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Back in the archipelago: first confirmed breeding of the Egadi Islands (Sicily, Italy) by Bonelli's eagle *Aquila fasciata* Vieillot, 1822 (Aves Accipitridae)

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ABSTRACT The Bonelli's eagle, *Aquila fasciata* Vieillot, 1822 (Aves Accipitridae), has been reported as a breeding species on the island of Favignana (Sicily, Italy) on the basis of data collected from 1970 onwards and subsequently confirmed by various authors without conclusive evidence. However, due to the lack of reliable and more recent data on this breeding, the Bonelli's eagle is no longer considered a breeding species on the island of Favignana. This paper reports the breeding of a pair of Bonelli's eagles on the island of Favignana.

KEY WORDS Nest; Favignana; Egadi archipelago; Trapani; Bonelli's eagle.

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INTRODUCTION

Our research into the birdlife of Sicily (Italy), particularly in the westernmost areas, including the Egadi Archipelago, has enabled us to make some interesting observations regarding the presence of the Bonelli's eagle, *Aquila fasciata* Vieillot, 1822 (Aves Accipitridae) on the island of Favignana.

The Bonelli's eagle was first reported in the Favignana Island in April–May 1953 by Steinbacher (1955). Subsequently, Krapp (1970) considered it to nest on Favignana (one pair) and on Marettimo (two pairs). According to Massa (1973) and Sorci et al. (1973), the species bred on Marettimo but used all three islands as a hunting range, where the authors observed it on several occasions. However, none of these authors actually found a nest (Massa B., pers. comm.). Therefore, later works (Di Vittorio, 2011; Di Vittorio et al., 2012) no longer included the Egadi Islands among the species' breeding sites.

RESULTS

On 19 May 2026, during an ornithological census of nesting birds on the island of Favignana Egadi Archipelago, Sicily, Italy), we observed a pair of Bonelli's Eagles near a rocky cliff on Monte Santa Caterina (Fig. 1).

One of us (S.S.) had repeatedly observed a pair of Bonelli's Eagles flying over Monte Santa Caterina on 31 March, 9 May and 17 May 2021, then heading towards the mainland or the other islands of the archipelago. Since this behaviour was repeated in subsequent years, we stopped at the base of the south-southwest facing cliffs and waited for the birds to return to the nest. The wait was brief: within a couple of hours, an individual was seen

twice entering a cavity (Fig. 2) located halfway up the cliff face (approximately 145 m above sea level).

Using a 20–60× Swarovski spotting scope from a distance of about 500 m, we were able to glimpse a fairly large chick inside the cavity, which appeared to be quite deep. All observations were made from a distance to avoid any disturbance. All activities complied with Italian wildlife protection laws and ethical guidelines for raptor monitoring.

These observations therefore confirms, for the first time, the nesting of Bonelli's eagles on Favignana Island.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In Sicily, the Bonelli's eagle experienced a marked decline: from an estimated 40 breeding pairs in the 1970s (Brichetti & Fracasso, 2003) to only 13 pairs in 2000 (Di Vittorio et al., 2001). However, a clear recovery has occurred in recent years (Massa et al., 2021). Currently, the number of occupied territories is 70 (Scuderi, 2025), and the population seems to have increased over the last twenty years. According to Di Vittorio et al. (2019), this recovery may be linked to a dietary shift: birds now constitute 57.6% of the diet, with pigeons (Rock Dove and Woodpigeon, 38.4%) and corvids (three species, 18.5%) being the main components, while rabbits have decreased to 37.1%. This change coincided with a dramatic decline in rabbit populations and a strong increase in Woodpigeons and feral pigeons (the domestic form of *Columba livia* J.F. Gmelin, 1789) across Sicily (Massa et al., 2021).

The Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* Linnaeus, 1758 is now well distributed throughout Favignana island. Moreover, since 2019 the Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* has become established on Favignana; the population has naturalised and spread widely, and recently also colonised the nearby island of Levanzo. In other parts of its range, *Alectoris* species are a staple prey of Bonelli's Eagle, but in Sicily they have rarely been recorded in its diet (Lo Valvo & Massa, 1992; Di Vittorio et al., 2001). On Favignana, rabbit numbers have also decreased significantly.

The confirmed nesting on Favignana is likely linked to the increase in pigeon and partridge pop-

Figure . One of two individuals observed on the island of Favignana on May 19, 2026 (photo by G. Mirlocca).

Figure 2. Bonelli's eagle nest placed inside a cavity, Favignana Island, May 19, 2026 (photo by G. Mirlocca).

ulations on the island, and continued monitoring is recommended.

A targeted search is needed on the island of Marettimo for other breeding pairs of Bonelli's eagles.

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