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“Birds are a reflection of the environment”

Sempach Ornithological Institute in the canton of Lucerne celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2024. This charitable institution is a highly regarded centre of competence in Switzerland and very popular among the population. It also has a warning for us: the diversity of domestic bird life is under threat.

SUSANNE WENGER

This winter, the evening skies above Langenthal in the canton of Berne were the showcase for hundreds of thousands of bramblings descending on the fir trees to spend the night. Every winter, the bramblings come from Scandinavia to Switzerland, explains Livio Rey, a biologist at Sempach Ornithological Institute: “However, you will only see a mass migration every few years, when the conditions are right.” They need enough beech nuts and there can’t be any snow; the conditions also have to be worse further up north. That’s when the birds move south.

Sempach Ornithological Institute is considered something of an authority on all things bird-related. Founded by the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Vogelkunde und Vogelschutz (Swiss society for ornithology and

trust and affection in which it is held by the general public. Although it is not funded by the public sector, it does perform assignments for the Confederation and cantons.

Early conservationists

The founders, including the first head of the institute, Alfred Schifferli from Sempach, an accountant and ornithologist, wanted to support research into bird life, which was an up-and-coming discipline at the time. Schifferli and his assistants ringed many birds to find out more about bird migration. The institute became the main reporting centre for ring recoveries and it provided specimens and eggs for studies. Its foundation is also connected with early nature conservation movements at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries in Switzerland. The institute’s purpose has always been to apply its learnings about bird life to benefit the birds.

“We have to understand birds in order to protect them and preserve their diversity for future generations,” says Rey, who is based at the headquarters at Lake Sempach, which is just outside the town and comprises a treatment centre for injured birds and a visitors’ centre. On this particular winter day, if you look out at the right time you can see a brightly coloured common kingfisher. Understanding, protection and preservation underpin the work of the institute and, according to Rey, its mission is now more urgent than ever.

One of the longest red lists

Although birds hold a certain fascination for many people through their song, general visibility and ability to fly, most people do not realise just

how bad their general situation is: 40 per cent of Switzerland’s roughly 200 bird species are currently under threat. The red list of endangered bird species is one of the longest in Europe, according to Rey. And the situation has failed to improve over the past ten years: the number of ‘potentially endangered’ birds on a type of prewarning list has increased. “Contrary to general opinion, Switzerland does not set a good example in terms of bird protection,” stresses the biologist.

However, some types of bird are faring better than others, as Rey points out. The birds that live in the forest are prospering, thanks to Switzerland’s relatively stringent forest conservation. The fortunes of herons and birds of prey are also improving. There is a ban on hunting these birds, so their numbers have picked up as a result. Examples include the golden eagle, the reintroduced bearded vulture and the red kite. The red kite was on the verge of extinction, says Rey, but “today we have ten per cent of the global population here in Switzerland”.

Cultivated land is bad for birds

Many bird species suffer a lot on cultivated land, where intensified crop cultivation has interfered with their habitat. Frequent mowing destroys broods. Extensive use of fertilisers and pesticides is affecting their food supply, i.e. insects. There is also a dearth of small structures, such as hedges or cairns. As a result, some types of bird have disappeared. Bird species that used to frequent the Swiss Plateau have died out, from the grey partridge to the ortolan bunting, a type of songbird. The bright song of the eurasian skylark has become something of a rarity.



Sempach Ornithological Institute on 6 April 1924.
Archive photo: Sempach Ornithological Institute

bird protection) in April 1924, it is a longstanding institution in Switzerland. The foundation employs almost 160 people and advises the authorities and professional groups, responds to enquiries from the general public and provides information on all things avian. The fact that 75 per cent of its funding comes from donations and legacies testifies to the



Bird species in wetlands, bodies of water or marshes, are also suffering. Leisure activities as well as other things are impacting their livelihood. "Birds are a reflection of the environment," concludes the expert. "They are a very accurate indicator of how we treat the environment." Knowledge of how things are developing is also based on the extensive data held by the institute. Monitoring, i.e. counting numbers, has been one of their top priorities for decades. They have more than 2,000 volunteers supporting them all over the country, from retired natural scientists to track layers.

The peregrine falcon – seen here diving at speed – is an example of successful species conservation. In the 1960s, it stood on the brink of extinction due to the use of a particular insecticide. A measure taken in 1972 ensured the species' survival.
Photo: Keystone

Teaming up with agriculture...

Researching bird migration is another cornerstone of the institute's mandate. The nature of this work has changed in line with technological advances. Migratory birds aren't just ringed anymore; they also carry extremely light data storage devices known as geolocators that are attached to the birds like a rucksack. They deliver "impressive findings", says Rey. For example, the alpine swift remains airborne for 200 consecutive days. The small great reed warbler reaches heights of up to 6,000 metres during migration.

Although the ornithological station has been working more closely on the living conditions of birds for about 50 years, it stays out of politics. The institute wants to focus on providing information, explains the biologist. The biodiversity initiative is an exception, however. It goes to the vote in 2024. The institute agrees with the popular initiative calling for more space and resources to cultivate diversity. To improve the birds' living environment, the institute works mainly on site by cooperating with farmers that work in close harmony with nature.

...to the benefit of the birds and hares

In Champagne (canton of Geneva) and Klettgau (canton of Schaffhausen), the institute has contributed to establishing award-winning ecological areas for the birds on agricultural land. Eurasian skylark numbers are on the rise in these areas and the hare has also made a comeback, says Rey. The 33-year-old Bernese native has been working at the institute for eight years. His favourite is the attractive peregrine falcon, a speed record-holder in the animal kingdom: it can dive at 200 kilometres per hour. It can be seen almost anywhere in the world: "It's a unifying force."

The peregrine falcon is also an example of successful species preservation. In the 1960s, the widespread use of the insecticide DDT brought it to the brink of extinction. An international environmental movement campaigned against the product, leading to it being banned in 1972. The peregrine falcon has since recovered. "It is living proof of what can be achieved if you try hard enough," says Rey.