

Nouvelles

Migration monitoring on Saeul Hill

This article, published in German in *Regulus* 5/2014, is by Norbert Paler and Jean Weiss. "Sëller Héicht" - Faszination Vogelzug => [DOWNLOAD HERE](#)

The (partly summarised) translation is by David Crowther. Please get in touch with me at dcrowther@pt.lu if you have any queries about the English text or the original version.

If you think you have to go to Falsterbo in Sweden, or to Eilat in Israel, or to Gibraltar to observe mass bird migration, think again. Luxembourg is a bit of a migration hotspot too, and not just for the highly conspicuous Cranes...



Red Kites like migrating in company. These Kites are circling, gaining height, and will then continue their migration in a gentle, energy-saving glide. (N. Paler)

Of course you need plenty of time, patience and a good pair of binoculars. But if you're in the right place at the right time you can, with a bit of luck, enjoy the impressive spectacle of bird migration virtually anywhere in Luxembourg. This is because Luxembourg has no natural pinch-point, no spot where the migrating birds are funnelled through a narrow gap, like a mountain pass or a short sea crossing. Here, birds cross the country across the board, so to speak.

On a hill ("Sëller Héicht" on the topographical map) between Saeul and Buschdorf, a group of local birdwatchers has for the past three years been monitoring bird migration daily between the beginning of August and the middle of November. This is a new departure for Luxembourg, and the results have been revealing and exciting.

We record around 120 000 migrants in each of these monitoring periods, which is par for the course in other countries too. In 2012 the total was around 120 000, including thirteen raptor species and 2297 individual raptors. 2013 figures were around 114 000 in total, with 2605 individual raptors of fifteen different species.

On Saeul Hill we lay the stress on raptors, which only start appearing around midday. So we are not up with the lark, or any other small birds that start migrating as soon as it gets light.

By now, in 2014, we have an impressive list of raptor sightings, with sixteen different species. Top-rankers in 2013 were the Red Kites, with 855 individuals, followed by Honey Buzzard (697), Sparrowhawk (368) and Common Buzzard (323).

Agenda

- 22.07
Bee in Solidarity with Pollinators
- 29.07
Escapardenne et réserves naturelles
- 05.08
Jardin méditerranéen à Schwebsange
- 14.08 - 15.08
Assomption
- 18.08
Visite guidée Schlammwiss by night
- 26.08
Porte ouverte à la Schlammwiss





Many small birds migrate at night and so are invisible to the recorders. This Wheatear has stopped for a rest and has thus entered the statistics! (N. Paler)



The Saeul Hill monitors see a surprising number of migrating Ospreys - 30 to 40 each year. (C. Dording)

Let's take a closer look at the Sparrowhawk. We have been aware for a long time that Sparrowhawks migrate through Luxembourg, but the scale of the migration has surprised us. On good days on Saeul Hill we recorded up to 47 migrating Sparrowhawks. Now, this observation point covers only a small section of Luxembourg, so we can safely assume that the number for the whole of Luxembourg is many times what we are recording. We can say this because observation stations at funnel-type pinch-points in Switzerland and the south of France record Sparrowhawk migration numbers that in a single day can exceed our figure for the whole 3½ months.



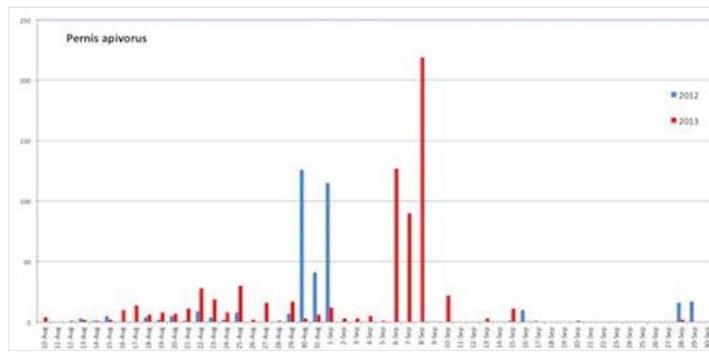
Sparrowhawks are lone migrants. But occasionally they join a circling group of mixed raptors before setting off alone once more. (N. Paler)

One obvious question - and one that is not easy to answer - is where do these birds come from? The Internet can help here, with the counts recorded by more northerly monitoring stations. On 3 September 2013, for instance, the station in Falsterbo (Sweden) recorded a huge passage of precisely 4152 Honey Buzzards. A few days later, on 6/7/8 September, Saeul Hill too saw massive numbers of Honey Buzzards on passage: 127, 90 and 219 respectively. This phenomenon was repeated in 2014. Over 2200 Honey Buzzards passed the Falsterbo recorders on 24/25/26 August. Three days later, on 27/28/29 August, Saeul had daily figures of between 110 and 120 (and Bridel reported more than 180 on 29.8!). These are almost certainly the Scandinavian migrants passing through Luxembourg. Saeul is around 750 km from Falsterbo, as the buzzard flies, so these Honey Buzzards would be covering something like 200 to 250 km a day, which is a perfectly realistic figure.

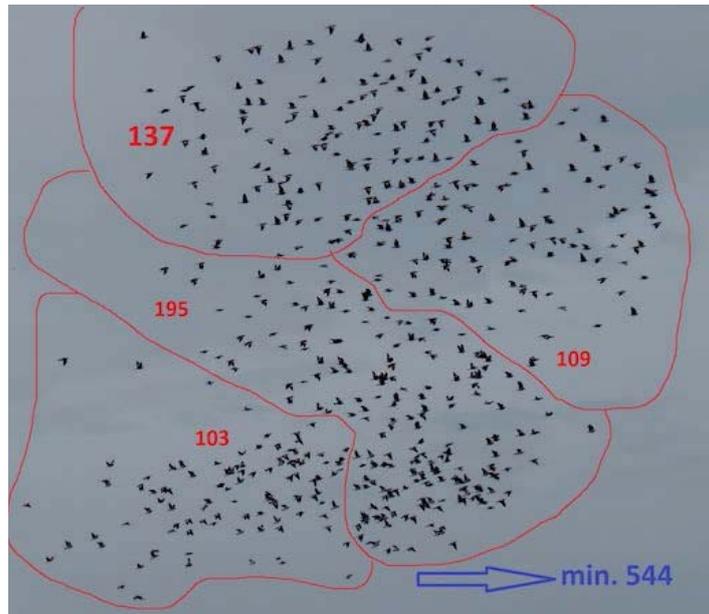


Honey Buzzards (this one is an adult male) migrate further than most raptors: to south of the Sahara. (C. Dording)

Migration timing is another interesting point. Again, Honey Buzzards tend to migrate throughout the month of August, but the main passage is concentrated in just a few days at the end of August or the beginning of September, as is shown in this bar graph.



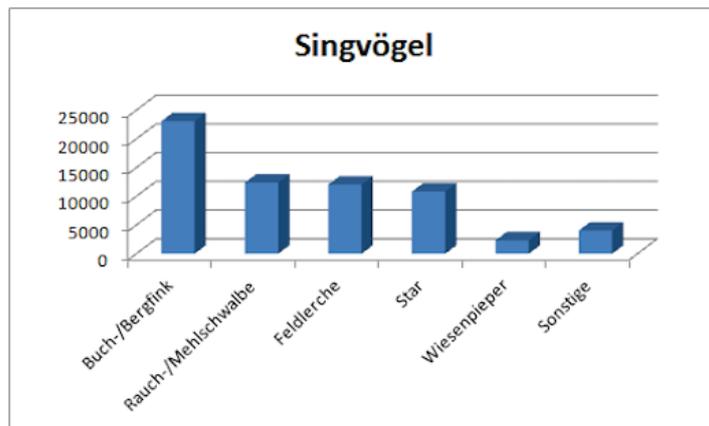
Timing of Honey Buzzard passage (R. Mettenhoven)



Wood Pigeons often form flocks of several hundred on migration. (L. Burton)

Though we focused mainly on raptor migration, we counted the smaller birds too. For example, in 2013 we counted no fewer than 34 883 Wood Pigeons, 3838 Cranes, 3734 Cormorants and 3679 Lapwings. We are always particularly pleased to see migrating White and Black Storks (both species now breed in Luxembourg); 2014 was a record passage year, with 58 White and 53 Black.

There are days when passerine (i.e. small songbird) migration is particularly marked, with several thousand passing through. This graph shows the numbers for 2013, accounting for well over half the total number of migrants. The bars from left to right relate to Chaffinch/Brambling; Swallow/House Martin; Skylark; Starling; Meadow Pipit; others.



Passerine passage 2013

We look forward every year to our late-summer migration watch. It's always exciting to wonder what each day will bring - perhaps a real rarity, like an east European Steppe Buzzard, a Red-footed Falcon, a Lesser Black-backed Gull or a Short-eared Owl. We go about our 'work' conscientiously and with good optical equipment, scanning the far horizon from the Kehmen ridge and the Vianden upper basin on the *Niklosberg* to the closer vantage points *Helperknapp* and *Bricherknapp*. We are determined not to miss a single migrant. This takes patience and endurance. But once you've caught the migration 'bug', you're hooked. Apart from the two authors

of this article, others who have caught the bug are Liette Aschman, Liliane Burton, Claude Dording, Pascale Karger, Patric Lorgé, Raoul Mettenhoven, Roland Thiry and Isabelle Zwick. Their help has been invaluable.

Not many people are aware that, apart from the Cranes, there are plenty of other big birds that fly in a V-formation. We sometimes get reports of Cranes on passage through Luxembourg as early as September. These are usually Cormorants that begin migrating about this time, whereas the first Cranes don't appear until October, normally not until mid-October. Grey Herons and wild geese also fly in formation, or in straggling lines, as the photos show.



Cranes in characteristic V-formation. Note the long extended neck and the trailing legs. And listen out for their calls! (J. Weiss)



Smallish flocks of Cormorants fly in formation not unlike the Cranes. Cormorants, though, don't call, have shorter necks and are dark all over (apart from the lighter-bellied youngsters). (L. Aschman)



This photo, taken on Saeul Hill on 16 October 2014, shows how strong the formation urge is. There are only four Greylag Geese here, but they have formed a tidy offset line. And a lone Cormorant has hitched a ride with them! (L. Burton)



A rare picture of Grey Herons on migration. Their wingbeats are slow and powerful, and their necks are drawn in, in an S-shape. (N. Paler)

Why fly in formation?

Racing cyclists like to ride in someone else's slipstream. This would not be in a migrating bird's interest. For one thing, the bird would be deprived of the necessary upward draught; for another, the bird ahead creates turbulence and blocks the following bird's view. This is why Cranes, Cormorants etc prefer to travel in an offset pattern. It also conserves energy, as each bird in the formation boosts the following bird's updraught. The only bird that doesn't derive any benefit from this is the formation leader. If you watch a formation closely, you'll see that the lead bird 'steps' aside after a time, tucks itself into the formation further back, and lets another leader take over.

Norbert Paler, Jean Weiss

More informations: Berthold, P. (2008): Vogelzug. 6. Auflage. WBG Darmstadt.

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