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Red-breasted Merganser display

At about 11.30 hrs on 10th March 2012, an unseasonably warm, sunny day with little or no wind, I observed the following behaviour by a group of Red-breasted Mergansers *Mergus serrator* on the Sleat peninsula, Skye. Six birds, five females and one male, swam into view in the sheltered inlet by the jetty at the Eilean Iarmain Hotel, Isle Ornsay. They formed into an almost perfectly straight line, the birds side by side and all facing in the same direction, just 3–4 m from the shore. They then began to wheel around in an anti-clockwise circle, all maintaining the line as if it had been drawn in the water with a ruler. The female in the centre of the circle was barely moving, while the drake, at the opposite end of the line and on the perimeter of the circle, was paddling furiously with head down, in order to maintain his position and the shape of the line. The group turned around slowly in these perfect wheels or circles three times. At the end of this spellbinding display of avian synchronised swimming, the line disintegrated and the birds swam into individual positions in a rough circle, all facing inwards, as if

‘eyeing one another up’. After a minute or so the drake and one of the ducks swam up to each other and then drifted back out of the inlet, out of sight; the remaining ducks followed suit in due course. The whole performance lasted between two and three minutes. The birds were silent throughout, with no pre-call head movements or other notable postures that I recall.

I can find no reference to any similar behaviour. Published accounts of Red-breasted Merganser courtship displays, including the description of communal courtship in *BWP* as well as video clips online, describe a quite different display. Typically, there are more males than females, and the males engage in a variety of energetic activities, some of them quite elaborate such as the ‘Salute-curtsey’, with the females typically on the periphery of the action. Indeed, although my observations on Skye seemed at the time to be obviously related to courtship, I wondered whether the behaviour could have had some other function, such as a prelude to co-operative feeding.

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Raptor migration at the Pelagie Islands

The islands of Lampedusa, Linosa and Lampione form the Isole Pelagie (Pelagie Islands), situated in the Sicilian Channel between Sicily and Tunisia. Owing to their strategic location they attract many migrants, particularly passerines, moving between Europe and North Africa. To date, only limited observations from the islands have been made and few details have been published (e.g. Moltoni 1970, Corti *et al.* 2002, Corso *et al.* 2012). Apart from a brief mention in Corso (2005) nothing has been published on raptor migration through the islands. To establish the importance of the islands for migrating raptors, observations were made on Lampedusa and Linosa in spring in 2006–08, and on six occasions in autumn between 1997 and 2008. In total, 19 visits extended over a period of 200 days and totalled almost 2,000 hours. The most extensive survey took place in

spring 2006 as part of the LIPU project ‘Rapaci Migratori’ (Gustin 2006), while observations were more sporadic during other visits. Typically, observations began at 06.30–07.00 hours and continued until 18.30–19.00 hours. Observers used 10× binoculars and 20–60× telescopes. On Lampedusa, most observations were carried out near Albero Sole, although in the late evening Cala Pulcino was the preferred site, where a small pine plantation hosted the island’s main raptor roost. On Linosa, the main observation post was at Monte Bandiera, while at sunset harriers were counted at roosts in the Mannarazza area. This study was able to confirm that the southern Sicilian Channel is largely avoided by the larger soaring raptors, but smaller species and those capable of making prolonged sea crossings used the islands regularly to help them cross the Sicilian Channel.

Table 1. Migrating raptors recorded during autumn migration at Pelagie (Agrigento, Sicilian Channel) within the following periods: (1) 29th August to 8th September 1997, (2) 5th–9th September 2005, (3) 10th–20th October 2005, (4) 22nd–24th September 2007, (5) October 2007, and (6) September and October 2008. Age class determined as follows: ad – adult, juv – juvenile, 2CY – second calendar-year, 3CY – third calendar-year, na – not aged.

Period	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
Honey-buzzard <i>Pernis apivorus</i>	1 ad 126 juv	29 ad 63 juv	33 juv	5 ad 58 juv	20 juv 2 3CY	5 ad 40 juv 70 na	452
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	4 ad 6 juv 9 2CY		1 ad 6 juv	2 ad 4 juv	1 ad 12 juv	3 ad 9 juv	57
Red Kite <i>Milvus milvus</i>				1 juv			1
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	40 ad 207 juv 38 2CY 9 3CY	99 ad 115 juv 53 2CY 15 3CY 41 na	11 ad 87 juv 14 2CY 29 3CY	81 ad 259 juv 92 na	15 ad 10 juv 19 2CY 10 na	33 ad 190 juv 50 2CY 40 na	1,557
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macrourus</i>	2 juv	4 juv	5 juv	1 juv	4 juv	1 ad 3 juv	20
Montagu's Harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>	1 ad 8 juv	1 juv 3 2CY	4 juv	2 juv	2 juv 1 2CY	3 juv 1 2CY	26
Booted Eagle <i>Aquila pennata</i>			2 3CY				2
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	2 juv	1 ad	1 ad 4 juv	1 ad 1 juv	1 ad 1 juv	1 ad 2 juv	15
Lesser Kestrel <i>Falco naumanni</i>	4 ad	6 ad 5 juv	1 ad 1 juv	10 ad 17 juv	3 ad 10 juv	2 juv	59
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10 ad 4 juv	25 na	17 ad 42 juv 21 2CY	c. 40	20	20	c. 199
Red-footed Falcon <i>Falco vespertinus</i>	9 ad 2 juv 6 2CY		2 ad 8 juv	4 juv	2 juv	4 juv	37
Hobby <i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1 ad 1 juv	5 ad	2 ad 3 juv	10 ad 2 juv	3 ad 1 juv	1 ad 4 juv	33
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1 ad 1 juv	1 ad 1 juv	1 ad	1 ad	6

A total of 3,724 raptors of 14 species were recorded, with most occurring in autumn (tables 1 and 2). The most abundant species were Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (1,967), Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (601), Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (349) and Red-footed Falcon *F. vespertinus* (157). The regular passage of Pallid Harriers *C. macrourus* (87) and Lesser Kestrels *F. naumanni* (143) in good numbers is particularly noteworthy.

Honey-buzzard

Numbers in autumn outnumbered those in spring by a factor of 3:1. In autumn the majority are juveniles, attempting a sea crossing for the first time; as reported by previous authors, most adults tend to avoid crossing the Sicilian Channel in the south, preferring to cross farther north, where the sea crossing is shorter (Agostini 2004; Agostini *et al.* 2002, 2004).

Table 2. Migrating raptors recorded during spring migration at Pelagie (Agrigento, Sicilian Channel) between March and May in 2006–08.

	2006	2007	2008	total
Honey-buzzard <i>Pernis apivorus</i>	90	38	21	149
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	200	120	90	410
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macrourus</i>	20	28	19	67
Montagu's Harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>	40	60	40	140
Unidentified harrier <i>Circus macrourus/pygargus</i>	10	12	13	35
Long-legged Buzzard <i>Buteo rufinus</i>	1			1
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	4	5	4	13
Lesser Kestrel <i>Falco naumanni</i>	35	27	22	84
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	c. 80	40	30	150
Red-footed Falcon <i>Falco vespertinus</i>	70	35	15	120
Hobby <i>Falco subbuteo</i>	20	19	34	73
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	8	4	6	18

Red Kite

A juvenile on 23rd September 2007 was the first record for the Pelagie Islands (Corti *et al.* 2002; Corso 2005).

Marsh Harrier

A total of 1,967 were recorded, of which 1,557 were in autumn and 410 in spring. Of the 1,374 individuals for which the age class was established in autumn, 279 were adults (20%), 868 juveniles (63%) and the remaining 227 immatures in their second or third calendar-year. Among adults in autumn, males outnumbered females by 60:40. In spring the majority were aged as adults, of which 70% were males. On Lampedusa, up to 299 Marsh Harriers have been counted going to roost on a single night, making this one of the most important roosting areas for the species during migration in the Western Palearctic (Sammot (2005) reported a roost of up to 200 migrating Marsh Harriers at Buskett, Malta).

Montagu's Harrier

Totals of 140 and 26 were counted during spring and autumn migration respectively. In spring, the majority are adults and mainly males, but several second-calendar-year birds were also observed. On Linosa, up to 40 have been observed roosting at Mannarazza in recent years.

Pallid Harrier

This is a rare breeding bird in Europe, and

the Pelagie Islands apparently represent an important site for birds en route to and from Europe (see Corso & Cardelli 2004). During this study, a total of 67 were recorded in spring and 20 in autumn. In March and early April almost 90% of the birds observed were adult males, while females predominated later in April and into May. This supports the findings of Gustin & Pizzari (1998) and Corso & Cardelli (2004), but is at odds with the observations of Panuccio & Agostini (2006).

Lesser Kestrel

With totals of 59 in spring and 84 in autumn, these islands are one of the most important migration sites in Italy for this species (Corso 2001b, 2005). The ability of falcons to maintain sustained flight over open water is doubtless responsible for the high total recorded.

Peregrine Falcon

All the birds recorded are thought to belong to the migratory form *F. p. calidus*, which breeds in the tundra regions of northern Europe and Siberia. Corso (2001a, 2005) suggested that this race occurs regularly in Italy and these observations support this view.

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House Sparrow copulating with juvenile

At 11.45 on 6th May 2012, I noticed a male House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* copulating vigorously with a female on the birdbath in my garden in Fife. Both birds were facing me at a distance of about 12 m and the event lasted no longer than 10–15 seconds. The female shook herself as if to repel water and remained motionless for some time before flying down to ground level, whereupon she was fed by an attendant female House

Sparrow who was also feeding a juvenile male with seed from a feeder. I thought this was unusual so quickly grabbed my binoculars and was surprised to see that the first female was also a juvenile, sporting an obvious yellow gape and short tail. No further copulation was noted and the birds were soon flushed by an incoming Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*.

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Repeated feather-catching by female Common Chaffinch

On 21st March 2012, in my garden in Somerseset, I watched a female Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, perched at the edge of a roof, suddenly fly out to catch a falling white feather (approx. 2 cm long) in its bill. The Chaffinch returned to its perch and promptly dropped the feather, which blew away in the wind. The feather was again chased and

seized and the bird returned to the same perch, where the feather was brandished for a few seconds, only to be dropped and then recaptured once more. The process was repeated a fourth time before the feather was dropped for a final time and the bird flew off. Female Chaffinches might catch feathers in order to line their nests but, as far I could tell,