

BRCMAGAZINE

A large flock of birds, likely raptors, is seen flying over a body of water under a clear blue sky. The birds are scattered across the frame, with some appearing closer and larger, while others are smaller and further away. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a lighter blue.

BATUMI RAPTOR COUNT MEMBER MAGAZINE

2018

1.145.774 RAPTORS
46 Volunteers
121 Members

This year 10 Georgians
participated during the
count

Bird observatory
under construction in
Sakhalvasho

Welcome!



Dear BRC members,

We hereby present you the 3rd edition of our membership magazine. We are very thankful you support our work and hope that the magazine provides you with a nice overview of our main activities during 2018.

There are two absolute highlights this year that I would like to point out. First of all, as you are reading this, an actual bird observatory is being built on our former station-1 site in Sakhalvasho. The construction of the watch platform is coordinated by the Tourism Department of Batumi and financed by the Ministry of Finance and Economy of Adjara. Batumi Raptor Count was consulted during the designing process and we are truly thrilled by the local municipality making such an investment. It really shows that our project is taken serious in the region and that a decade of counting and trying to promote ecotourism has come into fruition.

Another achievement we are proud of is that our complete dataset has been published open access on GBIF and that the accompanying paper we wrote has been officially accepted by ZooKeys for publication. We invite everybody to use our data for research and we really hope this will encourage others to follow our example of sharing data. A second paper discussing the trends of 8 important species and the relevance of ageing birds is currently in 2nd review by Ibis, so we hope to bring you more good news soon. In any case we are very happy that BRC was given considerable speaking time during the recent International Bird Observatory Conference in Eilat, to present these two works.

All in all, 2018 was a memorable year for BRC, and we're looking forward to 2019 and its counts. Yes, you read correctly, plural! We are very excited that, next to our annual autumn count, we are currently running a pilot spring count as well!

On a last note, I would like to announce that, although I keep being involved in the BRC board, this was my last season as president. Dries Engelen will be my successor and I wish him all the best!

Thanks again for your support!

Folkert de Boer - BRC President

BRC Magazine 2018

Text editing & Layout by Dries Engelen

Layout & Design by Rafa Benjumea

Cover picture by Frits Hoogeveen

New Sakhalvasho bird observatory!



The Tourism Department of Batumi will officially open the new observatory during the 2019 Batumi Bird Festival, between 1st & 8th of September. Come and see it for yourself next Autumn!



© Ministry of Finance and Economy of Adjara

2018: Unusual weather

Where did the Booteds go?

In the days leading up to the start of the count, during the final preparations, we could already observe several raptors moving southwards over the guesthouses. The species composition, surprisingly, was already quite diverse with nice numbers of **harriers and some Booted Eagles** passing. Although the first days of the count season are usually a little slow and — admittedly — can be a little boring for counters, but they are a good gradual start for them. We start the count early to be able to detect changes in phenology. Well, this year's count showed the importance of that very clearly, with many days in the first week being rather enjoyable and everything but slow. Already in the first week, we witnessed impressive Black Kite migration, relatively high numbers of Montagu's and Pallid Harriers and a very early Imperial Eagle. Other highlights during these first two weeks were an adult Pallas' Gull overhead and an **incredible flock of 423 White Storks**. This was the biggest flock seen by us in all 11 years and resulted in a day record for this species.

Ringtail harriers' migration peaked early this year, with the highest number of birds recorded in a single day already on the 8th day of the count. On the 24th of August, we could enjoy more than 1.300 Montagu's/Pallid migrating south. Amongst the Montagu's, there were also good numbers of Pallid Harriers, many of which were still **actively moulting their secondaries**. This is strange, as usually Pallids have undergone a full moult cycle before they start their migration. At one point, we stopped recording this phenomenon, but during the first weeks of the count, this applied to the majority of immature males (in which it is easiest to detect).

In the evenings after the count in late August, we would contemplate when the Honey Buzzard migration was finally going to show signs of peaking, but at one point we gave up. The cloudless mountains and the steady pace of migration on many days with more than 15.000 birds made us think the Honeys would not peak this season. But then, suddenly, on the 7th of September, while two of our coordinators were sleeping in Chorokhi, they still — sort of — came: **63.000 Honey Buzzards** passed the transect line that day in just over 2 hours. This last boost was needed to get a decent season total of 498.405 HBs. During the season and despite many birds passing too far away to do so, we managed to age a good 25.000 Honeys. This is generally more than sufficient to entertain even the veterans and information like this is which makes the BRC data extra valuable.



All sections covered! © Bart Hoekstra

One of the most enjoyable days of the season was the 10th of September, when cloudy weather and occasional light rain, forced a staggering **1.233 Marsh Harriers** through the bottleneck, the highest number recorded in a single day by BRC so far. The challenge of ageing and sexing these birds and the fascinating dark morph individuals, make it one of the most interesting species that passes the bottleneck. Interesting as well that day was the first burst of Steppe Buzzard migration, which — like several other species — seemed **quite early compared to previous seasons**.



Male Pallid Harrier with retained juvenile feathers
© Frits Hoogeveen

er & migration



Kettle of Honey Buzzards & Black Kites © Tohar Tal

➤ Mixed streams of raptors in mid-September

The following days could best be characterised as rather slow for this period of the season. On some days, we struggled to count more than 3.000 raptors even. Some eagles, a few Crested Honey Buzzards, a massive flock of 600+ Pratincoles and very impressive migration of hundreds of thousands of hirundines and thousands of Sand Martins somewhat made up for it.

Slow days are not what one comes to Batumi for, but they're still good for practicing and sharpening identification skills, as you can spend a little bit more time on birds than usually. These days were a good preparation for what hit us on the 18th and 19th of September, when we counted **over 130.000 raptors** passing the

transect line in incredibly mixed streams. Unfortunately, these mixed streams also meant that we simply didn't have the capacity to count them on species level, so we ended up counting loads of medium-sized raptors these days. Furthermore, there was an impressive **wall of Black Kites** moving west of Station 1, which resulted in an excellent number of more than 20.000 birds counted on the 19th. In total, we registered just short of 160.000 Black Kites this season. Another nice observation, with regard to this species, was done by our own Wim Bovens when he photographed a **Black Kite with Israeli wing tag** on the 22nd of September.

The Black Kite X99

A tagged Black Kite was observed by our counters.

On September the 22nd, when 4.257 Black Kites flew by Station 1, we spotted an individual with wingtags and a transmitter on its back. We were able to take a picture and luckily the wingtags could be read clearly: X99 written in white on a blue background on the wingtag.

A quick look on the European Colour-Ring Birding website indicated that it was a bird from an Israeli project. Contact was made and Daniel Berkowic, from the Israel Bird Ringing Center, Dudaïm Recycling Center and Tel-Aviv University School of Zoology was very excited with this high quality information about the location of the Black Kite and the picture. It seems that they had lost contact with the transmitter some days ago, they had no idea where X99 was and if it was even alive or not. Daniel sent us back a map with the migration route of the X99 Black Kite and the routes of several other individuals. It is very interesting to see how these Black Kites migrate through mountain passes

and, after crossing Batumi, follow either the coastline or pass through the Coruk river valley (Borcka) in Turkey.

Fortunately, Daniel and his team have contact again with the transmitter of X99 and they have been able to download the track of its autumn migration.



© Wim Bovens



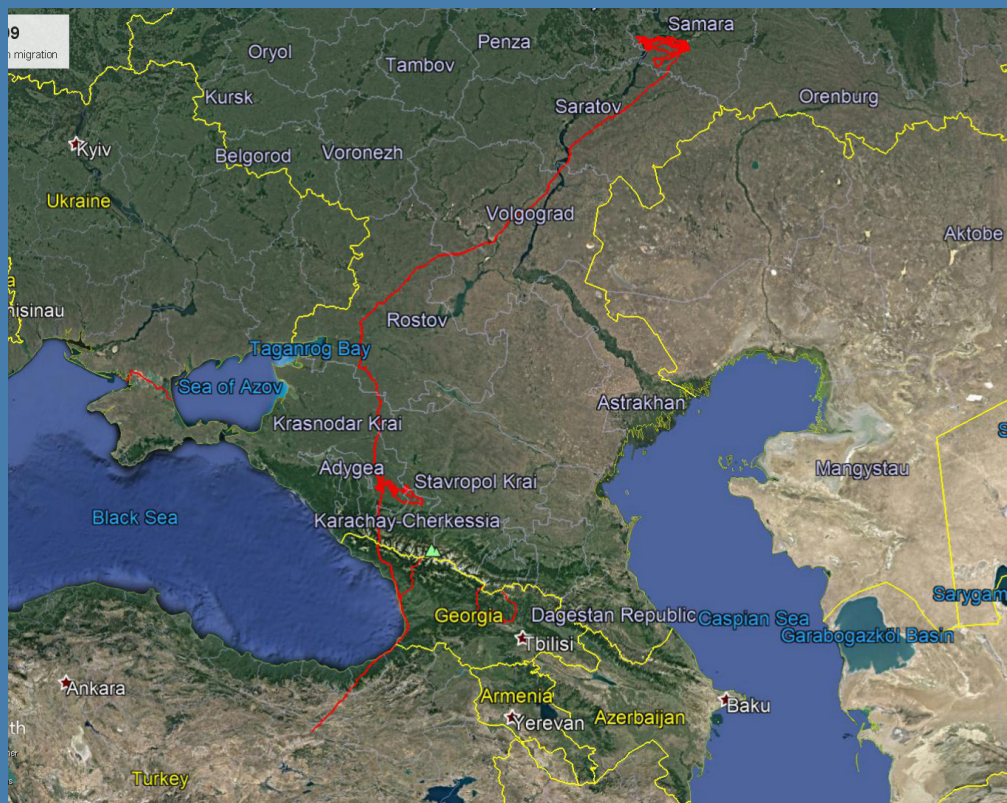
© Daniel Berkowic

➤ The trip of X99: From Russia to Israel

GPS transmitters offer very valuable and accurate information about raptor movements.

X99 was ringed at its wintering grounds in Israel. In Spring, the bird migrated to its breeding area in the region of Samara, Russia.

The track nicely shows that high mountains, like the Caucasus, form barriers for migrating raptors. They also have a funneling effect on the streams of raptors which, together with the Black Sea to the west and the Lesser Caucasus to the east, contributes to the formation of a bottleneck in the Batumi region.



© Daniel Berkowicz

➤ X99 got his wingtags, rings and transmitter at the Dudaim landfill, 5 km east of Ber Sheva, Israel, on January the 23rd of 2018.

➤ Do you remember...

the special observation a few counters made in the Chorokhi delta in 2017?

Exactly! The **Egyptian Nightjar!** Jonas Schärer and Simon Cavaillès wrote a small publication in **Dutch Birding** about this observation and the status of the Egyptian Nightjar in Europe. Go to our webpage to find the full article!



➤ Batumi's weather affects migration

Weather forecasts, independent of the source/model you choose to use, are mostly useless in Batumi. The vicinity of the bottleneck to the mountains of the Lesser Caucasus and the Black Sea, makes for weather that is incredibly hard to predict. Nevertheless, over the seasons, we had noticed that even if the morning starts with a clear sky, the intense sunlight evaporates so much water in the mountains that cloud cover from the east starts emerging latest around noon. As we burned in the sun for weeks, we learned that this was not the case this year. With no clouds, raptors can migrate over a much wider area and from our stations we often saw streams of unidentified raptors (or more specifically: 'dots') flying far inland and disappearing in the haze behind 'Little Ginger' (an important landmark). A positive side effect of the birds flying this far and high is that they stay out of reach of many hunters' rifles.



© Bart Hoekstra

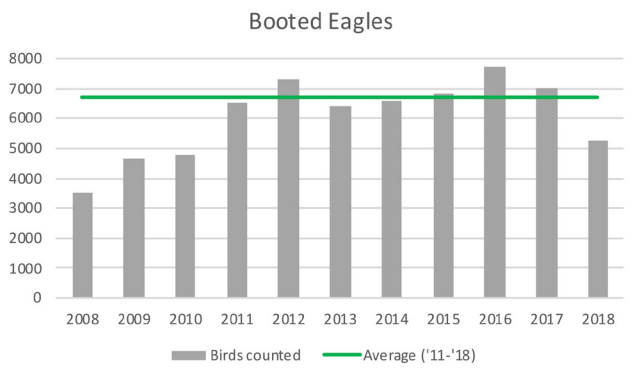
➤ Rain or sun, counters always have fun!



© Bart Hoekstra

➤ 2018 is the 7th consecutive count with over 1 million raptors

Interspersed with the mid-September streams were — finally — good days of Booted Eagles. On the 18th, we counted 818 of them and another 466 on the 19th. All in all, however, this season has seen very low numbers of Booted Eagles pass through the bottleneck (only 5,355 individuals — the lowest number in 7 years). We're unsure about the cause of this and are looking forward to what the next seasons will bring.



We encountered a few shockingly slow days during the end of September, with a total of 943 birds counted on the 25th and only

117 birds on the 26th. After truly hitting rock bottom, we were quickly up for an incredible spectacle on the 28th when **more than 105,000 raptors** passed through the bottleneck. Additionally, we observed a total of **450 Black Storks** between the two stations, making it the record day for this species. Contrary to what we were expecting, most birds passed close to the coast and the Sakhalvasho station was overwhelmed not only with 50,000 Steppe Buzzards, but also with **incredible numbers of large eagles**.

After six weeks of counting, the 8,000 raptors needed to pass the million were quickly counted in an early push of Steppe Buzzards. In line with this year's 'odd' phenology, **the million was hit relatively early this year**, as it usually happens in October. Passing the million couldn't happen on a better day: the scenery was great, the diversity of species was very high, we had great views of the birds and the migration was at the right pace to give plenty of time to enjoy individual birds. This marked the **7th year in a row during which we've counted more than a million raptors in a season**, placing Batumi firmly amongst one of the best raptor migration bottlenecks worldwide.



➤ This year we had the record count for Black Storks, 2.227!

My stay with BRC

by Katharine Khamhaengwong

This summer and autumn I had the opportunity to work with the Batumi Raptor Count. The BRC counts certain migratory raptor species as they fly through every autumn, and has been doing so for 11 years, collecting data for scientific research, educating the public, and working on various other projects. They count over a million raptors every year, a hard-to-imagine number, even having witnessed a lot of it!

Because of my school schedule, I couldn't make it for the required two-week stay all at once, so I volunteered to count for a week at the end of August, a weekend in September, and then a few days in October. While this isn't the standard counter experience, it was nice for me to see the different types of birds (lots of Honey Buzzards in August, eagles in September, Steppe Buzzards in October), and to meet almost all of the other counters, who come from all over Europe, plus another American and one from Mexico. Due to a preponderance of counters and coordinators from the Netherlands, in addition to learning a lot about birds, I also learned much more than I ever knew about Suriname. It was fun to be in a group of people from so many different places, and with so many people so passionate about birds. There was a conversation entirely made up of funny stories about gulls.

The BRC counts from two hilltops just outside of Batumi, in the villages of Sakhalvasho and Shuamta. Counters stay with families in the villages and eat breakfast and dinner there, with packed lunch to eat on the station. The families I stayed

It was fun to be in a group of people from so many different places

with were both very sweet, and delighted to have someone that spoke Georgian around. Sakhalvasho

is across from the Mtsvane Kontskhi (Green Cape), a lush bit of the coast that contains the Batumi Botanical Garden, and overlooks the sea. The hills are full of terraced mandarin orchards, and at night, despite the proximity to the city, the sky is alive with bats and birds and you can hear the Jackals howl. Shuamta is deeper into the mountains, up a windy road past old tea plantations, and the house we stay in is basically at the end of the road - no traffic, just trees and cows.

A typical count day begins with pre-dawn breakfast (I can't eat that early, so I would take breakfast to the station, where



I always felt quite accomplished after counting even a small stream of birds

some sneaky station animal would try to steal it), and then a 15 or 20 minutes uphill trek to get to the station for sunrise. In August the count ran from about 6 am to 6 pm, which was brutal, but the days were significantly reduced by the middle of October, when the count ended. The first hours were often slow, but beautiful enough that no one minded staring at the empty sky for a while. This was a good time to pet the dogs or cat that often joined us in the morning. As the day warmed up birds would begin streaming by, including massive groups of buzzards, lines of Black Kites, more solitary eagles, falcons, Chaffinches, European Rollers, and my new favorite bird, the European Bee Eater. Bee Eaters are a lovely colorful bird with the most cheerful, burbling call. Some days were full of birds, with over 100.000 birds counted on a least one day, and some days were much slower - just a few hundred birds, with 7 people counting for 8 hours or something like that. Lots of time to think your thoughts and admire the sea then. I got my first sunburn in a few years, since I showed

up to stand in the sun for about 72 hours with no hat, sunglasses, or sunscreen. I came a little better prepared for my next two visits. Days ended with a beer, a review of who saw what at which station, a delicious dinner, and then either everyone going to sleep immediately, an educational session (in case you want to learn about Egyptian Vulture conservation in Bulgaria or whatever), or everyone going to the "bar" in Sakhalvasho, for strawberry chacha and beer drunk while sitting on tree stumps.

The actual counting is more or less what you'd expect. There's an imaginary line running from the mountains to the coast, and counters count birds as they cross it. The BRC mostly counts migratory birds that don't really have resident populations in the area, so the chance of counting the same bird multiple times is reduced. Walkie talkie communication and distance codes and other techniques help ensure that birds aren't counted by both stations, and coordinators at each station assign roles to make sure everything goes smoothly. Most of the birds are very far away, birds that I on my own would probably have written

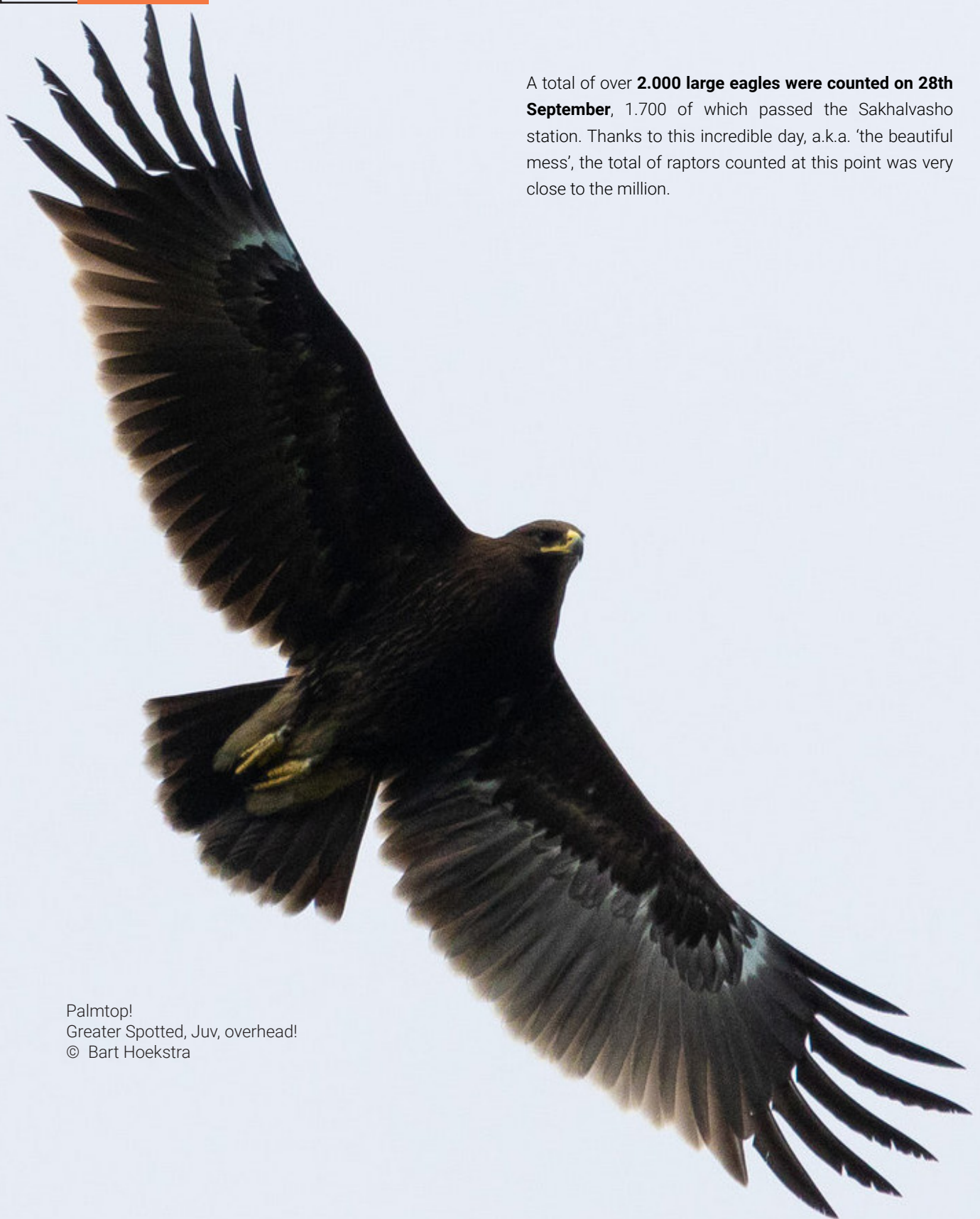
off as "some bird," but the more experienced counters and the people with fancy equipment, are very good at identifying things that look to me like fleas hopping on distant clouds. The BRC does do some evening sessions on how to ID different types of birds, but a lot of those were beginning at a level slightly beyond mine - like how to differentiate harrier species, while I needed to learn what a harrier was. I tried. Sometimes they would ask for someone to just click numbers of birds flying by while someone else did the species (and sometimes also the age and sex and color). That I could do, especially if the birds were near enough to be seen with the naked eye, and I always felt quite accomplished after counting even a small stream of birds. Just as I was beginning to feel like I could ID a few of the most common species though, the count was over. I understand why they ask for a two-week commitment.

Hopefully I can join the count again someday, if not this spring then in some future year. I spent this whole experience trying to cram new information into my brain, and I want to have the chance to use it again!



You can visit Katharine's blog at katharineiselsewhere.blogspot.com

A total of over **2.000 large eagles** were counted on **28th September**, 1.700 of which passed the Sakhalvasho station. Thanks to this incredible day, a.k.a. 'the beautiful mess', the total of raptors counted at this point was very close to the million.



Palmtop!
Greater Spotted, Juv, overhead!
© Bart Hoekstra

After a fantastic finish to September, the first week of October was rather slow but FINALLY brought some rain. The rain came at exactly the right moment, a day before the EuroBirdwatch started, promising some build-up of birds to our north. After counting only raptors for such a long period of time, it is nice when you can also spend some time counting passerines and waterbirds moving through the bottleneck. Nevertheless, the raptors were a clear

highlight. Especially on the 6th, we could enjoy a fantastic passage of eagles, including **11 Imperials, 59 Steppe, 68 Greater Spotted, 467 Lesser Spotted and 177 Short-toed Eagles**. Unusual high-altitude migration of another 40.000 Steppe Buzzards made the day complete. Finally, we would count a **total of 329.237 Steppe Buzzards** this season, quite a lot more than the ~250 000 of the last two years.

The last week of the count was calm, sunny and relatively uneventful, but we had great views of the birds. Not only the continuous push of large eagles from all age classes, but also the incredible diversity of Steppe Buzzard plumages could be greatly enjoyed. Other than that, these calmer days also gave us the opportunity to finally answer the question that had been bugging counters throughout the entire season: **"How long is the seemingly never-ending roll of 'Soviet' toilet paper"**. A proper experimental set-up on Station 1, critically followed by the counters on Station 2, proved it to reach all the way from the centre of the shelter until the bend in the stairs leading up to Station 1. Quite a distance really.

Some other highlights were the **9 Imperials Eagles** seen from station 1 on a single day, a very late Crested Honey Buzzard (on the 11th of October), the **only Saker Falcon of the season** and the **early onset of migration of Common Cranes**. 13th of October was particularly fruitful in this regard as our total of 143 Cranes culminated in yet another day record (within the official count period that is). Sadly, sometimes these beautiful moments are abruptly ended, as happened when two birds from a family flock, trumpeting their way south in the early morning light, were shot and dwindled down into the valley. Usually there is plenty of rain in October, which results in a build-up of birds to our North, but with the good weather this year that was not the case. Instead, we got to see a decent more-or-less continuous passage of birds throughout the month, slowing down towards the end.



© Jos Koopman

👉 **Second record of Sardinian Warbler for Georgia** 👈



© Bart Hoestktra

👉 How long is the roll of Soviet toilet paper? 👈

On the final day of the count we still counted almost 1.500 birds, but at least we did not have to fear a sudden big day right after the count had officially stopped (as happened previously with more rain in October). The continuous good weather was also not optimal for visiting the Chorokhi Delta this year as fewer birds than usual used the area as a stop-over site. Nonetheless, two counters (Filiep T'Jollyn and Jos Koopman) found a Sardinian Warbler there, which is only the **second record for this species in Georgia**.



© Rosena Tomova

From México to Batumi

The Challenge in the joy of Learning

by *Paulina de L. Camarena Gómez*

I still remember the time at Hawk Mountain, when one of my now best friends and colleagues in raptor conservation, Aneesha Pokharel, was slightly worried about identifying North American raptor species as she is from Nepal and those birds would be completely new to her. Now it was my turn.

As a field biologist focused on bird monitoring, particularly raptors, I have monitored migrating raptors in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in México, my home country, in addition to being an intern at Hawk Mountain in the spring of 2016. During my stay at Hawk Mountain (HMS) I learned about other main raptor migration spots worldwide, Batumi in the Republic of Georgia being among those. Certainly, I did not imagine at that time that two years later I was going to be spending two months surrounded by an unforgettable landscape starred by a daily view of the black sea and rivers of migrating birds upon the sky.

I remember the happy moment when I got the book *Raptors of Europe and the Middle East* by Dick Forsman, and flipped some pages to see what species I was about to see in the short future. The day arrived, and for various reasons my route involved a very long, 24hrs bus ride from Istanbul (Turkey) to Batumi. As with absolutely no one in the bus who speaks English or Spanish, I am

grateful with the people there who helped me both during this journey and upon my arrival in Batumi, despite all the language-communication issues. Finally, it was the morning of august 14th 2018 when I was there, in my new "autumn season" home. And I say "home" because it really felt like that. A Hoopoe crossed the garden, new species to me, and it was like a welcome gift.

I would be absolutely dishonest if I say the first days in Batumi were easy. Those days were long (about 10hrs daily observation) and hotter, with few birds in the sky. In addition, and just to make it better, I had barely clue about which species were most of the birds I was looking at. This was stressful indeed, but what are learning, challenges and rewarding adventures without a slice of stress? Fortunately, and as mostly everything, with time, practice and advice from my counter mates, soon my eyes started to "give shape and name" to what I was seeing (I mean, in an accurate way). However, I have to admit it took me a while to feel confident enough to say "Palmtop" and register the species I was seeing cross the transect line. While watching a bird through the binoculars and thinking "that's a Marsh Harrier" to then hear "Marsh Harrier!" by someone else, I knew that I was successfully learning and in those moments I felt such joy.





© Tohar Tal

“ I will never forget the moment at Batumi, when a Griffon Vulture circled among an enormous kettle of Steppe Buzzards ”

Then, days became more enjoyable and time started to pass by certainly quicker. Also, it was just matter of time, and the various streams of raptors above us started to increase in number.

Countless Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Marsh Harriers, Booted Eagles, Steppe Buzzards, Montagu's and Pallid Harriers, among others, decorated the skies of the first part of the season. It is a difficult task to describe how it is to see all these hundreds, thousands of birds from a close distance and naked eye, as Batumi is for me the place where I have seen raptors the closest. Wonderful is not enough word for that. I will never forget the moment at Batumi, when a Griffon Vulture circled among an enormous kettle of Steppe Buzzards just in front of us, and another memory made by a moment when, after some light rain around Station 2, raptors flew by so close to us that we felt we could almost touch them. In no place before I have seen raptors flying by so close. The time of the eagles also arrived, and watching hundreds of them flying above us was also memorable; these are the things that make you feel you are a lucky person.

Over a million raptors were counted this season, however Batumi was not only the birds. The BRC is the people from many countries and a variety of backgrounds, reunited to contribute in raptor conservation; it is the charming Georgian families who hosted us and the delicious food that was on our table on every dinner time. It is the sharing of knowledge and experience, for sure an amazing learning opportunity for everyone.

As of my knowledge, I was the first volunteer from Latin America at the BRC. This makes me wish that hopefully in the near future, more people from this wonderful area of the world can have the opportunity to participate in such conservation activities. We all know it can involve far traveling which usually results expensive and therefore not precisely easy, even if having all the willingness. I take the opportunity to acknowledge HMS, not only because of my previous Traineeship which impulsed me to follow a career in raptor conservation, but for the meaningful support they gave to me and made possible my participation with the BRC.





Ultimately, we look back on a somewhat unusual, but very interesting and successful season. **During the 11th edition of the Batumi Raptor Count we have counted 1.145.774 raptors in 1.337 hours of counting** (both stations combined). None of this would have been possible without the work of all volunteers involved in the project to whom we owe a big thanks! We are also very grateful for all the other people that continue to support us and make this project possible: our host families with their hospitality and delicious meals; the tourism department of Batumi; our members, donors and sponsors for their financial support; Gerard Troost and www.trektellen.nl.

The 12th Count is on, join it!

Did you see that the small spring count team has counted over 200.000 Black Kites already? We never had such a high number in autumn! That's why we need fresh sets of eyes to help us count! Or perhaps you are interested to see if the late peak of HBs in 2018 or the absence of Booted Eagles was a glitch in their phenology or that we are really on to something here. Another good reason to join us this autumn and find out! Or maybe you were already convinced after page 2 of this magazine when you saw this new shelter ready to be used for counting. Then come! The application for the **12th edition of the Batumi Raptor Count** has opened and can be found on our webpage. If you are unable to join us this autumn in Batumi, please consider forwarding this call for counters to birders who may be able and make sure to follow us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram...

...and tell them, that after 9 years of counting **Filiep T'jollyn** is finally stepping up and taking the task of coordinator upon himself this year!

This year we are **looking for up to 50 volunteers**, both experts and beginners, who can stay at least 12 days and pay a small daily fee to cover count expenses (for accommodation, food and transport). In return, you will be able to experience incredible raptor migration with up to 30 species of raptors per season and frequent days with 10.000s or even over a 100.000 birds. We will provide discounted daily fees for half season and full season counters and **free stay for Georgian counters**. We already received quite a number of applications, so don't wait too long with applying! The **positions for count coordinators are filled** already, so we won't be accepting new applications for those positions this season anymore.

One last thing, we will be counting this year from **12th of August to 21st of October**. Please note that our count period will start a few days earlier than normal and will end a couple of days after the usual end. This is because we want to make sure no Montagu's Harrier sneaks by our station before we have arrived and no Short-toed Eagles decide to drop by after we have left!



© Bart Hoekstra

Introducing young Georgian

One of the main aims of BRC for the 2018 season was to actively attract more Georgians to participate in the autumn count and other activities related to bird research and conservation. The generous 1000 £ donation from the **British Bird Charitable Trust** helped us a lot achieving this goal. First of all, we could accommodate two more experienced Georgian birdwatchers from the local Birdlife Partner SABUKO. Zurab Gurgenchidze and Nika Melikishvili, each joined the count for a period of two weeks and were fully integrated in the team and the work on station.

Furthermore, we were able to organize a small youth camp for six Georgian falconers, aged 12-17. These young guys (from the region of Poti) and their two supervisors, Nika Budagashvili and Gizo Seskuria, from **Flora and Fauna International** joined us for a full two weeks during August. Their young age and difficulties with the English language did not stop them from enjoying themselves. In fact, they were very eager to learn. On station, they were among the first to pick up newly arriving birds and they quickly picked up using the tablet for data entry.

We also gave them presentations about the Batumi bottleneck in general and about the identification of difficult raptor species such as harriers and eagles. They were particularly keen on the identification quizzes, after which they returned to station to put the theory into practice.

Apart from learning about raptor migration, we also spend two mornings with them ringing birds in the garden of one of our guesthouses (see table for an overview of the ringed birds). Despite the fact that they are falconers and are used to handling small raptors, they were clearly more nervous with holding small birds and needed some time to get comfortable with them. Lastly, the young guys spend one day during their stay with us going on a birdwatching trip by boat on lake Paliastomi in Kolikheti National Park.

Last, but not least, we had Katharine Khamhaengwong, a United States peace-core volunteer, join our project for 6 days in August and some following weekends in September and October. She teaches English to Georgian children of different ages in a village close to Keda. We organized a school trip for the children in her classes to come to the count station and introduced her to local English teacher and good friend of the project, Elza Makaradze. Read more about Katharine's educational work in the next bit!

Scientific Name	# ringed ind.
<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>	1
<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>	1
<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	6
<i>Sylvia borin</i>	2
<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1
<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1
<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	1
<i>Phylloscopus nitidus</i>	1
<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2
<i>Parus major</i>	1

Apart from the financial support of the British Birds Charitable Trust, we would also like to thank Kijkers voor Kijkers from Vogelbescherming Nederland for the donation of a scope and several binoculars to the project and Vaibla Linnujaam (Estonia) for donating us three mist nets.

is to the BRC project

We truly hope that more and more Georgians will be joining our project in the future and that together we can secure a safer passage for all raptors of the Batumi Bottleneck!



Educational outreach

by Katharine Khamhaengwong

Volunteering with the BRC gave me several opportunities to teach Georgian students about birds, conservation, and the BRC project. I brought a group of students from my school to Shuamta, visited the Sakhalvasho school for some guest lessons, and even visited Kolkheti National Park with a group of young falconers, though in that case I think I learned more from them. I also attended a presentation entirely in Georgian on the topic of sturgeon conservation, which I actually understood most of, a nice feeling for sure.

The school that I teach at, in the mountains of Adjara about 2.5 hours from Sakhalvasho, is very small, with only 40 pupils, and does not have a lot of resources, especially with regards to their science curriculum. Almost all of their learning is from textbooks, with few opportunities for fun and hands-on experience. Because of that, being able to visit the Batumi Raptor Count was a very exciting experience for my students and the two Georgian teachers that came with us. While there were not so many birds in early October, they were happy to use the binoculars and scopes to look out at Kobuleti and Batumi, and see some familiar places from a new vantage point. There was one distant kettle that had some of my students fighting each other for scope time though! They also learned about the different types of birds that fly through Batumi, why Batumi is such a unique place, and about why the BRC

monitors migration, while admiring the view from Ruslan's lovely yard. Despite the long drive, everyone who came was awed by the beauty of Sakhalvasho and Shuamta, places almost none of them had ever visited, and delighted by some strange mushrooms we saw, the struggle of our marshutka heading up to Shuamta, and the few birds we did see.

I also had the privilege of working with Sakhalvasho English teacher Elza, who invited me to visit her 3rd, 7th, and 11th grade classes. Most of the older students were at least somewhat familiar with the BRC, so I took the opportunity to play "Bird Jeopardy" with them, a fun way to practice their English vocabulary and bird knowledge, and hopefully more entertaining than a slideshow lecture on migration. While everyone could answer "Where does a cuckoo build its nest?" the question "What do bee-eaters eat?" completely stumped two entire classes of 7th and 11th graders. I didn't bother trying to teach a group of 3rd graders about migration flyways and the different types of buzzard, so instead we sang some silly songs about birds and looked out at a small kettle that had formed outside their classroom window.

These experiences help develop students' appreciation for and interest in birds, nature, and conservation, and hopefully some of them will go on to become Georgia's future scientists, teachers, and BRC counters.





We were at IBOC 2019!



Caucasus Team in Israel © Art Villem Adojaan

At the end of March 2019, we attended the 3rd International Bird Observatory Conference (IBOC) in Eilat. It was a very successful get together of people from bird observatories across the globe to share knowledge and experiences. There were a lot of inspiring talks and it was especially great to meet the people behind the different bird observatories. We were proud to represent the Caucasus together with colleagues from Besh Barnag (Azerbaijan) and Armenia and show the great importance of this region for migratory birds. We also met Steffen Oppel, who is one of the persons behind the new count in Belen (Turkey) which focuses on monitoring Egyptian Vultures and whose dataset forms a nice addition to the one we collect in Batumi. Furthermore, it was great to get to know so many faces from the very active Israeli bird conservation community, an important player on the eastern African-Eurasian flyway.

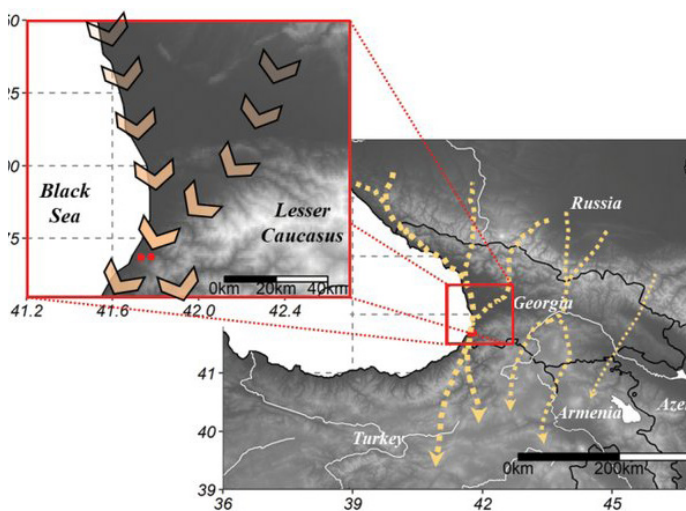
As BRC, we are very thankful to the organizers of the IBOC 2019 for helping us with part of the funding needed to come to Eilat and for giving us generous speaking time to present our work. Triin Kaasiku presented our project management and our recently published ZooKeys paper about our count philosophy, data management and open access dataset. Dries Engelen gave a presentation about our second paper, which is still under revision by Ibis, discussing the trends after 8 years of standardized monitoring and the importance of ageing birds. However, we are most of all proud that one of our first Georgian counters, Aslan Bolkvadze, presented the problems of illegal hunting in the bottleneck.



BRC goes Open Access

After more than a decade of counts, we are thrilled to announce that the entire BRC dataset, including over 370.000 occurrence records collected between 2008-2017, has been published open access in GBIF, the Global Biodiversity Information Facility. What's more, ZooKeys has published our complementary data paper in which we explain exactly how these data were collected, managed and processed, and how to best use our open data for monitoring and research. So far, open data is far from common practice among bird observatories. However, at Batumi Raptor Count we firmly believe in open data as an integral part of transparent and reproducible science and we very much hope these publications will inspire our colleagues monitoring bird migration elsewhere to consider a similar approach.

An important quality of the BRC dataset is that it not only contains information on abundance. Many records also include information regarding the age and sex of birds, allowing us to dig into the demographic changes underlying trends in species abundance. Looking further ahead, we believe our dataset can be very useful for anyone looking to study migration behaviour of raptors. So don't hesitate to get in touch if you are a student or researcher with some cool research ideas!



By publishing a data paper, we transparently identify key pitfalls in the use of our data. Any third party that wishes to use our data is advised to consult this data paper, and preferably the BRC research coordinator, before using BRC monitoring data for any other specific use. The count strategy of BRC is tailored to local conditions and flight behaviour of raptors in the bottleneck. When using our dataset you cannot just simply add up all numbers to determine daily or annual species totals. One pitfall is that for some species, such as spotted eagles and ringtail harriers, a large



© Art Villem Adojaan

number of individuals cannot be identified to species level in the field, and are thus recorded as, for example, 'Large Eagle Spec.' or 'MonPalHen'.

We realise these pitfalls complicate the use and arguably restrict the openness of our data. However, we developed scripts in the open source software R to estimate daily and annual species totals from the GBIF dataset, and these scripts are also published open access via Bitbucket. Users that need simplified tables of daily and annual species totals can request these from the BRC research coordinator.

The publication of the BRC dataset in GBIF and the preparation of the accompanying data paper for ZooKeys was supported in large part by NLBIF, the Dutch branch of GBIF. We are very grateful to Frank de Miranda and the Dutch Georgian Ornithological Foundation for their help in getting this project going.



Financial year report

We hereby inform you about our income and expenses of the year 2018. As usual, the majority of our budget goes to running the yearly autumn count and some small projects around that. A 1.000£ grant from the British Bird Charitable Trust aimed at increasing the Georgian involvement in our project really helped a lot in achieving this goal (see page 16-17). Additionally, some of our budget this year was spent on attending conferences and workshops. Dries Engelen and Triin Kaasiku participated in the open standards workshop in Georgia in spring. This was very useful for maintaining and expanding our network of contacts in Georgia and for learning about new conservation tools. Anna Sandor attended the Human Dimensions of Wildlife Conference in Germany to present her publications in the Journal of Threatened Taxa and Sandgrouse. Finally, we also organised an extra spring meeting in Georgia this year, to prepare our new team members Bart Hoekstra and Triin Kaasiku for the autumn count and to properly introduce them to our host families and other important local contacts. Part of these activities were covered by the great amount of donations we received this year.

A big thanks to all donors!

If you have ideas to increase our income to fund the long-term monitoring, please contact us. Your help is much appreciated and important for the project. board@batumiraptorcount.org

Thanks to the following sponsors for supporting us in 2018



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BRC - FINANCIAL YEAR REPORT 2018	IN		OUT	
	Euro	GEL	Euro	GEL
Left from 2017	10520,79			
Administrative Costs			291,36	
Conferences			1340,84	
Project Costs			10112,28	3213,5
Accommodation Volunteers	9765		9765	
Promotion Material	941	3528	657,78	
Grants	1114,86			
Memberships	1675			
Donations	4336,23	335		
Services to External Parties	3195			
Meetings			2805,53	
Totals	31547,88	3863,00	24972,79	3213,50
Totals Euros (1 € = 3.0 GEL)	€32.835,55		€26.043,96	
INCOME - EXPENSES	€6.791,59			
Account Balance per 01-Jan-2019	€6.664,57			
Paypal Balance per 01-Jan-2019	€127,02			
TOTAL BALANCE (Euros)	€6.791,59			

Membership



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Where your fee goes to:

Membership fees contribute directly to raptor conservation in Batumi, and cover our autumn raptor count monitoring, illegal shooting monitoring, training of regional students and involvement of Georgians. All members receive the BRC annual magazine with the annual monitoring report and conservation issues.

Continue your membership.

Members can easily continue their membership by just transferring the fee to BRC. Make sure to write down your name in the subject. No need for more forms. **BRC volunteers receive a free Mimino membership** for the year they participate and the following year.

Choose **annual automatic transfer** to not miss a year with BRC. batumiraptorcount.org/membership

Transfer details:

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BIC/ SWIFT: TRIONL2U
Bank: Triodos Bank, Postbus 55,
3700 AB Zeist, The Netherlands
Subject: Current year

Paypal: batumiraptorcount.org/transfer



Membership Category	Details	Fee
Trans-Caucasian	For Georgian, Azeri or Armenian citizens.	Free
Mimino (Sparrowhawk)	Basic membership.	25€
Irao (Honey Buzzard)	Membership + BRC T-shirt	50€
Artsivi (Imperial Eagle)	Membership + BRC T-shirt + acknowledgement on the website	100€



© Bart Hoekstra

➤ We hope to see you in Sakhalvasho soon to enjoy not only the birds, but also the local gastronomy and the Georgian hospitality. Gaumarjos!



BRC Foundation, Hannah Arendtweg 84. 1349CM Almere. The Netherlands

contact@batumiraptorcount.org