

Lie of the Land: Marion Shoard looks at the problems faced by migrating birds as they cross Europe

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One of the sadder features of the onset of autumn is the departure for another year of the birds of summer. We return from our own mass migration to the sun to find the swallows gathering on the telegraph wires and then slipping away along with our whitethroats and willow warblers, our nightingales and cuckoos and our memories of cut grass, cricket on the green and strawberries in the garden. In fact, this annual avian evacuation is an even sadder affair than it seems.

Most of the birds involved are heading for the African continent in search of the insect food they need to keep them going so they can return to our shores to breed in the spring. But to get there they and their fellows from the rest of Northern Europe must pass over or through those same Mediterranean countries that have played host to their human compatriots a month or two earlier - Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. Wearing by the first leg of their long journey, the birds settle among the orchards and olive groves to gather their strength for the sea crossing ahead. Awaiting them is a very different welcome from that accorded to British, German and Scandinavian tourists.

Much of the human male population of the region, including perhaps some of the cheery waiters and ice-cream sellers who enlivened our holidays, is lying in wait. Armed with nets, lime, traps, snares, but above all air-rifles and shotguns, the amateur hunters set about the systematic massacre of as many as possible of their feathered visitors.

The scale of the destruction is hard to grasp. A study in 1976 suggested that over three million thrushes are killed each year in Majorca alone. No kind of bird is safe: it makes little difference if a species is rare or common. Along with the thrushes and robins die large numbers of ospreys, hobbys, greenshank, sandpipers, stone curlews and nightjars. It is estimated that more than a sixth of the birds trying to cross the Mediterranean each autumn are killed by Man. Around five billion birds are trying to make the journey so that means there must be around 800 million victims.

Of course we all know that some of our continental cousins have a taste for eating small birds, and for hundreds of years birds have been killed in Europe that would be left unharmed in Britain. But few of the 800 million fall victim to colourful peasant folk snaring birds for the pot in line with ancient custom. The current scale of the slaughter has more to do with rising urban prosperity than rural Latin tradition.

Slaughter for Fun

In Britain, hunting is the preserve of the privileged, who happen to have a very strict idea of what kind of bird constitutes fair game. Elsewhere in Protestant Northern Europe, a similarly disciplined code is observed. In Southern Europe, however, hunting has always been much more of an activity of the common man and he has recognised fewer rules. Only recently, however, has the common man had access to sophisticated weaponry, the ability to travel easily and plentiful leisure time. Whereas migrating birds might in the past have had to negotiate the odd trap laid by a hungry local villager, they are now confronted by parties armed with repeater shotguns who may have driven to the areas where birds congregate from distant urban centres for a weekend of sporting entertainment. Nowadays few of the birds killed are eaten. They are slaughtered for fun.

Today Spain has a million shooters and France and Italy over two million each. In Italy there are several hundred thousand huts which enable hunters to shoot while hidden. These huts are specially favoured for shooting migrants and each hut accounts for a few hundred birds each year. In Calabria and Sicily alone, hundreds of honey buzzards are shot each year - a species of which only a handful of pairs breed in Britain.

Of course, all this might not matter so much if our migrant bird populations could stand this haemorrhage. But at the same time as the threat from human predators has changed, so has much else in the lives of our summer birds. All over Europe, the environmental conditions on which many of these largely insectivorous birds depend have become much less favourable. Not only in Britain but also in neighbouring countries subject to the Common Agricultural Policy, farmers have been subsidised to produce as much as they possibly can, if only to fill the Community's surplus stores. So they have been intent on destroying insect life with pesticides and on ploughing up the woods, hedges and wetlands which provide nesting sites for many bird species.

As if these problems in Europe were not enough, many of our summer birds face even worse problems if they manage to make it over the guns of Latin Europe to their African wintering grounds. The Sahelian drought that has had such tragic human consequences has also destroyed the food supplies of many migrant birds from Europe.

In the face of these difficulties, it is not surprising that many of the birds that come to us each summer do so in smaller numbers. Robert Browning's whitethroats dropped to a fraction of their former numbers in the 1970s, and now the sand martin population seems to have experienced a similar crash.

Even our most common summer visitors, like the willow warbler, seem to be declining, while some of those that were always scarcer, like the nightingale and nightjar, have disappeared completely from large areas.

No-one can tell what role in this is played by those repeater shotguns massed around the Mediterranean every autumn. Certainly, some of our summer bird visitors would have problems enough if they were left unmolested on migration. But it can hardly help species already under pressure that such large numbers of individuals are blasted out of the sky. If your summer evenings are no longer enhanced by a nightingale's song from the copse on the common, Latin gunmen may not be to blame. On the other hand, they may be.

This being so, the annual Mediterranean bird pogrom is a matter of concern to us as much as to the people of the countries where it takes place. In one sense, it is of more concern to us, since populations of some of the species that suffer, like nightingales and nightjars, have a far more tenuous grip in Britain than they have in countries further south.

It is the kind of situation that might make the nation-state-bound environmentalist gnash his teeth in frustration. Environmental protection seems to depend on national institutions. Yet migrating birds can no more be persuaded to take account of national frontiers than can acid rain.

Community Action

But wait. Does not something strike you about those Mediterranean countries where our feathered summer guests are butchered? Why yes! In spite of their alien ways in the matter of bird protection, most of them share with us membership of that one supra-national body which their and our leaders never tire of telling us is the one that really counts - the European Community. After suffering a thousand pointless irritations from metrication to standardised sausage recipes, might we now be able to look to the Common Market to actually do something useful? Do the Market's terms of reference cover wildlife?

They do. Along with the EC's more familiar obsessions goes a clear commitment to environmental protection throughout the territories of the member states. Indeed, other EC governments have taken advantage of this commitment to pillory Britain as the "Dirty Man of Europe" because of our enthusiasm to poison the North Sea, generate acid rain and take in nuclear laundry. About time, you may think, that we replied by looking to the may think, to attend to a more clear-cut evil than any of these.

Well, you will be glad to-learn that the matter of the Mediterranean massacre has indeed been raised in the counsels of the Community. What is more, bureaucratic Brussels opinion has felt obliged to concede that the indiscriminate slaughter of wildlife is something which is at odds with the enlightened environmental attitudes which the Community is bound to promote. Wheels have been set in motion and action has been initiated. Indeed, action was initiated as long ago as 1979.

Does this mean then that the guns will be falling silent in future autumns if not this one? Unfortunately it means nothing of the kind. The action taken by the Community seems to have satisfied both Brussels and the British Government representatives who pushed for it. But it has made very little difference to what actually happens.

Though enlightened opinion throughout Europe recognises that the annual massacre is wrong, the participants are both numerous and passionately committed to their sport. They do not welcome interference. Recently, a bomb was placed in a square in the Gironde where conservationists were due to meet in protest against the shooting of turtle doves in France. Another bomb exploded outside the offices of an Italian bird protection society in Calabria the day before a demonstration against the shooting of birds of prey in the Straits of Messina. Powerful organisations represent the hunters and EC governments have no wish to confront them. How then was the Community to deal with the autumnal slaughter?

Wild Bird Directive

On 2 April 1979, the European Council of Ministers issued a Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds, which among other things provided protection to most species of migrants. In 1981, this Directive came into effect throughout the Community. It is, however, up to member governments to enforce the Directive: and the governments of the Mediterranean countries have made little attempt to do that. Some of them have had to be taken to court to be forced to pass the necessary legislation. Where legislation exists, there is often little effort to enforce it. Still less is there any sign of the extensive education programme which will eventually be needed if whole populations are to be weaned from the gun to less destructive forms of interest in wildlife.

Any Community citizen who discovers evidence of a breach of the Directive on Wild Bird Conservation can report it to Brussels. But if a British tourist complains of a slaughter in an EC country, the most a European Commission official will do is to ask an official of the member government to investigate. The official will report that he has no evidence of wrong-doing, and once in receipt of this information, Brussels will drop the matter.

This is how politicians and officials get rid of matters about which they do not wish to know. But what would it take to make the Directive effective? The answer is: a mere fraction of the effort which the EC puts into many far less deserving causes. There would be nothing to stop the European Commission retaining a few enforcement officers who in the face of a complaint could travel to the area involved to conduct an investigation of their own. If the relevant government was confronted with a Commission dossier, it would not be able to wriggle out of its responsibilities. If it tried, a case could be brought in the European Court to force it into action.

The Royal Society of the Protection of Birds has asked our Government to push Brussels to conduct such investigations. But our Government absolutely refuses, fearful lest Euro-investigators start appearing at Dover intent on rooting out British breaches of Euro-regulations.

In fact, such investigators would probably discover little. We seem to abide by most of the Community's rules, whether we like them or not. It is not too much to ask that our European partners should do likewise, especially in a matter in which a British interest is genuinely at stake. If you agree, tell your IMP and your Euro-MP. Let's ensure that by next autumn there is at least a prospect of a safer passage for our summer birds.

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