

The Montsonís Bonelli's Eagle story

Montsonís is a tiny village that clings to a hillside on the edge of the rocky Montsec range in Lleida province, Catalonia. For many years now I have been guiding birders there to enjoy thrilling views of the resident **Bonelli's Eagles***, and with great success.

There are only 5 pairs of Bonelli's Eagles inhabiting the province of **Lleida**, and this magnificent bird is a rare and declining species over all of its European range. So I count my blessings to be able to bank on the presence of these birds year after year. Another joy of this particular site is that after enjoying views of the eagles we can then all saunter along to Montsonís itself, and have refreshments, a cup of tea or coffee perhaps, while admiring the village's cobbled streets and the distinguished castle.



However, I tend to worry a bit, and I was particularly concerned that something might happen to the Montsonís eagles. Firstly, out of self-interest: I didn't want to have to search for another Bonelli's Eagle site, and I felt that even if I found one it would be most unlikely to offer me the same degree of success and service. Secondly, I'm a conservationist, and I don't want the eagles to disappear, full-stop.

After a few years of escorting keen birders and beginners alike to watch the eagles it occurred to me that our birds had showed very few signs of having bred successfully in all that time. In 2010 things came to a head one day when Frank, a Dutch bird photographer, and I stood and saw how the eagles had just abandoned one long-standing nest in early spring and had started building another nearby, which in turn was also abandoned. What had happened? Perhaps it had been nothing unusual, as we eventually found out that the Montsonís Bonelli's Eagles hadn't reared a chick successfully since 2005.



Montsonís, the Bonelli's Eagles and some birders.

With that knowledge I felt that it was in our hands to do something. So we recruited Ramon. Ramon is a local travel agent and tourism entrepreneur who lives at Montsonís, and was the first one among us who confessed to be in need of some exercise, so he was the obvious candidate. With his regular walks from Montsonís up to the “sacrificial stone” we set in motion a supplementary feeding program with feral pigeons, caught from castles and other tourist spots where they were a nuisance, de-parasitized and then offered as food for the hungry eagles trying to raise a chick. We also drew up a polite informative letter addressed to the local population requesting their co-operation in our task of ensuring that 2011 would be a good year for the eagles. The main way we could all achieve that was to avoid frightening the eagles by not making loud noises with fireworks and music, which were commonplace at Easter and wedding celebrations.

Our efforts bore their fruits. The local people responded well and let off their fireworks elsewhere, Ramon lost a few pounds, there are no more feral pigeons at Montsonís or even nearby Montclar castle, and the local pair of Bonelli's Eagles raised a healthy chick for the first time in 6 years!



* The Bonelli's Eagle is one of the 36 raptor species depicted in the acclaimed Spanish Raptor Card Game, an ideal present for birders with families and a must-have for school environmental education programmes.