

THE AUDUBON CAUSE

Earthwatch: No Birds Sing on Saint Francis' Mountain

—BERT SCHWARZSCHILD

DON'T GO TO Scandinavia," my friend Marisa argued. "Go south, to Italy and the French Riviera, where the mandolins play." It didn't take much to persuade me to change plans, for I liked the prospect of warm, sunny beaches, verdant vineyards, and lazy days in cafes sipping *espresso* and *latte*. Thus did I happen to visit Italy, climb a mountain path, and make a terrible discovery.

Marisa and her husband, who live in Montreux, Switzerland, were visiting me in San Francisco last summer, just prior to my departure for a month-long vacation in Europe. I had already de-

cidated that it was going to be a real vacation—no schedules and only the sketchiest of itineraries, just traveling around on a Eurailpass, hopping on and off trains as the mood struck me. But, having accepted Marisa's suggestion to follow the sun, I decided to take advantage of her knowledge of Europe and asked her to suggest a few of her favorite places.

"You must promise to climb Mount Subasio in Assisi where Saint Francis preached to the birds," she said. "It's such a beautiful spot, with so many birds and wildflowers. Maybe Saint Francis' spirit will touch you."

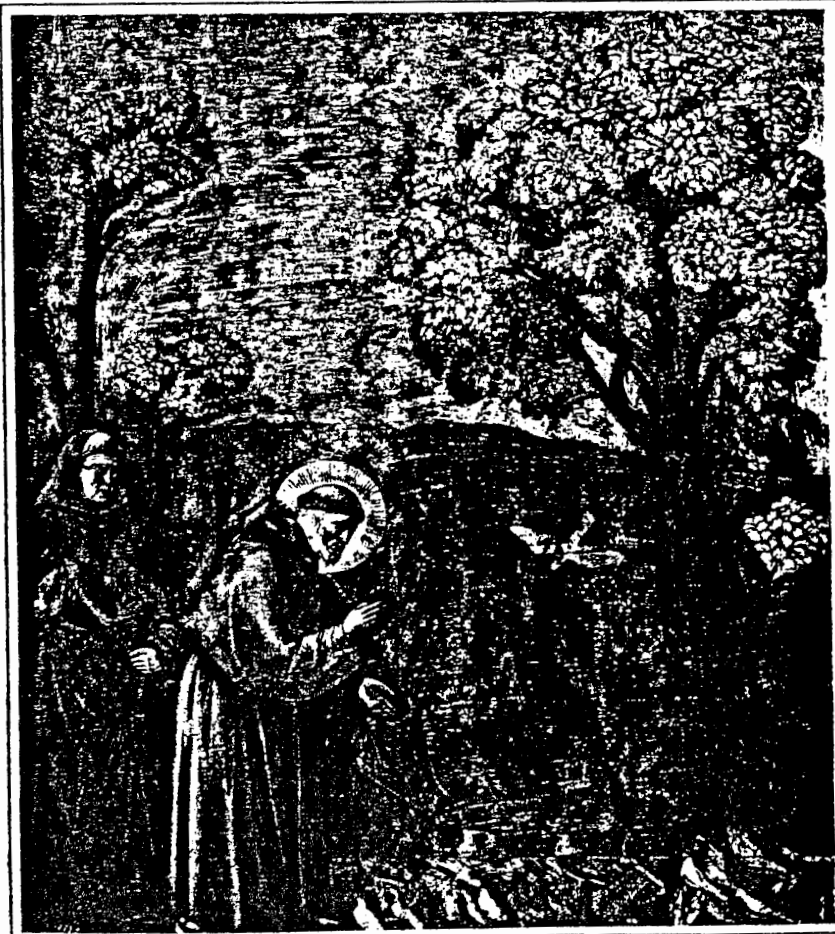
So it was that on a Sunday morning last September, near the end of my vacation, I found myself boarding a train in Florence, bound for the sun-drenched region of Umbria. After changing to a smaller train in Terontola, I arrived in Assisi around noon, along with many pilgrims from around the world who had come to honor the memory of gentle Saint Francis and to celebrate his eight-hundredth birthday.

As I gazed at the panorama of churches, castles, red-tiled houses, and ancient, fortified walls, I was elated that I had come to Assisi. I could understand how visiting Pope John XXIII could have been moved to comment on "this enchantment of nature, this artistic splendor, this charm of holiness which appears suspended in the air."

I wanted to start my hike up Mount Subasio as soon as possible, while there was still time to reach the top before dark. In a half-hour's walk I had left behind all the houses and paved streets and people. I headed straight up the mountain on a wide, rocky road that passed through a wooded area. Trees, shrubs, and wildflowers lined the way. What an ideal landscape for birds and the other humble creatures Saint Francis loved, I thought.

As I walked along at a steady pace, enjoying the warm sun and gentle breezes, I was startled frequently by the shotgun blasts that punctuated the otherwise quiet Sunday afternoon. All the gunfire was coming from the valley below, so I realized I didn't have to worry about it. Still, it was unsettling. After a while, I began noticing multicolored shotgun shells littering the road. There weren't many at first, certainly not enough of them to rival the wildflowers for attention, but as I proceeded up the hill their number multiplied rapidly.

Finally the number of spent shells I had passed mounted into the hundreds, and I noticed, from time to time, feathers stuck in the bushes or lying on the ground. Then I began to realize that I had not heard or seen a single bird during the past hour. Suddenly the enor-



Saint Francis breaching to the birds, in a fresco by Giotto.

mity of it struck me: Could it be that here, on Saint Francis' own mountain, all the birds had been hunted out? His beloved birds? How could such a disaster have been allowed? I was shocked

and outraged by what could only be called a desecration.

But the sun was sinking behind the hills, and I had to stir myself out of my contemplative rage. It soon would be dark. Down in Assisi and elsewhere in the valley, lights flickered on and glimmered in the darkening shadows. I dashed ahead, determined to make the top before dark. Finally, around a wind-swept turn, there it was, the bald knob of Mount Subasio's summit. It looked uninteresting, even anticlimactic after the long climb. I was satisfied I had seen it; I did not feel obligated to climb it; it was too empty and windy for sleeping.

Retracing my steps, I plunged back into the woods, looking for a place I had noticed not far from the summit. The spot I had chosen for my night on the mountain was a small, open, grassy glade near a cluster of cypress trees, on a ridge overlooking Assisi and the valley. My campsite and the valley were illuminated by a brilliant moon and the lights of the towns below. I smoothed down the grass, kicked away the small rocks, and laid out my sleeping bag. I sat down and dined on fruit, cheese, and crackers. Everything tasted superb.

I was camped at an altitude of about a thousand meters, and a cool night breeze was sweeping over my unprotected hillside. I felt chilly, then intensely cold. I climbed into my sleeping bag for warmth, but to no avail. I crawled back out, put on all my clothes, wrapped myself in a cotton sleep sheet I had thought I wouldn't need, and climbed back into the bag to sleep. As I felt my body cooling down again, I began to worry about surviving the night. What if it should get really cold? But I couldn't muster the energy to get out of the bag and scramble down the mountain to warmth and safety.

Time dragged on endlessly. I heard a faint rustling in a nearby bush. More fluttering, then the beautiful melody of a bird singing. I couldn't see the bird in the darkness, but I judged it to be about fifteen to twenty-five feet away. (From my description of its song, friends tell me it was probably a nightingale.) It was the first bird I had heard on the mountain. Then the bird flew away, and I was alone again. At that moment, I realized that the perfect birthday gift for Saint Francis would be to bring the birds back to his mountain.

As I drifted into slumber, contemplating the events of the day and night and my new mission. I wondered if this

was what Marisa meant: Had the spirit of Saint Francis touched me through the song of this bird? Before I could think it through, I fell asleep.

WITH THE RISING of the sun and the welcome warmth of its rays, I sprang out of my sleeping bag. Although I had not slept much, I was full of energy. I virtually ran down the trail and hitched a ride to the nearby Eremo delle Carceri, Saint Francis' favorite hermitage. The resident nuns spoke no English. One clerical brother, who had some rudimentary English, expressed sympathy with my discovery, but could offer no solution.

As I walked about the Eremo's courtyard, I was struck by the white doves flying around and in and out of the doors and windows. Visitors to the hermitage, most of whom would never walk Subasio's trail and experience the mountain's birdlessness, could be heard exclaiming, "How beautiful—Saint Francis' birds!" However innocently, church authorities were helping to hide the destruction of the native bird population with this dramatic display of imported white doves.

I hitchhiked back to the center of Assisi and walked through the narrow, ancient streets to the Basilica di San Francesco to continue my search for someone in the ecclesiastical hierarchy who might be able to help. Of all the churches in Assisi, this basilica is the most renowned because it houses the Giotto frescoes depicting the life of Saint Francis. As I stood before the fresco of Francis preaching to the birds, I became even more determined to help right the wrong I had discovered.

In the church basement, I found a priest manning a switchboard. We managed to communicate well enough that he made a few impatient calls trying to find an English-speaking priest.

Father Claude Jarnak, only recently arrived in Assisi from America, appeared within minutes and introduced himself. I told Father Claude about my experience and depressing discovery on the mountain. He, too, had heard the shooting and noticed the absence of birds. He had inquired and learned that the church had gotten a temporary shooting ban in deference to the celebration of Saint Francis' eight-hundredth birthday, but only on Mount Subasio itself. We agreed that it would take a longer period of year-round protection over a much wider area to bring the birds back in viable number and diversity.

As we sat on the church balcony, looking out over the Assisi countryside in the afternoon sun, Father Claude talked about Saint Francis' philosophy of reverence for life: "He felt that all

Earth by God for a purpose. Saint Francis avoided hurting even a worm because he felt it had a place on Earth. He especially loved the birds." As if to emphasize his point, Father Claude took me back inside and down to the main floor to look again at the fresco of the good saint preaching to the birds. Before we parted, Father Claude offered to help any way he could my determination to publicize the problem and find public support to return the birds to Assisi. I had found an ally.

How can the birds be brought back to Mount Subasio? Scientific research will be required to detail all the things that might be necessary to turn the tide, but surely the first step must be a ban on the killing of all wild winged creatures within the immediate vicinity of Assisi itself. Perhaps the ban should be a permanent one. Italy's many historic and religious buildings and monuments enjoy public protection and respect. Why not accord the same official recognition and protection to Saint Francis' birds? The birds of Assisi and Mount Subasio could be declared a living monument to honor this man of Assisi whose mortal acts of love and reverence for life eight centuries ago have touched the lives and imaginations of so many people throughout the world, irrespective of their religion.

Acting together, concerned people can make a difference. And through this birthday gift, we might help to keep alive Saint Francis' message of love for and peace with all of Earth's creatures. Italian conservation organizations, which have already expressed interest, will have to bear the major responsibility, but like-minded people elsewhere in the world can help, too. It would only take a few minutes to sit down and write to the responsible Italian authorities, asking that the birds of Assisi be declared a living monument and be protected from killing: Honorable Sandro Pertini, President, Il Quirinale, Rome, Italy, and Honorable Professor Gianfranco Costa, Mayor, Comune de Assisi, Assisi, Italy.

When I next climb Mount Subasio, I expect to be greeted by a multitude of birds along the trail Francis of Assisi walked. And I hope that among the flock will be a certain nightingale that serenaded me into action.

Bert Schwarzschild found our story while crisscrossing Europe after a five-year stint with American Youth Hostels. He has been a San Francisco community activist and environmental conservationist for decades and has written to support these causes in *Sierra*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, and other publications.