

CABRERA, FUTURE NATIONAL PARK OF THE BALEARIC ISLANDS

EAGLES, LIZARDS, TURTLES, DOLPHINS, SHEARWATERS...
A THREATENED FAUNA -UNIQUE AND MEDITERRANEAN-
INHABITS THE ISLAND OF CABRERA. IT IS THE SAME FAUNA
THAT INHABITED ALL THE BALEARIC COAST, AND WHICH HAS
BEEN DRIVEN OUT FROM SO MANY PLACES BY THE MASSIVE
OCCUPATION OF THE COASTLINE FOR TOURIST EXPLOITATION.

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Today, Charles Darwin could have avoided more than one bout of sea-sickness and several thousand miles of his travels round the world and still have made his brilliant discovery of the mechanism of evolution. He could have substituted a charter flight to Majorca for the lengthy voyage of the Beagle, and instead of the many days of dangerous sea-travel, he could have undertaken a modest crossing by pneumatic launch to the little Majorcan archipelago of Cabrera. Here we find biological phenomena similar to those of the Galapagos Islands, where giant turtles and island finches revealed to the great scientist the mutability of life. In Cabrera, the Balearic lizards have evolved in colonies isolated since the ice-age, and scientists have identified ten subspecies amongst them. On some of the smallest islands, the lizards do not see man as an enemy, and will even take food from his hand.

Cabrera is the name of the biggest island of the group (some 6 sq. miles), and by extension, of the whole group, made up of fifteen islands and a few rocky outcrops. Only Cabrera has any human population, reduced to a military detachment. Here, once or twice a year, military manoeuvres take place using live ammunition, strongly contested by local public opinion and the scientific community. The government has now promised to put a stop to this inappropriate and degrading use of the island, and turn the archipelago into a legally protected natural area, for the conservation of nature and for cultural use.

The lizards, of course, are not the only wildlife of interest on Cabrera, the largest western Mediterranean island with no nucleus of human habitation. Its greatest value lies in its community of marine fowl that gather there to breed. The abundance and the variety of sea-birds on these islands is extraordinary. The tiny Storm Petrel, the Balearic Shearwater and the Cory's Shearwater breed in the chalky clefts and caves. The Shag, a subspecies native to the Mediterranean, with its most important breeding-colonies in the Balearics, is not as abundant as it might be; it seems to be one of the victims of the lack of

protection and control in Cabrera. The gulls, the most popular and best-known sea-birds, form numerous noisy colonies on the deserted islands. Cabrera's most important species is, precisely, a gull: the Audouin's Gull, an exclusively Mediterranean bird of limited numbers. Hopefully, the small colony of Audouin's Gulls in Cabrera will grow, now that they are no longer going to be bombarded during their breeding season at the end of spring. Why this richness of sea-birds? The size and variety of the continental shelf, biologically the most productive sea-bed,



make Cabrera a privileged area for fish. Until recently, the abundance of Dusky Sea Perch, Combers, Wrasse, Scorpionfish, Conger Eels, Cape Town Lobster and Spiny Lobster was proverbial. This marine wealth, along with the negligible human influence on the islands (the military manoeuvres are a recent phenomenon), has allowed the range of bird-life mentioned, as well as the regular presence of dolphins and other cetaceans, and turtles. Unfortunately, the abusive exploitation of the natural resources has been uncontrolled and today the fish population around Cabrera has decreased significantly. To restore it, an appropriately rigorous control will be needed.

This relative impoverishment, along with the active human plundering, has already claimed a victim among the island fauna: the Monk Seal, which less than a generation ago was breeding in the caves along this coast. This formidable mammal disappeared from Cabrera in the fifties, although it has since been observed there from time to time. At the

present moment, the European Economic Community is starting a programme to recover the species. There is no doubt that Cabrera is the best place in which to return this animal to the Spanish fauna.

It is certain that seals swam in these waters when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Archduke Lluís Salvador of Austria noted the presence of black falcons in the area, which according to him "... glide at a great height whence they observe, with infernal cries and rapid turns, the prey they seek on the abrupt coast, an imposing landscape wherein they appear to play the part of evil spirits..." Although His Royal Highness was unaware of it, he was describing the Eleonora's Falcon, then only recently discovered by science. It is one of the most distinctive and ornate birds of prey in Europe: of variable colouring and colonial and migratory habits, this falcon only lives in coastal regions rich in migrant fowl, adapting its reproduction to their life-cycle. The archipelago's geographical situation makes it an ideal place for migrating birds, and the falcons maintain a colony there as a result. Every year, one of the last remaining pairs of Osprey –amongst the rarest Mediterranean eagles, and in danger of extinction in the country– nests on one of the island's cliffs. The nest is an imposing tower of branches which has been used since time immemorial.

Eagles, lizards, turtles, dolphins, shearwaters... A threatened fauna –unique and Mediterranean– inhabits these little islands. It is the same fauna that inhabited all the Balearic coast, and which has been driven out from so many places by the massive occupation of the coastline for tourist exploitation. Only Cabrera is clean, only Cabrera still provides a last quiet corner. Today the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands view with hope the repeated promises of legal protection for Cabrera; some through conservationist feelings, others because of general feelings about the deteriorated image of the Balearic coastline ("Balearization" is a synonym for urban chaos and uncontrolled growth). Whatever happens, those most benefited by the conservation of the area must be the Shags, the gulls, the fish, the lizards...