

Palm oil provenance

Unilever announced in December 2009 that it had stopped buying palm oil from Indonesian company PT SMART until it can demonstrate that its plantations are not contributing to the destruction of forests and peatlands. Unilever buys between 6 and 8 per cent of the total world production of palm oil.

Double trouble

Scientists in India have identified a second treatment for livestock that is fatal to vultures that feed on carcasses. The birds have declined dramatically in the past 20 years because of the impacts of Diclofenac.

NEWS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL REPORT

WHERE THRUSHES FEAR TO FLY

In Sardinia, volunteers are fighting back against poachers who kill hundreds of thousands of songbirds every year, reports **James Parry**.

EVERY AUTUMN, THE idyllic countryside of Sardinia becomes a killing ground for thousands of birds, mostly blackbirds, song thrushes and robins, as they head south from their breeding grounds in central and northern Europe.

The extensive scrub, or *macchia*, that cloaks the hills and valleys south and west of Cagliari, Sardinia's capital, is the perfect landfall for migrating birds seeking food and resting places as they fly in off the sea.

But what awaits them is far from welcoming. This is one of Europe's conservation blackspots, where vast numbers of banned traps and nets are used to catch birds for *grive*, a kind of kebab that's a local speciality.

Such is the scale of the slaughter that, every year, the

Italian League for Bird Protection (LIPU) organises camps of volunteers to try to break this illegal trade. The camps are headed by Giovanni Malara, whose campaign against the shooting of raptors in Calabria in

the far south of Italy helped to reduce the annual death toll of honey buzzards there from 2,000 in the mid-1980s to fewer than 200 in 2009.

With his team of volunteers, mostly students and young people drawn from

all over Italy, Malara is now trying to achieve comparable success in Sardinia. The camps start in November and run until January, coinciding with the main season for southward-migrating thrushes.

BBC Wildlife spent two days at a camp near the town of Capoterra, the most important centre for illegal trapping on the island. There are said to be 100 poachers active locally, each with his own 'patch' of thick undergrowth, through which he hacks narrow access paths.

The volunteers organise themselves into teams of four or five, scouring the hillsides until they discover a poacher's 'trail' and then destroy the traps and nets he has set.

The number of traps is staggering: in one day, the volunteers found more than 800 devices, both on the ground and mounted on branches. The traps

3m

The minimum number of songbirds – mostly robins – it is estimated are killed by illegal trapping in Brescia in northern Italy every year.



This song thrush was destined to be turned into a local dish.

Francesca Malara; Main picture: James Parry

have nooses, made of horse-hair or nylon, that are designed to snare the birds around their necks. Poachers also use 15m-long nets, which they suspend across flyways. The traps and nets are aimed primarily at thrushes and robins, but are indiscriminate in the birds they catch.

Though it remains legal in Sardinia to shoot certain bird

species – including thrushes – the use of traps and nets was outlawed on the island in 1978, and yet the practice continues.

Researcher Isabella Capurso has identified two main types of poacher: older men "who probably trapped birds in the days when it was still legal and just haven't stopped" and a younger generation, some of whom are addicted to drugs or alcohol and use the sale of birds to pay for their habit.

Responsibility for combating poaching lies with the Forest Ranger and Environmental Surveillance Corps, but there are

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Save our seabirds

Europe needs to start protecting its seabirds from destructive fishing practices in the way that action has been taken in the Southern Ocean, according to the RSPB. Every year, an estimated 200,000 seabirds are killed by longline and trawl fishing operations in European waters.



Dwindling saiga

81,000

The number of saiga antelope left in Kazakhstan, the species' last stronghold. In the 1970s, there were an estimated 1m saiga but poaching for meat and horns has left it officially classified as 'Critically Endangered'.



Traps are set up on avian flightways and are indiscriminate about which birds they catch.

still thousands of traps littering the hillsides around Capoterra.

A former head of the corps, Carlo Boni, explained why more is not done to deal with the situation. "I do not think that bird-trapping is our main problem," he said. "The truth is that for many trappers, it is their livelihood. It is illegal and has to be stopped, but without extreme reactions."

The attitude of some local politicians is equally equivocal. In 2006, Alberto Sanna, president of the Regional Council of Sardinia, criticised the actions of the volunteers. "It is difficult to understand the excessive

obstinacy against bird trapping of those who are trying to wipe out centuries-old traditions by removing the traps," he said.

Malara estimates that at least 300,000 birds are being killed illegally every year, but the camps are making a difference. "The poachers are not used to being challenged like this," he said. "We have destroyed so many traps and saved thousands of birds. I hope the corner is now being turned."

FURTHER INFORMATION

More information about the Italian League for Bird Protection www.lipu-uk.org



MARK CARWARDINE WILD THOUGHTS

Last night, I asked a group of friends if they could give me a few examples of the likely impacts of climate change on wildlife (I'm a lot of fun in the pub). Not surprisingly, they came up with just one: malnourished polar bears. An iconic species, affected by the simple story of melting ice, the polar bear has come to symbolise the whole problem.

But a report just published by the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species, *Species and Climate Change*, shows just how much of an impact it is likely to have on all kinds of wildlife. I thought the science and politics behind climate change itself were complicated enough, but the report shows just how subtle, unpredictable and downright convoluted many of its impacts are likely to be.

Take the koala, for example. Australia's favourite marsupial is likely to be affected in two ways. First, increasing levels of carbon dioxide will reduce the nutritional quality of its food – *Eucalyptus* leaves are already poor quality, and the koalas have to eat vast quantities to survive, so they may not be able to cope with a further decline.

Second, as the intensity and frequency of droughts increases, the koalas are likely to spend more time on the ground in search of water and new sources of food, and this makes them particularly vulnerable to predators and to being hit by cars.

Elsewhere, the impact of global warming is just as whimsical. As seawater turns more acidic, for instance, it will become harder for clownfish to find their host anemones by smell; this could be disastrous, since they rely on anemones for protection.

Meanwhile, rising sea levels and increased storm activity are destroying the nesting habitats of leatherback turtles, while hikes in temperature may lead to an increase in the number of females relative to males.

And so it goes on.

Species and Climate Change is scary. We all know that climate change is going to have a big impact on wildlife – but trying to predict exactly how is another matter altogether.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and TV presenter, and will be presenting a series about the Natural History Museum soon.



Up a gum tree: koalas may be badly affected by climate change.

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