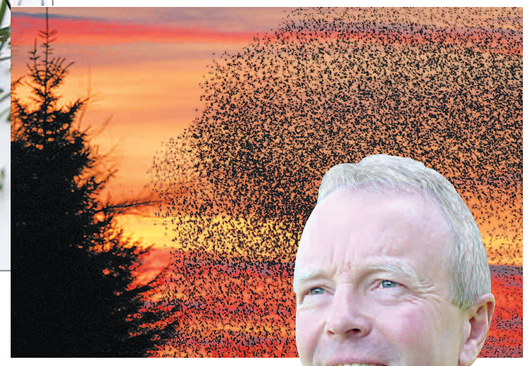

‘An exceptional moment and unusual species - the perfect combination’

One-time university lecturer, lifelong birdwatching enthusiast - and now International Wildlife Photographer of the Year in his category, Athens News columnist Steve Mills recalls the moment he captured a winning shot that combined ‘intrigue, planning, attack and murder’

By **Thrasy Petropoulos**
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STEVE MILLS, the *Athens News*’ very own Birdwatch columnist and - for as many months of the year as he can manage - resident of the island of Thasos, has been named Veolia Environment International Wildlife Photographer of the Year in the birds category.

The winning photograph in what is the most prestigious competition of its kind is of a rare merlin falcon killing a snipe in snow-covered North Yorkshire. Picked out among 42,000 entries from 95 countries, “The Assassin” (as the image has been named) will now be displayed along with the other 10 category winners in Britain’s Natural History Museum.

“It’s ironic because we drive across to Greece regularly, stopping off at wildlife places, and I spend an awful lot of time taking photographs in Greece,” Mills said from England, where he travelled to receive his award. “This was yards from my house in Whitby, North Yorkshire.”

The photograph was taken last winter, just after there had been heavy snowfall.

“My garden was dipping with birds trying to find food,” he recalls. “So I set out in the car, found a little patch of unfrozen ground and waited. It took only half an hour. The snipe arrived. It’s a secretive bird - I’ve only seen about four in the last ten years. Normally, it would have been looking round every second or two but it was so desperate that it didn’t see the falcon coming in from the left.”

The merlin pinioned the snipe, stared briefly at the photographer and then killed its prey with a series of rapid blows to the head. “It suggests intrigue, planning, attack and murder,” Mills comments.

He knew immediately that he had captured something special. “It ticked all the right boxes,” he says. “There was nothing obscuring either bird, it was pin-sharp and there was an uncluttered background.”

“Predator and prey and perfectly balanced” was judge Sophie Stafford’s estimation. It was, she added, an “exceptional moment and unusual species - the perfect combination”.

> “Unfortunately, an awful lot of habitats in Greece are being downgraded through illegal building and drainage. It’s sad because it’s a wonderland and there’s a whole world of ecotourism that’s being missed because this country is failing to exploit it. Not only should wildlife be protected for itself but there’s also money to be made”

Conservation work

A birdwatching enthusiast since he was 10, Mills added photography to his passion less than a decade ago as digital technology made it easier for amateur photographers to operate.

“When digital came in, it became so much cheaper to work,” he says. “In the old days you had to be careful when you pressed the shutter. It was harder to experiment and you had no immediate feedback.”

As the standard of his work improved, so he felt encouraged to enter the odd competition, winning the amateur section of the 2007 International Wildbird Photography competition with a shot of a hen harrier photographed in Porto Lagos, northern Greece.

With his wife, he has set up a conservation organisation (*www.birdwing.eu*) for northern Greece and written birdwatching guides to encourage ecotourism within the country. A children’s bird book of his has also been translated into Greek.

“We bought a house on Thasos in 2004 - a tumbledown - and, with my wife, we renovated it over the next two or three years,” he says. A former university lecturer in maths education, he now writes education books with his wife full time, for much of the year from their island home.

Greece, he says, is the ideal place for birdwatching - and is massively underappreciated.

“It’s fabulous, particularly northern Greece, because there are more habitats there that are intact,” he says. “Unfortunately, an awful lot of habitats are being - or have already been - downgraded through illegal building and drainage. It’s sad because it’s a wonderland and there’s a whole world of ecotourism that’s being missed because this country is failing to exploit it. Not only should wildlife be protected for itself, but there’s also money to be made.”

Feeding the tired, huddled masses

A spectacular hoopoe with thoughts of Africa

Steve Mills

A seasonal burst of new vegetation and insect population in Africa prompts millions of migrant birds to temporarily abandon their present abode

By **Steve Mills**

ALMOST all the birds that visit us for the summer have now left, exchanging our cooling temperatures and approaching winter for an African summer. These migrants never experience a winter. Instead their year consists of two summers, one here and one far to the south. Next April, as the African summer draws to a close, they will return to us here for a summer in Europe. They don’t, of course, seek out another summer for the kinds of reasons we do (perhaps a little sightseeing and the chance of a tan) but because their food supply - insects - largely disappears when winter comes. So, off to Africa they go.

But what happens when they get there? How can that continent suddenly give board and lodging to millions of new arrivals, when they have plenty of birds there already? And we’re talking about perhaps 4 billion birds that turn up there at this time of year. Nature often works in weird and wonderful ways, but it certainly doesn’t leave vast areas ready and waiting just to accommodate these incomers. So what happens?

> It is estimated that, every year, only around half of the migrants leaving our shores in the autumn make it back the following spring

Rain belt

Picture the scene. It’s October - spring in much of Africa - and the resident African birds are busy breeding. They’ve built nests and are sitting on eggs or feeding youngsters. Their breeding is timed to benefit from maximum food supplies, and this often means coordinating their efforts with the rainy season. The arrival of the rain promotes lush plant growth and swarms of nutritious insects, so it makes sense to have the babies at this time.

Africa is a huge continent and the rains don’t arrive everywhere at once. In September a broad belt of wet weather, lasting a month or two, moves slowly southwards bringing new growth and feeding opportunities in its wake. This is how Africa can suddenly support such an influx of birds from Europe and Asia. Suddenly in a given area there is a glut of food perfectly timed for the resident breeders but now also available for the migrants. In addition, the resident breeders can’t move far to take advantage of temporary food abundance caused perhaps by patchy rain because they are tied to an area around their nest. There’s no such restriction for the visitors, though. They are free to follow the rains and take advantage of any bonanzas that occur.

No borders

The arrival of the slow-moving rainy season is the key to how Africa can suddenly absorb all the new arrivals. As the wave of wet weather moves slowly along, huge numbers of insects hatch to feed on the new plant growth and, in turn, the migrants feed on them. This, together with the ability of the migrants to follow the rains, allows both the residents and the migrants to find enough to eat.

This brings us to another question. We think of the birds that visit us for the summer - hoopoes, bee-eaters, warblers, nightingales and others - as European birds that spend our winter in Africa. But are they really African birds that just come to Greece and the rest of Europe to breed? After all, most of them spend more time each year in Africa than they do with us.

For birds, of course, it doesn’t matter. They’re not concerned with the details of nationality, just with following a strategy that allows them to stay alive. Migration has evolved because it allows more birds in a given species to survive. But the price is still high. It is estimated that, every year, only around half of the migrants leaving our shores in the autumn make it back the following spring. And the news isn’t good for the future. With Africa changing rapidly as a result of more people, more intensive agriculture and more pesticides, perhaps now is as good as it gets for migrant birds.