

Bird poaching continues to result in victims

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An Eurasian sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), one of the species most frequently affected by this illegal activity. Credit: Wikipedia

Illegal hunting continues to be a challenge for biodiversity conservation in addition to posing a serious threat to some migratory species. The province of Gipuzkoa in northern Spain, a transit area for birds migrating between Africa and Europe, is an example of just how this illegal activity can severely affect these animals.

Over the course of the year, dozens of birds will arrive to the Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Gipuzkoa with firearm-inflicted wounds, evidence that there are still [illegal activities](#) taking place which threaten [biodiversity conservation](#). The information provided by the Centre has allowed for identification of the most affected species as well as the relationship between hunting ground locations and the areas where the birds were found harmed.

Researchers from the Aranzadi Society of Sciences (Gipuzkoa) analysed data from 2006 to 2013 in order to pinpoint what species arrived to the Rehabilitation Centre, where they had been found and their reason for being admitted to the centre.

Juan Arizaga, co-author of the study, explains to SINC that a statistical method was used to determine whether the distances between the birds shot at and the nearest fixed hunting stands measured less than the distances between those birds admitted to the centre for other reasons, such as collisions.

"Sure enough, the findings show that this distance is indeed shorter. This indicates that the spatial distribution of the birds which were shot at was not random. Rather, their [spatial distribution](#) tends to be concentrated around fixed hunting stands," points out Arizaga.

2,593 birds were admitted to the Rehabilitation Centre over the period of seven years analysed by the researchers. The data revealed that 411 birds had been shot in Gipuzkoa, amounting to 15.85% of the total number of birds admitted to the Centre. The data also confirmed that 53 different species had been wounded as a result of firearms, only 13 of which could legally be hunted.

Of all the birds that were shot at, 326 belong to species that cannot be hunted. Of the other 85 birds that do belong to species which can be

hunted, 10 were hunted outside the permitted hunting season and 75 were hunted during hunting season.

The birds belonging to the Falconidae family (such as falcons, for instance) stand out among these specimens given that they represent 48.7% of all the birds admitted to the Centre as a result of firearm wounds.

In addition, the records show that the two bird species most frequently affected by this illegal activity were the common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) and the Eurasian sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*).

A major migratory stopover site

According to the study, poaching is responsible for the death of millions of birds per year in Europe. Among the victims we can find protected species of birds of prey (raptors), capercaillies, marine birds and many others from the Passeriformes order.

This human activity is also one of the biggest obstacles to the conservation of [migratory species](#) particularly in the regions of southern Europe and northern Africa. Portugal, France, Spain and Italy are home to more cases of poaching than northern European countries, yet the problem also exists there as well.

In terms of preventing this problem in Spain, Arizaga believes that "most administrations have the willpower to put a stop to the problem, but they don't have the resources to do it. In any case, a powerful and bold solution in the face of such cases is long overdue at the state level".

Within the borders of Spain, Basque Country is a very important transit area for East Atlantic migration routes. Thus, any attack on the species that are passing through Spain can have serious implications.

In fact, another important piece of information provided by the Rehabilitation Centre is the correlation in time between the moment when the birds were shot and the hunting season, falling mainly between October and January. Keeping this in mind, poaching would not only affect the [birds](#) during their breeding season, but would also affect those that were passing through via their migratory route.

Necessary protective measures

According to the authors, this study is proof that further protective measures must be taken. Said measures are particularly necessary in areas such as Basque Country where there is a high concentration of bird species during migratory periods, many of which are vulnerable or threatened species.

The researchers believe that it will be essential to map the areas where poaching takes place and to identify the [species](#) most affected by this activity. This will be crucial for determining where the most critical hunting grounds are and, consequently, establishing appropriate protective measures.

"There needs to be a quick and effective plan of action to enforce the laws that establish fines or punishment for those who commit these acts of crime," concludes Arizaga.

More information: Juan Arizaga et al. A quantification of illegal hunting of birds in Gipuzkoa (north of Spain), *European Journal of Wildlife Research* (2015). [DOI: 10.1007/s10344-015-0940-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10344-015-0940-6)

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