

## Short communication

# Summer observations of Eleonora's Falcon (*Falco eleonora*) in the Stura Valley (South Western Alps)

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**Abstract** - From 1999 to 2020 the Eleonora's Falcon (*Falco eleonora*) has been observed 12 times at the site of Madonna del Pino, near Demonte (Province of Cuneo - Piedmont - South Western Alps). All of these individuals were birds in their second calendar year and thus these sightings are to be attributed to summer movements of non-breeding animals. The growing number of observations of this species is imputable to the increasing identification skills of birdwatchers, necessary in order to distinguish Eleonora's Falcons from the similar and very common Eurasian Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*), and to the constant monitoring of migrating raptors as part of the Migrans Project.

**Key words:** Eleonora's Falcon, *Falco eleonora*, Migrans Project, Stura Valley, South Western Alps.

**Riassunto** - Osservazioni estive del falco della Regina (*Falco eleonora*) in Valle Stura (Alpi sudoccidentali).

Dal 1999 al 2020 il falco della Regina (*Falco eleonora*) è stato osservato 12 volte presso il sito di Madonna del Pino, vicino a Demonte (Provincia di Cuneo - Piemonte - Alpi sud occidentali). Tutti questi individui erano immaturi (secondo calendario) e di conseguenza gli avvistamenti sono attribuibili ai movimenti estivi di soggetti non nidificanti. L'aumento del numero di osservazioni di questa specie è dovuto principalmente alla crescente capacità degli osservatori, necessaria per distinguerla dal somigliante e più comune lodolaio (*Falco subbuteo*), e alla costanza dell'attività di monitoraggio nell'ambito del Progetto Migrans.

**Parole chiave:** falco della Regina, *Falco eleonora*, Progetto Migrans, Valle Stura, Alpi sud occidentali.

The Eleonora's Falcon (*Falco eleonora*) is a long-distance migratory raptor, nesting colonially almost exclusively on rocky cliffs of islands of Mediterranean Sea. This specie delays reproduction to late summer (August-September) when there are the highest movements of migratory passerines which represents the main preys du-

ring its breeding season (Walter, 1979) as opposed to the remaining months of the year when its diet is composed mainly by insects (Walter, 1979; Gustin *et al.*, 2019) as beetles, dragonflies and damselflies (Cano, 2001; Belenquer *et al.*, 2004).

The Migrans Project started in 1992, on the initiative of the Palanfrè Wood and Lakes Natural Reserve and several local Associations, after many sightings of migrating raptors observed near Demonte: its goal was to monitor the post-reproductive migration of diurnal raptors, in particular of Honey Buzzards (*Pernis apivorus*) and Short-toed Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*), through the Stura Valley. The Alpi Marittime Natural Park is now coordinating the Project and the site of Madonna del Pino (1,030 m a.s.l.) has become the main workstation in 1996 and from 1998 the data collection has been standardized. Since the birth of the Migrans Project, that usually takes place continuously from 9:00 to 17:00 of each day in the period between the 18 August and the 06 September and for an average yearly number of 20 days and 160 hours, the Eleonora's Falcons (*Falco eleonora*) have been observed a total of 12 times. The following list collects all the sightings and their observers, up to September 2020:

1. August 31, 1999 - (Beraudo P. L. & Toffoli R.);
2. August 16, 2001 - (Caula B.);
3. August 05, 2006 - (Giordano M.);
4. August 22, 2006 - (Giordano M.);
5. August 31, 2006 - (Giordano M.);
6. August 25, 2010 - (Giordano M.);
7. August 25, 2012 - (Beraudo P. L., Caula B., Grasso M. & Grasso N.);
8. August 28, 2017 - (Sartirana F., Consolino F. & Cravero M.);
9. August 30, 2017 - (Sartirana F., Belfiore F., Cravero M., Noja L., Blangetti F., Capello D., Girardo M.P., Capello L., Capello G. & Baldo E.);
10. August 19, 2019 - (Grasso N., Biffoni G., Scalco L., Cravero M., Pietrobon A., Franchino S. & Chersich S.);
11. August 21, 2020 - (Grasso N., Bajno L., Biffoni G., Pietrobon A. & Botta L.);
12. August 29, 2020 - (Grasso N. & Cravero M.).

Eleonora's falcons are regularly observed from spring to early autumn throughout the Mediterranean basin, both in mountain and coastal areas, also very far from the bre-

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eding colonies. Normally the adults are observed in continental areas until July (month during which they return to the nesting sites) while non-breeding individuals, as immatures, are sighted until late summer-early autumn (Mellone *et al.*, 2013). In North West Italy and in South France, as demonstrated by the studies focused on tracked animals (Gschweng *et al.*, 2008; Mellone *et al.*, 2013), the individuals observed probably come mainly from the Spanish and Sardinian colonies. Immature Eleonora's Falcons, in their second calendar year, in late summer have been observed on a regular basis in Liguria, French Riviera and in Southern Piedmont (Baghino, 1996; Caula & Beraudo, 2014) and these sightings are to be attributed to summer movements of non-breeding birds. The Stura Valley is an important migration route for dragonflies too, mostly Red-veined Darters (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*) and Vagran Emperors (*Anax ephippiger*), and several Eleonora's Falcons observed from Madonna del Pino have been seen hunting these insects (for ex. the sighting of 21/08/2020), as observed in different studies on breeding grounds (Walter, 1979; Spina, 1992; Lo Cascio, 1999; Ristow, 2004; Corso, 2011) and on sites far from the nesting colonies (Cano, 2001; Belenguer *et al.*, 2004).



Fig. 1: Eleonora's Falcon sighted in the site of Madonna del Pino on August 19, 2019. / Falco della Regina avvistato dal sito di Madonna del Pino il 19 agosto 2019. (Photo by / Foto di Nicolò Grasso).

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