

AVOCETTA

Journal of Ornithology founded by Sergio Frugis



CISO

Centro Italiano Studi Ornitologici

ISSN 0404-4266

Volume 41 - N. 2 - 2017

**Proceedings of First conference on the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* population in Italy.
Population, Trends and Conservation**

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Recommended citation for the Proceedings:

Fasce P., Fasce L. & Gustin M. (eds), 2017. Proceedings of First conference on the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* population in Italy. Population, Trends and Conservation. Avocetta 41 (2): 33-98.

Recommended citation for the articles, example:

Tormen G. & Del Col S., 2017. Status of Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* in Veneto. In: Fasce P., Fasce L. & Gustin M. (eds), 2017. Proceedings of First conference on the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* population in Italy. Population, Trends and Conservation. Avocetta 41 (2): 55-58.

Associate editors: Bruno Massa and Toni Mingozzi

Foreword

The Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* in Italy

This volume contains the proceedings of a workshop on the Golden Eagle in Italy, held at Corte Giarola (Collecchio, Parma) on 10th December 2016; the workshop allowed the gathering of most raptor specialists from many Italian regions, who have been able to trace the history of the Italian Golden Eagle's population increase in the last decades.

The Golden Eagle was the power icon for emperors and kings, eagle statues are present in all of the Italian municipalities, as well as in other countries. When the Golden Eagle forms part of a conversation subject, the collective imagination resuscitates some kind of respect for this magnificent bird. People generally believe that this predator, at the highest level of the food web is generally rare. In fact, Arrigoni degli Oddi (1929) reported that in Italy the Golden Eagle was a scarce species, sedentary on the highest mountains, islands included. However, since 1980¹ something has changed when an increase of the alpine population was noted (Brichetti & Fracasso 2003). This rise in population is objective and does not depend only on the investigation growth: the estimate of 475 known pairs and 544 possible pairs recorded by Fasce & Fasce (2003), following the new data collected for the present volume, has increased to 630 known (increase of 24%) and 729 pairs (increase of 25%), respectively.

Table 1 shown by Fasce & Fasce (this volume) is impressive. In the Alps known pairs have increased by 18%, possible pairs by 22%, while in peninsular Italy known pairs have increased by 50% and possible pairs by 39%. With regards to the islands, the population growth in Sicily was in the order of only 2-3 pairs, while in Sardinia known pairs have increased by 28%, and possible pairs by 25%. This remarkable population increase in rather different landscapes through the Italian territories deserves some comments.

Raptor protection in Italy has regularly grown in the last decades; nowadays, in most regions the illegal hunting of raptors, mainly of large raptors, is a very rare event. Also private collections of stuffed birds have declined for many reasons which in this place we cannot argue out. In addition, at least in the northern regions of Italy, thanks to the protection of wide areas through regional and national parks and reserves, the most preferred prey of the Golden Eagle have increased. This is also shown by the high fledging success in most regions of Italy.

The remarkable population increase in the peninsular Italy could mean that today this species is covering all potential territories, from where in the past it was disturbed and removed. The increase in Sardinia is also interesting. Already Aresu *et al.* (1995) and Schenk (1995) reported about 50 pairs of Golden Eagles in Sardinia; thus, the increase should have occurred before, probably in the 1980¹. Some explanations are needed, because we can presume that, the Sardinian population is a closed one, changes between Sardinian and populations from mainland Italy have rarely occurred. Schenk (2015) recorded at least 34 specimens of Golden Eagle hunted down in Sardinia between 1970 and 1975, but he also highlighted that in the last twenty years the situation had improved. According to Ruiu (this volume), due to the abandonment of mountains by farmers, the Golden Eagle's population increased, territories and historical nests that had been abandoned for several decades have been re-occupied, and some pairs were also able to rear two chicks; paradoxically today irresponsible photographer-naturalists are among the main threats for this raptor, in some cases they are not able to hold the urge to approach and take a shutter release too close to the nest.

The Golden Eagle is considered Near Threatened in Italy (Peronace *et al.* 2012). The power icon of hu-

manists and scientists, the conservationism symbol now has a very good status; this may be considered as the combined result of the success of habitat and species protection and of the change in the landscape use, mainly by farmers. In summary, we could conclude that relationships between man and eagle in Italy have changed to the eagle's advantage.

Acknowledgements – I thank very much John J. Borg for the English revision of the present volume and all the contributors for their involvement.

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