Hunting in Italy

It has happened to me more than once in Italy to hear a man being described as a nature-lover. The justification given for making this assertion is invariably that he is a hunter.

In Umbria where we live, there are two main kinds of hunting. The first consists of the organised, responsible and very necessary culling of wild animals which do a lot of damage – in particular wild boars. These beasts can reach the same weight as a horse and are fast and agile. They trample crops and are always dangerous, especially when they are defending their offspring. They may have as many as seven piglets at a time, and with each female over the age of eighteen months capable of having a litter every year, the population can rapidly increase in the absence of any natural predator. They are hunted by being tracked across many square miles of forest and mountainside by dogs, some of which may be mauled by the boar’s tusks in the process, and then shot by marksmen with reflective jackets and walkie-talkies. Their meat, a lean and strong-tasting free-range pork, forms the basis of local dishes and delicacies, and the sausages are ever-popular in supermarkets.

I am prepared to accept that a desire to keep the numbers of wild boar in check is not at variance with a love of the environment, however I would dispute that this could be true about the other kind of hunter. He operates in a solitary manner and has no respect for property boundaries. His love of nature consists solely of a willingness to spend time in the midst of it, whether it be creeping through a coppice or holing up under a broom bush. He may claim to appreciate the frost on the grass and the mist in the hollows but he is there for the sole purpose of destroying the tranquillity of the early morning with the blast of his shotgun. This is hypocrisy, but the nature of his target makes him both ridiculous and, to my mind, criminal.

The typical hunter, who in my experience is always male, climbs out of bed in the small hours, coaxes his mud-caked Fiat Panda 4x4 to life and noses his way through the dark lanes. He parks tight against a hedge and then stumbles across rough ground by the light of a torch to find the hide which he has previously constructed from fir branches or sheets of corrugated iron. He crouches there, struggling against the urge to smoke because this will betray his presence, rubbing his hands together against the cold and longing for an Espresso. At first light he readies his rifle because soon he will have his reward. With a shiver of excitement he becomes aware that a songbird has alighted in the tree above him. He waits. There is a trill of song. The bird is feeling perfectly at ease. The hunter swivels round in his hiding place until he can see the silhouette against the sky. Taking careful aim, he fires. One shot – his skill has been honed over many winters – and the little body tumbles down through the branches. He reaches for it, feels its warmth in his hand, and stows it in his camouflage hunting bag. The first of many this morning, he hopes.

Of course, the smaller the bird, the more difficult the shot. When he meets up with his fellow-hunters, swaggering in his camouflage hat and
matching jacket, his prowess will be clear. He would not care one whit if the bird were nearing extinction – all the greater the prize. Maybe with his companions he does not stoop to making the quite incredible excuse that his birds are destined for the pot, and that he is reaping nature’s bounty in the same way as he might have picked wild mushrooms or looked for truffles. But that is the reason he will give to anyone outside the fraternity who asks why he kills small birds that do nothing but good.

“Surely there is very little meat on a blackbird?” I ask.

“Ah! They give a very special flavour to a casserole of pigeons.”

Pigeons, yes. I’m in favour of shooting them. But couldn’t flavour be obtained some other way?

Before we achieved (I hope) a sort of ‘gentleman’s agreement’ ban of unofficial hunting on our land, a seventy-year-old acquaintance showed me the song thrush which he had killed close to our house. He opened his bag with an air of someone revealing a treasure, clearly expecting me to be impressed by the sight of the poor little creature lying inside. My instinctive reaction was to exclaim:

“But they only sing!”

The man looked very taken aback.

“It’s just a migrant,” he protested.

I’ve never heard of song thrushes migrating, but that aside, why does a bird being a migrant make it fair game? Many species of migrant bird have been endangered by being killed in vast numbers when they reach landfall and are at their most vulnerable.

Despite his initial reaction, there must have been something in my heartfelt exclamation which affected him. I was genuinely upset – and rightly so because I didn’t hear a song thrush singing again on our land for more than a year. But I learnt later from his son that he had hung up his rifle and given up hunting for good. If that is indeed the case, bless him for it. I wish many more would follow his example.