



A candy for migratory birds

Old factory site becomes an Eldorado for kingfishers and others

Whilst it is well-known that birds do not like sugar, they obviously like the taste of the former settling ponds of a sugar factory near the small Slovenian town of Ormož which have developed into a good habitat for snipe, black-throated grebes and many other water-loving birds. It is exactly 11 years since the Slovenian Society for the Protection of Birds (DOPPS) took on the responsibility for a handful of lakes and some ponds as well as the surrounding green areas.

Damijan Denac, CEO of DOPPS remembers how it started. "After the factory was closed and sugar production halted, the water supply to the settling lakes was stopped. As a result, vegetation rapidly invaded the settling lakes, significantly reducing their attractiveness for birds." Slovenian conservationists took on the task of reversing this development.

First of all, they removed most of the rapidly invading vegetation with machinery and muscle power. A new water supply system was then set up channelling water from the River Drau into the basins. Breeding islands were created to attract water birds not only to pause there on migration, but also bring up their chicks. Our partners from DOPPS also bought 6 hectares of the nearby floodplain woodlands and restored an old oxbow lake on the Drau. This has attracted not only kingfishers, but also the Dytiscid diving beetle *Graphoderus bilineatus*, a rare relative of the great diving beetle.

No sooner had the first measures been carried out than numerous species of bird returned to the pools: gadwall, garganey and shoveler have been breeding again in the area since 2015 as well as bittern, Baillon's and spotted crakes. Marsh harrier and great reed warbler indeed have their only breeding sites in Slovenia here. The large numbers of birds in their turn attract large numbers of bird watchers and here is no exception. EuroNatur have helped their Slovenian partner DOPPS to erect an observation tower and an information panel close to the areas of water to highlight the outstanding importance of this area to the wider public.

Habitat improvement + an end to poaching = bird diversity

The constant improvements to the habitat were combined with one other positive development, namely the stopping of poaching. "For more than 25 years, we had a massive problem with illegal hunting in the area," says Damijan Denac. Above all, it was poachers coming from immediately across the border in neighbouring Croatia, using decoys and hunting the birds from the platforms. "In the course of the eighties and the early nineties the numbers of birds using the area as a resting place decreased by more than a half. However, we took decisive action to solve this problem," continues Denac.

The bird conservationists from DOPPS carried out a publicity campaign to explain to the public the importance of reporting any illegal hunting. In 2014 they received authorisation to tear down any illegally erected hunting lodges and hides. Since the end of poaching on the old clearing lakes in 2015/16, the numbers of birds using the lake as a migration stopover have increased dramatically, with the most recent count on 22nd December 2020 showing a total of 5,638 birds of 27 different species.

"That is a significant increase in the numbers of birds compared to the time when hunting was occurring. In those days, there would have been a maximum of 2,000 birds," remembers Damijan Denac. For thousands of wading and water birds, the pools at Ormož have thus become a valuable and safe haven during their migration. Here they can replenish their reserves without any disturbance before continuing their journey, or even spend their whole time here during the cold season. "This development has made me extremely happy," says Damijan Denac with a satisfied smile.

Christian Stielow



Photo: Irena Basič

The Ormož pools (Picture p.20) before and after completion of the renaturalisation measures. The areas of water freed from the vegetation can clearly be seen.



Photos: Damijan Denac

The linking channels to the nearby River Drau were laid using heavy machinery. River water now flows through the pipes into the pools.



Bitič: Luka Bazic



Photo: HEP

For a long time, hunting represented a huge problem in the area until, in 2014, permission was received to tear down illegally erected hunting hides. Since then, the water birds have been able to live safely on the Ormož pools.

The marsh harrier has its only breeding site in Slovenia here on the Ormož pools. Black-necked grebes also successfully raise their young in the area. The water buffalo are up to the necks in the water, but that does not bother them at all. On the contrary, these natural lawnmowers help to clear the excess vegetation in the pools.

Damijan Denac, too, is in his element. The ornithologist likes nothing better than to roam through the area with his binoculars and telescope



Photo: Jure Novak - Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*)



Photo: HEP - Water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*)



Photo: Jure Novak - Black-necked grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)



Photo: Danerich Tomc