

BRCMAGAZINE



BATUMI RAPTOR COUNT MEMBER MAGAZINE

2019

First full season spring
count with 462.041
raptors counted

First Black-winged Kite(s)
for BRC: 36th raptor species
for the bottleneck

Black Kite numbers
pass the 200.000
benchmark

Welcome!



Dear BRC members,

We are happy to present you the 4th edition of our membership magazine. It took a bit longer than usual, but by making this an extra big edition we hope to compensate a little for the delay. The year 2019 has been a **fantastic one for the BRC** which encompassed a lot more than 'just' running the yearly autumn count. To top it all off we just received the news from the ornithological journal *Ibis* that our research paper about raptor migration trends at Batumi, which was published in September, is among the **10 percent most downloaded** *Ibis* papers of the last two years.

To start with, 2019 saw our first full season **pilot spring count** with over 460.000 raptors counted and amongst them an incredible number of 200.000+ Black Kites and a "meagre" 89.000 Honey Buzzards. These notable differences compared to autumn were reason enough to run another edition and thus the 2020 spring count is currently underway! With the support of OSME we were even able to recruit a Georgian counter for the entire 2020 spring period, which will hopefully prepare him for a potential future autumn count coordinator position.

Our newly extended autumn count saw even higher numbers of Black Kites, record numbers of Short-toed Eagles and the first Black-winged Kite for the Batumi bottleneck. During the count we also started a **new educational project** with the aim to reach other villages in the bottleneck which are not reached by our yearly count activities. The project will involve Georgian teachers and conservationists and is supported by Ijsvogelfonds and the British Bird Charitable Trust.

Finally, we were happy to see the group of young Georgian falconers return to our count stations for a second year in a row. We are even happier to announce that a grant application with INNO-fonds (WWF) to start a **new raptor conservation project with the young falconers** was approved and will start being developed this year.

Altogether, 2019 was a very successful year and all signs were showing that 2020 was going to become an even better one for BRC with a great diversity of projects to engage local people. However, as already published online, we decided to **cancel the 2020 autumn count** in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The current national and international measures and the uncertainty with regard to the development of the pandemic make it impossible to prepare a count at this point. Furthermore we don't find it responsible in these times to attract counters from all parts of the world to come to Georgia. Apart from the health of the counters themselves, we also have a responsibility towards the health and well-being of our host families and the local community. Even if measures would ease during the coming months and international travel would be (partly) possible again, there is still a good chance that the virus will have a second wave and this is a risk we are not willing to take. Not towards the people involved, but also not financially as we are only a small volunteer-based NGO. Furthermore the educational project with the schools and the conservation project with young falconers will at least partly, but likely entirely, be canceled as well and moved to 2021.

Luckily, 2021 will come much faster than we think and we will make sure to use the extra time to prepare all the new projects even better. Meanwhile we hope you enjoy reading about our activities in more detail in this magazine and that it inspires you to **continue supporting our work** by renewing your membership.

Thanks again for your support!

Dries Engelen
BRC President

BRC Magazine 2019

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Count station upgrade Sakhalvasho

The new watch platform in Sakhalvasho is up and running and the difference with just 6 years ago is enormous! While minor improvements are still being implemented, this really is a milestone achievement. It shows the support of the local government to our project and to birdwatching ecotourism in the region. The future of this site seems more secured now for raptor watching purposes and we are truly thankful for that. The development of this new observatory was initiated by the Department of Tourism and Resorts of Adjara, funded by the Ministry of Finance and we were glad to be involved in the design and implementation.

**2013**

© Simon Cavallès

**2019**

© Johannes Jansen

2019: The first year-round monitor

462.041 raptors counted during the first full season spring count!

After 11 years of autumn counts, it was time for something completely different: not counting the southbound birds but rather **counting them while they head out to their breeding grounds**. The idea of a spring count has been brought up many times, but apart from some irregular count days in 2013 and 2014, it never got of the ground. Now, with a combined total of 13 enthusiastic counters, we covered more than 2 months almost daily between March 21st and May 31st, 2019. For logistic reasons and due to lack of manpower, we decided to **only count birds from Station 1**.

Right from the start the first issue occurred: from where exactly do we count? We knew that it wouldn't be possible to count from our autumn platform, since the station provides excellent views to the north, but the view to the south is really poor. Nonetheless, for practical reasons we had to find a place close to Sakhalvasho, because that is where we have our headquarters. Finally, we ended up just bit behind Station 1, further along the ridge on the east side of the mountain.

As we did not know what to expect, both in terms of species and numbers, we decided to count **all migrating raptor species**. This is quite different from the situation in autumn, when we solely focus on the species for which we can consistently gather high quality and valuable data. Apart from facing the other side, the view proved to be very different anyways. Not the familiar dark green hills, which during autumn slowly fade into red, but rather a winter wonderland with all the high peaks covered in snow. We even had a little bit of snowfall during the beginning of the count!

Spring of migration in Batumi



Spring count view over Batumi
© Diego Jansen

As the weather was still a bit cold, the pace of migration was still on the cool side as well. Many days with rain prevented the migration and our clickers from heating up. However, what we lacked in numbers was made up for in species. We already had a **Cinereous Vulture on the fourth day**, which is quite an uncommon bird in autumn and thus only the fifth record for BRC. On the next day, the weather provided good migration conditions and it really started to kick off with a lot of Short-toed Eagles (160), a Griffon Vulture and the first Egyptian Vulture of the season. Besides those, the real surprise of the spring count still had to come: **the staggering numbers of Black Kites**. Throughout the season we counted over 220.000 Black Kites, destroying all the autumn record counts of this species. We had several days with over 10.000 kites, but the real peak day was on the 5th of April when we counted a mind-blowing 41.000 Black Kites! During the first weeks of the count we also saw a Golden Eagle, another BRC rarity, and we had our first good numbers of Imperial-, Lesser- and Greater Spotted Eagles.

While enjoying all these specialities the Black Kites kept coming! Not just their numbers were impressive, but also their behaviour. Most of the time they were flying far in the west over the sea forming almost pure Black Kite streams with just an occasional (lost?) Steppe Buzzard in them. When the kites came closer we observed something interesting: while migrating the **Black Kites were catching insects in mid-flight**, to eat as a little snack. We never observed such behaviour during our autumn counts.

The non-raptors were enjoyable as well. The first days of the count we had good numbers of Common Cranes (116), but even better was a **Sardinian Warbler** on the station, which was just the 3rd record for Georgia, after the 2nd record during the 2018 autumn count. Later on, the trees surrounding the station proved to be passerine magnets, with perching Tree Pipits accompanied by Ortolan Buntings. Even the elusive Krüper's Nuthatch paid a welcoming visit to the station. Many birdwatchers visit the Botanical Garden to find this bird, but if you're patient enough, the bird may visit you! Another absolute highlight during the spring count was a **Black-winged Kite** (ssp. *vociferus*), only the 2nd record for Georgia, that the count team found in the Chorokhi Delta. This species is expanding its range northwards and will likely become a more regular visitor to the Batumi region over the coming years (see our autumn report for example).

Some species on the other hand, didn't seem to use the Batumi bottleneck during this spring. Especially the numbers of Marsh-, Montagu's- and Pallid Harriers were very low and we weren't seeing many of them at all. **We only recorded 56 Montagu's Harriers** for instance, which is a very small number compared to the almost 7000 birds that we counted in the bottleneck during autumn. Even though these numbers were low, we saw quite a few of them hunting in the Chorokhi Delta when we went there on slow migration days. On the contrary the Hen Harriers were doing pretty good in spring. We counted 90 of them, compared to a few dozen that we tend to see in autumn. Another species that did not really live up to our expectations was the species that dominates our autumn counts, the Honey Buzzard. Our expectations of their numbers were not only based on our autumn results, but also on counts and tracking results by other organisations. If we look at data from satellite tagged Honey Buzzards it is plausible that the birds also cluster near the Black Sea coast when they head up north. At least birds that are going to Finland seem to prefer flying over Batumi instead of the Bosphorus (Turkey) when they go north. Besides, with good numbers of Honey Buzzards recorded in Eilat during many spring counts, we expected a fair number of these birds would also come through Batumi on their northbound migration.

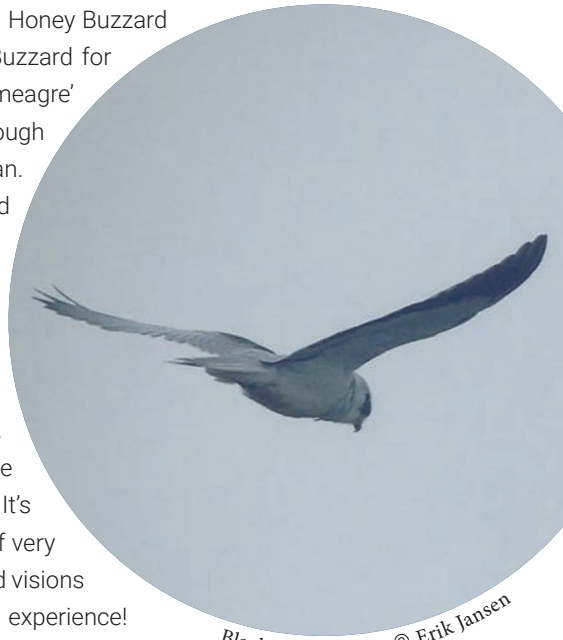


Black Kites foraging in mid-air
© Diego Jansen

Unfortunately, the Honey Buzzards had something else in mind. Although the first one was already seen exceptionally early on the 3rd of April, we eventually had to wait until April 27th for the first real day with Honey Buzzard migration. During this same day we also observed the first (of three) Crested Honey Buzzard for the season. **Honey Buzzard migration finally peaked on May 10th**, when we counted a 'meagre' 33.333 birds. A good number, but not really what we hoped for. Maybe they still went through Bosphorus after all, or perhaps they took a more inland route through Georgia or Azerbaijan. By the time the season came to an end we had a total of only 89.366 Honey Buzzards and unlike autumn it is only the third species in terms of numbers for spring, coming after the phenomenal Black Kite (223.322) and Steppe Buzzard (113.701).

Overall, we can look back on a **very nice and exciting spring season** with a lot of bird highlights. Despite the numbers of some species being (much) lower than we are used to in autumn, we are very happy that **for the first time in BRC history a structured spring count has been conducted and an impressive total of 462.041 raptors were counted.**

Hopefully our follow up pilot spring counts can provide us with even more data and the results of these counts can guide future decisions about continued spring monitoring. It's of course not just the birds that made it so pleasant. The atmosphere in a small group of very enthusiastic counters made it an even more memorable season. Sharing meals, drinks and visions during the entire day, with people from all over the world, makes for an unforgettable experience! Besides, the relatively low numbers this spring, made us realise how truly unique the autumn migration actually is!



Black-winged Kite © Erik Jansen



Sakhalvasho winter wonderland
© Tohar Tal

A new education project

Learning with birds

With the support of **British Birds Charitable Trust (BBCT)** and **Ijsvogelfonds**, BRC started a **new educational project involving schools, teachers and Georgian conservationists**. Although the Batumi Raptor Count has been monitoring the autumn migration for the last 12 years, the project mostly reaches the villages which are close to the count stations. That is why we believe that an educational project is needed to **reach the villages that are further away**, particularly those where intense illegal hunting has been documented before. The project wants to **bring birds into Georgian schools** as one more teaching tool, empowering teachers more in the educational process than in content development. In this way, it is not necessary for the teachers to have previous ornithological knowledge as both them and their students will learn together about birds and nature throughout the project. This is also very enriching and motivating for the students, who see how their own small research on birds also “teaches the teacher”.

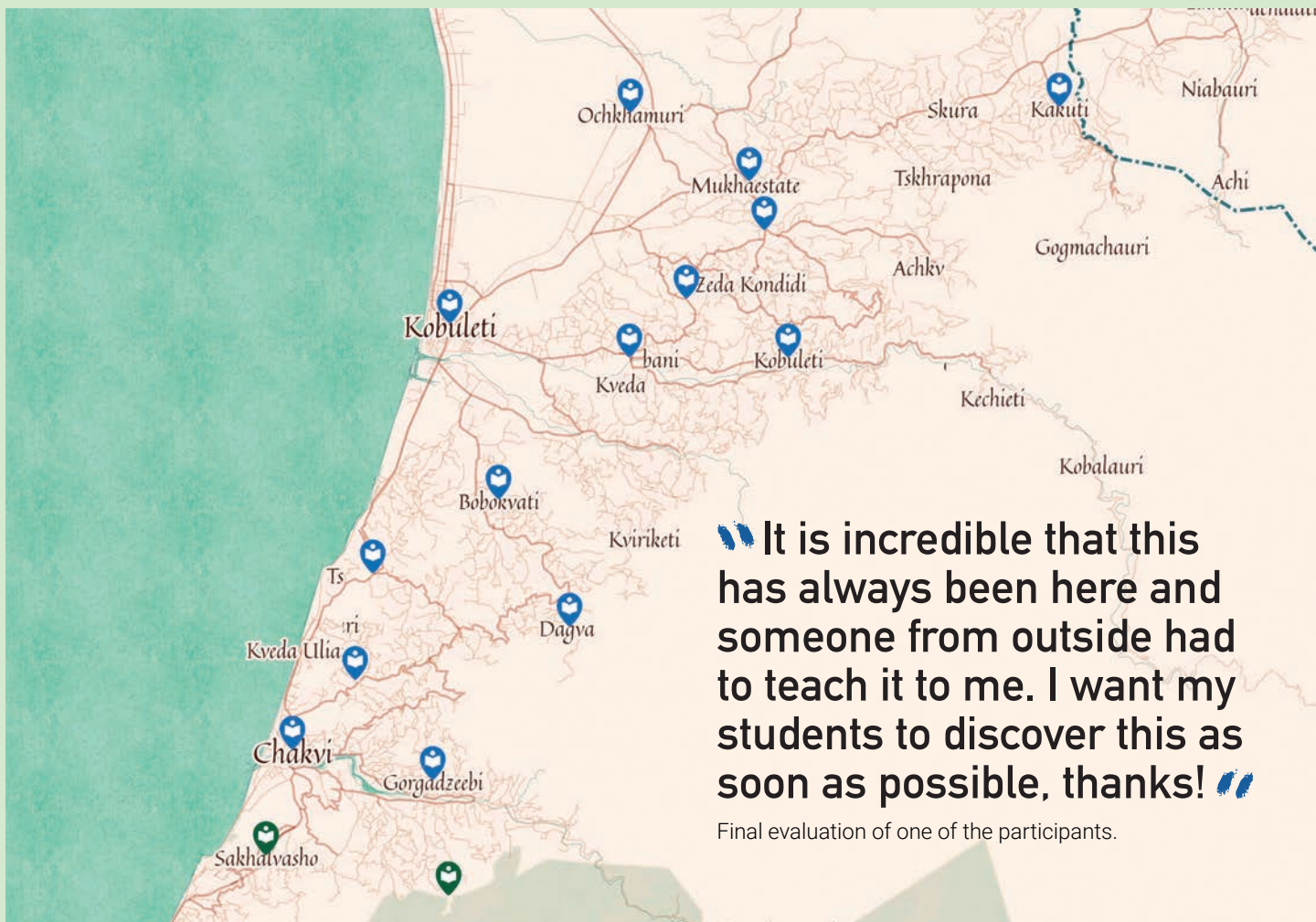
In September 2019 we organized the **first two workshops** with the invaluable help of Madona Gogitidze, head of Kobuleti municipality resource centre, and Elza Markadze, BRC friend since the start of the project and primary school teacher in Sakhalvasho. We gave a small introduction about the importance of the Batumi

bottleneck and its surroundings, so that, teachers are aware of the natural wealth that they have around them and the usefulness of birds as an educational tool. To explore this last point, we carried out a couple of activities with didactic materials already produced, where the teachers evaluated their formats, contents and whether they were really adequate to use in their work. It was fantastic to see the **great acceptance of the workshop** and the motivation of the teachers. After the workshops, the teachers came to **visit Station 1** for a day, where they were guided by local biologists Aslan Bolkvadze and Dachi Shoshitashvili. Here, they were able to observe first-hand the migratory phenomenon and discover both the work of the volunteers in the field and the tourist activity generated. We think it is very important that the teachers experience and recognize the importance of bird migration (and nature in general) in their area. They can then themselves transmit these feelings to their students.

During the following months, we will provide the teachers with an **educational booklet and a calendar** with bird related activities. After the teachers and their students have worked with the material for a while, we will organize **fieldtrips** for all the schools. In the end, we plan to reach out to more schools and youth nature clubs in order to scale up the project.



In this project we have involved 3 Georgians who will run the activities. In the picture, Elza Makaradze explains to the teachers how to use the different materials © Rafa Benjumea



🐦 It is incredible that this has always been here and someone from outside had to teach it to me. I want my students to discover this as soon as possible, thanks! 🐦

Final evaluation of one of the participants.

In total 19 biology teachers from 15 different municipalities participated. As you can see, we covered almost the entire Batumi bottleneck! In blue, villages involved in the educational project. In green, our count stations. © OpenMapTiles



2019: Breaking the Black Kite record

The 12th Batumi Raptor Count launched officially on the 12th of August 2019. We started the count with 8 volunteer counters/coordinators and ultimately **60 volunteers from 18 nationalities**, including a group of 7 young Georgian falconers, joined our monitoring efforts over the course of 70 days.

We started the count 5 days earlier than in previous years to improve our ability to detect phenological changes of migrants. Our experience in the past 11 years of monitoring has shown that in some years we miss some migrants before the count would start on the 17th, while ideally we would start the count more consistently with days of almost no migration at all. We hope to achieve this by extending our count season by 5 days at the beginning. Similarly, this is the first year we have officially extended the count by 5 days, because our recent trend analysis has shown we can further improve our monitoring quality for Short-toed Eagles if we count for a little longer.

Advancing the monitoring period right away showed why doing so is worthwhile. Had we started the count on the 17th, it would have been the best season start ever, as **we already counted over 2000 raptors that day**. Not only raptor numbers were fairly high already, so was the diversity of species, with the first Hen Harrier showing up already on the 17th as well, and another the day after. With the calm mid-August weather, thick cloud cover and the occasional drizzle, **Swift migration** was spectacular as they were flying close over our heads and we could easily hear their wings cut through the thick air. Nothing, however, could prepare us for the **incredible migration of Dragonflies** we experienced on the first 2 days of the count. All over the bottleneck, high and low, these insects were zig-zagging upwards and then – once they had gained enough altitude – all followed a southwesterly trajectory south. A few naked-eye transect counts resulted in an average of **100 dragonflies passing per minute** across a 10 meter transect. As this seemed to occur everywhere in the bottleneck, many hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of these insects must have passed through these days, blanketing the skies in layer upon layer of dragonflies. It was truly a sight to behold!

> **By extending the count, we can improve our monitoring quality for Short-toed Eagles**



Juvenile Short-toed Eagle © Bart Hoekstra



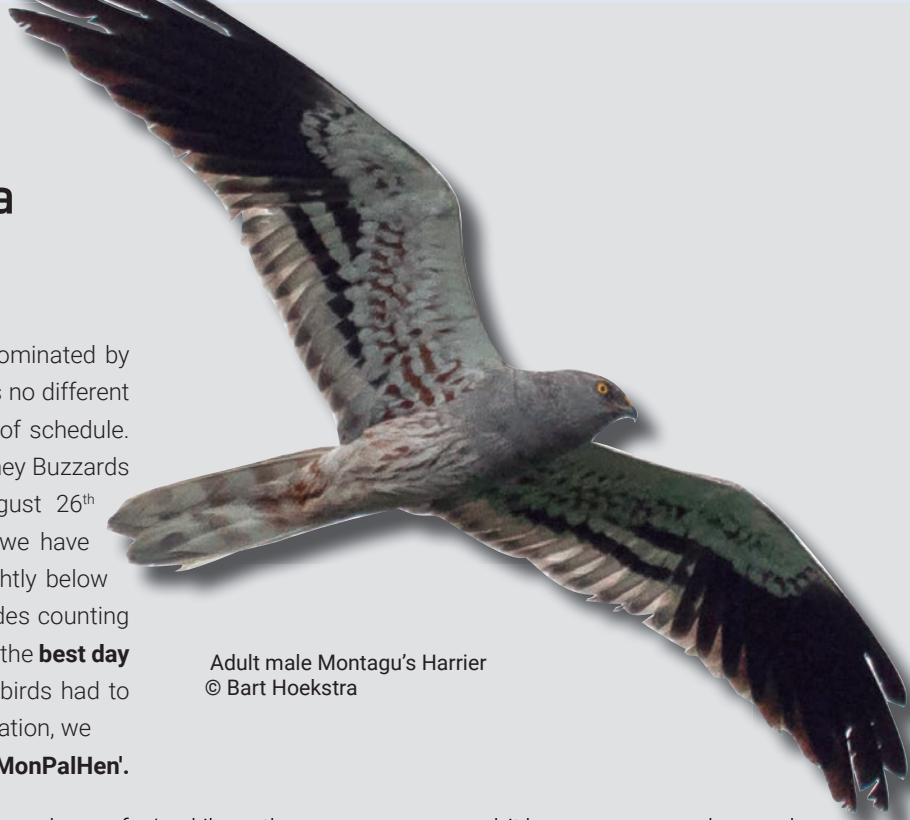
Anax ephippiger © Patrick Weber

for a second time this year



➤ Over 1.500 harriers in a single day

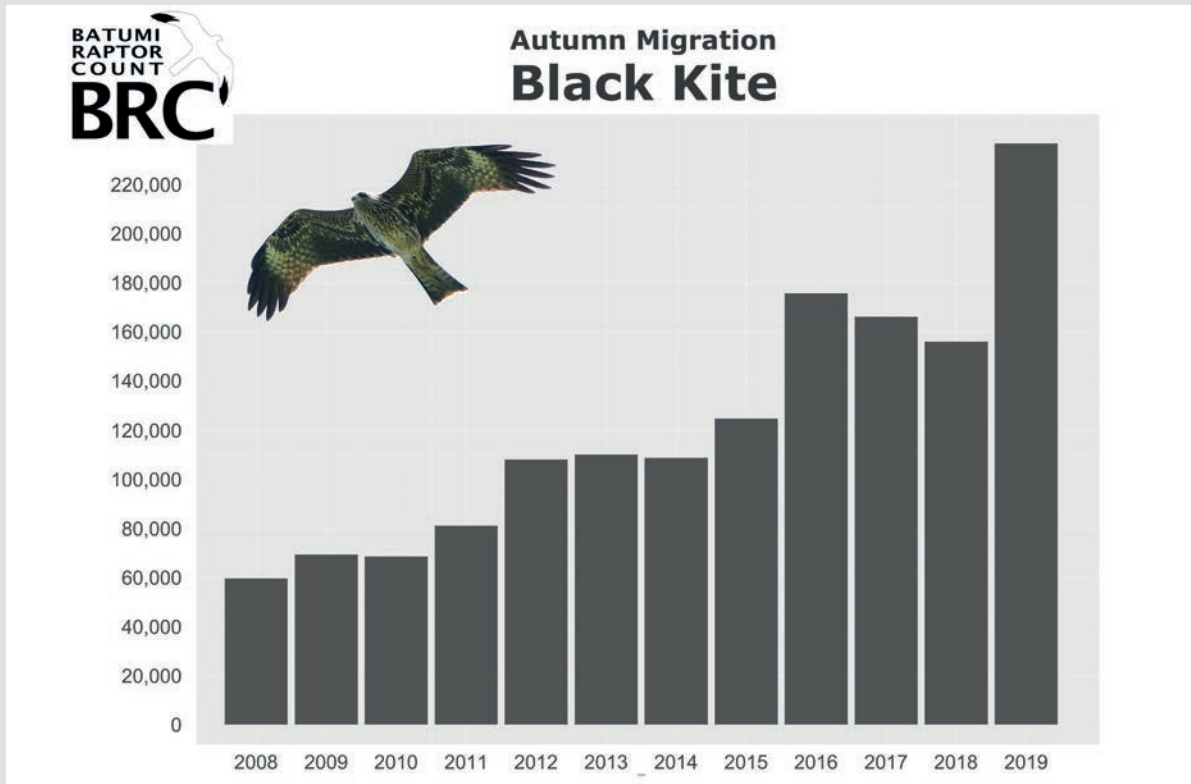
The first weeks of the counts are always dominated by Honey Buzzard migration and this year was no different with their migration occurring a bit ahead of schedule. On August 22nd we had the first 10.000 Honey Buzzards day, after which the species would peak on August 26th already with 75.000 migrants counted. In the end we have counted **513.799 Honey Buzzards** this season, slightly below our ~530.000 season average. On August 24th, besides counting almost 42.000 Honey Buzzards, we also experienced the **best day of harrier migration** in the season. Although many birds had to remain unidentified due to the sheer intensity of migration, we tallied over **600 Montagu's Harriers and almost 900 'MonPalHen'**.



Adult male Montagu's Harrier
© Bart Hoekstra

Besides Honey Buzzards and Montagu's Harriers, numbers of Black Kites were already very high at the end of August. On the 28th of August we had already counted 12.500 migrants, roughly **5 times more than on average by that time** and already 5.000 more than in 2018 when they migrated very early as well. Additionally, we heard from Daniel Berkowic that his tracked **Black Kites were on the move indeed ~1 week earlier** than in other years, which matched exactly with what we were seeing. After a record-breaking number of Black Kites were counted during spring, we were hopeful numbers would be very good this Autumn as well.

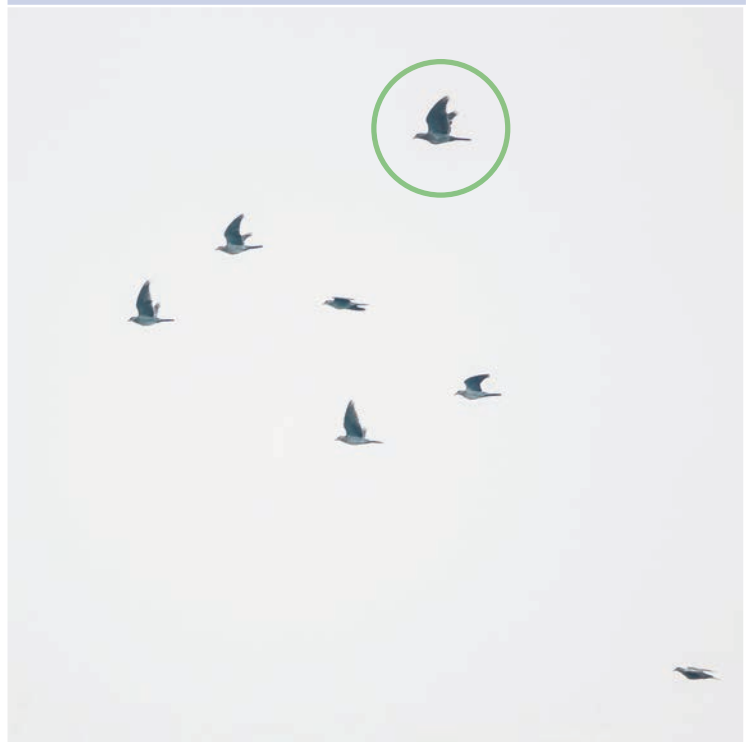
Luckily, as the season progressed, it became more and more clear this was indeed the case. Although no day records were set this season, with just a 'meagre' day **maximum of 20.710 on the 16th** of September (our 7th best day ever), the pace of migration was consistently high and lead up to the incredible total of **239.000 Black Kites this season**. It is hard to imagine that when BRC began monitoring the bottleneck, just over a decade ago, counts of BKs were still well below 100.000 in a season. **The species has more than doubled in number in just 12 years of monitoring!**



➤ More than 200.000 Black Kites!

➤ Oriental Turtle Dove, a newly monitored species

As usual, the last days of August and the first of September are the best to observe **migration of Turtle Doves**. In the past we have had a few 'unofficial' records of migrating Oriental Turtle Doves amongst those, so we have decided to **monitor this species properly** starting this year. August 22nd brought the first of this newly monitored species: an **Oriental Turtle Dove** was found in a flock of teensy-looking European Turtle Doves, passing right in between the two stations. As there is no appreciable difference in size between European Turtle Doves in a flock (i.e. you would not be able to agree on which bird is biggest), the sudden presence of a Turtle Dove in the flock that is certainly much (~30%) bigger, indicates one should have a careful look at the flock. **The darker appearance and jizz of a Stock Dove are supportive of the identification of Oriental Turtle Dove.** Without direct comparison with other Turtle Doves in a flock, e.g. if a single bird is seen, it is probably impossible to identify the species in the bottleneck without really detailed photos. We are planning to **write a short note on these observations**, as we are aware that these sightings are quite unexpected. In the end, we found a total of **7 Oriental Turtle Doves this season.**



Oriental Turtle Dove on top of a flock of Turtle Doves
© Juho Jolkkonen

Escaping the cocoon

by Filip T'Jollyn

My tenth year off to Batumi. I skipped 2011. Still don't know why. Nine years already I came to count for the project, never a whole season, but many times more than a month. Addicted to the clicking, the birds, seeing back and making new international friends, reuniting with my Sakhalvasho-family, *Sakartvelophil*, refining my skills in avoiding chacha, refining my skills in ID-ing raptors, *Jean Leblanc & Marche arrière*, still trying to find a really good Georgian wine, working on my Georgian list,



But they were also nine safe and peaceful years in the counter-cocoon. Working nine to five (actually sunrise to sunset), with food served on regular times, awaiting orders on the station: 'Can you count this stream please?'... 'Of course I can', I'd answer and I would start clicking while in the meantime dreaming away about anything and everything. When things would inevitably get messy, you'd just call the count coordinator, look at him/her with puppy-eyes and wait for their great solution. When migration is slow and it's hot and your eyes are sooo tired, just take a nap, the coordinator will keep an eye on that one Marsh Harrier that is flapping through. When the count is over you would just go downhill, take a shower and sit down with a beer (or two) and a bag of chips (or two) until dinner is served. After dinner Green Café, and after Green Café check the station-list and drop down in bed... Mmmmh, this really sounds like holiday almost doesn't it?

And then, in a moment of temporary insanity during a BRC meeting, where the energy and love for the project can reach high peaks (with alcohol as catalyst), I decided that after nine years of holidays, I maybe should stop running away from proper responsibilities and go for it: Mister Coordinator. I regretted this decision already the day after, of course, and even more when mid-September came closer. The last week I had nightmares, woke up in wet sheets due to heavy sweating and I started to make a plan to fake a sudden disease for which I would have to cancel my trip.

Since I am a very bad faker, I found myself on a train between Tbilisi and Batumi on the 20th of September 2019.

Bart, Pia and David were steering the ship at the time I arrived, while Triin had just left. From the first evening on, I got educated in coordinatorship. Uploading the data, charging the palmtops, checking the data in the Excel-sheets, saving the checked data in the right file on Dropbox, checking the data on Trektellen, writing some comments about the weather and the count, and adding the names of the counters. Making the station lists for the day after, 'Who's having day-off?' And then making the lunch lists for the next day as well: 'Who's vegetarian, gluten-free, lactose-free, Iranian,...' 'Take it to Ruslan!'. 'Who's staying at Elza's? Who's arriving new?, Who's leaving?'. 'Ah, we need a party!' 'Black-winged Kite today... there must be a Facebook post...' In the background you hear the laughing of the counters from the terrace... with their beers... and chips... 'Are there still enough sheets for the weather?', 'We need an eagle-presentation', 'We definitely need a guitar! Ruslan's birthday is coming.' 'We need another party!'

First day on the station. Under the wings of the routinés of course. First strange thing: no clicker in my hand... 'No no, you are not counting... you make them count.' Another strange thing: a walkie-talkie in my hand instead... 'Station 1, this is Station 2... Nono, sorry,

I am Station 1...' All the landmarks became even more important. Discussing streams, kettles, single counts, double counts, clouds, ... 'Didn't you know that from all the years you came here before?'... 'Uhh, no... I was safely in my cocoon deliberately ignoring all these messy things :-p'. Educated on Station 1, first day Station 2. The zone between the stations (which is discussed the most over the walkie-talkies) was now in the west instead of the east. A complete mess! Me: 'We are counting a nice stream in our east 2', Station1: 'Are you sure?' Me: 'Yes... Oh f*\$£!... No, in our west 2'...

I want to go home!!! I really, really wanted to. What a mistake I made, I thought. Give me a clicker and let me be in peace! Completely stressed out and exhausted I finally fell asleep and had my first good night of sleep that night.

I woke up as reborn. Getting the hang of the whole administrative system, feeling that the practical coordination became smoother and smoother and the most important thing of all, having the best team ever to work with, made everything fall into place. I was ready for the big day to come. And it came!

September 29. After the rain had stopped, the Steppe-Buzzard-highway opened up over Station 2. I, coordinating on Station 1, was happy that we only had to clean up the bits that fell of the table and were nicely in control, while in the meantime we were able to enjoy the spectacle over at Station 2. But shortly after that, things started to change. Streams came closer to our station and we had to take over a large part of the count. It was simply amazing! No time to stress, no time to hesitate, just running around the station like a chicken without a head, 'You count this stream!', 'Stop counting here!', 'You do species!', 'Give me your clicker'... No more question marks, only exclamation marks! 'Palmtoppppp!!!!' At some moment we took over everything from Station 2 as it was not possible anymore to divide the streams between the stations. Pure adrenaline! And we did so well! Thank you Bart for the perfect communication from the other side! Such a huge day and then being able to walk down the stairs after the count with a feeling that we were in control. It felt so good! 120.000 raptors and I saw them all. That's the advantage of coordinating: you get to see them all. As a counter, on these big days, you are stuck with your stream, clicking totals, doing species or ID-ing eagles. What a different experience!

From that day on, it was smooth surfing until the end of the count. No regrets anymore. On the contrary: happy that I pushed my boundaries. But I was so lucky to have the best team ever! So motivated to count, so motivated to party and so so motivated to count after the party!

Didi madloba to everybody!

The start of September marks the start of the most species-diverse period of migration in Batumi. Unsurprisingly, this is the time of the **Batumi Bird Festival**, bringing many visitors to the watchpoints and giving us the opportunity to share our count results. Like last year, at that time we were also joined by a group of **Georgian falconers and local supervisors** who participated in the count and took part in the Bird Festival activities. We hope that such programmes, organised together with the local branch of **Fauna & Flora International**, will show the local youngsters the importance of monitoring and inspire them to expand their knowledge of raptor identification, migration and conservation. The fact that **half of the boys from last year's camp returned** this year, shows it's already happening.

The mornings during the Bird Festival were comparatively slow for that time of the year. This period is usually when we expect to see good migration of Montagu's Harriers, but **this year the species almost disappeared from the bottleneck after the peak on August 24th**. Migrating Turtle Doves, Rollers and Marsh Harriers kept our eyes fixed to the skies, but we were a little disappointed to have so few harriers at this time in the season. The resulting lack of adrenaline in the mornings was at least made up for by some **early eagles in the afternoons**, such as the second earliest Imperial Eagle on August 29th, occasional Steppe and Lesser Spotted Eagles and very early Greater Spotted. Meanwhile **Crested Honey Buzzards** could be found in streams of European Honey Buzzards, Egyptian Vultures and Ospreys pass at their own leisure, all the while turning heads of many counters and tourists. Add to that the increasing species diversity and very high



Young falconers at BRC © Triin Kaasiku

proportions of Black Kites amongst the streams of Honey Buzzards and there was plenty on offer to challenge absolutely everyone on station. Especially September 10th was a difficult day, when messy streams in between the stations kept counters busy from the first till the last second of the count, despite comparatively 'few' birds (about 25.000 raptors). On some days lunch had to be skipped... **The day after we passed both the 500.000 Honey Buzzards and the 100.000 Black Kites milestones this season.**



No time for lunch, but always time for an after-count beer © Ron Lawie

Despite quite a few days with adverse conditions for migration (rain showers, strong winds), migration kept going strong in the middle of September. At any point in time Black Kites were being counted somewhere around both stations, Booted Eagles were following the coastal highway and a continuous passage of Marsh Harriers kept counters focused. The 14th marked **the start of Steppe Buzzard migration** with 3300 birds counted by Station 2 and on the 18th, we could log the **first Common Cranes for the season**. Contrary to 2018, Booted Eagle numbers were consistently high at this point in the season, which would lead up to another more-or-less normal year again for this species.

A little earlier than expected we already had **the first big eagle day on the 19th of September**. After a very slow start to the day and no clouds over the mountains to push the birds towards the coast, we had low expectations for the rest of the day. That all changed mid-afternoon when clouds started to develop rapidly. In a mere few hours, both stations combined counted 807 large eagles, with already fairly **high numbers of Greater Spotted**. The next day brought far less eagles, but a long-desired new species to the bottleneck. Inside the streams of Black Kites and large eagles west of Station 1 was a much smaller, almost fluttery, bird: a **Black-winged Kite!** After the spring counters found one earlier this year, this constitutes the **3rd record for the country** and the **first one for the BRC autumn counts**, being the 36th raptor species observed in the bottleneck. With the recent expansion of this species in the south, we are looking forward to record more in upcoming years.

➤ Black-winged Kite!!!



Station 1 slowly "glupsing" © Elien Hoekstra



1st Black-winged Kite for BRC, 36th raptor species for our monitoring © Tohar Tal

1 million raptors!

The following days were relatively uneventful, but migration showed no sign of stopping and passing the one million raptors mark started to come within reach.

The manageable pace of migration even let us find a few color-ringed birds (see pages 20-21). Except for harriers, Black Kites, small falcons and sparrowhawks, most raptors in the Batumi bottleneck tend not to migrate on days with intense rain, resulting in a 'build-up' of birds to our north. As Steppe Buzzards are expected to peak at the end of September or the beginning of October, a rainy day on the 28th of September is a sign for an interesting day ahead when rains finally stop. Little did we know what we were in for... On the morning of the 29th, when the rains finally stopped, counters at Station 2 quickly realised they were in for a treat. Steppe Buzzards had an 'en masse' appearance from

the bottom of the valleys, circling around like (flying) ants, and clearly arriving in full force. For the rest of the day, a stream of almost 100% Steppe Buzzards was pounding in Station 2's east, tallying up to a 'very reasonable' 84.000 individuals by the end of the day. Interspersed were good numbers of eagles already, but looking to the west – the sector of Station 1 – it was clear something entirely different was going on there. While Station 1 counted far lower numbers of Steppe Buzzards (still a respectable 28.000) that day, eagles more than made up for it. By the end of the day they had counted an incredible 1.734 large eagle sp., 452 Lesser Spotted, 19 Greater Spotted, 15 Steppe Eagles and 460 Short-toed Eagles. With a total of 3.071 birds out of a total of over 125.887, it was our **second highest ever day count of large eagles.**



➤ 29th September, the second highest ever day count of large eagles

Just one 'big day' away from passing the million, hopes were high for good Steppe Buzzard migration the next day. Well, they delivered. Despite the cloudless blue skies, a massive stream in the far east from sunrise onwards was enough to count the last few 10.000s of raptors needed **to pass the million** in just a few hours. Interspersed, but mostly much closer to Station 2 were — once again — over 1.600 large eagles. Amongst those were also high numbers of Short-toed Eagles, giving a good 'push' to what would become the best year for the species so far with 2.082 migrants counted. On the 29th and 30th of September combined, more than 5.100 large eagles passed through the bottleneck. Only once before (October 2nd, 2014) have we counted more eagles in such a short period of time...



Juv LSE
© Rafa Benjumea



Color-ring sightings

The increasing of cameras on the stations increases the number of ring sightings

Despite counting over a million raptors every autumn, and carefully observing a fair share of those, it remains surprisingly difficult to find color-ringed, wingmarked or GPS tracked birds in the vast streams of raptors passing the bottleneck. In 2018 we recorded the first wing-marked Black Kite that we could positively link to an individual, check the complete story on the 2018 BRC Magazine, out of a dozen or so that must have passed through or close to the bottleneck somewhere (Daniel Berkowic, unpublished data).

In 2019, we have done exceptionally well with no less than 4 documented observations of 'project' birds. Two concerned Lesser Spotted Eagles, one from Estonia (no further details) and another from Poland.

The increasing use of cameras on the counting stations will probably result in an increase in the number of color-ring sightings in the upcoming years. The Polish Lesser Spotted Eagle, for example, was only discovered when going through thousands of photos from this season (and we still have thousands more). Often the migration on station is so intense for counters, there is simply no time to observe birds carefully enough to notice them, so a lucky photographer has a good chance of finding unnoticed rings!

➤ U3P, Juvenile Black Stork from Ukraine

Besides the raptors, two juvenile Black Storks graced us with a close flyby, which let us make photos of one individual which happened to carry a ring that could be read easily.

This bird was ringed on July 3rd, 2019 just south of the Belarusian border in northwest Ukraine.



© Philip Elbek

➤ Lesser Spotted Eagle W22

Makhambet



© Bart Hoekstra

This bird was ringed on the 17th of July 2018 as a nestling in the eastern part of Poland.

This was the first resighting for this project east of the breeding grounds, probably as the majority migrates south through the Bosphorus.

➤ “Bojec” from Russia to Egypt through Batumi

A juvenile Greater Spotted Eagle with a metal clip ring and what appeared to be a GPS transmitter, flew over Station 2 on October 8th around 1pm.

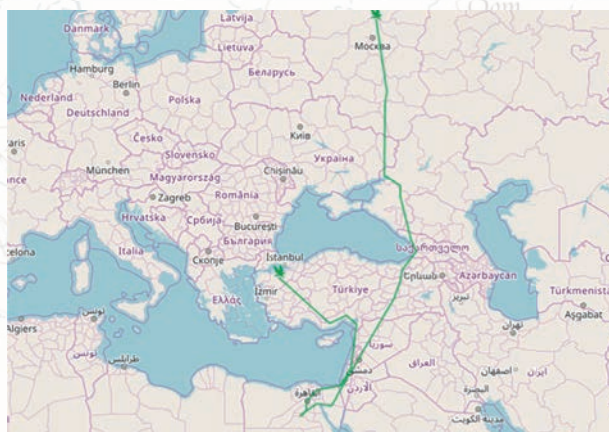
Though we could not read the ring, based on the GPS locations and corresponding timestamps transmitted in the vicinity, we could link this to an individual named ‘Bojec’ with close to 100% certainty. Bojec hatched and was ringed on the 25th of July 2019, in a location around 100km north of Moscow. It has subsequently spent the winter in Egypt and Israel and can even be followed online.

See how on its way back to the breeding grounds, Bojec is going through the western coast of the Black Sea.

You can see its trip online on gps.aquila-it.pl/en



© Bart Hoekstra



The following days could best be described as **'the silence after the storm'**, so we were thankful the EuroBirdwatch was scheduled to add some variety to our daily rhythm.

However, songbirds which had been flying numerous throughout the season, failed to perform on the 5th and 6th of October. Some eagles, a nice **cinnamon-type Crested Honey Buzzard** and a dense flock of 22 Arctic Skuas over the Black Sea were the clear EuroBirdwatch highlights for this year.

From the 10th of October migration started to pick up again. Around that time species composition switched from mostly Lesser Spotted to mostly Greater Spotted, Steppe Eagles and a few Imperials, a very interesting period to practice your identification skills. Surprisingly enough, at this time in the season there are almost no tourists, even though the quality of observation is probably higher than at any other point in the season. Three days later eagle diversity peaked when an immature **Golden Eagle was seen on Station 2**. This is a rare observation in the bottleneck, with the last birds recorded during our 2014 count. After rain on the 12th, a great day on the 13th, usually a 'slow' day is next, so only logically half our team decided to take a day off. But then... well, we will let the Trektellen comments do the talking...

On October 16th, which used to be the last day of the count, a sudden appearance of a bank of sea fog in the bottleneck was followed by a similarly unexpected appearance of both a juvenile **Cinereous Vulture** and an adult male Crested Honey Buzzard. The vulture was only our sixth record for the species and the Crested was the latest individual ever recorded. The final 5 days of the count saw increasing numbers of Long-legged Buzzard, but were generally quite uneventful. However slow in terms of numbers, with a fantastic team so finely attuned to each other, the daily rhythm of migration and the count, true boredom ceases to exist and the slow days continue to fly past. Meanwhile, music is playing from the stations, birds are observed with even more intense appreciation and plans for future visits are made. To top it all off we symbolically passed the **300.000 Steppe Buzzards** on the last day of the count, October 21st.

Ultimately, we finished the first officially extended season with – amongst many other highlights – record-shattering numbers of Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles and Common Cranes, and some of the biggest days for large eagles we have ever recorded. **A big thanks to all participants, sponsors and our local host families for making this another successful year.**

Trektellen.nl. October 13th

~ Station 1

Despite the fact that the weather was not looking very promising for proper migration conditions, the day turned out to be quite enjoyable. With Station 2 being slightly understaffed and with the eagle migration in full swing. We were dealing with the breadcrumbs that fell off the birdfeeder. If those breadcrumbs contain adult Imperial Eagle together with (it's?) juvenile, a Griffon Vulture, a White-tailed Eagle, Cranes and another possible Golden Eagle, then being a ground dweller is not so bad after all.

~ Station 2

Very slow morning. A Krüper's Nuthatch posed beautifully on top of a bush on station and we prematurely called it the highlight of the day. Many people took a day off expecting nothing but some annoying Stinky Bugs. They should have known better. This is Batumi!!! After a few hours an overhead eagle-catwalk unfolded and we could hardly 'wow' enough to give appropriate appreciation for every close encounter. Recordbreaking 70 Steppe Eagles (former day-record was 61), multiple juvenile Imperials, 2 adult Imperials, 2 White-Tailed Eagles, a Griffon Vulture, Greater Spotted Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Jean Leblancs (Short-toed Eagles, red.)... The quality of today's observations will be very difficult to top. What. A. Day!!



Dark morph adult male Marsh Harrier
© Bart Hoekstra

“ During the 12th edition of the Batumi Raptor Count we have counted 1.138.915 raptors in 1.462 hours (both stations combined) ”

Why do we count birds?

BRC data reveals recent changes in numbers and demography of migrant raptors

It cost us proverbial blood, sweat and tears, but following a hefty review process, we are incredibly proud that in 2019, our research paper on recent trends in the raptor migration at Batumi was accepted for publication in the world-leading ornithology journal *Ibis*. It was even included in a special issue of *Ibis* on Avian Migration and Movement. In this study, **we analyse recent trends in the abundance, demography and timing of 8 key species** over 8 years of standardised autumn counts (2011-2018). Even though this is a relatively short study period for monitoring, the high quality of the BRC dataset already provided enough statistical power to detect moderate changes in numbers and timing for most of our target species.

On the whole, **our study mostly suggests good news for raptor populations** migrating along the eastern Black Sea coast, since the adult passage of most species has remained relatively stable or has slightly increased over the years. For one species, Black Kite, we even found a remarkable strong upward trend of roughly 10% per year over the study period. In fact, while we recorded fewer than 100.000 kites at the start of the study period, this number had increased to around 170.000 by 2018. Following the publication of our trends paper, the number has only continued to grow, and exceeded 200.000 for the first time in autumn 2019!

So far, the increase of Black Kites seems to be driven mainly by an increase in the passage of non-juveniles, and a much weaker increase in juvenile numbers, suggesting the population is increasing due to high survival rather than high reproductive rates. In our research paper we hypothesize that this high survival is enabled by kites switching to novel wintering sites north of the Sahara, more specifically garbage dumps in the Middle East, where the winter population has grown rapidly in recent years. This idea seems to be supported by the fact that wing-tagged and satellite-tracked kites from Israel frequently migrate to Russia via Batumi, as we also reported in our 2018 magazine.

It is not all good news, however, as **for both Booted Eagle and Montagu's Harrier our counts suggest worrying declines in juvenile numbers**. These declines were largely masked by relatively stable adult counts, and at the moment we can only speculate about the possible reasons for these declines. However, the fact we were able to detect these juvenile declines also **emphasizes the importance of ageing birds at migration watch-sites**; something which -surprisingly- is not standard practice at many other observatories. In addition, our study also revealed that

there is still a lot to be learned about East African-Eurasian raptor populations in general. For example, **our counts of adult Honey Buzzards are equivalent to 119-179% of the official global population estimate**, proving that there is a lack of high-quality monitoring data for this and likely other species in the eastern flyway, and thus emphasizing how the **Batumi Raptor Count is providing critical data for the region**.

To make sure that you, the hundreds of volunteers and supporters that have made this research possible, can easily access these and other detailed results we have published an easily digestible summary of raptor trends and conclusions on the BRC website. Moreover, both the research paper in *Ibis* and the previously published data paper in *Zookeys* **are available for free**.

We have now established a firm benchmark for monitoring migrant raptor populations in the East African-Eurasian flyways and we are confident that with the help of our dedicated volunteers and kind members, the **BRC will continue to be an important barometer for decades to come**.

Accounting for differential migration strategies between age groups to monitor raptor population dynamics in the eastern Black Sea flyway

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Migration counts can offer a cost-effective method for monitoring the state of migrant raptor populations. However, differential migration strategies between inexperienced juveniles and experienced non-juveniles are rarely accounted for when inferring population trends from raptor migration counts. Since 2011, the Batumi Raptor Count (BRC) monitors the autumn migration of more than 1 million raptors along the eastern Black Sea coast in the Republic of Georgia. We also systematically sampled age-specific linear trends in abundance between 2011 and 2018 for eight focal species and the potential for assess differential migration timing between age groups and estimate age-specific linear trends in abundance between 2011 and 2018 for eight focal species and the potential for (1) to reassess the global relevance of BRC counts for each species and the potential for monitoring abundance of juveniles and non-juveniles, and (2) to identify demographic changes underlying recent trends in overall abundance. We found that the mean annual passage of non-juveniles at Batumi represents at least 1% of the estimated global breeding population of five study species. As expected, counts of juveniles were more variable than counts of non-juveniles. Yet despite our short monitoring period our models had sufficient statistical power to detect changes in abundance of 10%/year or less for at least one age group in all species except Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. We also found strong and significant increases in the abundance of Black Kites *Milvus migrans* and Short-toed Eagles *Circus gularis* that were primarily due to increasing numbers of non-juveniles. By contrast, juvenile Montagu's Harriers *Circus pygargus* and Booted Eagles *Hieraeetus pennatus* significantly decreased in abundance. The first decade of BRC surveys offers an important benchmark for monitoring raptor populations using the eastern African-Paleartic flyway in the 21st century. We discuss possible causes of the observed trends and hope our work will stimulate demographic monitoring at migration count sites.

Keywords: citizen science, migration count, monitoring, phenology, population trends.

Many raptors circumvent large water bodies and other barriers and follow topographical leading lines during long-distance migration. This causes large seasonal aggregations of migrant raptors at so-called geographical convergence zones or bottlenecks (Kerlinger 1989, Zalles & Bildstein 2000). Such aggregations are especially common among broad-winged soaring migrants with a strong preference to migrate over land, such as buzzards and eagles (Porter & Beaman 1985, Leshem & Yom-Tov 1996).

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Financial year report

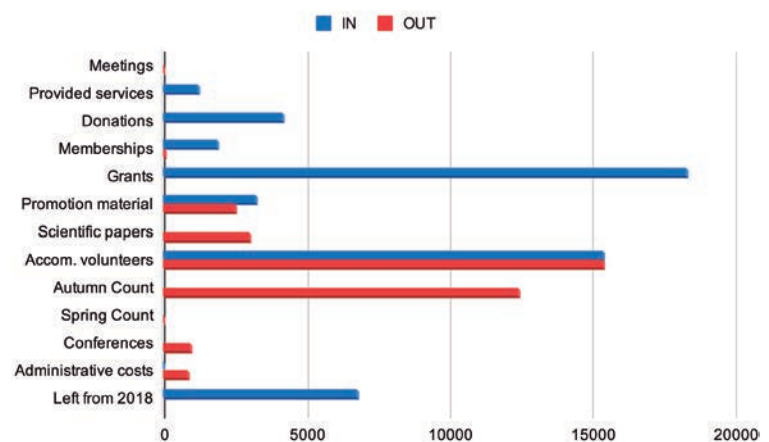
Hereby we present our financial year overview of 2019. Most of our budget was of course spent on running the **yearly autumn count**. Additionally, budget was spent on the publication costs (open access fees, color figures, etc.) for our two research papers in **Zookeys** and **Ibis**. We presented the results of these papers on several meetings and conferences, one of which was the international bird observatory conference (IBOC) in Eilat. With **three accepted speakers** (Dries Engelen, Triin Kaasiku and Aslan Bolkvadze), we were given generous time to talk about our work in the Batumi Bottleneck. A large part of the travel and accommodation costs was covered by the organization while the remaining fee was covered by ourselves.

Our income partly came from **successful grant applications**, such as the last installment of the **NLBIF grant**. As well as grants received from the **Ijsvogelfonds** (Vogelbescherming Nederland & de Nationale Postcode Loterij) and the **British Bird Charitable Trust** (BBCT) to work on our new education project (see pages 8-9). Unfortunately most of the planned activities for this new project have to be delayed due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, but we will make sure that the grants are saved and used for the exact same purposes in 2021. Another large part of our income was generated by the support of our **loyal members and generous donors** and we would like to take the opportunity once again **to thank everyone for this**. This support is crucial for us to keep running the count and other activities on a yearly basis.

If you have ideas to increase our income to fund the long-term monitoring, please contact us. Your help is much appreciated and important for the project. board@batumiraptorcount.org



Coordinators looking for funding © Axelle Denis



Current Balance 15.805€

Thanks also to the following sponsors for supporting us in 2019



Hans, ecotourist n°1

Hans Henrik Schou has been one of the most loyal ecotourists during the BRC counts and he is often jokingly called 'ecotourist n°1'. He also joined the BRC as a counter once, but he mostly enjoys coming together with his other Danish friends, like Steen, to enjoy the migration at their own pace. They always stay with the same host family in Sakhalvasho and by doing so they have been **very supportive to them** over the last years. Hans will mostly sit on the side of the station, never blocking the view of counters, where he and his friends have their own mini count. At the end of the day he then compares the numbers of their count with the ones from the BRC team. Another way to recognize Hans on station is that **he often wears blue**, his favourite color. Once, in 2014, this came in very handy actually as we tried to have as many counters on station to wear something blue so we could attract more Rollers to set the record count for this species. He borrowed his cap and other items, and with succes, because the **Roller record of 2014 still stands!** After all these years of loyal support we would like to put Hans in the spotlight once.

When did you first visit Georgia?

In 2010 I was a counter for BRC in Kazbegi. It was a subproject from the counts in Sakhalvasho, organised by Brecht Verhelst. From our watchpoint we had a fantastic view of Mount Kazbeg. We saw a lot of Pallid Harriers. Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and Peregrine Falcon were local birds.

Why do you come to Sakhalvasho every year?

The raptor migration here is amazing! The numbers of birds is incredible. Seeing up to 80.000 raptors in an day gives you a special feeling. Also the biodiversity is fantastic. In Batumi you see the western species and the eastern species like Steppe Eagle, Pallid Harrier and Steppe Buzzard. I also like the view, the village and the people here. In Bourgas in Bulgaria you have to hire a car because the sea breeze moves the raptors into the mountains in the afternoon. In Sakhalvasho you can just walk up to platform and enjoy amazing migration the whole day! If it's not raining...

👉 A close Pallid Harrier gets me excited! 👈



Station dress code for the Roller record in 2014 © Hans Schou

I think that you appeared in Sakhalvasho already in 2011?

Yes, I decided to come on my own to Sakhalvasho in September. Brecht organised a homestay in the village and Nuri picked me up at the airport. Driving through Sakhalvasho we passed a house where 3 birdwatchers looked at raptor migration from the balcony. Nuri said "tourist" and pointed at them. This actually means that I was not the first ecotourist in the village. The ecotourism was just beginning but it worked. My first homestay was not good. I got a strange dinner the first evening. The next morning the breakfast was the same as the dinner! I thought what is happening? That year I was all alone with the counters on station. The raptor migration was amazing and the counters were friendly and open to me and I had a perfect time. In 2012 things started to change. Many birdwatchers came to Batumi and the Batumi Bird Festival.

What are your favourite birds here?

The Booted Eagle is one of my favourites. Watching 700-800 a day of these birds with their fast wingbeats is amazing. Also a close Pallid Harrier gets me excited.

How is it to visit Sakhalvasho as an ecotourist?

The life as an ecotourist is perfect! I'm free to visit Station 1 or 2 depending of the weather. I usually visit the village with a Danish group, our homestay is perfect and we are living quite close with the family with very good Georgian food. During some years there was not much space at Station 1, when the shelter was broken down. Also the high vegetation made it difficult to follow and identify eagles in the east. These problems are solved now with the new platform. I also enjoy to see the counters working hard and having fun and building friendships together.

What do you think about the new platform at Station 1?

The new platform is nearly perfect! The view is fantastic and there is space for 100 ecotourists plus the counters. Of course, it would be nice if the new toilets could work. On top there is a small construction failure also, which make that the water cannot disappear. Some of these things are being improved now luckily.

How is the communication between counters and ecotourists?

I know the counters are busy, but sometimes it could be better. When we shout down to the counters that a special species passed and they don't react. Also, it would be nice with some more information from the coordinators and counters.

Can you describe one of your best migration days here?

September 24th, 2017, was fantastic. The day before the temperature decreased from 30° to 18°C with rain and thunder. I was on my way back from Svaneti with my friend Lars Paaby. The next morning, it was heavy rain and very cloudy. As soon as the rain stopped the first Pallid Harriers passed. By the time I came to Station 1, already 23 Pallids had passed! The migration continued with up to 7 Pallids in a flock. Unfortunately, afternoon rain slowed down the migration but in the end we saw 292 Pallids this day.

Without the rain we may have counted 500 this day. At least in my fantasy. For me it was a once in a lifetime! Although, September 29th, this year, with clouds on Station 2 pushing over 2.200 large eagles passed and 460 Short-toed Eagles to Station 1, was also incredible! That day, 12 juvenile Steppe Eagles passed above and below us.

What do you think about the poaching?

Well...the migration here is superb. In a way I can detach from the poaching. However, some years ago we saw some awful shooting west of Station 1. A Booted Eagle fell down to the earth and beat with its wings half dead. The poacher kicked the bird and the bird died. Awful! I know from the counters that the numbers of shots seems to be decreasing year after year. Maybe the poachers moved or perhaps they stopped poaching. We can only hope!

How do you see the development in the village since 2011?

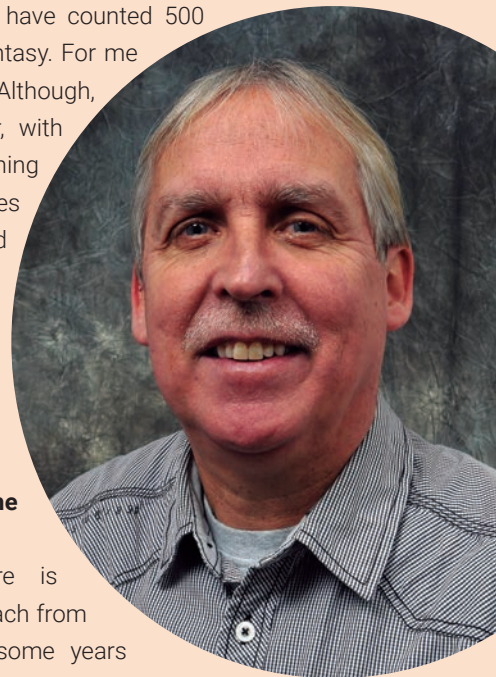
When I came in 2011, the road through Sakhalvasho was very bad and the accommodation in some of the homestays was very poor. Already in 2012 the road was fixed and slowly but steadily, some of the homestays got new bathrooms and toilets. These things are big improvements for us ecotourists. From 2015 the first homestays also had wi-fi which was another step up. I am still dreaming of a new place to watch migration from Station 2. A place that is easy to reach with a normal car also.

After all these years you must have some special memories?

During 2011-13, I had a lot of fun with the French group. In the late afternoon, a football match BRC vs. Sakhalvasho children was arranged at the school. Simon Cavaillès was very good at the midfield and Florian Jacob was a spectacular striker! The Batumi Festival Party in September 2012 is a special memory for me also.

Thank you Hans for this interview. Do you have some last words?

Thanks to all BRC staff for information about phenology. I wish to thank Brecht Verhelst and Lela Bolkvadze for helping me out with my first stays in the village. Also thanks to the counters and coordinators for data every day before Trektellen was established. I'm grateful to Aki Aintila, David Erterius, Jasper Wehrmann, Johannes Jansen, Rafa Benjumea, Dries Engelen and Simon Cavaillès for helping me out with transportation to Station 2 and general information. Finally I'm very thankful also to John Wright and Phillippe Malenfert for help with raptor identification.



Why the kites call?

by Barbara De Coninck

When God created the living creatures, he fixed a rule for them all: “From time to time you have to give me your children.” He demanded children also from the kites. The kites themselves begged: “If only you do not take away our children from us, in return we are prepared not to drink water in *ardadegi*”¹

The Lord heard them, and he did not start taking away their nestlings; but during the days of *ardadegi*, when the most intense heat sets in, he does not let them drink. The kites mill about and call. They sit down right by the water, and they are tormented by thirst, but they cannot drink.

That is why the people say, “what are you shouting for, like a kite in July?”²

Georgian Legend

Juvenile Black Kite © Thomas Cansse

¹ *Ardadegi* is the month following the day of the summer solstice. According to the Georgian variants: (1) the kite did not come in contact with water when God created him and for that reason, he lives only on dew and calls 'mtskuria', which means 'I am thirsty' / (2) when Noah let the kite out of the ark to ascertain the proximity of land, the kite did not return and for that reason, he is accursed and calls 'I am thirsty' / (3) water seems like blood to the kite / (4) water seems to him like pus. The call 'I am thirsty' is heard in July and August.

All of these variants are recorded in Guria and Imeretia.

According to the fourth variant, the kite had three young ones which grew up, attacked the mother who had brought them up and wanted to choke her. Getting angry, God forbade the kites to drink water on the plain. Since that time all kinds of water appear to them blood-stained, except when it has stagnated in the hollow of a tree, which is permitted for them to drink at any time.

In: *Georgian Folk Traditions and Legends (Caucasus)*. Compiled, with Foreword and Notes by E. Virsaladze. Translated by D.G. Hunt. Editor Meri Khukhunaishvili-Tsiklauri. Artanuji Publishing, 2018

² *Ibidem*

> The unknown Georgia

There was **something mysterious about Georgia**. It evoked associations with the Kingdom of Colchis, populated in ancient times by numerous Georgian tribes which might have arrived as early as 2.000 years before Christ. Its name spoke of the Argonauts who once upon a time sailed in their gorgeous vessels up to 'Phasis' – in ancient Greek referring to both the Rioni River and the city of Poti. The men were on their way to Mount Homli and to the Colchian court and princess Medea, to get hold of the Golden Fleece.

Prometheus was chained to the Caucasus, with his limbs bound upon the hard rocks by galling fetters of bronze, where he fed with his liver an eagle that ever rushed back to its prey (*Argonautica*)³. He suffered in Western Georgia until Herakles set him free.

Matthew the Apostle preached along the Black Sea Coast, which may explain why Georgia was one of the first nations to embrace Christianity, as it declared it as its State religion already 300 years AC.

Georgia was the land with an alphabet completely of its own, with an ancestral tradition of polyphonic music.

It was the cradle of winemaking: the word 'wine' itself stems from the Georgian word *ghvino* and its origins go back in time as far as 8.000 years. The Georgians invented the *kevri* winemaking method (recognized a monument of intangible cultural heritage by Unesco) with fermentation taking place in very large earthenware vessels with an inside coating of beeswax. The jars were covered with wooden lids at first and then sealed and buried in the ground⁴.

All this was Georgia... mysterious Georgia...

³ David Gorji, *Colchis and the Golden fleece*, edited by Lynne Muelle, Tbilisi, 2017, p. 27.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

საქართველო

"Sakartvelo" is how Georgians call their own country



GEORGIA



But then, after one day spent on the rooftop of Sakhalvasho at the BRC counting station, I threw it all away. Suddenly, Georgia had become nothing but a vast. It was 'down' and birds were 'up'. It had simultaneously shrunken and expanded into Batumi Raptor Count – this was its sole reality. It was a stairway to heaven. It was a spot - a bottleneck and a corridor - on a flyway for an enormous amount of raptors passing either overhead or in the far distance, whirling in kettles, coming over, streaming - either massively or as solitary birds. The jewels of the sky were passing by at dawn (harriers! sparrowhawks! Osprey!), in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, before sunset. They were an ever-turning winged wheel, a very long line, or a daunting squadron. Turning the 'deep harbour' of Batumi upside down and into a formidable airport. It was a never ending grand opera of Europe's finest selection of birds of prey.

“ It was a truly exhilarating and unique experience, a grandiose show ”

My stay as a visiting birder at Batumi Raptor Count lasted for two weeks. I had chosen to witness the final chunk of the autumn count – the famous 'fourth wave' when the Big Boys come through, most commonly Booted Eagle but also Lesser Spotted, Greater Spotted, Steppe, Short-toed, Imperial, White-tailed and Osprey. Sunday September 29, 2019 will always stay in my mind as my favorite birding day ever when an unlikely number of 125.887 raptors were counted on Sakhalvasho and Shuamta alike. I could hardly believe my eyes after I put up my telescope. Raptors were literally everywhere. It was as good and as wild as it gets. It was paradise.

Trektellen.nl

« Boom! Fantastic day for the bottleneck. After slow days with the Greater Caucasus blocked with heavy precipitation, today the Steppe Buzzards finally arrived in full force. For most of the day a stream of almost 100% Steppe Buzzard was pounding in our east, tallying up to 84.000 individuals by the end of the count.” (Shuamta/Station 2/29.09.2019)

A little later, also Station 1 was able to enjoy massive raptor migration. Impressive streams of Steppe Buzzards with hundreds of eagles passed our station kind of everywhere. This amazing day was spiced with a record day for Short-toed Eagles and the biggest large eagle-day ever.”
(Sakhalvasho/Station 1/29.09.2019)

Probably the city of Batumi should pick up its ancient rituals and ceremonies and pledge offerings and gifts to the Gods of the natural world as to honor them for this horn of plenty – unmatched in its extravagance, unique in the whole of Eurasia. The capital of Adjara sits on gold when it comes to ecotourism – Unesco should, just so you know, grant it with a medal for this 'monument of intangible natural heritage'.

“ The capital of Adjara sits on gold when it comes to ecotourism ”

Several crucial issues, however, still need to be addressed. The number one subjects here are the deep-rooted cultural traditions of hunting and trapping in Adjara's Biodiversity Hotspot. Sustained education is needed to mainstream the idea of nature protection in Gorgeous Georgia. In its Natural History gallery the lovely State Museum of Adjara for example still displays 'useful birds' in a showcase which contains samples of Blackbird, Starling, Goldfinch, Cuckoo, Swift, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Calandra Lark, Bohemian Waxwing, Thrush Nightingale, Mistle Thrush, Great Reed Warbler, Eurasian Jay, Brown Shrike, and even a mysterious 'field bird' (*Ornithurae*).

Spending my happy days alongside the counters and coordinators of Batumi Raptor Count, I can only bow deeply in gratitude and awe for their dedication (counting 6 days on 7 for at least two weeks), their seriousness and discipline, their imposing knowledge and their caring attitude. They surely belong to the better version of the *Homo sapiens*. They are not unlike Alexander von Humboldt combining a passion for field biology and science with a special gene for adventure and an interest in conservation ecology.

Batumi Raptor Count is citizen science at its very best. The BRC-database is a Golden Fleece for the XXIst century. It reminds us of the utmost beauty of our wild birds. It clamours the invitation to make kin with them, to care for them as to secure their sustainable protection.

Back in Belgium, I seriously got The Blues.

For days I was milling like a Black Kite.

In turn people asked: "what are you shouting for, like a Kite in July?"

Barbara De Coninck, Antwerp
BRC "Artsiri" Member

Membership



© Filiep T'Jollyn

Where your fee goes to:

Membership fees contribute directly to raptor conservation in Batumi, and cover our autumn raptor count monitoring, illegal shooting monitoring, training of regional students and involvement of Georgians. All members receive the BRC annual magazine with the annual monitoring report and conservation issues.

Continue your membership.

Members can easily continue their membership by just transferring the fee to BRC. Make sure to write down your name in the the subject. No need for more forms. **BRC volunteers receive a free Mimino membership** for the year they participate and the following year.

Choose **annual automatic transfer** for your bank transfers to not miss a year with BRC.

batumiraptorcount.org/membership

Transfer details:

Name: Batumi Roofvogel Club

IBAN: NL08TRIO0198379056

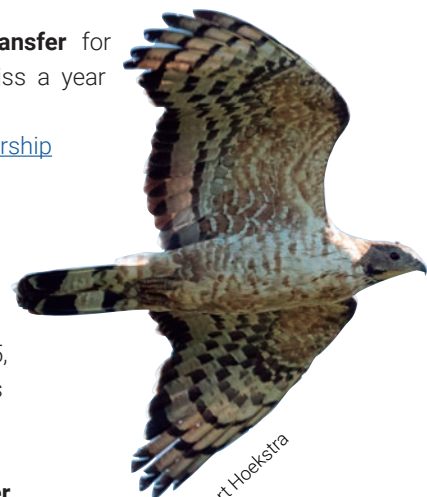
BIC/ SWIFT: TRIONL2U

Bank: Triodos Bank, Postbus 55, 3700 AB Zeist, The Netherlands

Subject: Current year

Renew with a payment provider

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Membership Category	Details	Fee
Trans-Caucasian	For Georgian, Azeri or Armenian citizens.	Free
Mimino (Sparrowhawk)	Basic membership.	25€
Irao (Honey Buzzard)	Membership + BRC T-shirt	50€
Artsivi (Imperial Eagle)	Membership + BRC T-shirt + acknowledgement on the website	100€



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➤ Unfortunately we are not counting in autumn 2020, but we hope to enjoy the migration with all of you again in 2021!



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