

# Editorial

## **Do ornithologists still play a role in reversing the crisis of farmland biodiversity?**

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is the EU legislation which drives the investments, and thus the direction, of the European agriculture in the 27 Member States. It is the most expensive EU asset, covering one-third of the EU budget (387 billion € in the period 2021-2027), 75% of which supports farmers' income (European Commission 2022). Since its enactment in 1962, the CAP has been periodically reformed to cope with the economic, political, societal, and environmental transformations that affected the continent. In parallel, scientists across a wide range of disciplines and countries have addressed its impacts on a variety of aspects of the EU citizens' life. From this effort, a wide consensus has emerged on the negative effects of such law on the environment, and in particular on farmland biodiversity, despite some attempts—or claims—to make it “greener” (Pe'er et al. 2014). Indeed, in the last decades, ornithologists quantified the decline of farmland species (Burns et al. 2021), studied its mechanistic causes (Butler et al. 2010), proposed solutions for mitigation (Concepción and Díaz 2019), and set priorities for conservation (Morrison et al. 2021). These studies all agreed in reporting that the strong decline of farmland birds across the continent has been unquestionably related to the intensification of farming practices and the abandonment of marginal lands favoured by the CAP (Donald et al. 2002; Sanderson et al. 2013).

At the end of 2021, the agreement on a new CAP reform was formally adopted; it will be implemented starting on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023. Sadly, it is increasingly evident that all the pleas for a greener agriculture have been deluded and the new reform appears to be even weaker than the previous one in promoting biodiversity-friendly practices within the agroecosystem (Candel et al. 2021). The mandatory quota of natural areas to be retained within farm has been set at only 4%, with many downside exceptions and derogations. The eco-schemes, one of the few green instruments of the new CAP, will be adopted only voluntarily and there is rising concern about their overall adequacy to sustain the declared goals to halt biodiversity crisis and mitigate climatic change (BirdLife Europe et al. 2021).

In a world that—apparently—aims to go towards an “ecological transition”, it is simply unacceptable that a huge amount of public money is given to privates without this being reflected in any clear benefit for the environment.

Looking at this gloomy picture, as an agroecologist and, before all, as an ornithologist, I wonder what is the use of the huge amount of knowledge we built up in the last decades. We have now a quite clear picture of how agroecosystems work, and which practices can impact or favour different species. Despite this, our farmland is more silent and aseptic year after year. Digging into our personal experience, each of us can clearly remember a red-backed shrike pair that disappeared along with the hedgerows in which it used to nest or a big oak that suddenly vanished

from the landscape along with its hoopoe nest, and again, a last small meadow patch, in which the rooks used to spend the winter, engulfed by the maize monoculture, along with the rooks themselves.

Although keeping pessimism in a corner appears an overarching task in these circumstances, I am convinced that we, as the community of Italian ornithologists which already gave a contribution to understanding the impact of agriculture on Italian birds (Brambilla 2019), must keep monitoring farmland species by aiming to explain their ecological needs and reveal new threats to their persistence in the agroecosystem.

For as much as this effort might be, however, I am afraid, this might not be enough. I am persuaded that if we want to contribute to halting the farmland biodiversity crisis and, in parallel, create a healthier and more beautiful countryside for us and for those who will come after us, we need to start working on an expanded network of scientists, practitioners, farmers, and common citizens, to raise the public awareness on the risks of a farmland deprived of wild organisms and to start restoring what has been lost until now.

It is unlikely to have an accurate estimate of how many years we still have to radically change our way to manage agricultural lands; however, year after year, fewer wild plants flourish on the edges between fields, fewer insects enter the trophic webs, and fewer young shrikes start their journey to Africa. Other clear signs - if there were not enough - that time is running out.

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