics make swifts seem like far-distant beings. Yet they live in our cities, among us, and are loved by all. At risk now due to our heedless urban ways, there is extensive community action to protect them and a new project from LIPU to give hope for the future.

There comes a day in Spring, a precise day, a precise moment (though a different one every year), when suddenly we hear a music from above. Atonal, cacophonous even, but irresistible. We look up to the skies and see them: the swifts have arrived. It is the moment when Spring truly becomes Spring. Only then does the beautiful season throw wide the windows of the year. The swifts have arrived. For some it is cause for celebration. For others, even if they are not consciously aware of it, it is the feeling that the world has been put back in order, and that life, on land and in the air, is flowing as it should.

Symbols in Sound

In The Tuning of the World (The Soundscape), his key work on Acoustic Ecology, the Canadian musicologist and composer Raymond Murray Schaffer, one of the founders of the discipline, divides the sonic landscape into different elements: the keynote, the sound signal, and the soundmark, to which is added the theme of the symbolic, the sound event – that is, the occasions when we attribute meaning to the music of the environment. What manner of symbol is the swift? What is it that its

presence inspires in us? What is it that makes it so loved? And why, at the same time, would a legendary English singer-songwriter, among other things a fervent birdwatcher, consider it to be an alien?

I Sleep on the Wing

That singer is Robert Wyatt, who on his 1997 album, Shleep, in large part inspired by birds, dedicates a song to the swift, which begins:

I sleep on the wing
Above the rainclouds
Blown by the wind (no roots on earth)
No ground below (no ground below)
Just ruins (timeless)
Dandelion clocks (drifting)
Am I from Venus? (higher, higher).

The track is called Alien, and is how Wyatt thinks of the swift: an alien. The swift, says Wyatt, is not of this world. It does not share in those elements such as the earth to which we are bound, as are, at base, most other species of birds. All birds need roots also in the earth. There they alight, and undertake many of the actions vital to life. The swift, no. Its element is the air. There is only the air.

High Altitude

The whole life cycle of the swift, save for the times of birth and nurturing for both adults and young, takes place on the wing. They feed in flight, they mate in flight, and in flight they take part in those extraordinary carousels, the screaming parties, in which the young flex their wings and come to know better the place in which they will live most of their

lives. And in flight, on the wing, they sleep. When the sun has set, these adepts of the air climb to high altitudes and let themselves be transported on the air currents, where they go into hemispheric sleep, a half sleep with one eye and one half of the brain still alert to keep some measure of control. It is a complex and engrossing phenomenon, as many studies have confirmed. During the Second World War, it is said, numerous English bomber pilots flying over the Channel were amazed to see graceful flights of small birds, namely swifts, slicing through the air kilometres high, as if skating across it. Our knowledge of them at the time was still scanty, and in spite of the intuitions of Lazzaro Spallanzani in the 1800s, who had guessed at many of these behaviours, we had no true understanding of the alien, no knowledge as yet of the wonders it was capable of. In many ways, we do not truly understand them today.

No Connection?

In Italian, only one letter separates the swift from the swallow, (respectively, rondone and rondine), but they are quite different things. The extraterrestrial dimension of the former is reflected in the nomenclature: the names for species, family, and order for the Common Swift, Apus apus, Apodidi, and Apodiformi, have all the same root, with the privative a- out of Greek, without feet, indicative of the fact that swifts do not have fully functional limbs. Or rather that they are present, but vestigial: truncated appendages that lead some to take them for raptors, given also their curved beaks and

sickle-shaped wings. But the swift's feet serve only for clinging onto walls in the few situations when it is necessary to do so. This can create a problem, which occurs when a swift, as a result of a collision or an error in its trajectory, becomes grounded. In this situation, the absence of limbs strong enough to give the lift to get back into the air means that a swift is in trouble. It is here that humans may intervene. When someone comes across a grounded swift, they might gather it up and take it to a recovery centre, or, knowing the situation, try to get it airborne again themselves.

'I feel no connection', someone said who had found a swift in trouble. They had come to its aid, and taken it to a LIPU recovery centre, but had not felt any affective signal, those fuzzy sensations that other species usually transmit.

Put to the Test

In this sense, the swift puts to the test our emotional wager with nature, our relationship with birds and with wild animals in general. We, who are always looking for kinship, a glance in which to sight at least a trace of a consciousness like our own, find it difficult with swifts. So remote, so apparently indifferent, the swift seems a classic example of Richard Mabey's declaration that 'our relationship with birds is one way, given that they do not care a dried fig about us'. Yet the swift is loved almost above all. More than that, it is one of the species most likely to arouse interest and involvement among people, who, without knowing the hour of their return, prepare for it and in different ways do what they can for them.

A Thread between Heaven and Earth

Altissime voci is a festival at Rimini dedicated to swifts and sponsored by LIPU, conceived and produced by opera singer Arianna Lanci, who is passionate about them. 'The voices of the swifts, poignant and unmistakeable – says Arianna – are a true chorus on the wing. A chorus that spirals into the sky, then swoops down to fly among monuments, buildings and homes. From this came the idea of a festival of vocal and choral music dedicated to swifts and urban biodiversity, of concerts held in the open air, in which the audience can listen to the chorus of the swifts along with that of the performers, crossing the boundaries between species, to make, through song, a thread between heaven and earth.' In Lanci's words about the swifts, the symbolic element of the music of the environment that Murray Schaffer describes is clearly to be seen. Of what are swifts and their songs symbolic? Not of alienation and distance, but on the contrary, of relationship. Of a calling to understanding. From the voices of the swifts comes a call for harmonisation between human society and the world of birds, and for the relationship to be remade and maintained. We live in the same cities, frequent the same neighbourhoods, live in the same houses, breathe the same air, make ourselves useful to others (which they do by consuming large numbers of insects), and we sing. Song becomes then a celebration of a shared history between humans and swifts, in which the built environment, whether villages or towns, represents the theatre, the stage on which they excel.

From Snares to Living Monuments

There are many groups and local associations, networks for action, such as the LIPU delegations (including Carpi, Gallarate, Bergamo, Brescia, and Novara to name but a few), working for cities to be places welcoming to swifts, and a home both for us and for them. Action is taken principally for the protection of nest sites, beginning with the rondonaie, swift towers, walled structures with niches like dovecotes, that not so long ago were made to trap them. In essence, swifts saw them as perfect nest sites, not knowing that the rondonaie were built merely to entice them in, and once the eggs were laid and the chicks born, they were taken for food. Abandoned, and their original use forbidden, they have now become a symbol of a swift renaissance, and an essential tool to aid breeding, as well as observation, censuses, and the study of their biology and ethology. In this way they have come to be known as monumenti vivi, living monuments (a term coined by the association of that name), or rather those buildings, whether ancient or modern, towers or swift towers, churches and civic palaces, that house or might house breeding swifts.

Saving Swallows and Swifts

An essential today is the mapping of these sites, in order to have an idea of the number and distribution of the swifts in order to protect them. It is not a simple task, and is becoming harder, given the amount of renovation taking place, which has been accelerated in the last few years by programmes and incentive schemes, from the buildings bonus to the projects of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, in many cases carried out without thought for

the non-human inhabitants of such buildings, such as falcons, owls, bats, swallows and martins, and swifts above all. LIPU's Save the Swift resolutions of earlier years were set up precisely with this in mind, to encourage local administrations both to put by-laws in place forbidding rebuilding work during nesting and to adopt measures to ensure that during the different phases of the period, from the occupation of the nest to the laying of the eggs, and from brooding through to fledging, they would not be disturbed. Since the first orders in Piemonte, Emilia, and the Veneto in 1999, there have been over 150 resolutions to save the swifts or the swallows, adopted by local councils with LIPU's prompting. Not all have been acted on, and if sometimes they have remained only on paper, they have had the capacity to create a different culture, knowledgeable and respectful towards the needs of the swifts.

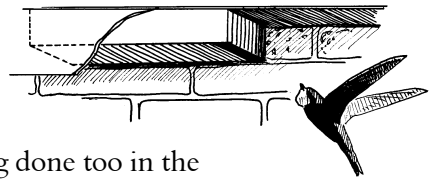
Three Major Problems, and a Fourth

In spite of its great importance, the residential problem, that of finding a home, is not the only one for the swifts. Others have resulted from the many ecological crises that have led to the conservation status of the Common Swift being given amber rating. Inadequate. There are currently 500,000 to a million pairs in Italy, with many fewer Alpine and fewer still of the Pallid, the other two species found in our country. According to Marco Gustin, LIPU's director for species and research, there are at least three problems where swifts are concerned. 'The first is the modification of their breeding habitats across Europe, with buildings being erected or restructured without concern for ecology. The second is the catastrophic decline in insect numbers, and therefore in the overall availability of food for swifts, as well

as the decline in its quality, which are the result of pollution and the unrestrained use of chemical pesticides. The third problem, more difficult to assess, is how swifts are faring in Africa, with probable damage to nesting sites and the ongoing problem of large-scale trapping. Nor can we ignore the great problem of our time, that of the climate emergency, which has wide-ranging impacts on swift populations, for example in terms of the outcomes of their journeys of migration. Unlike other species, which in the event of bad conditions can land to wait and rest, the swift is constrained by having to spend the entirety of its migration in flight, so that the impact of bad weather is all the greater.'

LIPU in Action

For these reasons, LIPU's actions for the protection of swifts have been widened accordingly. A new project supported by many donors, and by one major donor in particular, aims to increase breeding success, with actions including the restoration of swift towers in Emilia and Lombardy and the placing of nest boxes on the main buildings of the National Energy Board, as well as the usual work on protecting nest sites. Work is being done too in the recovery centres, which are studying the diet of rescued swifts (around three thousand a year) to assess deficiencies such as that of vitamin B1. LIPU is also involved in more generalised environmental projects, from the restoration of habitats (in this case of the urban landscape) as envisaged by the Nature Restoration Law to actions to alleviate the effects of climate change. Big and small, local and global,



specific and general, together: all must inform every environmental action worthy of the name, and be part of our culture and thought, in order to read the connections that bind all the creatures of this world, not least among them the swifts, the beloved swifts, so near and so far from us, emblematic and enthralling.

One Midsummer Day

There comes a day in the middle of the summer, one day in particular, one moment in particular (which nevertheless changes from year to year), in which, suddenly, the abstract music from above disappears. We look to the skies and cannot see them. The swifts have departed, left no forwarding address. It is the beginning of the end of summer. A few Pallid Swifts linger on, accustomed as they are to remaining until autumn, but for the rest, the skies are empty. For some it is a time of melancholy, even if tempered by the hope of their return. The swifts have departed, suddenly, without even a goodbye.

Love and Absence

Perhaps Richard Mabey was right: the birds find us less than impressive. They live their lives, they reach their destinations, they fly, they leave, they come and they go. At all events, we could perhaps look at them differently, in that birds reflect our consciousness in an indirect, non-linear way. Which is to say, to communicate to us a thank you or to ask us why? or does my song please you? is too long a way round to go. They say their I love yous in a language all their own. In many languages, all a little alien. It is for us to understand, not for them to make themselves understood. An important rule, in the task of

understanding the world and our being in the world as a whole, is that hasty conclusions do not help, nor will reaching for commonplaces, or the rooted beliefs we take for certain knowledge. We must think of love in different forms, certainly in relation to the swift. Love is not giving in order to receive, and least of all a form of possession. We have to seek it out, and learn to recognise it, even if it is hidden, or not immediately apparent, or taking other forms, in absence, icy altitudes and distance. It is the love that calls us on great voyages. It is the love left when the swifts have left us and the sky is empty, when it seems no longer to be there. Among all the possible forms of love, it is perhaps the most authentic, the deepest and the most generous. I love you and wish for nothing in return. A love supreme.

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HUNTING – ITALY IN TROUBLE

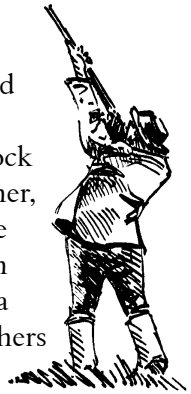
Parliamentary proceedings are continuing concerning the 'Bruzzone Law' for the liberalisation of hunting, against which LIPU has gathered another fifty thousand signatures. Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) is opening further proceedings against Italy regarding infringements over the use of lead ammunition in wetlands.

Giovanni Albarella, Manager of Anti-Poaching and Hunting Activity

There is no peace for hunting in Italy. Following the 'pilot' proceedings opened in 2023 concerning the lack of respect for an EU Directive regulating the use of lead ammunition in wetlands (see Ali, autumn 2023), the European Commission has now opened new infringement proceedings against our country over the use of lead. Meanwhile, a few months from the close of the hunting season, parliamentary proceedings have begun regarding the notorious Bill for Law n.1548, better known as 'the Bill for the Bruzzone Law', named after the Bill's first signatory. The Bill constitutes a clear violation of the Constitution, which under article 9 stipulates that the Republic should protect the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystems for the sake of future generations. The Bill also violates the requirements of the Birds Directive, thus putting Italy at significant risk of further proceedings for infringements, and of condemnation in the European Court of Justice. So, even without the Bruzzone Bill having become law, its contents with regard both to hunting during breeding and migration and to poaching are already being condemned by the EU.

“Hunting with no limits”

The most criticised aspects of the Bruzzone Bill include the elimination of pauses in hunting and the possibility of hunting seven days per week. The Bill also proposes five-year hunting calendars and the option for Regions to extend the hunting season beyond the limits prescribed in Law 157/92, which would make it impossible for environmental associations to lodge legal action to block activities considered illegitimate. Further, in a particularly shameful approach the Bill includes removing legal protection from live decoys, which would create a huge loophole for traffickers and poachers to exploit by capturing animals in the wild while insisting that they are domestically bred.



Collection of Signatures Against the Bruzzone Bill

LIPU went into action at the end of February by starting a campaign to collect signatures to request the withdrawal of the Bill and a series of actions for the protection of birds and biodiversity. The initiative was organised through the association, using both traditional and social media. It had great success, since in little more than four months fifty thousand signatures were collected (ending in June), indicating that citizens still do not want wild hunting. A contribution came even from our international partner BirdLife International which has spread the appeal of the petition in English on its own social media channels.

More lead in ammunition

The grounds for dispute in the pilot proceedings of 2023 involved four elements in particular, three of which can be summarised as follows: First, in a circular, the Minister for the Environment and Agriculture arbitrarily interpreted the regulation in question to exclude any prohibition of the use of lead in very many wetlands. Second, no national anti-poaching action plan has been implemented. The third element concerns the hunting of bird species during migration and of species in a poor state of conservation, in accordance with development plans, even if these exist but are not implemented.

Meanwhile, a Circular regarding lead has replaced the modification of Law 157/92, thus formalising the possibility of using lead munitions in many wetlands in contravention of European regulations that totally prohibit its use. Which has led to the European Commission officially opening infringement proceedings (INFR(2023)2187) under which it officially protests against this violation of the EU REACH Regulation, which in 2020 banned the use of lead shot in wetlands in the Union. The Circular’s definition of ‘wetlands’ is too permissive, there is too much freedom to transport lead munitions within wetlands, and any administrative penalties – including fines of a mere 20 euros – are both ridiculous and ineffective.

Violation of the REACH Regulation, which is directly applicable in all Member States, involves violation of the Treaty regarding the very functioning of the European Union. And the new infringement proceedings accuse Italy of violation of the Birds Directive with regard to the inspection of fauna

derived from the legislative change 157/92 introduced as part of the 2022 Budget Law.

Support Us

The Bill for the Bruzzone Law is part of this sad picture of violations of Community legislation and would, if successful, take our country back decades with regard to the protection of fauna, causing it, and biodiversity, serious harm. Let's make people aware of this. If you haven't already done so, please sign the petition, talk about it as much as possible, and forward details of our appeal to your network. And continue to support LIPU via your subscription, and with a donation too if possible. It is important for our future, and for the safeguarding of nature and of the entire planet.

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BIRDS OF PREY ARE DOING WELL

After centuries of killing that brought them to the brink of extinction, many diurnal birds of prey have been steadily increasing in numbers over the past 50 years. But not all. The Egyptian Vulture and Lanner are down to just a few pairs.

Marco Gustin, Head of Species and Research

Raptors have been persecuted by man for hundreds of years – killed and poisoned illegally or indirectly through the use of various pesticides, including DDT. Some of the most majestic birds to populate our skies, their lives are hard. In recent years, however, there have been encouraging signs, and some species have significantly increased their populations. Although this trend exhibits certain dramatic exceptions.

From Extinction to Growth

In the Alps, the last Lammergeier – or Bearded Vulture – was shot in 1913, and in the following decades the Osprey and the Black Vulture became extinct in Italy. The populations of other birds that were then still abundant declined considerably: the Griffon Vulture in Sardinia, the Peregrine Falcon, the Red Kite, and the Egyptian Vulture, which has retreated in the last 50 years to certain inaccessible areas in southern Italy and Sicily. Helped by the hunting ban in force since 1977, the recovery of many species has been steady, if slow. Recent records have seen a significant increase in the numbers of many birds of prey, both for widespread species such as Buzzards, Sparrowhawks and Kestrels and for more localised species, including Peregrine Falcons and Lesser Kestrels. Some previously extinct species (Lammergeiers and Ospreys) have returned, and new breeding species (Booted Eagles) have appeared. The sole exception is the Lanner, which is considered the most at risk of extinction in the short term.

Today, most species of raptor show higher numbers. And in some cases, such as that of the Golden Eagle, probably even the highest ever.

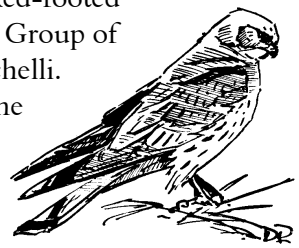
170 Young Harriers Fledge

Over the last 20 years, LIPU has worked extensively on various species of birds of prey. Many of which – including Montagu's Harrier, the Lesser Kestrel and the Red-footed Falcon – are linked to agricultural ecosystems.

In the case of Montagu's Harrier, the location of this work was the provinces of Viterbo, Foggia, and Pesaro. Each offers different breeding environments – including meadows (Viterbo), gullies (Pesaro), and intensive cereal-growing land (Foggia) – and the work carried out involved safeguarding nesting sites. In the province of Viterbo alone, for example, thanks to the tireless work of delegate Enzo Calevi and numerous volunteers it was possible to save at least 170 young harriers from certain death during the harvests of 2003–22. No less important for this species is the work conducted by Enzo Cripezzi in the extensive agricultural lands of the province of Foggia.

Red-footed Falcon: 100+ pairs

Also of significant importance is the work carried out in Apulia on the Lesser Kestrel, and that conducted in the province of Parma on the Red-footed Falcon by the Local Conservation Group of Parma, in particular Andrea Zanichelli. For the former, we have studied the importance of night flights, the spatial separation of colonies, and how pseudo-steppes are the most suitable type of land for foraging during the breeding season.



For the Red-footed Falcon, hundreds of nest boxes have been installed – starting with a LIFE project 15 years ago, and supported by LIPU-UK – and their use has increased steadily, contributing to significantly higher numbers in the Po Valley, which now hosts over 100 nesting pairs.

Threats

Birds of prey are threatened by habitat loss, electrocution by power lines – which still claims hundreds of victims each year in Italy, especially among Eagle Owls and Red Kites – collision with power lines and vehicular and rail traffic, pesticide poisoning, and illegal persecution. An additional, particularly lethal phenomenon affects vultures and other carrion eaters: lead poisoning from the lead munitions used in hunting.

Alongside direct habitat loss due to urban development there are growing problems for species in agricultural areas (such as Little Owls and Barn Owls) and those affected by leisure activities (e.g. climbing, paragliding, and nest photography). And then there is wind power, where collision with wind turbines is not limited to breeding species but also affects migrating birds.

Birds of Prey Bouncing Back: Bonelli's Eagle

Until a few years ago, this species – its range reduced to Sicily alone – was close to extinction, with a population estimated at fewer than 20 pairs. Just over 10 years ago the Group for the Protection of Birds of Prey was formed to protect this very species. The Group is composed of various associations, including LIPU, EBN Italia, and the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS), a regional coordination for the protection, control and monitoring of the species in Sicily.

Thanks to constant surveillance work at nests and in the subsequent roosting areas of a large number of young, the Bonelli's Eagle population has increased

significantly, reaching over 60 nesting pairs and taking the species from CR (Critically Endangered) to EN (Endangered) on the national Red List.

The Alps, and the Return of the Bearded Vulture

Once exterminated across the entire Alpine arc, thanks to the reintroduction project initiated several decades ago in several European protected areas including the Maritime Alps Nature Park and the Stelvio National Park, today the Lammergeier once again occupies several sectors of the Alps in France and Switzerland. And in Italy too, with at least 7 pairs.

This species' reintroduction to the Alps has been facilitated by the fact that the cause of its disappearance – direct persecution – is known and has now been largely eliminated, and because habitat quality is good thanks to the availability of food and the presence of breeding sites.

With 44 young Bearded Vultures fledged in the Alpine wilds, the 2021 breeding season was the most successful since reintroduction began. In all, 72 territories and 58 breeding pairs were monitored by the International Bearded Vulture Monitoring network, an international network that coordinates the monitoring of European populations, unifying and managing the data collected in a shared database.

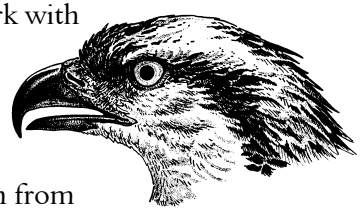
The Recovery of the Peregrine Falcon

In the 1950s and 1960s, Rachel Carson highlighted the severity of the problems caused by DDT, which were driving the Peregrine Falcon to extinction.

Thanks to conservation programmes and the banning of such chemicals, the Peregrine has largely recovered in many parts of the world, including in Italy, which now hosts over 2,000 pairs, many in cities. An emblematic example of this recovery is the presence of at least 25 pairs in the city of Rome alone. In Parma, for years volunteers have been looking after the pair that nest on the bell tower of the church of San Giovanni Evangelista.

Osprey – Now 8 nesting pairs

After more than 40 years, the Osprey nested once more in Italy in 2011, just nine years after a reintroduction project had been launched in 2002 in the Maremma Regional Park with the aim of re-establishing a nesting population. In 2006 the second phase of the project began, involving young birds taken from nests in Corsica. In the following years the species nested in the Diaccia Botrona marsh, the Orbetello Lagoon and the Orti-Bottagone oases. In 2020, the bird returned, unexpectedly, to Sardinia, in the shape of a pair on the island's north-western cliffs, which also bred successfully in 2021 and 2022. And 2020 also marked a first attempt at breeding on the island of Capraia. The result: eight breeding pairs in Italy.



More recently a nesting platform was – in collaboration with the company Solvay – erected in the LIPU-managed Santa Luce Nature Reserve, on a spot frequented by Ospreys.

Shrinking Populations: the Egyptian Vulture

The Egyptian Vulture remains one of the most threatened species of bird of prey in Italy, despite the fact that its population appears to have remained constant over the last decade at no more than 10 pairs. In September 2023, the EU-funded LIFE Egyptian Vulture project for the conservation of the Egyptian Vulture in its native range in southern Italy came to an end. In the LIPU Gravina di Laterza Oasis and in the Matera ravine, captive-born Egyptian Vultures have been released for several years by the Association for Threatened Raptors (CERM) to encourage the recovery of the wild population. GPS transmitters have been fitted to these birds, allowing researchers to follow their routes and obtain important information on their migration and wintering areas and on the threat factors affecting the species. From 71 pairs of Egyptian Vultures in 1971, located in Tuscany, Lazio, Basilicata, Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily, the number has fallen to 10 pairs (-85% in 50 years), which breed only in Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily.
The good news is that a pair has recently 'colonised' Sardinia, where it has been breeding for 2–3 consecutive years.

The Lanner, a Rapid Decline

Italy is home to 85 per cent of the entire breeding population of the European continent's Lanner subspecies feldeggii, but with a discontinuous, fragmentary distribution principally concentrated in Sicily. Unfortunately, in recent decades the once historic Italian strongholds of this exclusive subspecies have exhibited a collapse in breeding populations. Launched in 2020, the project LIFE Lanner (18NAT/IT/000720) will, until 2025, breed Lanners in captivity before releasing them into the wild, thus preventing the bird's extinction.
The rapid decline registered is caused by changes in favoured habitats such as open environments, uncultivated fields, semi-desert areas and rock faces, where the birds nest. But also due to the removal of eggs and chicks from nests and to the disturbance caused by outdoor activities in proximity to nesting sites. Monitoring carried out in 2023 as part of LIFE Lanner revealed only 24 breeding pairs across the 13 regions that historically hosted the species.

Overall, with regard to birds of prey the light outweighs the shadows. But there is still much work to be done to save these splendid animals. LIPU is on the front line and will do everything to preserve them and to ensure they are present for future generations to marvel at.

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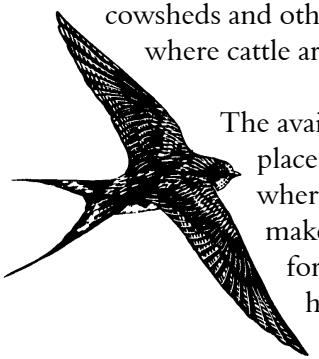
SWALLOWS AND FARMING, A WINNING COMBINATION

Francesca Roseo, MUSE
Federica Luoni, Head of Agriculture

The story of man and several species of birds shows the two intertwined and proceeding together. We are talking especially about those species that are linked to habitats like meadows and grassland, which agricultural activities have extended and maintained for a long time. The swallow has even become recognised as a symbol of such habitats.

This species is associated with large open spaces, both in our countryside, where we enjoy its presence in spring and summer during the nesting season, and on migration, when it crosses seas, deserts and savannah to reach the regions of Africa where it spends the winter.

The swallow is also profoundly linked to man, on whom it has developed a certain dependency: its nests exploit constructions such as the porches of small villages and the arches of bridges, but also cowsheds and other rural buildings, above all where cattle are present.



The availability of warm and secure places near to the open areas where swallows go to feed also makes cowsheds a favoured place for large colonies to form. This has always been appreciated by farmers because of the birds' ability to keep down insect numbers inside such structures. The presence of flies is a source of stress for farm animals: it makes them irritable, annoys them, and often leads to a reduction in milk yield. Worse, insects can be vectors of pathogens that can cause serious illness in cattle.

Swallows in the Val di Non

To investigate scientifically the empirical knowledge traditional farmers have gathered over centuries of coexistence with these birds, the LIPU Trento group, together with researchers from MUSE and Milan University, developed a pilot study to assess the effectiveness of swallows as a deterrent to the presence of flies in cowsheds.

The abundance of swallows and flies was measured for 16 weeks on nine different farms with differing numbers of nesting swallows in the Valle di Non in Trentino. From April to August 2022, weekly data was gathered on the level of activity of flies, the presence of swallows, the size of clutches, and the numbers and ages of chicks. The activity of the flies was surveyed indirectly using white sheets attached to the walls of the cowsheds. Flies leave 'spot', or stains, on these, from which a measurement of activity can be obtained.

The Results

The flies, subjected to increased stress because of the presence of potential predators in the form of swallows, tend to reduce their feeding activity and remain longer in flight. They spend less time on the cards and therefore potentially also on the cows' skin, thus reducing annoyance levels for the animals and the probability of disease transmission.

Using appropriate statistical models it was possible to quantify the effect of the swallows on the insects. The results demonstrate that the activity level of the flies increases, as expected, with the temperature and as the season progresses. This increment is, however, much less marked when swallows are present and is further limited when they are relatively abundant. For example, at a temperature of 22 degrees Celsius, the local presence of 25 swallows corresponds to an average reduction of more than 60 per cent in the activity level of flies compared to what there would be in a cowshed without the birds.

The Swallow is Useful, but in Decline

Thanks to the study, it is possible to state that swallows deliver a true ecosystem service as an effective biological control of flying insects in cowsheds, contributing to animal well-being and reducing the need to use insecticides, which are also potentially harmful to man.

This relationship however is at considerable risk: according to data from the Farmland Birds Index – gathered in Italy by LIPU on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture – all over Europe the number of swallows is decreasing at the alarming rate of 8 per cent per year.

There are many reasons for this. The insects on which the swallows feed, once present in abundance in the fields and fodder over which the birds hunt, are available in lower numbers because of the intensification of grassland management. Mowing is conducted more frequently, preventing insects from completing their life cycles, and fertilisers and synthetic pesticides, which are also harmful to swallows, are used.

Climate change is also contributing to the decline of the swallow. The areas they fly over during migration are ever more subject to profound ecological changes. These include an increase in desert areas in Africa and the disappearance of wetlands and stopover sites.

A further threat, and one that is too often underestimated, is the loss of nesting sites. Modern cowsheds, tall and open, are unsuitable for this species. And biosecurity protocols require the elimination of swallows' nests inside cowsheds,

disrupting the coexistence of wild species and farmers. These rules, which apply to large, intensive farms, adapt poorly to the reality of hills and mountains, where cowsheds are small or medium sized and – fortunately – the swallow's presence is accepted.

The results of this study, which demonstrate that the presence of swallows is not a biosecurity risk but rather an advantage, will be used to establish institutional dialogue and to modify these protocols, supporting those farmers who are committed to keeping this so charismatic species in their cowsheds. To protect farm species like swallows, it is necessary for science, conservation, and agriculture to work collaboratively.

We as consumers can play our part by supporting dairy supply chains that allow the maintenance of grassland and pasture without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilisers and antibiotics.
Only by us doing so will this thousand-year-old alliance be able to continue, and will swallows be able to fill our springs with their unpredictable flight, their sounds, and their beautiful colours.

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LIPU IN ACTION

Natura 2000 Day

Nineteen events in 15 Natura 2000 network sites, from Veneto to Sicily. This was the programme organised by LIPU within the framework of the Life A-Mar Natura 2000 project to celebrate Natura 2000 Day on 21 May. Events were held at some of the

most beautiful coastal and marine sites to promote good conservation practices through more sustainable management of human activities. Present in all EU Member States, Natura 2000 sites constitute the largest network of protected areas in the world, both on land and in the marine environment, protecting 1,200 rare or endangered species and 230 habitats. In Italy alone, it protects 91 species of flora, 385 species of wild birds, and a further 119 species of fauna. The Life A-Mar Natura 2000 project is coordinated by Federparchi and has Triton Research, Fundacion Biodiversidad and LIPU as partners. Funded by the Life Environmental Governance & Information programme, it is co-financed by the Asinara National Park, the Tuscan Archipelago National Park and the Cinque Terre National Park.

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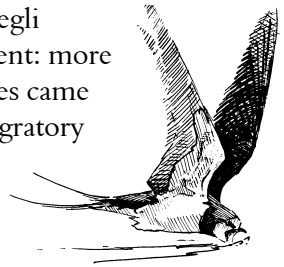
Legal victory for Lake Vico

"A revolutionary ruling for Italy, but one that could have important repercussions for future biodiversity lawsuits in Europe". This is how ClientEarth and LIPU responded to the Council of State's pronouncement on the two NGOs' appeal for the protection of Lake Vico. The Council of State in fact ordered the Lazio Region to take immediate action to "counter" the destruction of a protected habitat, giving it six months to take the necessary measures

This is the third act in a series of appeals presented by NGOs: with this last one, the Council of State, in a final ruling that can no longer be appealed, found the Region of Lazio in clear violation of its legal obligation to safeguard Lake Vico - a protected natural site - from the dangerous pollution caused by the intensive hazelnut cultivation taking place in the area. The Court had already condemned the authorities after residents in the area were deprived of drinking water due to the same pollution.*** * ***

Cuneo, the Day of the Swallows



On 23 March, the provincial delegation of Cuneo joined the National Swallow Day, which took place at our Nature Garden on Viale degli Angeli. It was a well-attended event: more than 50 children and their families came to learn about swallows, their migratory journey and the problems that are causing their severe decline. As in previous years, an award was presented to a citizen who has distinguished himself in the defence of the nests: this year it was the mayor of Vignolo, Danilo Bernardi, who was presented with a plaque that he will affix at the town hall; the mayor undertook to adopt a resolution to protect the nests, as, all municipalities should do. Only with everyone's sensitivity and action will it be possible to protect this emblematic bird, which is threatened by pesticides used in agriculture, the destruction of nests and the disappearance of traditional stables.

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NEWS FROM LIPU-UK

Postal charges are almost certainly going to rise again.

Royal Mail, whose motto seems to be, "Charge more, deliver less" has increased the cost of second

class franked mail only three months after their last increase and our saving is now only 5p per letter. The next update for stamps is due in October and it is unlikely to be a reduction.

In the light of this I'd like to suggest some ways of reducing the cost for all of us although I admit that we have to make use of modern methods – so I do understand that if you don't use a smartphone or computer this will not be possible.

• Use email whenever possible rather than pay for stamps.

• Consider setting up a monthly or annual Bankers' Order to renew your membership, I can send a form for that.

• Make any or all contributions by bank transfer (BACS). a/c LIPU-UK 08 92 99 65114517

• If you use Paypal please consider choosing "Friends and Family" rather than "Goods and Services", this will avoid the charges applied to us, we are: mail@lipu-uk.org

• If taking part in the annual Draw, transfer funds as above and email me – I will put tickets in for you.

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My thanks to my production team who, for this issue, were: Barbara Avery, Dave Brooks, Peter Rafferty and Lesley Tompkins.

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Another raptor whose future is considered on page 16, the Red Kite is holding its own in the face of many threats.The Barn Swallow, below, is one of our most welcome visitors see page 23. © *David Lingard*

Magnificent is the best word to describe the Bonelli's Eagle, the subject of many years of successful work by LIPU.

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