It is still pitch dark when we step into the dugout pirogue which will take us to the roost, discovered twelve months previously by Philippe Pilard of LPO’s Mission Rapaces. After the water crossing, we still have several kilometres of walking through the mud ahead of us. Tracks of Spotted Hyenas are everywhere. We take up a strategic position and wait for first light. Then the spectacle begins... Thousands of Lesser Kestrels ascend from the roost and disappear in a northeasterly direction. Even bigger clouds of Swallow-tailed Kites rise and resume position in the top of the Baobabs in which they have roosted. At sunrise some 70,000 raptors have already passed overhead, an unforgettable sight. But another surprise is waiting. Under the roosting trees we find a carpet of pellets, literally untold millions of them. When we give these a closer look we see that the predominant prey items are grasshoppers. Two days later we have located the falcons’ main hunting grounds. Despite the seemingly unfavourable conditions of the dry season, we are surprised to see massive numbers of grasshoppers... and their predators: not only thousands of Lesser Kestrels, Montagu’s Harriers, Northern Wheatears and Abyssinian Rollers, but also White Storks and Marabou Storks. Flocks of up to 500 Cattle Egrets move rapidly through the dry vegetation, chasing grasshoppers in front of them. Hundreds
Introduction

Predation of locusts and grasshoppers by vertebrates, and birds in particular, has attracted attention since time immemorial. Nevo (1996) cites numerous historic sources which report predators of locusts and grasshoppers in the eastern Mediterranean basin, such as Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340 AD, Bishop of Caesarea) who stated that the Egyptians honour the ibis for its destruction of snakes, locusts and caterpillars. Pliny (23-79 AD) explains that predators arrived in response to prayers offered to Jupiter by the people in the region of Mt. Cadmus (Jebel el Akra in today’s Turkey), when locusts were attacking their fields. According to his information, migratory birds destroyed the invading locusts (Nevo 1996).

In the early 20th century the Committee of Control of the South African Central Locust Bureau considered bird predation as an important control mechanism of Red Locusts *Nomadacris septemfasciata* and Brown Locusts *Locustana pardalina*. In their annual reports special emphasis was given to this phenomenon (Lounsbury 1909). The word “Locust Bird” or “Sprinkhaanvoël” in Afrikaans (Van Ee 1995) was commonly used for predators that were considered important in destroying locusts, such as White Storks and Black-winged Pratincoles (Lounsbury 1909) and Wattled Starlings (Meinertzhagen 1959). Elsewhere in Africa (Moreau & Sclater 1938, Hudleston 1958, Schuz 1955) and India (Husain & Bhalla 1931, Singh & Dhamdhere 1986), birds were also seen as important natural enemies of locusts and grasshoppers. In the second half of the 19th century Indian Mynahs *Acridotheres tristis*, acridivores from the Indian subcontinent, were even introduced to Madagascar to control Red Locusts, which, however, they failed to do (Franc 2007). Rosy Starlings have been mentioned as the major predator of the locusts which used to occur in the steppes of the Cis-Caucasus, *i.e.* Migratory Locusts *Locusta migratoria* (Belik and Mihalevich 1994) and probably Moroccan Locusts *Dociostaurus maroccanus*. Outbreaks were particularly heavy in the 1920s, reputedly due to the vast stretches of newly abandoned fields during and after the Civil War (Znamensky 1926). Wild Boars *Sus scrofa* living in the Kizlyar Steppe and the “Caspian reeds” fed entirely on locusts during locust invasions; up to 1.5 kg of locusts have been found in a single stomach (Heptner et al. 1989). After the frequency of locust upsurges slumped Rosy Starling numbers dropped sharply, only to increase again during outbreaks of Italian Locusts *Calliptamus italicus* (Belik and Mihalevich 1994).

The widespread use of chemical pesticides for locust and grasshopper control since the Second World War removed the focus on “economic ornithology” (Kirk et al. 1996). National crop protection services, locust control centres and international organizations lost interest in natural factors contributing to population regulation of...