

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 53 ■ September 2017





A busy month ahead

October should be an interesting month for us; we will have our AGM and I hope to see as many members as possible. By October we should also know the decision of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on finch trapping. After having seen what was published by the Advocate General (AG), we are very hopeful that this will be won by the birds!

The written and public opinion of the AG was very clear; if the ECJ remains faithful to the AG's opinion, then there will be no more finch trapping in Malta! This journey has taken four years of hard work by BirdLife Malta staff (well done) and the support of BirdLife Europe. This is the strength that we have in being part of a global partnership that also has a very strong presence in Brussels and in international fora.

The AGM will be an opportunity to share with all the members not only the various efforts on conservation but also our initiatives in other areas like education. Our education team has been awarded another Erasmus project which aims to make our education platform *Dinja Waħda* an international BirdLife initiative alongside our other education programmes like *Ġonna Dinja Waħda* and *Klabb Ħuttaf*.

By October I would hope that we will have also signed the Management Agreement of the Salina Nature Reserve for which we have a Heads of Agreement with the Government. This would mean that along with *Għadira*, *Simar* and *Foresta 2000*, BirdLife Malta will be managing another Natura 2000 site.

So please pencil in your diaries the date of our AGM and come over, there is a lot to share and talk about! I look forward to seeing you all at Salina Nature Reserve.



Darryl Grima President

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A new look for our magazine!

As you can see from this latest issue we have given our magazine a new look and we hope you like it as much as we do!

With a new colour scheme that reflects our logo, a more cheerful and friendly font and a fresher way of presenting our content, we want to make *Bird's Eye View* more exclusive and above all informative and interesting to read. Apart from a complete revamp in terms of style, *Bird's Eye View* is now also being redesigned in terms of structure according to a new concept. The pages now run in parallel with the main topics in our mission statement – **protect, educate, campaign, research and care** – so we can always share our aims and vision with you.

I would like to personally thank Veerle and Jess from the communications team who developed these innovative ideas and set out to design the new look we have today.

We will continue to do our utmost to enhance our quarterly publication which is exclusively printed for you, our members. We will also strive to update you with how your support enables us to continue our work through personal stories and beautiful images produced by the passionate people at BirdLife Malta. Let's hope that with this new project we're launching today, we manage to reach this goal!

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Front cover photo Grey Heron by Victor Falzon

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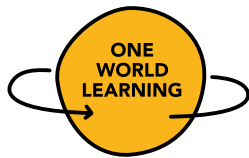


Veerle van Werde

► Action for Nature group 2017. Celebrating the newly-developed area at Simar Nature Reserve

New education initiative launched

As July marked the end of the successful 20-month Action for Nature project, BirdLife Malta is delighted to launch our new Erasmus-funded education initiative, One World Learning. The new project aims to promote diversity, citizenship, language learning, integrated science, team work, and critical thinking in an environmental context for children, youths and adult in order to empower them to become environmentally responsible. Partnered with organisations based in the U.K., Poland, Portugal and the Netherlands, the project will stretch across Europe on an exciting new endeavour!



► One World Learning logo

Foresta 2000 Olive grove

Since the healthy Olive grove at Foresta 2000 was sadly destroyed in an act of vandalism in June, BirdLife Malta has been taking steps to try and revive the trees. Reserves Warden Ray Vella has been tending to the area, providing much needed water to encourage growth. As the weather starts to cool down in the approach to autumn we are hoping to see some progress and the first signs of life as the trees begin to sprout! Despite the circumstances, BirdLife Malta is positive about the response received in reaction to incident, not only in the form of financial aid from The Alfred Mizzi Foundation but also from shock and disappointment expressed by the general public against this attack on our environment.

Autumn hunting season commences

As we enter the autumn months, we begin to prepare ourselves for the opening of the 2017 autumn hunting season which commenced on the 1 September and will run until the 31 January. During a three week period across September and October, BirdLife Malta will also be running its annual Raptor Camp to monitor peak migration as well as any illegalities which may take place.



Aron Tanti

Moving to end finch trapping

In July, Eleanor V. E. Sharpston, Advocate General at the ECJ delivered her opinion on the practice of finch trapping in Malta in which it was stated

► Red-footed Falcons could be spotted during migration

that Malta has failed to abide by the Wild Birds Directive and does not respect Malta’s obligations under EU law. This is a positive step in the right direction toward the end of finch trapping in Malta, with the final verdict anticipated in October. For updates on this historic case, like our Facebook page or visit our website for the latest news.

WORDS **Jessica Irwin** Communications Officer

Grey Heron

■ FACTS & DETAILS

Maltese name: Russett Griż

Scientific name: *Ardea cinerea*

Length: 84-102 cm

Wingspan: 155-157cm

Local status: Fairly common spring and autumn migrant

Conservation status: Least Concern (IUCN). Large population with vast breeding range across Europe and Asia east up to Japan

Call: A rather hoarse croaking call often given during flight

Habits: Sits motionless close to the water's edge awaiting its prey

Habitat: Wetlands including marshes, rivers, lagoons, reed beds, and salt marshes



The harbingers of stormy weather, a flock of Grey Herons is always an awesome sight as they fly south in a V-formation against an autumn sky. Grey Herons are easily recognised by their large size, long necks and legs, and dagger-like bills. They are mainly grey above with white and light grey hues below. In flight, Grey Herons fold their long necks and fly on deeply-bowed wings with slow wing beats while holding their legs outstretched behind. They may be seen between August and October often in large flocks reaching over eighty individuals composed of adults and young birds.

Flocks can be seen migrating along the coast or even crossing high over land. During migration Grey Herons sometimes mix with other heron species within the same flock, especially Purple Herons. These are slightly smaller with an overall darker appearance and reddish-brown hues. In spring Grey Herons show up usually in small flocks heading north between February and April, peaking in March. The Grey Heron has never been recorded breeding in the Maltese Islands.

Hérons often migrate during the night, when they may be heard calling. Birds call to keep contact within a flock especially when leaving a roost. Birds resting at nature reserves have often been observed calling to migratory flocks which may descend to join the resting birds or vice versa. Migrating birds often roost during the day in suitable wetlands or in wooded areas. Flocks sometimes stop to rest at suitable habitats such as at Għadira, Simar and Salina Nature Reserves especially during adverse weather conditions. Herons feed mainly on fish and amphibians and when hunting, a heron patiently waits at the water's edge for its prey to come close enough when it strikes rapidly spearing its catch with its bill.

Grey Herons are highly gregarious. They breed in colonies, called heronries, in tall trees at lakesides and marshes. In Europe, the Grey Heron has sizeable populations in France, Germany and Russia. Grey Herons resident in Western Europe are mainly sedentary while most migratory populations are found in the east of Europe.

All heron species are protected in the Maltese Islands. In the past herons were highly persecuted for taxidermy. Fortunately, such practices have diminished through stricter laws and a greater appreciation of nature.

WORDS **David Attard** Managing Warden at Għadira Nature Reserve

NATURE IN FOCUS at Salina

Little Egret

Agrett Abjad

Egretta garzetta

Of the several heron species that occur in Malta, the Little Egret is the most common. While not a year-round resident, it is a regular passage bird that occurs in spring and autumn, and a pair or two occasionally nest as well. With their brilliant white plumage Little Egrets cannot very well blend with their surrounding, but they don't try to hide either, relying on their keen eyesight to keep them out of trouble. So when Little Egrets land at Salina they are quite easy to spot as they strut about on their long legs looking for small fish, shrimps or whatever else can pass through their long, slender neck. Little Egrets often gang up in flocks in order to migrate. Watching a 30-strong flock of these white beauties sailing silently overhead is an unforgettable experience.

African Tamarisk

Bruka

Tamarix africana

Most plants don't much tolerate salt in their water, and places like saltmarshes, seashores, and coastal sand dunes are places to avoid. Some plants, however, have managed to colonise these saline habitats, and along our shores the tree most evidently adapted to these conditions is the African Tamarisk. It's actually more a large shrub than a tree, and despite the name it is a native species and grows in many of our coastal areas, not least Salina. The tamarisk can survive in saline habitats not because it needs the salt but because it evolved a way of ridding its system of excess salinity by expelling salt from its leaves. The salt crystals sitting on the leaves also render them unpalatable to most insects. On the other hand, tamarisks flower profusely and attract lots of insects.

Large Carpenter Bee

Bomblu Iswed

Xylocopa violacea

Of the many bees and wasps that occur in the Maltese Islands, the Large Carpenter Bee is one of our most eye-catching species: it's big, it's shiny and it's hairy! Despite the fearsome appearance, however, the species is not aggressive, and will mind its own business unless molested. Its business, incidentally, will be either gorging on nectar and pollen or looking for a nesting place. Unlike the Honey Bee, the Large Carpenter Bee is solitary and nests in hollow stalks



such as reed stems. To reach the inner space, the bee often uses its sharp mouth-parts to cut a neat round hole in the stem, which explains the 'carpenter' in the name. Although the bee's body is black, its wings have this beautiful iridescent blue-pink sheen, best seen when the animal is at rest.

WORDS Victor Falzon Naturalist and Field Teacher

GREENING OUR SCHOOLS

Extinction of experience

Everyone knows that nature is in trouble worldwide. Humans have been so successful in nature's eternal game of survival of the fittest that we have pushed nature to the edges of our world. As our numbers increase so do our waste products, creating more strain on nature as it struggles to clean up our act and keep Earth in balance.

While BirdLife Malta has been creating habitats and protecting species in its efforts to redress the balance, its education team has turned to international research to understand the best way how to use education as a tool for protecting nature.

Overwhelmingly, studies into human behaviour and environmental destruction converge on a simple cause-and-effect: human lifestyle is increasingly disconnected from nature. More than half the world's population lives in urban areas, a figure that hits the 80% mark in Malta. This is creating a vicious cycle that leads to the extinction of experience: adults are passing on less and less life-stories based in nature to their children, as their own experiences become fewer and far between. Today's role models for children cannot pass down positive emotions, knowledge and attitudes with regards to nature - because they hardly had a relationship with nature themselves. And just as we protect what we love, if children have no relationship with nature they will not care about protecting it. But how to bond with nature in a country where every parcel of soil is coveted by development-crazed eyes?

Mapping the situation

In line with our belief that everyone has a role to play in putting nature back into children's lives, our education team took up the challenge, targeting the place where all children spend at least 30 hours a week: school. The first thing we did was take stock of school landscapes. What we found was a true reflection of our society's diminishing bond with nature. When we compared school footprints from the 1950s to today, we found a clear tendency in recently-built schools to regard nature as an insignificant part of life. The obvious next step was to bring this to the attention of those who wield influence.



► Learning environmental responsibility hands-on in the school Dinja Waħda Garden

“But how to bond with nature in a country where every parcel of soil is coveted by development-crazed eyes?”

Over the past three years, we have presented our colour-coded school maps and the story they tell to education officials and authorities. We aired our concern over the lack of consideration in school design for places where children benefit from real life, hands-on experience with nature. Moreover, in an era of climate change, and with the current generation of children being less active, we must be making extra efforts to entice children to spend more time in engaging, child-centred, green-designed school grounds.



Learning through nature

Local research on connectedness with nature was so thin on the ground that we applied for and subsequently achieved an Erasmus+ project to study the effects of Lifelong Learning through Nature. The three-year project concluded this August. An independent researcher within the project studied the importance of connecting with nature through our Dinja Waħda outdoor learning programme. It was found that our children are very disconnected from nature except those who come from a farming background. More importantly, the project proved that after outdoor learning experiences, children understood the natural world better, were eager to be outdoors more often, and were much more appreciative of nature’s importance to our lives.

Viewed in this perspective, the lack of nature on school grounds becomes a very worrying trend that we are making every effort to change. Through our Dinja Waħda education programme, BirdLife Malta is spearheading an education movement to take the curriculum outdoors and

“Our children are very disconnected from nature”

connect children to nature. Our green schools design team - which includes local and foreign experts - is offering the Education Directorate designs for nature-play-and-learn school grounds as well as landscaping advice on improving existing school concrete-only outdoor spaces.

Every child’s right

Introducing a new philosophy in school design as well as in teaching and learning is not an easy task. What keeps us going is our belief that it is every child’s right to benefit from the impacts of learning through nature on their education, physical health, emotional wellbeing, personal, social, and sustainability skills that make them environmentally responsible citizens.



► Science comes alive during real-life lessons through nature in school

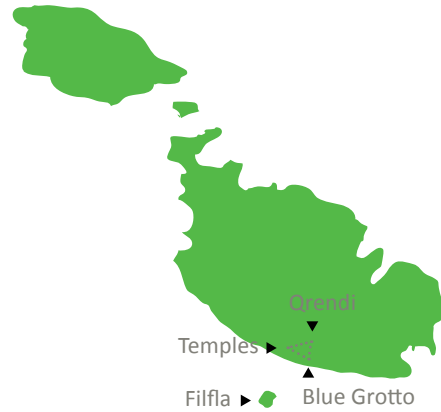
WORDS **Desirée Falzon** Field Teacher

South Side Sightseeing

As the summer period draws to a close and our outdoor climate becomes more bearable, it is a great time to explore a bit further afield rather than simply head to the beach for a swim or barbeque. Like the rest of the local coastline, Malta's southwestern area has a few gems of its own. Depending on the route you choose to discover, this walk will take you from Qrendi's quaint town centre or the ancient Ħaġar Qim temples nearby to the picturesque Blue Grotto. No need to wear any special gear, however a hat, camera and binoculars could come in handy.

Route 1 | After a look around Qrendi centre and its vibrant church, band clubs, and the adjacent streets lined with traditional limestone households, you can quite easily find your way to Il-Maqluba using directions from friendly locals and road signs. Take the path beside the chapel which leads to a viewing point overlooking a small yet impressive “crater”. This densely vegetated site hosts a mix of reeds and plants, many Carob trees and amongst the oldest naturally occurring Araar, our national tree. The national bird, Blue Rock Thrush, is often seen crossing from one side to another of this unique ravine-like habitat. It is unsafe to venture further into the “crater”, so climb back up to the small Il-Maqluba square to continue towards the next destination. Find the signs to the temples which take you to another chapel. Then walk another stretch amongst old quarries presently used as agricultural land, all the way to a bus stop outside the temple access road. Once here you can choose to include the following route for a closer look at the prehistoric remains and additional nature-watching. You may head straight to Blue Grotto instead, and take in the coastal views along the way.

Route 2 | For a shorter walk you could start from the megalithic temple area. After passing the Heritage Malta visitor centre, walk around the Ħaġar Qim ruins and downwards on a path towards the Mnajdra temples. Pass through the garrigue towards a stone memorial to a British Governor buried at sea between this point and Filfla islet, and then on to a Knights-era tower. Better sights of the area below await you, where a natural arch and Filfla are best viewed. It’s also an opportunity to encounter numerous indigenous plants and shrubs, especially the Wolfbane, Mediterranean Heath and thistles. The Wolfbane is particularly common here, flowering later in autumn. You may notice empty horn-like pods, which disperse seeds by wind into the summer months. Chameleons frequently roam the habitat, while a Wild Rabbit is rarer but not impossible to spot. A good variety of bird species also occur, such as the resident Zitting Cisticolas and Spectacled Warblers, while others like Common Swifts and Short-toed Larks can be observed throughout this section.



How to get there | Take bus 72 or 74 - ideal as this walk is not circular - then stop at the ‘Qrendi’ bus stop at the town centre for route 1, or at ‘Ħaġar’ near the temples for route 2.



Wolfbane

“A small fishing village is visible along this last bit, where you can take a short boat ride or swim”



The African Carline Thistle

A marked path leads you back to the temples along a long wall, going past many hunting and trapping patches, some of which appear abandoned. When back at the top of the garrigue it’s hard to ignore a restaurant with distinctive signposts, peculiarly featuring the owner. Go through this place and back onto the road, moving away from the temples. Then take a bus or continue walking right to the Blue Grotto. A small fishing village is visible along this last bit, where you can take a short boat ride or swim. Before taking the winding road down to it, make sure to look out for our national flower, the Maltese Rock Century. Cross to the valley watch point above Wied Babu, where these scarce plants can be found protruding out of the cliff faces while viewing the stunning Blue Grotto.

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

Making Malta a safe haven for Yelkouan Shearwaters

The 2017 Yelkouan Shearwater breeding season might be over and the birds have left their colonies, but after over 100 ringing sessions, 63 land surveys, 23 boat surveys as well as 40 trail cameras and 15 sound recorders active in remote monitoring, the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija team has a lot of data to analyse.

Together with the data collected from the 2016 field season we are obtaining better knowledge of the Yelkouan Shearwater population numbers nesting in various locations in the Maltese Islands. Not only that, but in 2017 we confirmed Yelkouan Shearwaters nesting in locations never accessed before. This success can be attributed in part to the much-needed help and support of volunteers who joined us conducting night counts of birds calling, helping us to pinpoint exact locations.

Yet another unforgettable event was a Yelkouan Shearwater pair nesting in a nest box, just months after we deployed it! Nest boxes provide a larger number of accessible nests in addition to the natural ones monitored for reproductive success. However, viewing the contents of nests is no mean feat! This elusive species nests deep inside crevices and at the end of winding tunnels. It is all worth it though when an incubating bird or healthy nestling is spotted! Unfortunately this is not always the case - and all too often we find eggs or young chicks predated by rats. The only exception is at L-Irdum tal-Madonna, where an effective rat control programme has been in place since the 2007 LIFE Yelkouan Project. This is not only benefitting the shearwaters but also the smaller Mediterranean Storm-petrels that have started to establish themselves there.

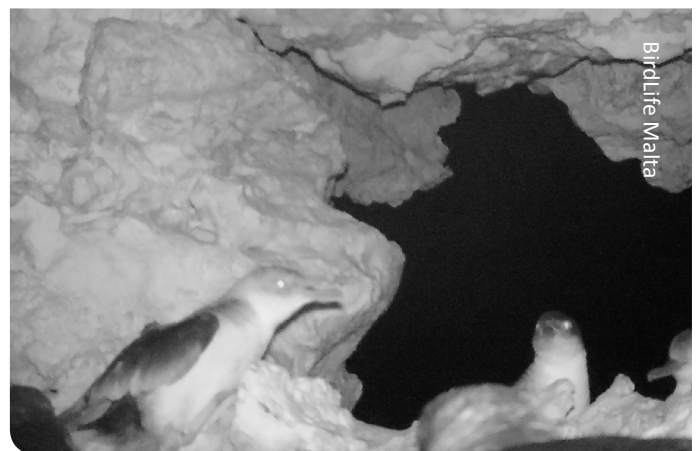
The first two years of the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project have therefore acted as a baseline of how the colonies fare without predator control and with human disturbance. After implementing conservation actions planned for the next three years we believe we will record a greater number of young Yelkouan Shearwaters leaving their nests for the open ocean. Most importantly, we will expand rat control to more colonies. We are also focusing on our public engagement efforts, so that Maltese residents and visitors can feel proud of the Maltese Islands being home to these incredible seabirds and inspire a sense of responsibility to help protect them. We are taking the growing number of stranded Yelkouan and Scopoli's Shearwater fledglings being handed over to BirdLife



Paulo Lago

Adult Yelkouan Shearwater with a chick hatched in 2017 in a nest box

“We believe we will record a greater number of young Yelkouan Shearwaters leaving their nests for the open ocean”



BirdLife Malta

Picture taken with a trail camera from inside a cave where Yelkouan Shearwaters breed

Malta by the public as a sign that awareness is increasing in the last years. Nevertheless, we want to tackle the root of the stranding problem and LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija continues to work with several stakeholders such as Transport Malta to decrease the light pollution on the coast which disorients seabirds onto land.

The 2016 and 2017 field seasons have been successful, but the challenges to truly make the Maltese Islands safe for Yelkouan Shearwaters lie ahead. We invite you to follow and support our progress.

WORDS **Martin Austad** LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija Project Warden

Upcoming Events

SCIENCE IN THE CITY

Friday 29 September
18:00-00:00 | Valletta

Join us at one of Malta's largest national festivals that focuses on applied research and science with dazzling art installations, exhibitions, music, theatre, and performances. This year's theme is 'The Future' and BirdLife Malta will be there to feature the Turtle Dove satellite project. The project will showcase the latest technology used to monitor and track wild birds for effective actions for their conservation in the future.

MIGRATION FESTIVAL

Saturday 30 September & Sunday 1 October
14:00-19:00 | Buskett and Laferla Cross

As part of the EuroBirdwatch17, the annual Migration Festival is a great opportunity to raise public awareness on wild bird conservation and to show how effectively the BirdLife network operates across national frontiers. The focus this year is on migratory birds and how important it is to protect bird habitats, breeding areas, stopover sites, and flyways.

NOTTE BIANCA

Saturday 7 October
19:00-02:00 | Valletta

Come and enjoy a variety of entertainment that will make Valletta an open-city of culture for one night! Churches, historical sites, and museums will be open to visitors until the early hours, hosting exhibitions, local artists, workshops, and concerts. The twelfth edition of Malta's largest outdoor festival is going to be very special, thanks to the collaboration with Valletta2018 - European Capital of the Culture. BirdLife Malta will be attending to promote a culture of socio-environmental awareness among the general public!

NATURE RESERVES OPEN DAYS

Saturday 28 & Sunday 29 October
10:00-16:00 | Simar and Għadira

After a very hot summer, autumn is one of the best seasons to visit our nature reserves! During this weekend, there will be activities for children and adults specially created to explore these green areas which are vital natural resources for the Maltese wildlife!

Thanks
for helping
us fly!



Watch some awesome releases on our YouTube channel. Like our Facebook page. Subscribe to the newsletter or come to one of our events. Tweet along with us and enjoy beautiful pictures on Instagram.



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Past Event

This year's Shearwater boat trips in June and July have been an unforgettable experience enjoying the wonders of nature. We would like to thank everyone who joined us and we look forward to seeing you on Shearwater boat trips next year!

Want to join an event?

More details: www.birdlifemalta.org/events

Email: events@birdlifemalta.org

Call: +356 2134 7646

“Another day at the office”

During the Yelkouan Shearwater breeding season scaling cliff faces becomes part of the daily activity. This enigmatic species nests within the caves and crevices of coastal cliffs so researching the colonies calls for sturdy climbing equipment and a strong nerve. Between February and July these seabirds make their home in these secretive sites to raise their young before returning to a life at sea. Active at night, BirdLife Malta’s LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project team have the privilege to watch the spectacular sunset over the horizon before the nocturnal chorus of the shearwaters begins and a night of exploration is underway.

