**Brief report**

**First evidence of widespread nocturnal activity of Lesser Kestrel (Falco naumannii) in Southern Italy**

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We report here the first description of recorded nocturnal activity of the Lesser Kestrel in Italy. Using accurate GPS data-loggers on nine birds, we registered widespread nocturnal flights with distances from nests up to 19 km. At night, Lesser Kestrels were active even in areas with no artificial illumination. When comparing night-time and daytime periods, we found significant differences for 5-minute flight length and instantaneous flight speed, whereas distance from nest did not significantly differ. We conclude that the need for food during the reproductive period imposes also nocturnal activities to this typically diurnal species. Our study suggests that the Lesser Kestrel might not be a strictly diurnal species. Our findings are now considered by the Alta Murgia National Park and local municipalities in order to refine their conservation strategies by assigning higher conservation priority to areas used by Lesser Kestrels during both daytime and night-time.

1. **Introduction**

The Lesser Kestrel (Falco naumannii) is a migratory, colonial, small falcon breeding mainly in holes and crevices in large historic buildings within towns and villages, or often in abandoned farm houses scattered across the countryside. In Western Europe it is mainly a summer visitor, migrating to Africa in winter (Cramp & Simmons 1980). The species has declined markedly in the last decades, mainly due to agricultural intensification and pesticide use, which affect its foraging habitats and food availability (BirdLife International 2004). Today the Lesser Kestrel is considered a species of “least concern” (BirdLife International 2014). In Italy, the largest colonies are located in the cities of Gravina in Puglia and Altamura (Apulia, Southern Italy), close to the Alta Murgia National Park (Bux et al. 2008).

There are many references to roosting behaviour of the Lesser Kestrel in different parts of the world (Rodríguez et al. 2009; Limiñana et al. 2012), indicating that individuals typically roost all night long. In the wintering grounds in Africa,
Lesser Kestrels gather in large traditional roost sites, sometimes numbering thousands of individuals. They arrive in those places at sunset and depart around sunrise. In the breeding grounds in Europe, it has been reported repeatedly that individuals either roost at the nest site (often the two members of the couple together) or at roost sites near the colony (Negro 1997).

Hence, the Lesser Kestrel being considered a typically diurnal species (Cramp & Simmons 1977), little is known about its nocturnal activities at a local scale. To our best knowledge, only two studies focussed on this topic (Andrada & Franco 1974, Negro et al. 2000), but they were conducted in an urban area (Seville in Southern Spain) with artificial lighting conditions, and were hence not dealing with widespread nocturnal flight activities on the countryside with no artificial illumination. Furthermore, to date in Italy no reports indicate that the species is active at night in rural or urban areas.

For these reasons, we investigated the nocturnal activity of Lesser Kestrels at a local scale in Italy. The goals of our work were to: 1) compare the night-time and day-time activities of Lesser Kestrels, 2) hypothesize the purposes of nocturnal flights, and 3) try to explain which factors may allow for it.

2. Materials and methods

The study area lies within the SPA (Special Protection Area) “Murgia Alta” IT9120007 which also covers the Alta Murgia National Park, and is included within the IBA (Important Bird Area) “Murge” (Heath & Evans 2000). Surveys were conducted using TechnoSmart GiPSy-4 data-loggers (23 × 15 × 6 mm, 1.8 g plus 3.2 g battery), that provided information about date, local time, latitude, longitude, altitude and instantaneous speed.

Nine individuals (four males and five females) were surveyed in the period from June 20th to July 9th 2012, corresponding to the complete nesting period. Sunset took place at about 21:30 local time, and sunrise at about 6:00 local time. Data ac-
 acquisition occurred every 5 minutes during two
time periods: day (6:00–21:30) and night (21:30–
6:00). In situ surveys allowed us to locate nests and
roosts used by the observed individuals. Birds
were captured and fitted with data loggers at their
nest boxes when they were delivering food to their
nestlings. To download the data from the data-log-
ners, birds were recaptured at their nest boxes after
batteries were exhausted three days later.

GPS data were imported into the GIS GRASS
(Neteler & Mitasova 2008). Layers used for the
subsequent analyses were: a) boundaries of the
Alta Murgia National Park, b) land cover at
1:10,000 scale, c) digital terrain model of the study
area (digitized at 1:10,000 scale by the authors
from the available topographic maps of Apulia Re-
gion), d) boundaries of Gravina in Puglia and
Altamura, e) nest and roost locations. Flight height
above ground level was calculated by subtracting
terrain elevation from altitude above mean sea
level provided by data-loggers. This step allowed
us to detect locations of the study area where
Lesser Kestrels remained motionless at the terrain
level (i.e., flight height equal to 0 m), this indicat-
ing potential hunting activities. Five-minute flight
length was measured as the length (in km) of flight
between two successive GPS acquisitions. In addi-
tion, for each GPS point we calculated the distance
in meters from the nest.

Descriptive statistics on the flight variables
were extracted from the GIS data, and thereafter
used as response variables in inferential tests. As
the data points from the same individuals could not
be treated as independent (uncorrelated) observa-
tions, we compared the averaged night and day ac-
tivities for all individuals, using a study design that
corresponds to a classic two sample t-test. For the
same reason, we used GPS data about diurnal
flights for those individuals showing only diurnal
activity (or for whom GPS locators did not return
nocturnal data), and data about only nocturnal ac-
tivity for those individuals having flight activity
during both diurnal and nocturnal periods. Last,
we correlated nocturnal activity (i.e., average per-
individual nocturnal flight length) with moon visi-
ability in order to detect a possible relationship be-
tween nocturnal flights and natural light condi-
tions. All the descriptive and inferential analyses
were performed using R (R Development Core
Team 2010). Tests were considered significant for
p < 0.05.

3. Results

We found evidence of nocturnal flights of Lesser
Kestrels in both Gravina in Puglia and Altamura
colonies (Fig. 1). Four individuals (2 males and 2
females) out of nine showed nocturnal flight activ-
ities. GPS locators for some reason failed to collect
data during the night for the remaining five indi-
viduals. Hence, for inferential tests we used data
from four individuals for depicting nocturnal
flight behaviour, and data from the remaining five
individuals for diurnal flight behaviour.

The nocturnal monitoring effort was almost 56
hours ($N_1 = 670$ GPS points) during which the four observed individuals totalled 414.1 km of flight, unevenly distributed during the 4 hours of nocturnal monitoring ($\chi^2 = 89.703$, df = 3, $p < 0.001$; Fig. 2). The diurnal monitoring effort for the remaining five individuals was about 148 hours (3,260.2 km; $N_2 = 1,776$ GPS points).

Two flight attributes (5-minute flight length and instantaneous speed) out of three were significantly higher ($p < 0.05$; online Supplement A) for the diurnal period than for the nocturnal one. Instead, the distance from nest did not differ significantly ($p > 0.05$; online Supplement A). The correlation between moon visibility and the average (per-individual) nocturnal flight length (online Supplement B) was significantly negative (Pearson’s correlation coefficient = $-0.959$, $p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion

Our work provides the first description of recorded nocturnal activity of Lesser Kestrels in Italy.

We registered widespread flights with distances from nest sites up to almost 19 km. At night, Lesser Kestrels were active even in areas with no artificial illumination. In fact, at night the study area is almost completely unilluminated, with the exception of Gravina in Puglia, Altamura and few farmhouses present in the countryside and within the national park. In Italy, harvesting activities during the night can sometimes occur using artificial illumination, but this was not our case as we verified in situ. We observed an unevenly distributed nocturnal flight activity during the four hours of monitoring effort. Although higher activity levels happened close to sunrise, Lesser Kestrels showed substantial flight activity in conditions without any visible sunlight.

We found significant differences for two out of three flight attributes when comparing night-time and daytime periods. Scarce or no illumination might force Lesser Kestrels to be more restrictive in their nocturnal behaviour. However, distance from nest to the foraging grounds was not significantly different in the two time periods. A simple reason accounts for this: during night-time, the observed Lesser Kestrels were used to forage in the same areas they utilized at daytime. We base this conclusion on several arguments. First, GPS data (and successive GIS analyses) revealed that Lesser Kestrels stayed nearly motionless on ground during night-time in the same areas they used for foraging in the daytime. Secondly, these areas do not correspond to roosts because Lesser Kestrels stayed there for a limited amount of time (< 20 minutes). Third, these areas correspond to pseudeppes with traditional agro-pastoral systems, which are particularly suitable for their foraging activities (Tella et al. 1998).

During the monitoring period, moon visibility was always higher than 60%, with full moon happening on July 2nd (data from the meteorological office of Apulia Region; online Supplement B). Although we expected a positive correlation between flight efforts and moon visibility, we found a negative one. The study area is almost completely without artificial illumination, hence a source of natural illumination was needed by Lesser Kestrels for their nocturnal foraging activities.

While a minimum cut-off level of moon visibility was necessary, we hypothesize that above that threshold the average per-individual flight length was likely driven by factors other than natural lighting conditions, such as foraging success/failure during the daytime. Negro et al. (2000) observed that, compared to the daytime, nest provisioning for Lesser Kestrels is minor at night, and therefore the main purpose of the adult birds’ flights at night is probably to feed themselves. This is very important because birds in better condition typically breed early and produce larger clutches and more offspring (Catry et al. 2012). Hence, despite the decreasing natural illumination, it is plausible that surveyed Lesser Kestrels were forced to more frequent nocturnal activities in order to feed themselves, determining the observed negative correlation.

Our study suggests that Lesser Kestrel is not a strictly diurnal species. At night, the birds exhibited widespread foraging activity even in rural areas with no artificial illumination. We hypothesize two possible reasons for this behaviour. Firstly, the average difference in temperature between day and night was elevated in the study area during the monitoring period (about 20°C; data from the meteorological office of Apulia Region), and hence it could be energetically more profitable.
for Lesser Kestrels to hunt during the night. Secondly, the behaviour and availability of potential prey animals might be very different between day and night. Instead, on the basis of our in situ knowledge of the study area, we can exclude an outbreak of some mostly nocturnal prey during the monitoring period.

Since we might have uncovered some unusual nocturnal behaviour by an otherwise diurnal raptor species, we are now planning to extend our monitoring to a larger number of individuals and colonies. In addition, in order to detect if nocturnal activities of Lesser Kestrels are a prerogative of the reproductive period, we are also planning to extend our surveys to the pre-reproductive period (from May to June). Further investigation is also necessary to support the hypothesis that a minimum threshold of natural illumination is needed for nocturnal flights, by extending GPS monitoring to periods of time with low levels of moon visibility. Our findings are now considered by the Alta Murgia National Park and local municipalities (Gravina in Puglia and Altamura) in order to refine their conservation strategies by assigning higher conservation priority to areas used by Lesser Kestrels during both daytime and night-time.

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References


