

MIGRATION WATCH

A grass-roots campaign in Georgia aims to monitor and protect birds of prey migrating through the Caucasus. **Chris Fitch** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS FITCH AND CHRISTIAN GELPKE



Local organisation SABUKO promotes Batumi, Georgia, as a birdwatching hotspot, providing an alternative income for local hunters



While not a traditional pastime, hunting birds of prey has become increasingly popular despite being illegal

Twice a year, for up to eight weeks at a time, the skies above western Georgia darken, as thousands upon thousands of birds of prey fill the air. With up to 100,000 flying overhead daily, over a million birds will pass through each season. Depending on the time of year, they are either heading south to winter in Africa, or returning to Eastern Europe or Russia for summer - one of three main flyways between the two continents.

For species that rely on thermal air currents for gliding, such as buzzards and eagles, it is essential to utilise flat land routes for long-distance migrations. Thanks to the topography of the Caucasus region, these enormous numbers of birds passing overhead become channelled into a 10km wide narrow strip of land between the Black Sea and the mountains, known as the 'Batumi Bottleneck'. Unsurprisingly, it's a hotspot for birdwatchers. It also attracts local hunters.

'A very big percentage of the Georgian population hunts,' admits Alexander Rukhaia, director of SABUKO, a Georgian nature conservation organisation, 'especially along the Black Sea coast, where the migration is very active'. SABUKO is a leading voice in combating the popularity of illegal raptor hunting - primarily for sport, but sometimes also for food - in this part of the world.

KILLING GROUNDS

Rukhaia and his team agreed to let me tag along for a morning of surveying as they headed into the hills around Dagva, a popular spot for local hunters. As soon as we arrive, the evidence is all too clear to see. We have barely stepped out of our cars and shaken hands before Aslan Bolkvadze, a young, local SABUKO biologist, is calling us over to look at a cluster of feathers scattered on the ground. He leans down, and picks up a complete wing, glorious in colour and pattern, but hanging limp and pathetic without its owner.

'This was a honey buzzard, a female,' he says, parting the feathers to get a closer look. 'You can tell by the colours.' He pulls out his camera and snaps a few shots of the wing before taking a pair of scissors to the magnificent spread of feathers (by cutting off the ends, the team will know that this bird's death has already been recorded).

It's a predictable discovery. Honey buzzards are the most frequently observed raptors to migrate through the bottleneck; as many as half a million pass through each autumn. Over 250,000 steppe buzzards are the next most common, followed by around 50,000 black kites, and thousands of harriers, sparrowhawks, and eagles. These huge numbers - which first came to light when over 800,000 birds were counted in a single season in 2008 - are why the Batumi Bottleneck is likely Eurasia's most important autumn flyway.



As we hike up to the summit, we are continually forced to stop by fresh batches of feathers, sprayed across bushes and terrain as though the birds had spontaneously exploded. At each spot, Bolkvadze repeats his procedure: study, photo, cut. 'No identification,' he murmurs at one of them, sifting through the wreckage in search of some distinguishable marking. 'Maybe a sparrowhawk.' As we walk on, my boots can't help but crunch over the occasional discarded rifle cartridge, the colourful plastic casings standing out in sharp contrast to the natural foliage.

GROWING AWARENESS

Georgia is a party to the Bonn Convention, which commits it to suppressing the illegal 'taking' of listed migratory species through hunting, capturing or killing. However, the law is poorly enforced, especially in the coastal region of Adjara. Hunting birds of prey was allowed during the Soviet era, and growing wealth and prosperity in Georgia has seen an influx of guns flowing into the hands of hunters.

'Hunting, with guns, has never been a culture in Georgia,' insists Rukhaia. 'Many people are mistaken. Wild falconry, yes. Falconry has been a very long tradition. But now it's really disgusting. Hunting [with guns] has never been a tradition, so anyone who says this, it is a mistake.'

SABUKO's work involves everything from helping injured birds, like this Montagu's harrier, to counting the number shot from the sky, to hosting local educational seminars

SABUKO (sabuko.org) - which emerged in 2014 from what was once the Georgian Centre for the Conservation of Wildlife - is a small team funded by public memberships and donations. They focus both on raising awareness about the raptor migration, and educating local people about its importance; why it is something they should care about. By monitoring raptor numbers, observing shooting activity, and raising general awareness of the significance of the migration, they have overseen success stories such as an 80 per cent reduction in the number of birds killed in two key villages. They also arrange educational seminars for hunters and non-hunters alike, in an effort to spread the conservation word across the region.

What was undoubtedly helpful was a ceremony at the RGS-IBG in April 2016 that saw Rukhaia and SABUKO awarded £35,000 from the Whitley Fund for Nature. 'Everything good came after this,' he enthuses. 'It was very powerful.' With the publicity that followed the ceremony - which included photos of Rukhaia alongside patron HRH The Princess Royal, as well as a short film narrated by trustee David Attenborough - came a major influx of support, including official recognition from Georgia's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection. The award money will enable SABUKO to expand into six new villages, each with their own local hunting hotspots.

GATHERING EVIDENCE

'We call it the hunter trail,' Rukhaia says, pointing at a well-worn gap between a grouping of bushes. I follow his gaze, spotting a number of feathers on the floor leading up the same path into the surrounding vegetation. We continue up a steep trail, squeezing between the greenery, until we reach a small clearing near the summit. A series of thick poles lashed together with string forms a rudimentary shelter, surrounded by litter, indicating this is a favoured spot for local hunters.

Due to the need to access sites such as this for the annual count, SABUKO has a tense but working relationship with the hunters. 'Some of them might be aggressive,' admits Rukhaia, 'because they know everything they do is illegal.' On the walk up, it had been suggested that, with today being so hot, the birds might be flying higher than normal, making poor conditions for shooting. The emptiness of the hideout proves this to be correct.

Rukhaia begins peering through the surrounding bushes. In almost no time at all we find ourselves running over to where he has uncovered a huge pile of feathers and body parts - what must be several birds' worth - scattered in a giant pile all over the floor. A swarm of flies buzzes excitedly over the scene of the massacre.

Bolkvadze charges straight in, on the hunt for identifiable body parts. Like a stage magician pulling a chain of handkerchiefs from his pocket, he extracts more and more frayed wings from the pile, swearing increasingly loudly under his breath with each new discovery.

After finding as many complete body parts as he thinks he can, Bolkvadze takes various wings and attempts to pair them up. Out comes the bird identification book and frenzied discussions ensue over what exactly we are staring at, whether common kestrel, red-footed falcon, or others. Eventually, when all are happy with the decisions, Bolkvadze tapes together the parts he believes to be connected and drops them in a bag, ready to be taken away for further analysis.

I'm grateful for the shelter of the hunters' hide as protection from the heat of the rising sun. To the north, a few birds - two, three, four, begin soaring high above, their distinctive circling on display as they ride thermals upwards. My untrained eye is unable to tell what I'm looking at, but I'm soon informed they are two marsh harriers, one honey buzzard, and a Montagu's harrier. Binoculars held firmly to my eyes, I follow one individual as he works his way up the thermal, before suddenly taking off over the hillside, heading east.

Suddenly Bolkvadze bursts out of the bushes, clutching another clump of feathers. Except, these ones are still moving. It's a live bird, a Montagu's harrier, the size of a small rugby ball. One wing hangs limply from its side, a bloody smear running all the way up its body - the clear path of a bullet. Bolkvadze gently ties up its feet to stop it attempting to flee, carefully dabs some water on its beak, and sets it down in the cool shade. The animal's fear is obvious; its mottled light and dark body rapidly rising and falling with its quick breathing.

The exact numbers of birds like this one shot down during the migration periods is hard to know for certain, but estimates range from 7,000 to over 30,000, according to SABUKO and international conservation partnership Birdlife. These all just feel like abstract numbers until you find yourself sat next a potentially-mortally wounded individual, hurt and scared, entirely dependent on the healing of its damaged limb for survival.

TOURIST SEASON

Half an hour down the road, having dropped off the injured harrier at a makeshift bird hospital, Rukhaia and I enjoy some slices of fresh watermelon outside Ruslan Dilaverov, a guesthouse in the village of Sakhalvasho. Overlooking the Chakui lowlands, it's one of the two villages where raptor hunting has experienced a dramatic drop-off.

This is also the epicentre of SABUKO's sister organisation, Batumi Birding (www.batumbirding.com), which works to promote bird-watching in the region. 'The idea is that this is a travel agency for ecotourism, bird-watching, photography, eco-photography, nature photography, whatever,' Rukhaia explains. 'Then the profit of this company comes to SABUKO, to support its conservation activities.'

Batumi Birding also oversees the letting of houses in the village to guests arriving for the

main bird-watching seasons, helping local residents with the process of letting out their spare rooms to those visiting the region with aspirations of following the raptor migration. 'People have an alternative source for income, an alternative to hunting,' he explains, pointing at various houses perched on the side of the hill, signalling which are the twenty-five Batumi Birding guesthouses. 'Those are all former hunters, two or three hunters in a family, so a few generations of hunters. They've never run a guesthouse business before. We've taught them.'

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Nearby sits Sakhalvasho watchpoint, one of two specially-run bird-watching points in the area (the village of Shuamta housing the other). As we walk up some battered steps to the top, I'm expecting to see one, maybe two, tourists who have made the trek to this sleepy mountain village. Instead, I'm amazed to see whole groups of people camped out on the summit, a hubbub of excitement simmering as professionals and amateurs alike scan the skies with their gigantic camera lenses, hoping to spot a rare species and willing those faintly visible in the distance to come closer. One man points far off towards the horizon, commenting loudly on the birds we can see flying high along the crests of the mountains.

A green string tied up between poles divides the official Batumi Raptor Count volunteer counters - whose job it is to keep an accurate and reliable count of the number of birds passing by here on a daily basis - from the tourists and bird-spotters from around the world who have made this relatively remote part of the world their destination of choice.

SPREADING WINGS

The next step for SABUKO is extending this tourism/bird-watching model into the six new villages. 'We know that the method is very successful,' says Rukhaia. 'This is a success story, a best practice which we would like to bring to all those places as well.'

Crucially, the educational events they host locally, where local hunters are urged to put down their guns and join the movement as a bird watcher or a tourist host, are focused largely on the youth. 'It's very important to work with the new generation,' he insists. 'They grow up together with us. They grow up with this idea. It's not going to happen in one or two days, but one day, you will see the results.'