

## **BIRD PROTECTION IN ITALY**

Bird Notes, vol. 31, n. 12, 1965: 384-387

In order to understand the problems of bird protection in Italy one must consider the country's traditional attitude towards bird. For most Italians, game (including birds) is meant to be captured for the pot, by shooting or trapping, and the arts of bird-catching and cookery are considered complementary. The Catholic religion considers animals as God's gift to man who must use them wisely and shooting them for food is regarded as a practical interpretation of this view.

The tradition of catching birds, even small songbirds, for food goes back to Roman times and today throughout Italy, birds are on the menu to satisfy taste as well as mere hunger.

There are, of course, those who take the opposite view and appreciate birds from an aesthetic standpoint-Saints (St. Francis was one) and poets such as Catullus, Leopardi and Pascoli have loved them and sung their praises but this has little effect on the general attitude. The Church has never opposed nor has it adversely criticised the shooting and trapping of birds.

### **Lack of interest**

Few people in Italy appear to regard birds as beautiful features of the landscape or as objects of natural and scientific interest, worthy of special consideration and protection. Few professional zoologists and naturalists are interested in ornithology, which is largely followed by amateurs. There is no national ornithological or bird protection organisation in Italy although a small band of ornithologists is concerned with the publication in Milan of *Rivista Italiana di Ornitologia* (Italian Journal of Ornithology). The Italian Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation is, by its constitution, concerned with uniting the interests of national bodies rather than with seeking the support of individuals but with the National Organisation for the Protection of Animals it has in the last few years sought to introduce bird protection measures.

### **"Free" shooting**

On the other hand, the number of people who shoot and trap birds has doubled in about 20 years. They are well, organised in societies and federations and both shooters and trappers have strong spokesmen in Parliament to represent their interests. Extensive shooting and the consequent reduction in game is the result of so-called "free" shooting by

which anyone possessing a government licence can kill birds on land without the owner's consent; under Italian law wild birds (as with game in general) belong to the first person to obtain them, by whatever method.

### **Ineffective legislation**

The current Act dealing with shooting protects birds generally for the benefit of the hunter although it does provide for the protection of small songbirds in certain cases. Article 38 lists a number of species which should not be killed or trapped at any time but this is virtually ineffective because there are not enough people with sufficient knowledge or time to enforce it. There is no legislation under which officially recognised bird sanctuaries can be created, and parks and private gardens must be surrounded by suitable fencing about six feet high if they are to be reasonably successful in avoiding the attention of shooters.

Administrative decentralisation of certain services covering the operation of shooting laws has made the situation worse rather than better and experience has shown that in many cases provincial administrations find it more difficult than the Ministry of Agriculture to resist the appeals of shooters and trappers for permission to do something which is clearly against the interests of bird protection.

### **Conflicting interests**

Various Bills covering the subject of shooting and bird protection have been introduced in the Italian Parliament but not all were inspired by bird protection motives, and new legislation is often hindered by conflicting interests. In March this year, however, a Ministry of Agriculture decree fixed the end of the shooting season for migrant birds as 12<sup>th</sup> April (3<sup>rd</sup> May in the southern Provinces).

A number of bird protection congresses have been held in Italy in recent years, including one organised in Bologna in 1952 by the Italian Section of the I.C.B.P. which, with the Committee for Nature Conservancy of Genoa, organised another in Genoa in 1955. Four important meetings on bird protection have been held in the last two years. Two of them were in Rome (one organised by the Roman Station for the Observation and Protection of Birds and the other taking place at the National Academy of Lincei). The third was in Florence, held in conjunction with the International Shooting Show, and the fourth was held in Ravenna. But all these meetings were poorly attended.

The President of the Italian Section of the I.C.B.P., Professor A. Ghigi, is now pressing, through the National Council for Research and in other

quarters, for the reintroduction of natural history teaching in high schools. For the Section is convinced that the ultimate solution of what appears to be an almost unsurmountable problem lies in education, particularly of young people, and that action in this sphere will achieve more and lasting results than the present publicity campaign with its conferences, lectures and distribution of leaflets.

*Augusto Toschi*