

Let us not forget the power of natural forces

Davorin Tome (Ljubljana, Slovenia)



Ljubljansko barje by the end of May 2019 – Whinchat study site was completely under the water (Photo: © D. TOME).

2019 started with »business as usual«. Whinchats returned to my study site on Ljubljansko barje in mid-April. By the end of the month several males were already marking their territories. Females were present too, although much more difficult to see, due to less conspicuous colours and less prominent behaviour. By the middle of May I was convinced breeding would be typical for this decade: typical timing of breeding, typical breeding density and I was hoping for typical breeding success too. Not that I would be happy with such a breeding output, but at least it would not be worse than it was in the last couple of years – about 30 breeding pairs and about half of them successful in fledging their young.

Boy, how wrong I was! At the end of May, by the time the first young birds should leave the nest, a prolonged rainy period caused severe floods. Most of the study site became inaccessible due to the high water level. When the water receded,

after two weeks, not a single Whinchat was seen feeding its young. The whole cohort of first brood chicks for 2019 seemed to have drowned. Since mowing followed the floods relatively quickly, there was little chance that potential replacement clutches would fare any better in respect of success. Later in June, three families with already strongly flying young birds were documented in the area. Perhaps some pairs were successful after all, or, more likely, they came from some other breeding grounds, not suffering problems with water.

In the heat of so many and such intense human influences on natural populations as we have witnessed in recent decades in the case of the grassland birds, natural causes of destruction often operate unnoticed. Unless of course, in extreme situations as in 2019 on Ljubljansko barje. But nevertheless, even if they are “natural” and “small” they deserve our full attention. In today’s

severely decimated populations they can still tip the balance and reduce the number of birds even more. We must understand! Species evolved in a much, much less human dominated World than it is today, while many natural pressures likely remain quite similar to what they were in the past. This means that birds are “used” to them, by having a range of successful defence mechanisms against them. But success of those mechanisms is often based on population numbers – a big, widespread population can easily overcome a problem like floods, since only a small part of it

is destroyed by the water. Unfortunately, today, this small part of the population is often all that we have left. So yes, even natural influences, which populations are evolved to overcome, can be problematic in today’s world.

PS.: I used expressions “natural” and “human related” just to clearly separate different origins of influences. Otherwise I cannot see a reason why human influences would not be regarded as “natural” too. As far as I know, we are not robots or something, at least not yet.

Author’s address:

Davorin Tome, National Institute of Biology, Slovenia, davorin.tome@nib.si



Male Whinchat in Ljubljansko barje (Photo: © D. TOME).