



# BirdTalk

BIRDLIFE MALTA MOS NEWSLETTER

July/August '95

## Birds in Europe A cause for concern

BirdLife International, the global network of non-governmental organisations in the field of birds and nature protection, has recently published an alarming study on the situation of all 514 bird species occurring in Europe. According to this study 38% of European bird species are endangered and another 25% have shown a serious decline in recent years. Endangered species on the European scale include the redshank, nightjar, peregrine falcon, kingfisher and skylark. All these species are encountered on our islands during their migration between the continents.

The most important countries for these species of European concern are countries from South and Eastern Europe, like Russia (133 species), Turkey (112 species) and Spain (106 species).

Concerning the key threats for the birds' decline, the study reveals that many species are affected by similar threats. By far the most important threat is agricultural intensification for 42% of affected species. This process has led to the large scale destruction of valuable habitats like wetlands or steppe areas. Other causes are hunting and pesticides. The results of the review show that action is urgently needed if the

numbers and distribution of birds in Europe are to be maintained. In order to reach this goal, the protection of a small percentage of the land is not sufficient. Instead there is a clear need for an environmentally sound land use on 100% of the territory.

This study is available from BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Giron Rd, Cambridge CB3 0NA, UK.

## Soaring Achievements



Membership in BirdLife Malta has risen to over 4000. This follows a very successful membership drive during the Green Week last April. A photographic exhibition as well as a stand for Klabb Huttaf (the junior section) attracted hundreds of nature lovers. The youth and adult membership now stands at almost 1800 with young members totaling over 1900, Foreign membership maintains a steady 350. A big thank you goes to all those volunteers who helped out in some way during the five days of the fair.

As part of a membership scheme that randomly awards a prize for membership renewal, Ms P Bonello and Mr D Muscat have each won a bottle of wine. Is your membership up for renewal?

**The bird-hunting season closed on May 20. Should you notice any hunting or trapping for birds between now and the end of August please inform us immediately by calling 230684/250229.**

**With your help we will save more birds.**





## The Case of the Ringers

A clause in the 1980 bird regulations rightly disallowed trapping in nature reserves. The authorities, however, never considered this regulation to apply to bird ringing, an activity which is regularly and legitimately conducted in nature reserves. In September 1993 two MOS ringers and a helper were taken to court for having been "caught trapping" birds at Is-Simar, which had recently been declared a nature reserve. Court ruled the ringers innocent. However the prosecutor appealed the court decision, taking advantage of the unclear statement in the regulation regarding ringing. In April this year the ringers were fined a token Lm 10!

The 1994 regulations have rectified the ambiguity in connection with the above. They now clearly distinguish selfish bird trapping (which is banned in several places and during parts of the year) from scientific ringing by qualified people which is allowed everywhere and at all times of the year.

## Getting Tough with the Real Offenders



A number of trappers and hunters were caught over the past months engaged in illegal bird hunting and trapping sprees.

A taxidermist was raided and relieved of hundreds of bird carcasses, most of them protected (and endangered) species.

Frankie Calleja, a youth from Mgarr was recently sentenced three months imprisonment - the sentence has been, however, suspended for two years! The court found Calleja guilty of being in possession of two mute swans, a honey buzzard and two blue rock thrushes, all of them of course protected species. He was also found guilty of having unlicensed weapons and radio transceivers.

## A Night with the Shearwater

Ta' Ċenċ cliffs in Gozo hold one of the best breeding populations of Cory's shearwater on the Island. This is a pelagic bird, coming to shore only during the dark hours of the night to lay their eggs and to feed their young. At dusk they congregate in large flocks and only start flying towards land as the night settles in.



Here is an opportunity for you to hear the eerie cries of these birds as they follow the scent of their nest buried deep inside the cliff face. A tour is being organised for members and friends to this seabird colony set in the beautiful surrounding of the Gozitan landscape.

Date: **Saturday 22 July 1995**

Meeting Place: **Ċirkewwa Police station** (behind restaurant)

Time: **6.45 pm sharp**

Back at Ċirkewwa: **around midnight**

Price: About **Lm1.25** (depending on the number of participants)

Closing date: **12 July 1995**

- Price excludes ferry ticket but includes transport in Gozo.
- Please book by phone on Tel: 230684/250229.

## Rare Visitor

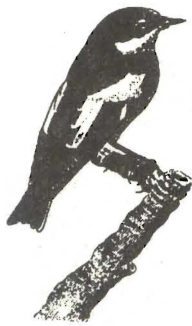
A **bittern** (Maltese **Kappun**), a scarce migrant from mid-March to late April, was observed on different occasions at the nature reserves of Għadira and Is-Simar last spring.





At Is-Simar the bittern was present for over a week. Belonging to the heron family this large, brown bird is very secretive, keeping a low profile as it wades among reed beds. It was however observed displaying itself and fishing along the fringes of reedbeds, rather extrovert behaviour for a notoriously shy bird!

### Progetto Piccole Isole



For the past five years BirdLife Malta has participated in a programme to study the migration of birds through the small islands in the Mediterranean. This Small Islands Project is co-ordinated by the Wildlife Institute of Bologna.

The study is carried out using special nets in which birds are caught and ringed. The birds are then released again into the wild. This year the number of ringed birds was a bonus on last year's. In fact just over 1500 birds were ringed. These included various species including garden warbler, flycatcher, wood warbler, woodchat shrike and scops owl.

### Of Wetlands and Marshlands

The Planning Authority has recently afforded protection to a number of fresh water pools and saline marshy areas. In all thirteen sites have been designated as Site of Scientific or Ecological Importance.

Such habitats are very rare locally, and indeed threatened on a global scale. They often support a highly specialised combination of plant and animal species. In fact each site normally harbours its own peculiar habitat characteristics and range of species.

These protective measures do not cover the area of Għadira and Is-Simar, which are already protected under the Environment Protection Act. These latter two areas form the largest wetland areas in

Malta and are important sites for migratory birds, especially waders and passerines.

### Abroad this Summer

As a nature lover, you may want to visit a nature spot while on holiday. To help you, we've picked out some favourite birdwatching spots close to major holiday destinations.

#### ENGLAND

**River Thames:** The visitor to London need look no further than the marshes that line the Thames estuary in North Kent. The Thames itself has exposed mudbanks at low tide that are the haunt of waders and ducks.

**Minsmere:** Here is another excellent place to watch birds. It consists of a series of coastal marshes in Suffolk where one can see a number of duck species including shoveler and garganey as well as avocet, nightjar and bearded tit. Minsmere is a reserve of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and though it can be seen from two public hides, entrance to the reserve is strictly by permit. Travel from London to Darsham and then hire a taxi from a nearby garage.

#### GERMANY

One of the best areas for birds in southern Germany lies around the Munich region. Various lakes hold a number of water birds like grebes, herons, ducks, gulls and terns. Of particular interest are:

**Ismaninger Teichgebiet:** a reservoir with an adjacent area of fishponds northeast of Munich

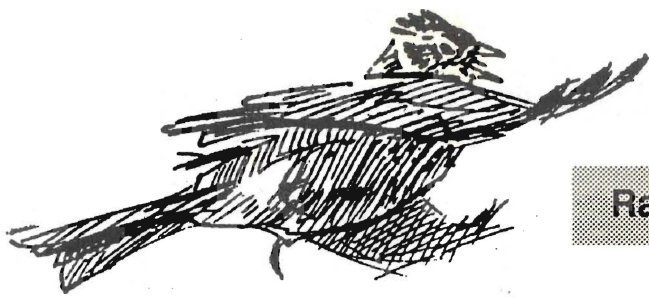
**Inn Lakes:** easily found by following the road along the river south of Passau.

**Chiemsee:** easy to locate north of the Munich-Salzburg motorway.

#### ITALY

**Venice:** is laced with some excellent birding spots. Regular boat services connect the various islands with the city and the main beach resorts, and offer easy access to many of the better spots. In summer one can see various species of gulls and terns as well as black-winged stilt and collared pratincole.





## Raiders of the Lost Lark



Vulnerable to human activity, the **short-toed lark** is decreasing in numbers over much of its European breeding range. This is mainly due to the degradation of its habitat through the expansion and intensification of agriculture.

The distribution of the short-toed lark lies around the Mediterranean and Black Seas and extends eastwards to the steppes of central Asia. A migratory species, the lark winters in the Sahel and Red Sea coastal zones of Africa.

Only a small proportion of the short-toed lark's breeding population occurs within protected areas. As a dispersed and migratory bird, this species requires large areas of suitable habitat to maintain its population levels. Its future therefore depends on broad conservation measures aimed at maintenance and expansion of such habitat, which includes low-intensity agriculture.

Locally the short-toed lark (Maltese: Bilbla) is a common migrant and breeding summer resident. It arrives in early spring when flocks of up to a hundred may be seen in favourable localities. It breeds from mid-April onwards in open rocky areas as well as in cultivated and uncultivated fields. It takes up territory and sings in flight for most of the day, often also on moonlit nights. At the end of July and throughout August short-toed larks start to congregate in flocks and are soon on the way south to their wintering quarters.

Unfortunately the short-toed lark is decreasing in Malta as well. Human interference, mainly in the form of cultivation and grazing destroys a number of nests annually. Natural causes, including the predation of eggs and fledglings by the common western whip snake may also inflict a heavy toll on the breeding success of this bird. .



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