



# Minding the Earth



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## **St. Francis and Bert**

Eight hundred years ago, St. Francis climbed Mt. Subasio near his home of Assisi, Italy, to preach to and learn from the birds there. The moment was given durable form by the painter Giotto, whose "St. Francis Preaching to the Birds" is among the great Italian frescoes. The life of St. Francis is one of the few examples showing Christian affirmation of the spiritual significance of animals and wild creatures. Belatedly in 1980, St. Francis was at last designated the patron saint of ecology.

Two years ago a man from San Francisco, Bert Schwarzschild, climbed Mt. Subasio and found no birds living there. What he did find were spent shotgun shells left by sport hunters whose only remaining targets in that depleted land are migratory songbirds. Bert, a Jew, came down from the mountain determined to salvage and restore one of the rare sites on earth where Christianity and nature have been on friendly terms.

Bert wrote articles for American magazines, mobilized conservation groups, enlisted influential people, and



brought pressure upon Italian, American, and Vatican officials in a one-man whirlwind of effective activity. Just two years later, Subasio Regional Park was dedicated in October, 1984, as a permanent sanctuary for wildlife, and an International Ecology Center has been established in Assisi. "Somehow," Bert believes, "the spirit of St. Francis must have intervened to achieve protection for all his mountain's creatures and their habitat."

Intervention was never St. Francis' way, but living as an example to others was. Bert has affirmed that the principle still works, and that one person with vision and dedication can restore, if not move, mountains. A new bird population has been transplanted to Mt. Subasio, and other plant and animal species will be protected there in a permanent living monument. Between them, St. Francis of Assisi and Bert Schwarzschild of San Francisco have reaffirmed the bond between spirit and nature, and have demonstrated the power inherent in a life that is well lived.

Poverty was one of the cornerstones of St. Francis' teaching. Bert has inadvertently learned that lesson, too, by spending more of his own money than he could afford to save Mt. Subasio for the birds.

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