



PEOPLE

CONSERVATION

Bringing the Birds Back to Assisi

Hunters nearly killed off the songbirds of St. Francis; Bert Schwarzschild helps protect them

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BOSTON

EVERY September in Florence, Italy, the *Fiesta Degli Uccelli* (Fair of the Birds) ushers in the new hunting season. The *Viale Machiavelli* is blocked off, and hunters display guns, ammunition, and wild songbirds in cages (used to attract free-flying birds).

But this year the only unusual sight on the street were some black-boarded notices lamenting the "death" of the fair.

Hunting in general, and the hunting of songbirds in particular, is under fire in Italy (which is located on a major songbird migration path).

Throughout the country, conservationists rally for revised hunting laws. Petitions circulate, politicians speak out. A Rome-based newspaper poll in December 1986 found that 80 percent of the public wanted some reduction or the total abolition of hunting in Italy.

Watching from the sidelines is American Bert Schwarzschild, who began a songbird campaign in Italy in 1983. Mr. Schwarzschild played a significant role in prompting the Italian public to rethink a tradition he calls "barbaric" and "unsporting."

Songbirds are a delicacy in Italy, and are roasted, baked in bread, and prepared in other ways. Schwarzschild's concerns led to a national campaign in

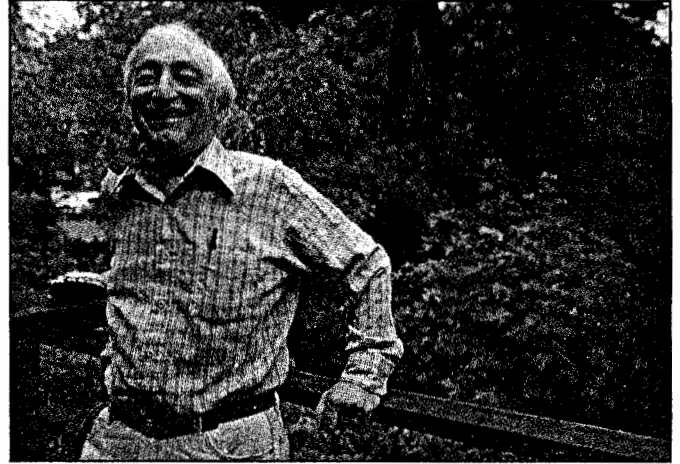
Italy, and the establishment of the Assisi Bird Council—Europe, which he co-founded with Maria Luisa Cohen in 1984.

Rousing thought is practically second nature for Schwarzschild, an electrical engineer-turned-environmentalist. "I've always had an empathy for the plights of other people and the plight of other living beings," says the soft-spoken, Berkeley, Calif. activist. He was national director of the Whale Center in Oakland, Ca., executive director of the

American Youth Hostels, and chairman of the US education committee for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. He also founded an American branch of the Assisi Bird Council.

Schwarzschild found the impetus for his Assisi Bird Campaign while vacationing in Italy in 1983. He was intrigued with the idea of hiking up Mt. Subasio, the place where Saint Francis befriended birds and animals in the 13th century.

"As I started walking up, I heard shotgun blasts in the valley below," Schwartzchild recalls. "Then I started to notice hundreds of shotgun casings on the trail, and feathers in the bushes.



SCHWARZSCHILD: How can a compassionate people allow this to happen? he asked Italians.

And I realized I didn't hear a single songbird. . . . The songbirds of Saint Francis were no more, and had been decimated by hunters."

According to the International Council for Bird Preservation in Oxford, England, hundreds of millions of songbirds (perhaps 15 percent of those migrating) are shot, trapped, netted, or caught with lime-sticks (branches that are coated with a sticky substance) as they travel the Mediterranean flyway. Some of the hunting is legal, some is not. Italy has the second-largest concentration of hunters in the world, after Malta.

"There's a war going on between hunters and protectionists," says Dr. Yves Lecocq, secretary general of the Federation of Hunters' Associations for the EEC (FACE) in Brussels, Belgium. "It's not by banning that the situation will improve," he says. He would rather talk to the hunting groups, and get them to "intensify their education for members."

FACE, which lobbies the European Economic Community on behalf of hunters, condemned Italy in 1987 for hunting 11 species of birds and mammals protected in other European countries. Italian hunting laws are permissive and poorly enforced, says Dr. Lecocq.

Lecocq is quick to defend Italian hunters, however, and says songbird hunting is "often an emotional issue." "We think that [hunting] should only be discussed on a scientific basis, and as long as it can be viewed as wise use, nothing is wrong with it."

"According to research, more birds are killed in the UK and Germany by domestic cats than birds in Italy," he says. "But it doesn't excuse what is sometimes happening in Italy" with illegal

hunting, he says.

Besides launching a campaign to save songbirds, in 1983 Schwarzschild published his experience in Audubon magazine. In it, he recommended a moratorium on hunting songbirds on Mt. Subasio. A torrent of mail opposing the hunt poured into the town of Assisi—so much that the mayor had to have his mail delivered in a wheelbarrow, says Schwarzschild.

The issue of shooting songbirds spread to Italian newspapers and magazines. A "bird day" was celebrated in Assisi with musicians and a symbolic releasing of doves. And the newly elected minister of the environment, Alfredo Biondi, attended the celebration and declared that the birds should be brought back to Assisi. The issue became a national controversy that continues today.

Schwartzchild appealed to Italian pride: "How can you, a civilized country with your traditions and your monuments of compassion—because the Italians by and large are very compassionate people," he told them, "how can you allow this to happen?"

"I can safely tell you that we were a catalyst in bringing together the conservation organizations in Italy who had been discouraged because the hunting lobby in Italy is so powerful," says Schwarzschild. "It was our effort that got the media worked up."

A moratorium has been placed on songbird hunting on Mt. Subasio, and the Italian government recently approved the boundaries of a park on the mountain, though no funds for the park have been set aside.



SHIRLEY POON - STAFF

Songbird Numbers Are in Doubt

THE status of songbird population worldwide is difficult to determine. Some studies show that songbird populations are declining, but sources of the problem are hard to pinpoint.

Many scientists attribute the decline in Europe to the invasion of bird habitats by agriculture, building and industrialization, and extraction of raw materials. Pollution and pesticides also contribute. Hunting may not be the major factor, but scientists say there's no doubt it exacerbates the problem.

The practice of shooting songbirds is traditional in many countries, including Italy, Malta, France, Greece, Spain, Turkey, and Portugal.

"Save the Birds" by Rudolf L. Schreiber and others, an international best-seller published in 12 languages and 16 countries (by Houghton Mifflin in the United States), says that "alteration of habitats and the pressure of hunting are the two major threats to birds." The book's publication spearheads an international "Save the Birds" campaign co-founded by Pro Natur in Frankfurt, West Germany, and the International Council for the Preservation of Birds (ICPB) —

the oldest conservation organization in the world—located in Cambridge, England.

Recently released statistics drawn from 20 years of breeding-bird surveys conducted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service show that North American songbirds that migrate to the tropics are declining 1 percent each year. However, some individual species are declining by as much as 40 percent each year.

Data is not nearly as comprehensive for European birds—partly because coordinating a survey among so many countries is difficult, and intensive study is required over a long period.

"There have been studies, mainly in Germany and Austria, that are systematic studies for songbirds," says Dr. Tobias Salathe, program officer for migratory birds at the ICPB. "They actually captured 37 different species and analyzed the data over a period of 10 years," he says.

The study found that between 1974 and 1983, 64 percent of the songbirds decreased while 38 percent increased in number. Twenty of the 37 species showed declines.

— C. H.