

# Last Song for Migrating Birds

## An interview with best-selling author Jonathan Franzen

His novels, above all "Freedom" and "The Corrections", are world-famous and the magazine TIME honoured him on its title page as "Great American Novelist". Few people, however, realise that Jonathan Franzen is a dedicated bird-watcher and is actively involved in bird protection. In March 2012 he set off commissioned by National Geographic to research bird hunting in the Balkans. The alarming results of this trip were published in the July issue of the magazine. Last spring, accompanied by Dr. Martin Schneider-Jacoby, late EuroNatur project leader, and the photographer, David Guttenfelder, Jonathan Franzen spent two weeks visiting all the important resting places along the Eastern Adriatic from Karavasta National Park in Albania to the Neretva Delta in Croatia. He talked to hunters, observed hunting practices and described the background of bird hunting in the Balkans. His article "Last song for Migrating Birds" shows impressively how bird hunting along the East Adriatic is systematically destroying the effect of intensive programmes for bird protection in the breeding areas of migrating birds. In his interview he describes what it was like to follow the bird hunters out hunting, why the slaughter of birds in these Eastern Adriatic countries affects him and why he believes that there are prospects of success for the fight against bird-hunting.

**EuroNatur:** In the July issue of the National Geographic you wrote a report on bird hunting in the Balkans. 7000 kilometers lie between New York where you live now and Lake Skadar, one of the most important resting places for migrating birds on the East Adriatic. Despite this distance the topic seems to have touched you deeply – how does that come about?

Franzen: I've done enough birdwatching in Europe to become very attached to the Old World's birds and to feel some personal responsibility for them. The Adriatic Coast also presents a unique situation: an area of critical importance to migratory birds, a terrible problem with their illegal hunting and persecution, and the possibility of rapid change for the better.

**EuroNatur:** The fact that on the islands of Cyprus and Malta birds are hunted and trapped on a massive scale is no secret. But hardly anyone knows that on the other side of the Adriatic well over 2 million birds a year fall victim to hunting. How did this topic come to your notice?

Franzen: Two German friends of mine, Andreas Meissner and Andrea Wilke, alerted me to the situation in the central Mediterranean, and I promised to write about it for The New Yorker magazine. In the course of reporting that story, I learned that the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean is even worse. When National Geographic proposed that I write about illegal bird hunting, I suggested that I go to Albania and Egypt.

**EuroNatur:** You are a passionate about bird watching. What are the scenes and what species of bird come to mind when you think of your research trip along the Eastern Adriatic coast?

Franzen: Near the coast in Albania, in the company of the late, wonderful Martin Schneider-Jacoby, I saw two raptors in conflict overhead. They turned out to be a Lanner Falcon and a Saker Falcon. It would have been exciting to see even one of them; to see them together was incredible. I might also mention the sheer number of resting waterfowl and waders at the salt pans in Ulcinj, Montenegro, which is currently protected from poachers with the aid of EuroNatur.

**EuroNatur:** What impression did you get of bird hunting in the Balkans?

Franzen: I was in Albania in mid-March, when hunting is strictly prohibited, and everywhere I went I saw Italian tourist hunters illegally shooting large numbers of waterfowl. Albanian hunters were all along the coast, preventing migrating birds from landing. Many of them were also shooting waders from blinds in the wetlands.



US bestselling author, Jonathan Franzen, last year when he came to see the bird hunting situation in the Balkans for himself.

*„In Albania even the hunters are worried about the collapse of bird populations.“*

**EuroNatur:** Were there areas where it was particularly bad and were there any in which one could see signs of improvement?

Franzen: All of Albania is terrible—millions of birds fly in, very few come out. In the Neretva delta (Croatia) I could tell, from the complete absence of bird life, that hunters were active. On the plus side, the posting of a single guard in Ulcinj was enough to keep the salt pans free of poachers.

**EuroNatur:** What do you think motivates bird hunters in countries like Albania or Montenegro? Did you meet any hunters personally?

Franzen: I did talk to hunters. In Albania, especially, the young men are motivated by their sudden freedom to own and use firearms after fifty years of dictatorship. The tourist hunters, mostly Italian, seem to be motivated by a wish to hunt without any sort of regulation and without considering the environmental consequences.



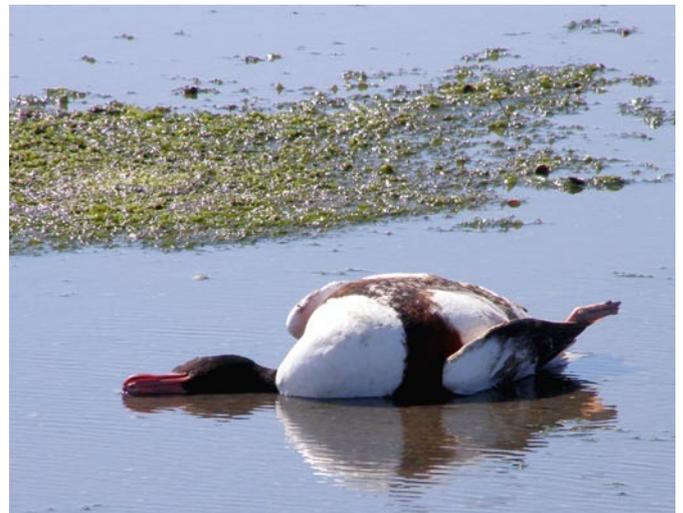
Never without tripod and binoculars: for two weeks Jonathan Franzen visited important bird resting areas along the Eastern Adriatic in company with EuroNatur project leader, the late Dr. Martin Schneider-Jacoby.



*Beware snipers! A bird hunter in his hide awaiting the arrival of migrating birds as they reach Velika Plaza in Montenegro, exhausted after their long flight over the Adriatic.*



*Rare birds such as Black-crowned Night Herons and Pygmy Cormorants are openly offered for sale at the fish market in Shkodra.*



*Landing dead - like many other Common Shelducks after their flight across the Adriatic. Shot by a bird hunter.*



photos: Euronatur

*Jonathan Franzen and Martin Schneider-Jacoby at Lake Skadar Nationalpark found much to photograph here - including bird hunters at work!*



photos: Davorica Kitanic

There are precious habitats for birds here along the Eastern Adriatic. In the Neretva Delta, which stretches from Bosnia-Herzegovina across the Croatian border to reach the Adriatic, rare bird species can be found. In the picture: the Eurasian Spoonbill (left) and the Black-winged Stilt (right). However bird hunters make it a far from safe place to be for them.

**EuroNatur: One might get the impression that fighting against bird hunting is like tilting at windmills. What, in your opinion, can EuroNatur achieve and what is your message to our donors and supporters?**

Franzen: It was clear, in Montenegro, that even a very small and inexpensive expenditure of manpower is enough to discourage poaching. And in Albania I found that even the hunters are worried about the collapse of bird populations, and are prepared to accept a hunting ban. I think the approach that EuroNatur has taken in Croatia - working with communities to preserve traditional landscapes and ways of life - has a good chance of succeeding in other Balkan countries. There is no longstanding, widespread tradition of bird hunting in these countries, and the potential benefits of ecotourism are real.

respective governments are willing to act rationally. The vast natural areas of Albania are worth far more for tourism than for private use by a relatively tiny number of Italian tourist hunters, and my impression is that many of the new Albanian hunters would happily accept a hunting ban if it applied to everyone. We need to support the NGOs and government officials who understand the financial and environmental advantages of better conservation.

**EuroNatur: In August 2012 our long-standing project leader Dr. Martin Schneider-Jacoby died after a brief and severe illness. He had thrown his energies into a campaign against bird hunting right up to the time of his death. One of his last trips was with you. How do you remember him?**

*„There are people who care deeply about birds in each of the Balkan countries, and they need to be encouraged.“*

**EuroNatur: “Go bird-watching instead of bird-hunting” could be a motto for the Balkans. Can bird-watching tourism take over from bird-hunting on the Eastern Adriatic? What do you think?**

Franzen: There are people who care deeply about birds in each of the Balkan countries, and they need to be encouraged. Whether the situation can be turned around depends on whether the

Franzen: Every once in a while, I have the privilege of meeting a human being who is truly great - great-hearted, passionate, committed, highly rational, highly effective. Martin was one of those people. I was lucky to spend ten days with him in the Balkans, and I had the feeling that he and I would be working together for many years to come. It was a tremendous shock, and a tremendous loss for the world, when he died soon after that.

*Interview Katharina Grund*