

## Lesser Spotted Eagle wintering in Sicily, Italy, in 2000-01

Between late September and late October 2000, c seven juvenile Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina*, all migrants, were recorded between Siracusa and Gela, south-eastern Sicily, Italy, by Giuseppe Consoli, Andrea Corso, Carmelo Iapichino, Renzo Ientile and others. On 31 October 2000, AC, accompanied by Carmela Cardelli and two Swedish birders, was at Saline di Siracusa (a 50-ha saltpan complex just outside Siracusa) when a juvenile Lesser Spotted Eagle flew off from the semi-dried ponds in the northern salt pans. The next day, it was seen again by GC. After an absence of a couple of days, the bird was relocated in the Saline di Siracusa area. The rest of the month, it was seen there almost daily. During the early morning, the bird was hunting in nearby fields or along reed-beds and from c 12:00 it used to perch on dead trees (enabling a detailed study of the plumage). Its range became gradually larger and after a month, the bird not only frequented the Saline di Siracusa area but also more distant areas. In fact, it was often seen arriving from the direction of Mount Climiti and Val d'Anapo, Mount Iblei, an area of low mountains behind Siracusa. Possibly, the bird roosted overnight in the woods of this area and hunted in the valleys and the Saline di Siracusa area during the day. It remained in the area until 13 December but the bird's range became even larger. On 4 December, it was seen flying south to Penisola della Maddalena-Capo Murro di Porco. On 8 December, CI saw the bird flying above Saline di Siracusa in the remarkable company of an immature Steppe Eagle *A nivalensis* (constituting the 16th record for Italy and the third for Sicily). After 13 December, the Lesser Spotted Eagle could not be found anymore. However, on 26 December, it was relocated at Vendicari NR, a wetland 45 km south of Saline di Siracusa. Some days later, Giampaolo Terranova discovered the bird at Vendicari NR. On 31 December, Daniele Aliffi, CC, AC, CI, Carlo Nardini and Angelo Nitti saw the bird and videoed it through a telescope. The bird's features could be perfectly studied on the video. In early January 2001, the bird was seen by several birders – among them Ottavio Janni (a CIR member), Diego Rubolini, Violetta Longoni and Roberto Garavaglia. The last record was on 18 January 2001.

### Identification and ageing

The 'S-shaped' wing profile, the regular white terminal band along the trailing edge of the wing and tail, the visible pale spots on the greater coverts and to a much lesser extent on the median coverts (which may be almost totally abraded already towards the end of the second calendar-year), the whitish tips to the tertials, the general coloration and the complete absence of moult fit a juvenile Lesser Spotted Eagle.

The very similar Greater Spotted Eagle *A clanga* could be excluded by the following characters (cf Forsman 1999, Clark 1999; Andrea Corso pers obs). The iris was yellowish with an easily discernible pupil; in Greater Spotted, it is always darker, ie, dark brown-amber or blackish-grey (Andrea Corso pers obs). The bill was small and not very high (very kite *Milvus*-like); in Greater Spotted, it is usually higher, bigger and heavier looking. The upper- and underwing showed an obvious contrast between the paler brownish coverts and the much darker blackish-grey; in Greater Spotted, the upperwing appears uniform (or even shows the reverse pattern, more or less the same contrast can be found in the palest Lesser Spotted Eagle). The pale spots on the upperwing were small and inconspicuous; in juvenile Greater Spotted, these spots are normally much more dense, obvious and extended. The bird showed a well-visible and conspicuous golden nape patch; this is absent in most Greater Spotted or, if visible, not so conspicuous and wide (normally it is also situated more at the rear-crown than on the nape). The base to the

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tarsus-feathers/thigh was dark; this area is often white in Greater Spotted (Clark 1999; Andrea Corso pers obs). Six clearly fingered primaries were visible; in Greater Spotted, there are seven (although there are some age-related differences in this character). In addition, the wings were narrower than in Greater Spotted.

Steppe Eagle has a distinctly longer gape, an oval (not round) nostril, a higher, heavier and more powerful bill, thicker legs, longer and narrower wings, a different wing formula, larger dimensions, no pale spotting on the upperwing, an obvious white underwing band (present during at least three plumages but often more conspicuous than the sparse white spotting in Lesser Spotted present up to the fourth plumage) and different barring on the remiges and rectrices.

#### *Winter occurrence in Western Palearctic*

Lesser Spotted Eagle irregularly (?) winters in the Middle East, particularly in northern Israel (Nir Sapir pers comm) and Turkey (Methan Ozen pers comm), and possibly in Cyprus (Iankov et al 1996). In the winter of 2000/01, one or two individuals stayed in Israel (Nir Sapir pers comm).

Brichetti & Benussi (1992) mention the following winter records of Lesser Spotted Eagle for Italy: two in Lombardia (February 1954 and January 1962), one in Piemonte (December 1962) and one in Puglia (December 1981-January 1982). However, some – if not all – of these records are insufficiently documented and should therefore be considered doubtful. The record in Puglia refers to a specimen in the collection of a hunter who claimed that he had shot the bird 'this winter', without giving more details (Giovanni Boano pers comm). A more recent winter record of an immature at Torrile, Emilia-Romagna, north-eastern Italy, on 22 December 1993 (Ravasini 1998) is not photographically documented and therefore also unacceptable.

Elsewhere in Europe, sporadic winter records have been reported in former Yugoslavia and Greece (Iankov et al 1996). However, also these records lack sufficient documentation. A juvenile was observed along the Black Sea coast in

Bulgaria on 17 January 1993 (Iankov et al 1996). Interestingly, infrequent reports in the Camargue, Bouches-du-Rhône, France, from 15 December 2001 into January 2002 suggest another European winter record (van den Berg 2002). A possible hybrid Greater x Lesser Spotted Eagle was seen and photographed at La Rocina, Doñana NP, Andalusia, Spain, on 27 December 2001 (Gutiérrez & Villa 2002).

In conclusion, the record in Sicily from 31 October 2000 to 18 January 2001 presumably constitutes the first well-documented record of a wintering Lesser Spotted Eagle for Italy and perhaps Europe.

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