

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 55 ■ March 2018




BirdLife
MALTA

Challenges looming while springtime is blooming

noticed that there are already the sweet signs of springtime arriving.

Unfortunately, our country's natural beauty is passing through a challenging period. Many areas designated as Outside Development Zones are being targeted by business entities to find loopholes within planning policies, while riding on the economic feel-good factor we are experiencing as a country to develop such areas. Our natural lands and open spaces are under threat and BirdLife Malta is doing all it can to hammer in the idea of sustainable development. Apart from this, BirdLife Malta remains adamant to help with the management of our Natura 2000 sites.

As you might have read in the press, 2017 was the worst year for illegal bird hunting in the past five years. The situation is mainly due to the lack of enforcement. That is why this year we will have a stronger Spring Watch camp, making sure that the spring hunting season for Quail does not become a smokescreen for illegal hunting of protected birds. In the meantime, we are still waiting for the outcome of the European Court of Justice verdict on the finch trapping derogation. Follow the #STOPTRAPPINGNOW campaign we launched to learn more on the impacts of trapping.

"2017 was the worst year for illegal bird hunting in the past five years"

Finally, I want to thank all those who helped us raise over €7,000 during the #ISAVEBIRDS crowdfunding campaign along with many others who are joining us and becoming members. I ask you to remain proactive members and entice others to join us. We want to grow our lobby strength and you are instrumental in helping us achieve this.

Mark Sultana CEO



Although I write this on a much needed rainy weekend in mid-February, those that were lucky enough to be out and about in the countryside would have

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Springtime splendour!

Spring is here and of course our first issue of Bird's Eye View for 2018 heralds this beautiful time of year. Though it seems we are always short of space, in this issue we have tried to fit as much content as possible to make our members' magazine more informative and enjoyable to read!

As you have probably noticed already, for our front page we've chosen a very common spring migrant – the Barn Swallow or *Huttafa* in Maltese. Synonymous with spring, this species is also very popular with people throughout Europe, including in Malta – and you can find out why this is on page 4. In our 'Nature in focus' piece Victor Falzon focuses on our Simar Nature Reserve, whilst 'Educate' is all about trapping and what we've been doing to educate people on the implications of this practice. In this issue's walking tour, our new events coordinator Eleni will take you to the south of Malta for a coastal tour whilst the research page includes an interesting piece by our Reserves Manager Mark Gauci about what we found out during 2017 thanks to our bird ringing scheme. We have packed page 11 with all of our upcoming events (which we hope you will be able to join us at) and dedicated the back page to our annual White Wagtail roost count held at the start of the year in Valletta – this year's European Capital of Culture. We hope you enjoy reading this issue and some of the wonderful sights springtime is sure to bring to Malta.

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Spring hunting season looms

As we leave winter behind we are once again anticipating the next spring hunting season. This follows one of the worst autumn hunting seasons we have seen in years, with a total of 62 known illegally shot birds across the five month period. Despite this, we are preparing to maintain our presence in the countryside during Spring Watch to deter and report any potential illegalities as well as be on hand to rescue and rehabilitate any injured birds that fall victim to hunting.

Launch of teacher training course

February marked an exciting month in our education department as we launched a new course for primary school teachers in collaboration with the Institute for Education. The MQF Level 6 Award in Teaching Outdoor Learning through Nature will be delivered by BirdLife Malta and will provide teachers with the skills and competencies to deliver curriculum-linked activities in an outdoor setting. We hope the course will enhance environmental education in Malta as well as provide opportunities for more children to connect with nature.



Veerle van Werde

► Countryside monitoring

A new field season for LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija

Our LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project is now entering another Yelkouan Shearwater breeding season, meaning the team are hard at work in the field. During February, the project held its first call count of the year, inviting volunteers to assist in vital data collection of Yelkouan Shearwater populations across Malta. The project will also be holding more across the spring months when these seabirds become more active in their coastal nesting sites.

Proposed development threatens Simar Nature Reserve

A proposed five-storey development in Xemxija is posing a risk to the neighbouring Simar Nature Reserve. The plan, which does not fall in line with existing policies for the area, can negatively impact the BirdLife Malta reserve – a protected bird sanctuary that also makes up part of a Natura 2000 site. In response, we have raised our concerns and urged the relevant authorities to block the proposal due to the sensitive nature of the site in order to maintain its protected and valuable status.



Veerle van Werde

► Yelkouan Shearwater call count team

WORDS **Jessica Irwin** BirdLife Malta Communications Officer



Steven Williams

► Simar Nature Reserve

Barn Swallow

The spring migration season starts with the arrival of House Martins which can be seen as early as late January. For the many migratory avian species this journey is long and perilous, yet a phenomenon so many of us admire. The Barn Swallow, a cousin species of the House Martin, can be seen in Malta from March when the return passage picks up. In fact, these two species are regularly found together, chattering and calling as they settle on overhead cables.

A total of six subspecies give the Barn Swallow an extensive global range, occurring in almost all continents, mostly as a migratory species. Observed in practically any habitat, this well-known bird is a common sight in spring, grouping into big communal roosts within reed beds. Simar Nature Reserve is a particularly good spot to watch significant numbers congregate until May, although other valleys host comparable roosts. Their dark breast-band and deep red face is harder to notice at a distance, having uniform dark blue upperparts with a paler belly and underwing. While these glossy and beautifully-plumaged birds venture north to breed in continental Europe, breeding individuals are present into the summer months, until their broods fledge and disperse.

Even though prospective and successful nesting is scarce and localised, our sister island Gozo has been experiencing more of an expansion, as Gozitan birdwatchers continue to record new nest sites with each passing year. As their name suggests, Barn Swallows breed in buildings, constructing their cup-shaped nests with mud and plant litter against a structure or on top of a projection. With up to two broods, four or five chicks are typically raised after around two weeks of incubation.

The Barn Swallow's pointed wings and long, forked tail are essential for in-flight feeding. Males tend to have longer streamers, although this feature is more pronounced in Nordic populations. Flying fast and low to catch insects such as flies and moths, their consumption prior to (and during) migration is substantially higher than their wintering period in sub-Saharan Africa. They are also smooth fliers, regularly swooping over water reservoirs and pools for a drink.

As a common migratory bird, the Barn Swallow is protected by law and rarely targeted, boding well for its breeding potential across our tiny archipelago.

WORDS **Tim Micallef** Bird ringer and Falko leader



Maltese Name: Huttafa

Scientific Name: *Hirundo rustica*

Length: 17-21 cm

Wingspan: 32-34.5 cm

Conservation status: Least Concern (IUCN)

Local status: Very common migrant and annual, localised breeder

Call: Noisy and varied twittering, such as a loud "vit!" in flight

Behaviour: Rapid flight with frequent curving and an abrupt wing beat

Habitat: Breeds in both rural and urban areas, roosts communally in reed beds and feeds on the wing in any habitat



▶ Canal and reed bed at Simar



Yellow Wagtail ◀

Nature in focus at **SIMAR**



▶ Painted Lady



Moorhen ◀

Yellow Wagtail Isfar *Motacilla flava*

It's spring and birds are on the move! In our part of the world hundreds of millions are right now flying from Africa to Europe to find a place to nest. Birds that cross over Malta come mostly by way of Libya or Tunisia, and after that 400km nonstop sea-crossing they often rest here a bit. One of these is the Yellow Wagtail, a small, slim, long-tailed character of an almost impossibly intense yellow! Yellow Wagtails love to live and travel in groups - sometimes hundreds of them - and look for wetlands and other humid places where to hunt for mosquitoes, their favourite food. A place like Simar with its gently swaying reedbeds teeming with small insects is often a magnet for these intrepid minuscule travellers.

Painted Lady Farfett tax-Xewk *Vanessa cardui*

Many people know that birds migrate. What many don't realise is that many other animals too migrate, from whales all the way down the size spectrum to butterflies. One species that migrates through Malta is the lovely Painted Lady and much like birds, butterflies too stop for a rest and a bite. Actually a drink, because a butterfly's mouthparts can only suck liquid, so they gorge on the energy-rich nectar from flowers like the Golden Samphire so common at Simar. The Painted Lady also lays eggs here and is always careful where

to lay. Their caterpillars are particular to leaves of Borage, Mallow and thistles, so these are the plants the mother lays on. These species are all too often considered weeds and people reach for the herbicide - but at the reserve there's no fear of that of course!

Moorhen Gallozz Iswed *Gallinula chloropus*

Rails and crakes are secretive wetland birds with generally drab colours, which renders them even harder to spot. Of the dozen or so species recorded in Malta, Moorhens are the ones you will most likely see, the main reason being that this species is a year-round resident breeding bird. However, it hasn't always been so. As recently as 1982 Moorhens were still recorded as birds of passage, but not breeding. So what happened? Well, habitat restoration happened! The creation of the protected wetlands at Għadira and Simar became des res for Moorhens, and several pairs nowadays nest at each site, with Simar quite a stronghold. Every year young Moorhens leave the reserves and disperse to other suitable breeding locations, such as valleys. But thanks to our zealous hunters, they never succeed.

WORDS **Victor Falzon** Naturalist and Field Teacher

A fight for change

The trapping of finches has a long-rooted history in Malta. Prized for their alluring songs, the unlucky birds who find themselves captive go on to form part of a vicious circle underpinned by a narrative of ‘tradition’.

Unfortunately, the argument of tradition omits the damaging reality of the long-term and unsustainable impacts of trapping, not just in Malta, but the effects it has on species populations across Europe. As an organisation committed to the protection and conservation of wild birds and their habitats, we work tirelessly to end such cruel practices that negatively affect our environment and the wildlife that call it home.

“Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to inspire change”

Of course, this is no easy task; we need to use a toolkit of approaches, with education as a key element. Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to inspire change through all aspects of our community and empowering people with knowledge that fosters environmentally-conscious values. For trapping, this has been years in the making.

Looking back at 2004, when Malta joined the EU, trapping had been agreed to be phased out by 2009.



The legislation allowing the practice of finch trapping would be removed – at the time considered a right by circa 4,000 trappers. Though abolishing the practice was the spirit of the law, Malta had negotiated the five-year phasing out period in order to provide alternatives to trappers such as a captive-breeding programme for finches to stop the need of catching wild birds. Needless to say, the trapping community headed by organisations such as the FKNK, outrightly refused any other way, making the transition as hard as can be.



BirdLife Malta

► Finch trapping

By 2008 nothing much was really done, with misinformation being the order of the day. It was at this point, frustrated and disappointed by the lack of progress, that we, along with project partners the RSPB and MediaToday, embarked on an EU LIFE+ Information and Communications project to raise awareness amongst the public and decision-makers of the transition Malta

PING

would undertake in eliminating finch trapping. During the project's lifetime, finch trapping persisted, even illegally following the 2009 deadline, with BirdLife Malta together with CABS being the only entities maintaining pressure on the issue and the impacts associated with it through campaigns and research.

“A glimmer of hope shines on the horizon with the ECJ’s verdict on the continuation of the practice imminent”

After these persistent efforts and thanks to the actions of our LIFE+ project on Bird Migration and Trapping, there seemed to be a light at the end of the tunnel and the European Commission launched an infringement case looking into illegal trapping activities and subsequent widespread clearing of habitats at coastal Natura 2000 sites. Yet by 2014, the situation had once again revolved itself completely. Aware of the fact that Malta could apply a derogation for something as controversial as spring hunting, the Maltese Government toyed with the idea of getting the practice back as a derogation – even though this would go against the EU Accession Treaty agreed over ten years earlier. This meant igniting the battle once more.

Almost four years later and finch trapping seasons have been continually reopened each year, with trapping licences shooting up, precious habitats cleared for sites and an unregulated quota allowing a practically free-for-all situation. However

a glimmer of hope shines on the horizon with the ECJ’s verdict on the continuation of the practice imminent. At a time when interest in trapping has never been higher, we are continuing to spread the message whether it is relaying information from the field to the European Commission, sharing the damning evidence from undercover work in markets trading in finches, or reaching the local and international audiences through our most recent #STOPTRAPPINGNOW campaign.

For sure a trapping season in 2018 will bear the changes demanded of this important milestone, but until we see wild birds flying free in the skies where they belong, we will continue to shine a light on trapping.



BirdLife Malta

► Destruction of natural habitats caused by trapping

WORDS **Nicholas Barbara** BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager

Kisses from the south

Now is the perfect time of year to walk in nature. It is not too hot nor is it too cold — it is just right! This tour takes you to the south-eastern part of Malta. You will explore the pristine countryside, spectacular sea caves, stunning white cliffs, and traditional villages. You will start the morning at St Thomas Bay, and then go to the Munxar Hills, Xrobb I-Għaġin, St Peters Pool and finish at Marsaxlokk. Make sure to pack plenty of water and a pair of binoculars to try and spot some of Malta's migrant bird species which start to arrive around March time. This route is approximately 7km and it will take you from 2-4 hours to complete depending on the stops you make.

Start at St Thomas Bay

St Thomas Bay at Marsaskala village is a vast, peaceful bay with clear waters, comprised of smaller sandy and rocky banks. Head west walking along the coast, with the sea on your left, until you reach the cliff edge.

Munxar Path and Hills

Keep following the path along the cliff edge, and you will reach Munxar Path and then Munxar Hills in no time. You will be surrounded by the beautiful countryside, rich in wild plants like the endemic Maltese Salt Tree (*Darniella melitensis*), with gulls circling over the azure waters.

Xrobb L-Għaġin

You will come across the quaint Kappella ta' San Pawl chapel; turn left to the path towards the peninsula. The peninsula is composed of the Upper and Middle Globigerina Limestone, surrounded by low cliffs and spectacular views of sea water erosion. You can admire picturesque Il-Ħofra l-Kbira cove on your right. Keep going straight and you will see the entrance to Xrobb L-Għaġin on your left, a Nature Park and Sustainable Development Centre where you can take a short break to refuel on the picnic benches and soak up the surroundings. When you leave the park, turn right and head back the way you came and then left to the path to continue the route.

St Peter's Pool

Follow the path until you reach the end and turn right and walk away from the coast until you see stone fences and a sign with the number 8 on it where you turn left. You will then find yourself immersed in beautiful greenery, surrounded by wild flowers and pine trees. Head downhill on the winding path then take the sharp left at the bottom where you will be able to see the Delimara power station – a sight hard to miss from its contrasting surroundings! Continue straight and when you see a street with a house on the left, just before the power station chimney, turn left for the longer but more scenic path embellished with vibrant flora, otherwise just follow the path and the signs straight ahead. You will shortly see the large cove Il-Ħofra ż-Żgħira on your left, which makes for a beautiful panoramic shot! Continue along and turn right to the natural path along the cliff and you will soon see St Peter's Pool below. Venture down the rocky track and



► Fisherman statue with “luzzu” fishing boats in the background

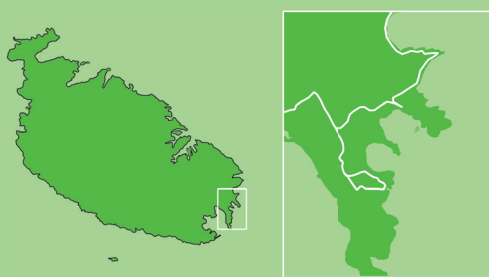


► The endemic *Darniella melitensis* plant (right) with Il-Ħofra l-Kbira cove in the background

HOW TO GET THERE

By bus:

- Valletta to St Thomas Bay: 91
- Marsaxlokk to Valletta: 81, 82
- Marsaxlokk back to St Thomas Bay: 119



explore the salt pans and rough cliff formations around the pool – one of the best natural lidos in Malta! The springtime breeze does not make for ideal swimming conditions but as months heat up it is a great spot to take a dip and cool off after the walk. The flat rocks however make it a perfect location for a picnic, taking in the sun and listening to the waves breaking on the shore — just remember not to litter and use reusable tableware to help keep the area pristine!

Marsaxlokk

Go up the stairs from St Peter's Pool then turn to the path on the right, then uphill and turn right and follow the road. At the end of the road, turn right again and follow the path until you find a fork and take the road on the left. You will then come across Tas-Silġ Church, indicating the route down to the town centre on the left turn. Keep walking until you cross over the roundabout and then veer left towards the marina. Walking along the seafront, you will see the local fishermen mending their fishnets, the bright colours of the traditional ‘luzzu’ fishing boats, and a fitting fisherman statue casting views over the water. As your final destination, take some time to grab a bite to eat at one of the many restaurants, bars and cafes. You can also visit the open market that sells food, clothes, souvenirs, and traditional goods – on Sundays it gets even bigger, with freshly caught fish and jars of sweet honey decorating the stalls!

WORDS & PICTURES **Eleni Karatzia** BirdLife Malta Communications and Events Assistant

The secret life of birds

A 38-year-old beauty has recently been hitting the headlines all over Europe. Originating from France, this majestic pink lady has travelled to Spain, Turkey and most recently to Sicily in Italy where she will now seemingly settle to raise a family. You might be wondering about which celebrity we are talking about...well it is none other than a Greater Flamingo nicknamed Amelia. This Flamingo was ringed as a young bird just wandering away from her nest for the first time in 1979. Thanks to a special coloured plastic ring applied on her leg, ornithologists and researchers have been able to follow her movements ever since. This is just the kind of insightful information which the scientific study of bird ringing provides researchers with.

What is bird ringing?

Bird ringing is the process through which trained and licensed researchers catch birds and place a light and uniquely marked ring on the tarsus. The bird is identified, when possible aged and sexed, measured, weighed, and released.

Why ring birds?

The re-capture or re-sighting of this bird will provide information relating to the longevity of the bird, the migratory habits, wintering site fidelity and many more precious data.

The BirdLife Malta bird ringing scheme was set up in 1965 when bird ringers from the United Kingdom visited the Island and trained the first ringers. The local ringing group is part of EURING, the European Union for Bird Ringing Schemes. EURING is responsible for co-ordinating all scientific aspects of bird ringing. In fact, the ringing records of all European schemes are gathered in one large database with such priceless information used in order to carry out large scale European and worldwide projects, this especially bearing in mind that birds and their populations are an excellent indicator of the environment we live in.



Joe Sultana

▶ Mont Hirons weighing an Icterine Warbler in Xagħra Gozo, the first bird caught during the first ringing session ever in September 1965

“The BirdLife Malta bird ringing scheme was set up in 1965. Today, 53 years on, the group is made up of over 20 ringers with various projects and studies being handled”

BirdLife Malta carries out various projects related to bird ringing, including the Comino spring and autumn bird ringing projects and the Għadira and Simar nature reserves used as ongoing ringing sites. Bird ringing is also one of the main tasks of the LIFE Arċipelagu Garnija project since it is one of the means to identify longevity, site fidelity and breeding success of the Yelkouan Shearwater. This project is also introducing us to new ways to complement bird ringing, such as satellite tagging, which is crucial to mapping the flightpaths of the birds.

Even though the record achieved by Amelia is one of a kind we are not to be outdone either! Bird ringing has enabled us to record a European Storm-petrel living up to 27 years on Filfla – no mean feat for a bird the size of a sparrow

which spends most of its life out at sea! We also learned that the young of the Little Ringed Plover and Black-winged Stilts breeding at Għadira return in subsequent years to rear families of their own. The same can also be said of the Reed Warblers breeding at Simar; some of which have been recorded returning to the same site for seven consecutive years. Equally impressive was the plucky Dunlin recorded last year flying down to Malta from Ukraine in a matter of a few days in September!



▶ Song Thrush being ringed

Pascale Kouassigan

Ringing is helping us to answer persistent questions about the amazing lives of birds and the mammoth journeys they undertake. So next time you admire the Robin visiting your bird table each year, just think it could well be the same bird returning to the same site each winter! If you want to learn more about ringing, and some of the amazing discoveries in Malta, you can find more information on our ringing research through our ornithological journal *Il-Merill*, available on our website.

WORDS **Mark Gauci** BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves Manager

Upcoming Events

Easter Egg-Citement

Saturday 31 March

10:00-14:00 | Simar Nature Reserve

One of the most anticipated events of BirdLife Malta is just around the corner! Easter Egg-Citement is an excellent opportunity to have a day out with the family, be in nature and participate in fun-filled activities like the Easter egg hunt and arts and crafts!



BirdLife Malta

► Easter Egg-Citement

Science in the Citadel

Saturday 28 April

10:00-16:00 | Victoria, Gozo

Visit us at Science in the Citadel, a festival that engages people with science through interesting exhibitions

and stands! This year, we will be offering a variety of educational and interactive activities on the theme of Malta's migrating birds. You will also learn more about the innovative work the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project team does in an effort to protect the Yelkouan Shearwater, a secretive species of seabird that can only be found in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean region.

Past Events

Christmas Nature Fair

It was amazing to see children enjoy themselves in nature whilst learning! There were various activities, including story telling sessions, bird ringing demonstrations, educational craft activities and exhibits raising awareness about environmental issues from various organisations.



Nathaniel Attard

► Christmas Nature Fair

Champions of the Flyway

This March, members of a team of four BirdLife Malta birdwatchers calling themselves **The Maltese Falcons** will be travelling to Israel to participate in the 2018 Champions of the Flyway project, hoping to rank Malta as high as possible in its annual race of sightings. Working with BIOM (BirdLife Croatia) and the Bird Protection and Study Society of Serbia (BirdLife Serbia), the project which takes the form of a bird race to celebrate bird migration will also aim to tackle the issues of killing and trapping of birds along the Adriatic Flyway through the event.

You can support the team in their efforts by making a donation to the project today:
www.champions-of-the-flyway.com/the-maltese-falcons

#ISAVEBIRDS

Our #ISAVEBIRDS campaign came to a close at the end of December after an amazing response! The campaign was launched in light of one of the worst autumn hunting seasons we have seen in years in terms of injured birds, with any donations made funding our rescue and rehabilitation work. We would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who supported this campaign and helped us raise awareness for our vital work. We raised over €7,000 in total which will enable us to expand our service and help us save more birds, returning them to a life in the wild. We couldn't do it without you!

Want to help us continue our work?

Join: www.birdlifemalta.org/become-member

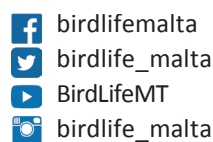
Donate: www.birdlifemalta.org/donate

Want to join an event?

More details: www.birdlifemalta.org/events

Email: events@birdlifemalta.org

Call: +356 2134 7646



Valletta's special visitors



The historic backdrop of Valletta is the setting for this year's European Capital of Culture. The narrow streets and the old and imposing buildings evoke Malta's history and cultural identity whilst the air is filled with the distinctive sound of the White Wagtail, an annual visitor to the country's capital. A city centre might not be the conventional scene to enjoy nature but Valletta's ficus trees create the perfect home for roosting White Wagtails each winter – providing the perfect opportunity for our annual roost count event. At a time when the country is celebrating all things that make Valletta special, its unexpected wildlife is something we are encouraging all to look out for, especially in a year which recorded 10,323 - our second-highest count of this wintering species at our roost count this January! A big thank you must go to all of our volunteers who joined us for our first event of 2018 to enjoy a small yet significant part of our natural heritage.

