

UPDATE

Saving the Birds of St. Francis

THE INTERNATIONAL effort to save Saint Francis of Assisi's birds from hunters' guns seems to be nearing its ultimate goal: the establishment of a nature preserve on Mount Subasio in Assisi, Italy. Early in October a group of conservation, religious, public, and government leaders were scheduled to assemble in Assisi's venerable city hall to witness the convening of the Subasio Nature Council. Next step is the establishment of Subasio Regional Park, which the nature council will help to govern and administer.

The meeting in Assisi also marks the official, public sanctioning of the proposed park's boundaries by the regional government of Umbria. According to Bert Schwarzschild, the San Francisco, California conservationist who spearheaded the drive as U.S. chairman of the Assisi Bird Campaign, "Essentially we are celebrating the elimination of all barriers and obstructions and the turning of all lights to 'green' to establish the park."

It was Schwarzschild who sparked the whole protection effort by writing an account in these pages of his visit to Assisi during the eight-hundredth anniversary celebration of Saint Francis' birth. In that article he described his shock and outrage at discovering how badly the migratory songbirds have been overhunted on Mount Subasio.

In concluding that article, Schwarzschild proposed the protection of Subasio's birds and the establishment of a living monument to the memory of the

gentle saint who preached to the birds and other humble creatures, and urged that readers support this goal by writing the president of Italy and the mayor of Assisi. Formal launching of the Assisi Bird Campaign coincided with the appearance of the article.

Since then the fray has been joined by representatives of numerous conservation organizations, governments, and religious bodies, as well as artists, musicians, poets, journalists, and other individuals from throughout Italy, the United States, and the world. The city government of Assisi was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the cause.

Because of political pressure from hunters, the Italian government had hoped to maintain a low profile and a position of neutrality, but it could not withstand the storm of interest generated by the issue, most of it in support of the protectionist effort. As the normally cautious Italian magazine *Airone* put it, 56 million Italians were taking the rap for 1.5 million hunters. The last hurdle was getting the Umbrian government's approval of the park's boundaries, a difficult process because of the many ownerships and land uses involved.

"Acting together," Bert Schwarzschild wrote in his article just a year and a half ago, "concerned people can make a difference." (See "Earthwatch: No Birds Sing on Saint Francis' Mountain," on page 132 of *Audubon's* March 1983 issue.)