

S.F. Effort to Save Birds On St. Francis' Mountain

By Randy Shilts

An unusual assortment of religious, environmental and community leaders announced yesterday an international effort to save the dwindling bird population on the Italian mountain where, according to legend, St. Francis once preached to the birds.

Though the fledgling effort to ban hunting on Mount Subasio in Assisi is rapidly gaining support, organizer Bert Schwarzschild said he chose San Francisco to announce the campaign officially yesterday because "this is the city named for St. Francis, the sister city of Assisi."

Schwarzschild, a longtime San Francisco conservationist, said a pilgrimage last year to the mountain where St. Francis based his life's work inspired the campaign.

"I did not see or hear the expected birds" associated with the St. Francis legend, said Schwarzschild.

"Instead, I saw hundreds of shotgun casings and feathers stuck in the bushes," he said. "My walk was punctuated every few minutes by a shotgun blast in the valley below. I realized with shock and outrage that St. Francis' birds had been decimated by hunters."

The conservationist said that subsequent talks with local religious leaders

found that church pressure had been able to instate only a one-year moratorium on the popular hunting of birds on Mount Subasio in deference to the observation of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' birth.

The moratorium ends in October.

"They (Assisi religious leaders) shrugged their shoulders like there was nothing that can be done," said Schwarzschild. "It's like anything else in life — people accept tragedies. They're not leading the way. International pressure might change this."

At the press conference yesterday, religious leaders, officials of local Italian community groups and environmental organizations joined in supporting the "ecolo-menical" effort to declare Mount Subasio a "living monument" and ban bird hunting there both for ecological reasons and to honor St. Francis, the patron saint of wildlife.

The Audubon Society will throw its weight behind the campaign next week when it publishes a plea for a hunting ban in its monthly magazine.

"It is an important struggle to win — the home of St. Francis is an important symbol of responsible stewardship of wildlife," said David Brower, chairman of Friends of the Earth, in a statement released at the conference.