

## Obituary - Necrologio

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### Michele Panuccio (1976-2019)



Michele Panuccio passed away on the night of 18th June 2019, after having fought for a long time, with perseverance and lucidity, against a hard illness. A versatile and complete field naturalist, but above all an ornithologist, he devoted most of his short life to the study of migrations of birds of prey, starting as a volunteer at the Strait of Messina in 1997. In the following years he took an active role in monitoring projects, especially on the circum-Sicilian islands, often carried out by simultaneous direct visual observations at various watch-sites. Michele was a man who always put the "Us" before the "Individual" and so, in 2004, he proposed to us to found the Mediterranean Raptor Migration Network (MEDRAPTORS), with the aim to collaborate with all those interested to the study and protection of migratory birds of prey in the Mediterranean region.

Two years later, he graduated in Natural Sciences at the University of Camerino, obviously with a thesis on the migration strategies of raptors in the Central Mediterranean. Thanks to his contagious passion, he managed to involve numerous young ornithologists in new researches, which from the Calabrian Apennines expanded to Greece and Turkey, but maintaining their main fulcrum in Italy, also in collaboration with the Italian League for the Protection of Birds (LIPU, BirdLife Italy).

His sense of humor, his great knowledge, in the noblest sense of the term, and his enthusiasm made field-work with Michele an experience of great human enrichment, even when we were, sometimes, in disagreement. Those who are writing treasure an endless list of anecdotes that will be never forgotten. The observations, carried out in a rigorous and often exhausting manner, were accompanied by the meticulous analysis of data, which led him to publish dozens of papers in ISI journals. The main questions to which Michele tried to answer are the differential migration between age and sex classes, the effect of meteorological varia-

bles on the visible migration, and aspects concerning orientation and social interactions, always in relation to the geography of a large ecological barrier such as the Mediterranean Sea. Among the most surprising achievements of those years, and result of his intuition, he will be worthy remembered for the discovery of the migration strategy of the Greek short-toed Snake Eagles, which avoid crossing the Aegean Sea by concentrating on the slopes of Mount Olympus en route to the Bosphorus. This strategy is similar to that followed by Italian conspecifics, which avoid the crossing of the Channel of Sicily concentrating in the Strait of Gibraltar, and to whose study Michele had already dedicated himself.

Most of these fieldworks were self-financed and carried out in the spare time from his job as a ranger at the Decima-Malafede Nature Reserve (Rome), where he had been employed since 2004 and, far from to accomplish just his institutional tasks, he also worked in the monitoring and conservation of local raptors.

However, in 2009, Michele began to devote himself to full-time scientific research, achieving his PhD at the University of Pavia in 2012. This became an opportunity to open up to new techniques and new topics, but without straying too far from his beloved migratory raptors: ringing recoveries analyses, species distribution models and winter transects are some of the new methods used by Michele to answer the endless list of scientific questions he was producing, without never forgetting a solid ecological and evolutionary background. During the PhD he also started teaching activities, being the supervisor of several MSc students during their theses, too. After the PhD he started to collaborate also with the association Ornithologica Italiana and with the Migres Foundation (Strait of Gibraltar) showing again his flexibility and embracing new research fields, such as the effect of climate change on the migration phenology, the breeding biology of common Kestrels and Black Kites and GPS tracking.

He also collaborated to field studies in Georgia, Armenia, Iran and Thailand. However, the most important project on which he had been working during the latest years is the monitoring at the Strait of Messina: in a place where working properly had been always very difficult for several reasons, he was able to involve, from Italy and foreign countries, tens of scientists, technicians and volunteers, using both direct visual observation and radar monitoring. In this way, he finally established a necessary standardized monitoring in one of the most important European migration bottle-necks.

Always aiming at boosting the international reputation of Italian ornithology, he became Associate Editor of *Avocetta*, and also a member of the scientific committee of the forthcoming Italian Ornithological Congress. During the last year he has been contracted by the ISPRA (Italian Institute of Environmental Protection & Research) to work on migration strategies of Pin-tailed Ducks and other waterbirds. Despite the illness, he did not stop to work until the very last days and he could complete an important step of this appointment. He has been living his life in the most visceral way, giving everything for its passions: besides a scientist he was also a political activist, a musician and a photographer. Overall, he has been a brave and non-conformist person, far away from stereotypes, always pursuing a better world, both for people and wildlife. His death leaves an overwhelming emptiness, but also an immense heredity, which we hope new generations of ornithologists will be able to pick up.

**Nicolantonio Agostini, Ugo Mellone**

MEDRAPTORS (Mediterranean Raptor Migration Network)