

OSME's YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FUND: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS 2019–2023

Tomas Axén Haraldsson & Rob Sheldon

OSME has a long history of supporting conservation and research across our region through the awarding of small grants, initially via our Conservation and Research Fund, established in 1982 (recently renamed the Conservation Fund). By the mid-2010s we were receiving an increasing number of applications for projects that were focused on the training and development of young birdwatchers and conservationists. At the same time, we were getting feedback from members and supporters that developing the next generation of birdwatchers, and conservation capacity in general, should be a high priority for OSME.

Between 2014 and 2017, in collaboration with the World Land Trust, OSME provided a series of grants to the Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC, now the BirdLife Partner in Armenia) for the Sun Child project, which focused on educating schoolchildren about the environment and conservation. Two grants, each of £5000, were made in 2016 and 2017; these were only made possible by donations that were made to OSME for this project. It was becoming apparent that projects aimed at training and developing the next generation of birdwatchers and conservationists were popular with potential donors as well as with OSME members.

From 2016 to 2018 OSME helped fund training activities and youth exchange visits at the migration bottleneck of Besh Barmag, Azerbaijan. Here we developed the Bird Camp concept where students from different countries were able to participate in a range of training activities, such as bird identification and ringing, whilst camping for several nights. Young German ecologists discovered this internationally important site as recently as 2007 and have been closely involved in its development ever since. The Youth Committee from BirdLife Sweden has

also been involved and helped lead various initiatives. This combination of young conservationists from Germany and Sweden, working in collaboration with talented young Azerbaijani birdwatchers, led to the establishment of a successful three-month bird migration count in 2018. A staggering three million birds were counted and Besh Barmag has become an increasingly popular destination for birders wanting to witness one of the best autumn migration spectacles in the Western Palearctic (see *Sandgrouse* 42: 29-45).

The Bird Camp concept developed at Besh Barmag was readily adaptable to other places where there were willing local partners. The BirdLife Partner, Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL), and local stakeholders established such an initiative in central Lebanon. With some seed funding, advice and co-leadership from OSME, three Bird Camps in the mountain towns of Hammana and Ras al-Maten were held in 2018-2019 as well as a four-week raptor count at Hammana. This programme has subsequently been continued by SPNL. Notably, four young Lebanese birdwatchers also spent a two-week internship at Swedish bird observatories (although this was not funded by OSME).

Combined, the above projects in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Lebanon, stimulated much discussion and feedback from OSME's Conservation Fund Committee. The Committee felt that they needed further expertise to provide constructive feedback on the increasing number of educational projects they were receiving. At the same time, Tomas Axén Haraldsson (TAH), who was instrumental in developing the Azerbaijan projects, and OSME Chairman, Rob Sheldon (RS), who had visited the Armenia Sun Child project in 2017, started to map out the future of OSME's work in youth development and education. The workload was potentially significant and needed dedicated OSME time

Table 1. Projects supported by the OSME Youth Development Fund between 2019 and 2023.

| Project | Country | Expenditure (GB£) | | | | |
|---|------------|-------------------|------|------|--------|--------|
| | | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| Besh Barmag Bird Camps | Azerbaijan | | | 809 | 5969 | 1944 |
| Marbled Teal surveys | Azerbaijan | | | | 5004 | |
| North Cyprus Bird Camps | Cyprus | | | 2200 | 1500 | 1800 |
| Damietta University Bird Monitoring Training | Egypt | | | | 2000 | 2000 |
| Aswan Bird Camps | Egypt | | | 2000 | 2000 | 2000 |
| Galalah Raptor Count Training Programme | Egypt | | | | | 4000 |
| Young Falconers Education Project | Georgia | | 2000 | 2000 | 1000 | 2000 |
| Hammana Bird Camp | Lebanon | 4428 | | 500 | 550 | |
| Simurg Bird Sanctuary & School of Avian Ecology | Türkiye | | 1951 | | 2232 | 2800 |
| Eymir Bird Ringing Station | Türkiye | | | | 1500 | 3400 |
| Youth Development Fund Travel Bursary | | | | | | 300 |
| TOTAL FUNDING | | 4428 | 3951 | 7509 | 21 755 | 20 244 |

to further develop the work.

With the full agreement of OSME Council it was agreed to broaden our small grants programme to include a specific Youth Development Fund. This was launched at the UK Birdfair in August 2019. To take the work forward OSME established our first dedicated Youth Development Officer role which was eagerly taken up by TAH. The Youth Development Officer had the responsibility to develop more dedicated projects across the OSME region building on the successes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Lebanon. Crucially, a dedicated budget line was established in the OSME budgeting process, and the Youth Development Officer was responsible for making recommendations to OSME Council regarding which projects should be supported. Specific funding applications were no longer required for such projects, but initiatives were developed jointly between in-country project leaders and OSME.

Up to the end of 2023, the Youth Development Fund has funded nine projects in six countries across the OSME region (Table 1). Importantly, we aim to work with projects for several years to get them established and build longer term capacity. OSME support is not only financial but also includes advice on project design, direct support with activities on the ground and help with developing other funding opportunities. During the first few

years of the fund, annual expenditure was relatively modest (although still significant for a charity of OSME’s size), but in 2022 the level of funding increased dramatically (Table 1) thanks to donors coming forward specifically to support this area of OSME’s work. Here we review the projects funded to the end of 2023, and illustrate their impact with quotes from some of their beneficiaries.

Youth Development Fund projects by country

AZERBAIJAN

Besh Barmag Bird Camps (approximately 350 participants to date)

As recently as in 2007 it was discovered that one of the most important, diverse, yet virtually unknown bird migration bottlenecks in Eurasia passed by the Caspian Sea plain at Besh Barmag, north of the Azerbaijani capital of Baku. In subsequent years the place was more closely studied by young European and local birdwatchers and it has always had a youthful, explorative and upbeat atmosphere to it. OSME has played a key role in funding the Bird Camps as well as supporting the migration counts. A number of young Azeris who participated in the early Bird Camps are now leading the annual activities as well as being experienced surveyors involved in the autumn migration counts. OSME has also



Plate 1. Participants of the autumn migration counts at Besh Barmag, including Bird Camp graduates Zulfu Farajli (furthest left) and Elvin Memmedsoy (second from left). © Zulfu Farajli

provided opportunities for ‘graduates’ of the Besh Barmag Bird Camp to contribute guest blogs for the OSME website, moderate local language content on our Facebook page and make presentations at our online meetings. This exemplifies the approach of our Youth Development Fund to provide more than just financial support. Our approach is paying dividends; in 2022, Zulfu Farajli and Elvin Memmedsoy, both participants in the early Bird Camps (Plate 1), developed and led their own projects on Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* and Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* respectively.

Since my childhood I have a great passion for nature, but my great interest in birds started during my university years when I met German biologist Til Dietrich and did my first birding together with him. The first birds I identified were White Wagtail and Eurasian Jay and at that time I understood I indescribably enjoyed the identification of birds and decided that I should continue this. Unfortunately, birdwatching is not a common activity in Azerbaijan. I could not

find people who share the same interest with me. But in 2016 I got acquainted with some foreigners on social network who travel to Besh Barmag for observation and ringing of birds. Thus, in autumn 2016 and spring 2017 I participated in the international Bird Camp at the famous Besh Barmag bottleneck in Azerbaijan. In the autumn count 2018 I spent more than one month at Besh and also joined the counts in 2022.

Gunay Behramzade, participant at Bird Camps and migration counts at Besh Barmag

Marbled Teal Surveys – Youth development in action (4 local surveyors)

In early 2022, BirdLife International and OSME agreed to collaborate on a project to undertake preliminary surveys of the Near Threatened Marbled Teal in Azerbaijan. A key component of the project was to support the development of local birdwatchers that OSME had identified through the Besh Barmag Bird Camps (see above). There are few recent data on the numbers and distribution of Marbled Teal in

Azerbaijan, but a number of key sites were identified for targeted survey work based on local knowledge and expert advice. The local team consisted of Elvin Memmedsoy (project leader), Abdin Abbasov, Konul Aghayeva and Firangiz Gadirova – all previous participants in Besh Barmag Bird Camps. The surveys focused on breeding sites in the spring with a return visit in late summer to look for fledged birds and family groups. The team did an excellent job in designing the project and undertaking survey work to a high standard. A research paper is currently being prepared for publication in *Sandgrouse*.

CYPRUS

Youth Bird Camps (approximately 70 youth participants)

The island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean is well known amongst the global birding community as an impressive location to witness bird migration in both spring and autumn. It also has a less welcome reputation as a hotspot for the rampant illegal killing of birds, with estimates of up to two million individuals being killed each year. Educating and inspiring the next generation about the wonder of birds and how we can protect them was a key aim for a series of youth bird camps proposed by conservation organization, Kuşkor. Based on experience from similar camps held in Azerbaijan and Lebanon, OSME advised and helped fund four-day bird camps in the northern part of Cyprus during the autumns of 2021, 2022 and

2023. The first camp in 2021 also involved participants from the Youth Committee of BirdLife Sweden, and BirdLife Cyprus have been involved in the delivery of activities in the later bird camps. All the camps have focused on making activities fun and inclusive and have involved bird identification and hugely popular bird ringing sessions (Plate 2).

While it was a great learning experience for the youth, as KUŞKOR we also learned a great deal from participants about how to better engage youth in our conservation activities. The experience of camping and birding for a weekend with three exciting young Swedish bird conservationists will be one they will never forget. I can say that young people always find it fascinating when they realise that there is an entire science behind catching and ringing birds, the systematic and methodical process, materials used, measurements and observations taken etc. The fact that the data go into an international database. The amount of organisation involved tends to blow their mind and we enjoy sharing that. Also, when participants get to the end of a day birding and realise they have recorded 50 species they never knew existed, they realise what diversity there is. That is a great way to introduce them to biodiversity conservation and the concept of identifying and protecting habitats, for example through the IBA process.

Robin Snape, conservationist and bird camp organiser for Kuşkor



Plate 2. Cyprus Bird Camp attendees learning about waterbird monitoring. © Robin Snape

EGYPT

Damietta University Bird Monitoring and Training (50 students trained)

The Nile Delta sees some of the most intensely cultivated and densely inhabited areas in the OSME region. It is also a place of wetlands, lakes and lagoons, home to tens of thousands of breeding and wintering birds. At the nearby Damietta University students are lucky to have one of Egypt's few female ornithologists, Dr Basma Sheta. As part of graduate biology courses, Dr Sheta has been teaching avian ecology and basic bird survey techniques. With the support of the Youth Development Fund in the autumns of 2022 and 2023, an additional training course was developed to build on this introductory course, and to provide additional intensive training to students, especially in relation to waterbirds. Egypt is in urgent need of qualified ornithologists to undertake monitoring and contribute to Environmental Impact Assessments, especially within IBAs. The training course was interactive and practical, and students were encouraged to work together and exchange ideas about bird identification. As well as class-based work, there were several field visits to nearby Lake Manzala to participate in practical sessions (Plate 3).

My big dream is the establishment of a big lab of ornithology studies, making it a center of excellence to all students not only in Egypt but in Africa and all the world who are interested in bird ecology. We need here more moral and funding support. We need more opportunities for us to attend international conferences and meet worldwide ornithologists to show what we did and to be a part of the big ornithological society. We want to say we are here!

Dr Basma Sheta, initiative holder and pioneering female Egyptian ornithologist

I am a masters student in Damietta University's Fauna and Animal Ecology Program and a Zoology Department bachelor's degree holder. Since 2020, I have been a team member in the research project 'Study about the genetic structure of migratory birds infected with avian influenza'



Plate 3. Dr Basma Sheta (left) teaching students bird identification at Lake Manzala, Egypt. © Basma Sheta

financed by The Science, Technology, & Innovation Funding Authority. My work within the influenza project drew my attention to the importance of this topic for Egypt because of its important position along migratory flyways and as a wintering area for birds that may carry the avian influenza virus. Last winter I attended a workshop about the classification of water birds in which I learned about the basics of classification and how to differentiate between similar groups, methods of bird monitoring, and also how to write data sheets, after that I participated as a team member in winter bird count activities in Lake Manzala, Lake Burullus as well as the coastal area in Damietta. Definitely those activities will help me in my thesis but also for me the most enjoyable time is when I learn about birds and share my enthusiasm for them with others.

Omnia Waheed Asaad, workshop participant

Aswan Bird Camp (75 participants in Bird Camps)

The main city in southernmost Egypt, Aswan, not only has a postcard-beautiful setting along the Nile. It also has a lively but tiny community of both local and visiting birdwatchers, and regular activities such as winter bird counts and breeding bird surveys on nearby Lake Nasser. Inspired by similar Bird Camps in Azerbaijan and Lebanon to reach out and engage local youth with a nature interest, an initiative led by Amr Hady implemented



Plate 4. Project leader Amr Hady delivering a lecture as part of the Aswan Bird Camps. © NCE

three Bird Camp-style activities during 2022-2023. The Bird Camps were a collaboration between local birders, local authorities and the national BirdLife Partner, Nature Conservation Egypt. Participants received classroom-based training (Plate 4), as well as practical sessions in the field to develop identification and survey skills. In addition, there were sessions on understanding what visiting birding tourists are looking for to help develop eco-tourism and employment opportunities in the future.

Bird conservation faces several threats and challenging future scenarios with habitat degradation around the city of Aswan and the surrounding areas which are considered important habitats for several bird species. However, still, Aswan's habitat has a huge potential to be used as a raw model of eco-tourism and bird watching activities, especially in winter. In the winter season, Aswan witnesses a big number of visiting wintering birds with a relatively big variety of species. Disturbingly, Lake Nasser south of Aswan has been under pressure from the annual hunting season in winter. Now there is a new ban on hunting in place since autumn 2023. Maltese hunting tourists have been the main group behind the hunting

activities in Lake Nasser and one of the main sources of income for many Safari companies. Recently the conservation community in Aswan has tried to find an alternative to organizing the hunting activities in the Lake Nasser. One of the major potential activities to compensate the safari companies to shift gently from hunting trips is to be open to organizing birdwatching trips.

Amr Hady, Bird Camp leader, Aswan

My passion was conservation and natural resources management. I had many questions and the available information was not enough to answer them. And the activities related to birds weren't mostly unavailable to me. I was selected to attend the Bird Camp training, from which my enthusiasm multiplied. The content of the training was so accurate in directing my thoughts as it started with activities. We learned the classification of birds, biological diversity, the importance of birds, and from them to the basic skills of bird watching, and then only the simpler method of classification and the presence of all the necessary equipment for work. Thanks to Mr. Amr Hady and Sobek Planet, who has always followed and supported me in every step of my journey, I have continued my education

and the experience began and my love for wildlife has multiplied. I still cross boundaries that may seem societal, but these are the physiological limits we set for ourselves.

Omima Sayed Dawi, participant in Aswan Bird Camp and later on raptor migration research at Ras Gharib, Red Sea

Galala Raptor Count Training Programme (40 participants)

The Suez region in north-eastern Egypt, and the very corner of the African continent, has been known for decades to be the main point of crossing for the spring migration of soaring birds on their way to their breeding grounds in Eurasia. Traditionally these migration surveys have taken place at various sites on ground level; at Suez city, at Ain Sukhna and at Ras Gharib further south. But recently, Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE, the national BirdLife partner) discovered an elevated site at 600 m above sea level near the town of Galala. In the springs of 2022 and 2023, they organized an incredibly successful three-month-long raptor count that has demonstrated the long-term potential of the site for monitoring the trends of various birds of prey species. Raptors and soaring birds, such as storks, pass by in their hundreds of thousands, often at eye level! As well as long-term monitoring, there are significant opportunities for developing birdwatching tourism, conducting training in bird surveys, and education and awareness raising opportunities with local and regional

communities. Links have already been made with the nearby Galala University, as well as local authorities and the Egyptian Ministry of Environment, and discussions are well underway to establish the Galala Bird Observatory.

As part of the spring 2023 raptor count, the OSME Youth Development Fund supported a week-long field training course for a number of young Egyptian naturalists (Plate 5), and this was repeated in March 2024. Importantly, the Galala Bird Observatory was chosen as the project to be supported by the UK Global Bird Fair in 2024 and has received \$125 000 to develop the new observatory, a real game changer for their work!

During 8 days, participants learned basic methods of spotting and identifying species. The first three days we were hosted in the halls of the Faculty of Science at Galala University for the theory lectures to trainees, after which we continued with practical training in the Galala Bird Observatory. Some days our energy helped us to spend evenings together where we enjoyed getting to know each other more and also birds, their migration and protection practices. We are very happy with the group we trained with, from varying backgrounds and ages, and very excited to provide more opportunities for themselves and others in the near future.

Khaled Noby, Director General of Nature Conservation Egypt



Plate 5. Trainers and participants of the spring 2023 Galala raptor count training course.

GEORGIA

Fauna & Flora International Young Falconers Education Project (approximately 100 students and pupils participated in project activities)

The mountain valleys and villages in Georgia see more than a million raptors pass overhead each year, as made famous through the Batumi Raptor Count. Hunting of raptors, including trapping for falconry, is a popular pastime for many villagers during the migration period. Recently it has become clear that many of the raptor species involved are declining and that such hunting practices are not sustainable. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has been working with young Georgians, who participate in traditional raptor hunting, to develop an understanding of raptor migration and their conservation. FFI has been working to change the behaviour of falconers in Georgia since 2016, with a focus on combating illegal trade in raptors. Prior to the project, many falconers were involved in illicit activities but were oblivious to their negative impact on wild raptor populations. Working closely with falconers and government agencies, and with co-funding from OSME, FFI has encouraged the adoption of less harmful falconry practices and the development of a regulatory framework to safeguard raptors against unsustainable levels of exploitation.

'Fostering environmental awareness among Georgia's youth through birdwatching' was the title of the project in

2022 and built upon OSME-funded work in 2021, by engaging young falconers to support its implementation. As part of OSME-funded projects, youth participants are trained in basic bird identification and subsequently guided birdwatching tours for students from local schools (Plate 6). During this project, they cooperated with Kolkheti National Park, experts at Batumi Raptor Count and with public and private schools in the town of Poti. Activities like basic bird surveys, learning about regional bird migration and identification have been undertaken as part of several projects between 2020 and 2023.

The knowledge of birds in local people is very poor. Raising awareness along the Black Sea coast has an important role in keeping bird populations and their migration safe. So, working with local young falconers who at least have an interest in raptors will give us hope to turn them more in bird conservation. The goal of this project was for girls and boys, aged 15-17, to better understand bird ecology & migration. In order to foster greater awareness of biodiversity conservation and environmental values the project is supporting Georgian youth to participate in birdwatching activities. By engaging students in fun, participatory activities the project aimed to foster appreciation of Georgia's natural heritage, specifically its unique avifauna. Secondary to the direct engagement, we aim for students to share their new knowledge with their contemporaries to build understanding among their classmates, effectively acting as role models for the protection of birds at their school and in their communities.

*Gizo Seskuria, young Georgian ornithologist and
co-leader of the initiative*



Plate 6. Georgian pupils from a local school in Poti enjoying birdwatching activities at Kolkheti National Park led by their peers. © Gizo Seskuria

LEBANON

Hammana Bird Camp (approximately 250 participants in the various activities)

The location of Lebanon, directly on the flyway along the eastern Mediterranean, means that millions of migrating birds pass along its mountain ridges each spring and autumn. This is a spectacle enjoyed by local

birdwatchers and interested locals but also unfortunately by the thousands of hunters and poachers that kill birds in huge numbers annually. The current political situation, poor law enforcement, socio-economic strife and rampant shooting of migrating birds make conservation a significant challenge. But there is hope; an active and passionate nature conservation community, well connected to funding through the Lebanese diaspora and a youthful generation with an interest in wildlife and the environment.

OSME helped arrange the first Bird Camp in 2018 together with the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, the national BirdLife Partner) as well as community groups in the villages of Ras al-Maten and Hammana, in the Lebanese mountains east of Beirut. The Youth Committee of BirdLife Sweden sent some young Swedish ornithologists to join in and meet their Lebanese counterparts. Another Bird Camp was arranged in April 2019 and a follow-up camp in the autumn incorporated the first four-week Raptor Count. This involved a number of school visits (Plate 7) as well as training and capacity building components. Additionally, but not funded by OSME, four young Lebanese students undertook a two week internship at Swedish bird observatories during the summer of 2019. These four are now Supported OSME members. During the COVID-19 pandemic the raptor counts continued but without the input of international visitors.



Plate 7. Pupils from a local school being introduced to the importance of Lebanon for bird migration. © SPNL

Besides the international volunteers, local birdwatchers, as well as other interested people and decision makers were regularly visiting the count site. It was very interesting to discuss and enjoy nature together. I hope we sparked the fire for birdwatching in some of them! Illegal hunting is a big problem in Lebanon and initiatives like this project is one way to do something about it. Change, coming from inside of Lebanon, is happening, but it will be a long way. The community of Hammana, the pretty little town where the count is based, has declared itself a safe haven for birds and is very strict against illegal hunting.

Valentin Moser, participant, Switzerland

TÜRKIYE

Simurg Bird Sanctuary & School of Avian Ecology (75 participants)

Ankara, and particularly the Middle East Technical University, has long been a hub for the Turkish birding community. More than 50 years ago OSME was founded as the Ornithological Society of Turkey (OST) and it is particularly pleasing to follow the growth of the youthful Turkish ornithology scene. With the support of OSME, in 2020 the Simurg Bird Sanctuary carried out a White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* survey which included a significant capacity building and learning component to the project. The results of the survey were expertly showcased during a memorable presentation at the OSME Winter Meeting in 2021.

During a week in September 2022, the same group organized the very first 'School of Avian Ecology' in Türkiye with OSME co-funding. The young, passionate team led by Ibrahim Kaan Özgencil, set up a dedicated website for the project, and attracted 27 participants (24 Turks and one each from Russia, Azerbaijan and Morocco!) from all over Türkiye. The workshops and activities (Plate 8) were varied to provide a broad introduction to the skills required for a career in bird conservation, and included modules are bird identification, data analysis and how to prepare a funding application (presented online by the OSME Chairman). From a sustainability perspective the project aimed

to be as low-impact as possible, for example using locally sourced vegetarian products for meals. OSME Council was hugely impressed with the drive and passion of the team and the impact the school had on the participants and provided increased funding in autumn 2023.

School of Avian Ecology's main purpose is to provide high-quality applied and theoretical scientific education to undergraduate and graduate students, early-career researchers, people working at conservation NGOs and state agencies, who are from different parts of Türkiye and from different socio-economic backgrounds. While doing that, our school also aims to show zero discrimination based on social, geography, economic background, ethnic/racial background, religious beliefs, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. The school aims to achieve its goals by bringing together experienced people and experts in the fields of interest and giving the attendees the opportunity to receive high quality hands-on and theoretical training, which is becoming more difficult to acquire in Türkiye by the day, while also providing them with a social environment where they can interact with their peers, lecturers, researchers, and form networks.

To the best of our knowledge, the School of Avian Ecology 2022 was by far the biggest and the most comprehensive educational event in the history of ornithology in Türkiye. What sets it apart from other similar events was the higher level of scientific education provided and its social side. We, as the organizing committee of the school, were very happy and satisfied with the impact we had and the feedback we received (anonymous feedback was collected from each participant at the end of the school via an online form to improve the school in the coming years). The interest the school received and the hype it created was far beyond our craziest expectations.

Ibrahim Kaan Özgencil, project leader, Simurg Bird Sanctuary



Plate 8. Students learning about bird classification at the School of Avian Ecology, Türkiye. © Melisa Soylier

Eymir Bird Ringing Station (150 students and children participated in the various project activities)

Another active and ambitious bird conservation initiative in central Türkiye is the Eymir Bird Ringing Station which closely collaborates with the Ankara universities and the Simurg Bird Sanctuary. Eymir and Simurg have supported each other by exchanging participants and sharing administration costs, which has helped OSME funding go even further. Five Eymir Ringing Station volunteers attended the 'School of Avian Ecology' organized by the Simurg Bird Sanctuary, and gave a presentation on the theme of bird migration. During 2022 OSME funded training activities at the ringing station for six weeks in spring, and another six weeks in autumn. In addition, to help connect local children with nature, specific educational activities were arranged for under-10 year-olds by one of the former volunteers who is now a teacher and certified in nature education. The children's parents also visited the ringing station to learn about the wonders of bird migration. The project was widely covered in the local press and social media, including the national TV channel NTV which included the initiative in the nature program 'Green Screen'. Given the success of the project, the OSME Youth Development Fund continued to fund the ringing camp in autumn 2023.

This program means a lot to me. Although we are conducting a scientific study at Eymir Ringing Station, we aim to reach young people who want to spend time with

birds but cannot find the opportunity. University students who have difficulties accessing social activities economically; spend time together for a week at Eymir Ringing Station. They study in teams of up to 5 people. They spend a week full of birds in nature, regardless of gender, age, university, etc. They cooked together, washed the dishes together, and organize the whole camp activities together. They have learned the bird species, their habitats, threats, their migration as well as the meaning of residents. I think it is a very nice improvement for them.

Eymir ringing station is a very enjoyable experience for young people who have never done bird watching or participated in an activity in nature. Two of our volunteers started their master's degree in birds. Ankara University students decided to continue their activities at the university by establishing a "biodiversity club". With the end of the station season, they have begun to participate in my bird-watching activities on the weekends. They have begun regular birdwatching on campus. They have met with E-bird and started to put bird records.

Arzu Gürsoy Ergen, Manager of the Eymir Bird Ringing Station

I am a biology student in Ankara University, and I have worked at Eymir bird ringing station from 1-8 October 2022. I have learnt and experienced a lot of things here and I believe this experience will shape my future experiences too. I have learnt so much things about birds that I could not even imagined, from the simplest to the most complicated stuff. I have learnt things that I did not even knew existed. From this moment, as a future biologist, my eyes will be wide open to the nature and birds. I am very happy that people and associations like OSME gives us opportunities to see how big and unpredictable the nature is.

Bahar Öksüzer, recipient of training at the Eymir Bird Ringing Station

The value of long-term support

One of the key aspects of our youth development work is not just the direct funding of projects, but to identify key individuals that would benefit from long-term support and advice. That support can simply be to encourage individuals to stay involved in the projects and get them to take the lead in organizing events in subsequent years. OSME provides opportunities for project participants to write guest blogs for the website and to contribute local language posts on our Facebook page. For some individuals we have provided technical support with grant applications for conservation projects, advice on survey methodology and manuscript preparation - all important skills that are required by the conservationists of tomorrow.

I have had an interest in nature, particularly birds, from childhood. I vividly remember sitting on our balcony and watching birds after school. However, this uncommon hobby of mine was done alone until 2016 when I joined the first Bird Camp at Besh Barmag between 16-19 September. In this OSME-supported event, I met many nature enthusiasts like myself and birders from Germany and Sweden. During the camp, various scientific methods, such as bird migration counts and bird ringing were demonstrated. Despite the language barrier, considering my English wasn't great back then, we were on the same page on one topic - the birds migrating over our heads and how interesting this experience was. For the first time in my life I felt that my "crazy" obsession with birds was shared by others as well.

The following year, in spring 2017 I joined the second Bird Camp again supported by OSME and later that year I was part of the first comprehensive bird ringing study by Pia Fetting in the bottleneck. This was quite interesting to see birds in hand and learning more about them, especially so-called "little brown jobs". During these youth camps, it was obvious more avian research in the bottleneck lay ahead and in 2018 the first full 3-month autumn migration count was held. I joined this majestic event as much

as possible despite being in my last year in university where I was preparing to study abroad. However, due to the global Covid pandemic, the counts on the bottleneck had to be suspended until 2022. In that year I was doing my mandatory military service and only managed to join the counts partially.

During these years I realized that our precious avifauna faces an array of threats (illegal hunting, habitat destruction, dysfunctional law enforcement etc.) and that more conservation activities are needed to protect them alongside their ecosystems. Thus, in the winter of 2023 with the financial support of OSME, we did a preliminary survey on wintering Little Bustards in Azerbaijan and the threats they face. The findings of this work are published in the 45th issue of the OSME journal Sandgrouse. We are planning to widen the scope of our Little Bustard project and turn Azerbaijan, which holds the world's largest wintering population, into a safe haven for them. Similarly, in autumn 2023 I was a part of the management team of the Besh Barmaq Bird Migration Count.

Zulfu Farajli, describing his progress from participation in bird camps to publication in Sandgrouse

What next for the OSME Youth Development Fund?

The first five years of OSME's focused youth development work has been hugely successful. We have reached more than 1160 individuals through the various supported projects outlined above. The feedback we have received from both participants and OSME supporters has been overwhelmingly positive and it is clear that this part of our work is greatly valued and is having a positive impact. A number of supporters have made specific donations to the Youth Development Fund and even to specific projects. Despite the numerous obstacles (a global pandemic, rising inflation, increasingly complex international banking requirements and political tension) many of the projects, and project teams, have shown a remarkable resilience. All projects supported to date have fully implemented agreed activities and

typically deliver more than expected. Project leaders and participants have gladly shared their experiences, as exemplified in the many personal quotes highlighted in this article. OSME Council expects to continue with the Youth Development Fund and is planning to maintain, and funding permitting, further grow this area of our work. Already during 2024 we have expanded into new countries, as well as maintaining our support of some of our existing projects.

One area that we are seeking to expand is the Youth Development Fund Travel Bursary which was launched in May 2023. This small fund aims to support those participants of Youth Development Fund projects that would benefit from attending further training courses or work experience. Melisa Soylyuer, a participant and organiser of the Simurg Bird Sanctuary and School of Avian Ecology projects in Türkiye, was the very first recipient of the travel bursary (Plate 9). This contributed to the costs of attending the 14th European Ornithologists' Union (EOU) congress in Lund, Sweden. You can read her truly inspiring blog post on the OSME website (published on 1 March 2024). Zulfu Farajli was awarded a travel bursary to contribute to his attendance of a conservation internship in Croatia.

During 2024 there were several exciting developments. The Global Birdfair held at Rutland, England, chose the Galala Bird Observatory project to be the recipient of funds raised during the annual event. The OSME stand was adjacent to that of NCE and it was great to see the level of interest in the Galala project amongst the Birdfair attendees. An incredible \$125 000 was raised and handed over to the NCE to help develop the observatory at the Galala migratory bird hotspot. OSME are in discussion with NCE as to how we can continue to support the training and capacity building component of the project – watch this space!

In collaboration with our long-term partners and friends, the Batumi Raptor Count (BRC), we launched the Flyways Monitoring Internship. Each year, two young trainees from the OSME region will be selected for a four-week internship, with their costs paid for by a bursary provided by the OSME Youth Development Fund. The BRC team will then



Plate 9. Stephen Menzie handing over Opticron binoculars to Melisa Soyluer whilst attending the EOU Congress.

provide intensive training in raptor migration and monitoring, with a key aim that the interns take their newly acquired knowledge back to their projects in their home countries.

OSME Council remains committed to the Youth Development Fund and is keen to see its work expand to new countries. In 2024 we funded a two-year bird camp style project in Kyrgyzstan and are looking to support work in two new countries in 2025. Of course, funding will be a major constraint but there are potential sources out there that we need to tap into. Another limiting factor is staff time. TAH, OSME's Youth Development Officer, works as a volunteer to develop and nurture projects, but if our work is to grow in the future we need more people with the right skills to get involved. If you think you can help with funding, time, skills or ideas, then please get in contact with us (youthdevelopment@osme.org, chairman@osme.org) and you can be part of what promises to be an amazing

next five years.

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