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BATUMI

BOTTLENECK

A two-sided discovery for raptor conservation

By Johannes Jansen

ALTHOUGH COUNTS HAD BEEN CONDUCTED

before along the eastern coast of the Black Sea, we were completely amazed at the more than 800,000 raptors that passed through the Batumi bottleneck in the republic of Georgia during our first count season. At no other place in Eurasia had similar numbers of migrating raptors ever been observed during autumn.

Perhaps nowhere else was the shooting of raptors so evident as well. The



Batumi is on the eastern coast of the Black Sea in the republic of Georgia.

hills around our count stations crowded with hunters who shot at every raptor low enough to hit. That's when I stopped

Counters recorded more than 800,000 migrating raptors during the first full season count at Batumi.

counting hawks and started counting shots, and spent all of last autumn among the Georgian gunners.

The story begins in autumn 2007 when I joined friends on a birding trip to Georgia and Azerbaijan to watch for migrants in the Batumi region. We were quickly overwhelmed by the numbers of raptors we saw, much more than all previously known counts in the wide region. My friend Brecht Verhelst and I seized the opportunity and immediately organized a full-season count.

The first Batumi Raptor Count was held the next year, but timing was bad. The short war between Georgia and Russia began just prior to the count and scared away many volunteers, but hard work and a strong team spirit paid off. By season's end, counters had tallied 812,665 raptors representing 32 species between August 21 and

October 14. The count confirmed the site was one of the most diverse migration bottlenecks for birds of prey in Eurasia.

The next year the region enjoyed relative political stability and more than 60 volunteers joined us, along with a youth exchange of over 20 participants from Georgia, Armenia, Sweden and Belgium. Together with former Hawk Mountain leadership intern Wouter Vansteelant, we worked hard to give the young people an extensive training in raptor identification and monitoring.

All the while traces of shooting were well visible about the count stations. From the onset, we recorded the number of shots heard and any raptors we observed being hit. Despite our presence and interaction with hunters, the tradition continued.

*"...meat is considered a luxury,
so the birds were a 'nice extra'
for the dinner table."*

Because we knew so little and had so many questions, I decided to study the

people who persecuted the migrants and determine the drive behind their actions for my master's thesis in biodiversity conservation. I made random visits to suitable hunting areas, estimated the number of hunters and number of kills, and plugged all the data into a GIS-model to identify range, patterns, high shooting risk areas and the estimated kills.

I quickly learned that hunters shot raptors for food as well as for sport, and removed only the body, leaving the head, wings and legs behind. Hunters were exclusively male, always a local, and both employed and unemployed. They didn't eat raptors to avoid starvation (fresh produce is plentiful in the region) but meat

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Hunters casually discard the wings, head and legs of their kill, a practice that undermines the ability to build tourism from birders.



Shooting hawks is a tradition that dates back to Soviet reign in Batumi. The shooters are always men, and both young and old participate.

is considered a luxury, so the birds were a 'nice extra' for the dinner table. Birds also offered numerous, easy targets during September and October, and ammunition was cheap. Some even made homemade bullets by recycling old cartridges filled with gun power and lead.

The primarily targets were honey buzzards, considered most tasty as well as most numerous, followed by the steppe buzzard, which was shot for its sheer numbers rather than taste. The men knew little about individual species, simply calling all medium-sized raptors "*Irao*," which included honey and steppe buzzard, booted eagle, harriers and kites. Typically a hunter carried home one or two *Irao*, and more during a peak flight, although one man reported killing as many as 40 birds in a single day.

In some areas the men knew more about species and the timing of the passage, and hunted exclusively for the larger Aquila-eagles (mostly lesser spotted eagle or "*Big Irao*"). They used heavier bullets to bring

them down and even knew that the peak passage would be September 25. In other places, harriers were the target, though some hunters told me they are slim birds and not as tasty. Black kites were avoided altogether due to their terrible smell and taste. Sparrowhawks, falcons, bee-eaters and orioles were shot mostly by young hunters and usually out of boredom.

Unfortunately, their aim was good, hitting one third of the birds and finding 65% of killed birds. Though the majority of dead birds were honey or steppe buzzards, almost 10% of the victims were species of conservation concern: eagles, Levant sparrowhawks, and Montagu's and Pallid harriers.

The good news is that the hunters were a clear minority of the Georgian population, and in every village I found people who felt strongly against the shooting. The bad news is that most of the villagers were unaware or felt unaffected by the hunting, and although Georgia forbids the persecution of all birds of prey, the eco-

*To celebrate the 5th
season of the Batumi Raptor
Count, this autumn we
will host the first
Batumi Bird Festival,
September 20-23.*



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police are understaffed, preoccupied by illegal logging, and know little about the migration or the species that pass.

As part of my research I spent considerable time with the shooters and found them open and friendly. Similar to the shooting at Hawk Mountain in the 1920s and 30s, the situation in Batumi is led by men upholding a tradition, an annual ritual that dates back to Soviet reign when hunting was allowed. In fact, most hunters I encountered even carried an old "Baikal" rifle, most in surprisingly good condition. Some of the veterans told me not only have the number of shooters declined over the years, but so has the number of hawks.

In the end a solution lies only in changing public attitude, increasing awareness and pride among villagers, and helping local leaders to see the economic potential from birding tours and associated tourism.

Already we are making progress. We trained dozens of regional exchange students and promoted several bachelor and master dissertations. We made the first steps for an education program in the local schools and started to stimulate local eco-tourism by helping coordinate overnight visits. We established a relationship with the ministries of Tourism and Environment, always working to address the illegal hunting in a careful and thoughtful way.

This year will be the 5th season of the Batumi Raptor Count and we will celebrate by hosting the first Batumi Bird Festival, September 20-23. The event boasts experienced guides and lecturers (including Dr. Keith Bildstein of Hawk Mountain), daily excursions, delicious Georgian food, comfortable accommodations, and of course, lots and lots of hawk watching.

I hope to meet some members of the Hawk Mountain family and have a chance to share with you this beautiful country where we continue to make positive strides for birds of prey. If you, too, share a love of raptors and the incredible phenomena of migration, consider joining us, and help us to spread the word of the amazing flight that takes place each autumn at Batumi. In the meantime, we will continue to monitor the raptors and I encourage birders everywhere to join us. By working together I know that one day the shots will be silenced as the hunters become hawk watchers, and learn to appreciate these magnificent migrants. 🦅

**To learn more or to join Johannes:
festival@batumiraptorcount.org and
www.batumiraptorcount.org/bird-festival**

Johannes Jansen is a spring 2012 leadership intern and passionate birder. He recently completed his master's thesis on the shooting of raptors in Batumi.