

# Die Bedrohung der Greifvögel auf dem Zug

## – am Beispiel der Straße von Messina

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The Straits of Messina are one of the main migratory routes in the Mediterranean sea. Thousands of raptors and other species such as herons and storks cross every spring the short distance which divides Sicily from the Europe. Needless to say how fascinating is this phenomenon: Vultures, Eagles, Honey buzzard, Kites, Falcons, Harriers flew over, from March till June, with rhythms and frequencies not easily foreseeable which are however typical of the migration.

During the 1986 continuous observations for more than one month allowed us to count 9000 raptors belonging to 25 different species. The raptors observed over the Straits of Messina are up to now less numerous than those which cross Cape Bon, the Bosphorus and Gibraltar. Moreover, there is a great difference in the morphology of the territory and a greater width of the migratory front. From Sicily, the raptors can reach the opposite coast of Calabria over a front of more than 40 km. Moreover, due to the presence of mountains higher even more than 1000 m and distant from the coast few km, raptors can easily escape from computation and observation by ornithologists and birdwatchers. It must be added that also Eolian Islands may serve as a basis for migratory birds and thus they can not be accounted for, as this area advance that of control and studies.

The migratory front can thus be assumed in the order of 80 km, not easily controllable; moreover, at variance of other crossings in the Mediterranean Sea, raptors cross over here at very high altitudes, far from observation. Potentially the number of migratory is higher than that referred above probably close to that reported for Cape Bon i.e. 40000. Few raptors which migrate through this route come also from the south of Tunisia and Libia, mostly non soaring birds.

The importance of this migratory route was, till recently, unknown or underestimated, as in fact proven from very few information available in literature besides most recent reports.

With this background let me introduce the main scope of this my presentation. Over the Straits of Messina raptors have been shot for centuries by armed poachers. Recently they have modernized their weapons using high precision guns and high sophisticated types of cartridges able to shoot storks and eagles. Moreover they have discovered the convenience of the binoculars not used to identify the birds of prey but to sight them in advance. Recently walkie-talkies have been used to communicate amongst them with regard the movement of protectionists and Forestal guards. Then, why this foolish and anachronistic hunting tradition? It is not easily understood nor their arguments can convince anybody. When seven years ago I started to devote myself to this activity, some poachers told me that the Honey buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) were coming from India to be killed here because they were hap-

py to do so. Still that they were affirming that raptors, specially the Honey buzzard, stole their chickens and pigeons and for those reasons they should revenge themselves and defend. Needless to say what coldness was accompanying my early explanations and attempts to fight against their ignorance. Slowly the thesis of India was forgotten but new stories came out going back either to the tradition or to other fact. Thus poachers put emphasis on the fact that, anyhow, raptors are millions and that hunters are not responsible but rather the pesticides or the pharmaceutical industries. Why? Rumors were that the eggs of the Honey buzzard were utilized in Germany to make perfumes and soaps. Elder people were affirming on the basis of their experience that killing at least on Honey buzzard avoid conjugal misfortunes.

Young people refused this thesis and they get angry if the story was made public. Hundreds of people take their vacations to go and shoot the Honey buzzards; other came from other regions for hunting. There is no other explanation rather than selfishness, madness and ignorance! In Sicily, seven years ago there were at least 200 poachers and more than 2000 in Calabria. The difference is significant as it reflects also the difference in the flux of migratory birds. In Sicily, apart for particular climatic conditions, raptors are concentrated in few well defined points from which they take upward to cross the Straits of Messina. In Calabria, on their crossing over the steep hills, flocks of 30-40 Honey buzzards can soon disperse along the 70 km of the Calabrian front and thus are easy prey. The Honey buzzard (and obviously other raptors) can reach the coast along the sea level or all along the heights of the hills. As modes of approaching the coast have been well known for years it is obvious the sophistication put there in the poaching and the higher number of poachers with respect to Sicily. In the years, poachers have built bunkers in the order of thousands some of which on the roofs and very often birds are killed from Windows or roofs of the city of Reggio Calabria! In Sicily bunkers are less numerous, in the order of 50, most of which in concrete. Those located in places owned by the State have been abated after the approval of the law against the poaching.

The national law of 1977 and the regional one of 1981 protect in fact all raptors and some species, such as Eagles and Vultures, are particularly protected. As the hunting in Sicily ends the 28th of February, poaching starts soon after till June. According to the law, fixed hides are prohibited on mountains or hill crossings.

Till 1981 in spite of restrictions imposed by law none had attempted to stop poaching. Few articles appeared in 1975 were the only voice against. In 1981 in cooperation with a professor of the university of Palermo I wrote charges to the Organizations of Vigilance and the police. While I was accused of

arrogance, overbearingness and presumption, I still continued to write charges. In the 1982 we organized a protest in Monte Ciccio, an hill nearby Messina. Some cars were damaged and the posters burned in front of the state television and the police. In 1983 we organized in Messina the national meeting of the LIPU's members during which we repeated the same manifestations in favour of birdwatching. During that day none was shooting to the raptors and no poacher was disturbing our excursion. Times were mature enough for organizing in 1984 the first "Camp for studies and surveillance of migratory raptors over the straits of Messina" In the meantime, a manifestation was organized for the first time in Calabria where no other initiative had been taken before. During the night of the 6th of May in Pellaro, near Reggio Calabria, a bomb was exploded at the office of the LIPU which was promoting the initiative. It was a shock for all of us but the manifestation was accomplished as well. The Camp started operating and this was the beginning of a scientific activity till then fragmentary. The basis was put for future work of research and surveillance together with prevention. To the activities of the camp did participate also members of the MOS as they were having and still have the same troubles. Since then we have been organizing the camp every year with some variations as to the period and number of participants. Attendance of locals was and it is still critical due to lack of interest, selfishness and fear. This creates problems to willing people for which also the indifference of the citizens is a big concern. As an index of this struggle I want to refer of some personal experience.

In 1986 on the Easter-Monday I went to Monte Ciccio with my boy-friend and some other friends trusting that there were no poachers. Error! There were so many that I decided of recruiting as many as possible people for the whole month till the beginning of the camp which was supposed to start the 5th of May. During the night of April 24th my car posted in front of my house in the center of the city was burned. In spite of, the day after we were again in the forefront of our observation and surveillance. The camp was open as programmed and it was run regularly with some novelties: from our National and Regional Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry reinforcements were sent to the Forestry guards. More than 150 guards were sent for a month in Calabria and 12 in Sicily to prevent and repress. The same operation was repeated in Calabria in 1985 and 1987. As the front of poaching was broad, helicopters were sent to Calabria and sometime guns were shot from both sides: helicopters and poachers. We have alternatively proven frustrations and happiness during the years! In the 1984 with strong winds from SE prevailing and birds flying close to the land's level we were afraid that there would be a lot of shooting. Nothing happened! As we were surrounded by the poachers it was a surprise their respect of our rules and laws: they did not kill any bird. Happiness went to the skies when two Egyptian vultures were flying no more than 20 m over our heads and no one was shooting. In another occasion (the 6th of May of 1987) with more than 1200 Honey buzzards crossing the Straits in one day, we were happy not to see poachers around and be able to admire the spectacle in the midst of the mountains. It was truly an happy day such as to forget those sad days during which

we have been assisting to the massacre of tens of raptors! As the time goes it is nice to sum-up the results and be able to say that have been struggling against the violence and the ignorance. In essence, we have been successful, although in part, as the following numbers say. In 1984 we counted shots in a month in the order of 1185 against 3198 raptors (0,37 shot for each raptors). In the 1985 in Sicily we counted 506 shots for 3210 raptors (0.15 shot for each raptor) on account of 12 days of observation. In the 1986, year during which LIPU and ICBP have organized in Reggio Calabria an "International symposium on the protection of migratory raptors" the shots in Sicily were 367 against 9486 raptors (0,038 shot for each bird). As the numbers say, it was a clear sign of improvement for which we have been fighting so long. The improvement was even greater in the 1987 as only 205 shots were made for 8002 raptors in Sicily (0,025 shot for each bird) in contrast with a worsening in Calabria i.e. 1911 shots against 8002 raptors (0,23 shot for bird).

To conclude, the activity of the LIPU, the surveillance of the Forest Department, the organization of meetings, assemblies has allowed in the recent five years to save thousands of raptors. We are obviously proud of it. I must emphasize also that in 1987 the Camp was organized with the active and substantial participation of the DBV Without it we could operate the Camp for only six days against the month foreseen. As to the question of which kind of species is more frequently shoot by poachers, the answer is that Honey buzzard comes first. We estimate that over 1000 specimens were abated each year in the past. Next follows the Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*), the Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), the Harrier sp. (*Circus sp.*), the Red footed falcon (*Falco vespertinus* and the less common like Booted eagle (*Hieraetus pennatus*). Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) and all the other species (Lesser spooted eagle, Osprey and so on). Even if according to some ornitologist 1000 birds of prey are insignificant with respect to big migration through Bosphorous or Gibraltar, I do not agree with their statements. In fact, it must be considered that birds of prey crossing those places will hardly nest where the 1000 were supposed to breed and thus the corresponding areas will lack bird's occupation or insufficient density of population of pairs. Poaching also hits frequently species much less common such as Eagles and Vultures, Falcons like the *Falco eleonora* and the other species. As to answer to these ornitologists I said before it is almost impossible to ask poachers to shoot only the most common species. Raptors are severely menaced by other factors such as the disappearance of the habitat, the pollution, the falconery and the decrease of prey. The protection during the delicate phase of the migration is therefore imperative and even very important and necessary for their survival. Underestimating or forgetting this problem can cause severe damage to the whole avifauna, migratory or not. Allowing, through lack of control and opposition, the killing of species protected can accelerate the phenomenon at the expense of those same raptors, herons and of passerines. It is surprising to hear sometime that these activities of control and studies are to be considered only passtime or to be conformist or as an expression of sentimental-

lism. Is not the case for us as the previous personal stories tell. Everybody who study raptors or birds cannot refrain from getting angry from what happens over the Straits of Messina, Malta or the Pyrenees. Saving these species from any form of destruction is imperative for all appassionate of the matter! To do so, we are trying to realize an International Ornithological Observatory over the Straits of Messina. This is not an easy task and the economic difficulties are great. If we succeed we need to make it more active, the cooperation of the ornithologists and appassionate of all Europe. Poaching can be defeated not with afraidness and absence but with the alternative presence of scientific and ecology-minded tourism which substitutes for the guns, a reminiscence of centuries of ignorance and selfishness. This is the next step after years of strenuous sight against poaching. To do so, we need to turn the Straits of Messina into a second (Gibraltar) or poaching will make vain seven years of fights in the defense of raptors which live in Central Europe.

### Summary

The straights of Messina are one of the main routes for the migration of the raptors through the

Mediterranean Sea. Researches carried out in the last years have allowed to count, in the spring time, more than 9000 raptors of 25 different species even through a limited lag of time shorter than the effective course. Unfortunately there it exists, through the centuries, an hunting tradition by which all kinds of migratory birds are shooted including raptors and other species such as storks and herons. Notwithstanding the law protects these birds since 10 years now and the shooting in the springtime is prohibited, numerous hunters still practice hunting to Eagles, Kites, Buzzards, Vultures, Harriers and Falcons, during the migration season, on both sides of the straights. For years the LIPU coordinated also by the ICBP and more recently also by the DBN struggles against these massacres. Stopping the poaching of migratory raptors is now imperative for their survival.

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