
Introduction

Birds fascinate because they appear to be fundamentally alien forms of life – removed from our environment and from our concerns, free to float above us and forever out of reach. They leave no tracks, and their journeys are for the most part invisible.

—Jon Day, *Homing: On Pigeons, Dwellings and Why We Return*¹

Among the earliest known animal images are small carvings of flying swans. Found at Mal'ta, an Upper Paleolithic site in Siberia, they are made from mammoth ivory and are thought to date back at least 15,000 years. Wonderfully stylized and designed to be worn as pendants, they tell of a timeless human fascination with bird flight and migration. They also suggest that swans in particular have long been spellbinding and talismanic (see Cocker 2013). In antiquity, they were associated with Venus and Apollo on account of the unsullied whiteness of their plumage. In a passage in the *Aeneid*, the sudden appearance of swans is read as an auspicious sign (Impelluso 2004). The examples are many and as well-travelled as the birds themselves.

The mute swan is the best-known species of its kind in Europe. In flight, its stately and self-assured presence on lakes and ponds is transformed into over 2 metres of beating wingspan. The mute swan is fully migratory and freezing temperatures can displace it off the normal routes and wintering sites. So it was that a flock of swans appeared at St Thomas Bay in Malta, an island in the Mediterranean, on 20 January 2002. For the small crowd that congregated on shore, it was to be a short-lived charm. Within minutes of the swans' arrival, a speedboat was in hot pursuit. On board, like demented Lohengrins, three hunters. Swans are powerful flyers, but their tremendous weight makes take-off a laborious process. A barrage of shots drowned out whatever wistful swansong there may have been. At least six birds were killed, three of which were quickly bundled into the boat, which then made off at great speed.

In Malta, swans are fully protected occasional migrants. The shooting, which was hailed as an outrage and a national embarrassment domestically, was also widely reported in the British press and international news channels.² As it turned out, the grainy photographs taken from shore by onlookers were enough for the police to arrest and charge three young hunters, who were eventually convicted and sent to prison. The incident remains etched in the memory as one of the darkest episodes in the history of bird conservation in Malta. There are more personal scars too. Ten years later, I happened to be talking about birds and hunting with builders who were doing some work at my house and who were all themselves hunters. When the conversation touched on swans, one of the men, whom I shall call Salvu, suddenly appeared upset and sullen. Later, one of his colleagues took me aside and told me never to bring up the swans story again when Salvu was around. The convicted hunters were close relatives of his and the matter had shamed the family. Tellingly, the shame was greatest in hunting circles: by their reckless and brazen action, the swan killers had done great damage to the public image of hunters in Malta. As we shall see, it had also come at the worst possible time.

'Path-building', Georg Simmel assures us in a celebrated essay, 'is a specifically human achievement; the animal too continuously overcomes a separation and often in the cleverest and most ingenious of ways, but its beginning and end remain unconnected, it does not accomplish the miracle of the road: freezing movement into a solid structure that commences from it and in which it terminates' (Simmel 1994: 6). Be that as it may, the path-building projects of humans and animals do in fact intersect in many ways. Take the protagonists of this book. Birds, like other migratory animals such as fish and insects, are good to think with: to draw battle lines and contest accessibility over, to align social divisions (both internal and external), to precipitate contesting notions of 'culture' and 'value', to embody different elaborations of aesthetics, to establish transnational alliances and to highlight that the hegemony and legitimation of scientific enquiry are contestable.

They also set up a perfect domain where anthropological enquiry can be applied fruitfully. What follows is first and foremost an ethnography of hunting and conservation in what bird protectionists widely regard as one of the darkest corners (Malta) of a black spot (the Mediterranean) for migrating birds. The case is lent complexity in that the number and variety of birds shot and trapped in Malta has declined sharply in recent years, and especially following the country's accession to the European Union (EU). In this sense, the book is a study of conservation outcomes at a time when global issues like bushmeat, the Anthropocene and the 'sixth extinction' (Kolbert 2014) have become particularly pressing for

conservationists and ecologists. Besides, and because migration journeys cut across geographical, political and social boundaries, the exploitation and conservation of migratory species bring into play a number of unique features and challenges. Beyond the specifics of the case study, this book can be located within a number of scholarly fields. First, it is a study of human–nonhuman interactions, and of some of the practices and feelings that pattern and nourish them. Second, it sheds light on the politics of hunting and conservation, and the ways in which it is played out in national, supranational (mainly the EU) and international political spaces. Third, it is a study of how local environmentalist movements are made and of how they embed themselves in broader discourses of science and rationality. Fourth, it offers a look at how supranational regulations and legislation are translated into practice in specific local contexts. These are some of the arguments that are dealt with in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 1 I first describe the setting and its birds, with an emphasis on the transience of migration. I then describe the twin practices of hunting and trapping. It turns out that they have emerged as one of the most vitriolic issues in the country, aligning individuals and groups, precipitating national referendums, leveraging political parties as well as being leveraged by them, and becoming a *cause célèbre* in perceptions of, and state interactions with, the EU. Finally, I discuss my fieldwork in Malta and locate it within the hunting-conservation dynamic. The main argument of Chapter 2 is that an in-depth understanding of hunting requires us to pay attention to both emotion and practice. I look at how hunters are made and at what sustains their urge to hunt. The anatomy of the emotions that hunters feel is explored in terms of the characteristics of nature generally and birds specifically. (It is also here that the vagaries of migration matter.) I then discuss the ways in which the hunting experience intersects with notions of modernity, masculinity and Mediterranean alterity. In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the relations between hunters and conservationists. I first trace the rise of bird protection organizations in Malta and their location within global models and trajectories of conservation. I then discuss politics and the various political spaces within which bird protection is embedded; in particular, the transition from national politics to multilevel governance is explored. I also look at some of the ways in which hunting emerged as a contested field. In the final part of the chapter I focus on a single set of events that took place in 2015, when a national referendum was held on whether or not spring hunting should be banned. It turns out that the fate of long-distance migrants is also shaped by local and national circumstances. Chapter 4 takes up the theme of physical places to explore some of the many and complex relations between Maltese hunters and their environment,

focusing in particular on hunting as spatial experience ('being-in-the-field'), as well as access to, and transformations of, the 'pulling' land that attracts migrating birds. These transformations are often vigorously opposed by conservationists and it is to this aspect that I then turn in the second part of the chapter. In Chapter 5, I look at how bird protectionists attempt literally to make place for conservation. This includes fenced bird reserves, sites of 'special scientific interest' and internationally recognized 'important bird areas'. I also describe and discuss the rise of field surveillance by Maltese and international activists, and its crucial role in bird conservation. Hunting in Malta offers an excellent case study of the intersection between science, numbers and conservation, and Chapter 6 looks at bird protectionists as producers of scientific data generally and numbers in particular. I discuss some of the ways in which hunters contest these data and seek to set up a discourse of sustainability in a context where the species concerned breed elsewhere. In the last section I trace the development of an enumerative modality in the context of Malta's accession to the EU. It turns out that Malta is a fine testing ground for anthropological understandings of human-wildlife interactions, conservation and environmental governance.

Notes

1. See Day 2019: 7.
2. See, for instance, 'Outrage at Maltese Massacre of Swans', *The Telegraph*, 24 February 2002.