

President of Malta visits Ghadira Reserve

BirdLife Malta commemorated Wetlands Day on Friday 2 February by promoting the two nature reserves it is administrating on behalf of the Maltese Government. Both these reserves are typical coastal wetlands, a habitat that has all but disappeared from the Maltese Islands. The President of Malta, Prof Guido Demarco inaugurated an exhibition on the nature reserve. He said that by saving the site from building development and transforming it into a nature reserve, BirdLife had managed to work a "small miracle" considering the lack of public environmental conscience that existed in Malta in the seventies and eighties, when the reserve was set up. Dr. Joe Mizzii (MLP spokesman for the environment) and Dr. Harry Vassallo (chairperson, Alternattiva Demokratika) also visited the exhibition and met the BirdLife employees and volunteers who work at the Reserve.

World Wetlands Day is an initiative of the Ramsar Convention - an International agreement for the conservation of wetlands - which Malta signed in 1971. This year the convention is commemorating its 30th anniversary. Malta is a party to this convention with Ghadira and Simar listed as protected sites according to this agreement.



Comino Project: Assistance from Vogelbescherming Nederland

BirdLife Malta has, for the past eight years, leased from the Maltese Government an area of land at Comino which seems to be a natural funnel for migrating birds and has proved to be an excellent bird-ringing site. The ringing activities actually started ten years ago as part of the Small Islands Project (Progetto Piccole Isole) of the National Wildlife Institute of Bologna in Italy, and generally carried out in spring, from mid-April to mid-May. Since Comino has proved to possess such potential for ornithological research it has been decided to extend the season for observations and ringing so that both autumn and spring migrations may be monitored.

For this reason it has become necessary to convert a small building to serve as living quarters for the bird-ringers. While they can stay under canvas during spring, the vagaries of the Maltese autumn weather does not make camping out a feasible idea. Fortunately, BirdLife Malta has found the support of the Vogelbescherming Nederland, the BirdLife partner in the Netherlands, which is generously sponsoring the necessary works for the conversion.



This is another fine example of the international co-operation between BirdLife Partners and of the importance that our European partners and friends attach to bird conservation and research in Malta.

New staff for educational work

It is with pleasure that we announce the appointment of Victor Falzon as full-time teacher at the Ghadira nature reserve. Victor's role will be that of guiding the various groups of schoolchildren and students who daily visit the reserve and his appointment is in line with the management plan that was drawn up when the running of the reserve was handed over to BirdLife Malta by the Environment Protection Department.

Another new BirdLife Malta appointment is that of Marvic Attard Gialanzé as part-time education officer. Her job will be to visit schools promoting environmental awareness and Klabb Huttaf (the youth section of BirdLife Malta) membership..

Annual General Meeting

This year the Annual General meeting is going to be held on the 27 February at 6.00 pm at the BirdLife premises (see page 4 of this newsletter for the address).

This year the AGM will include the election of a new Council to run the Society for the next two years. The candidates are Denis Cachia, Desiree Falzon, Ray Galea, Joe Mangion, Ian Mifsud, Joe Sultana, Justin Vassallo and Antoine Vella.

The agenda also includes reports by the Chairperson, the Secretary and the Treasurer of the Society while the President will also deliver a short address.

Before the Meeting, various BirdLife members will be projecting slides taken by themselves on their

Survey of trapping sites funded by BirdLife International

BirdLife Malta is presently embarking on a scientific survey to establish the number and location of trapping sites in Malta and Gozo. This is being carried out by examining aerial photographs produced by the Mapping Section of the Planning Authority.

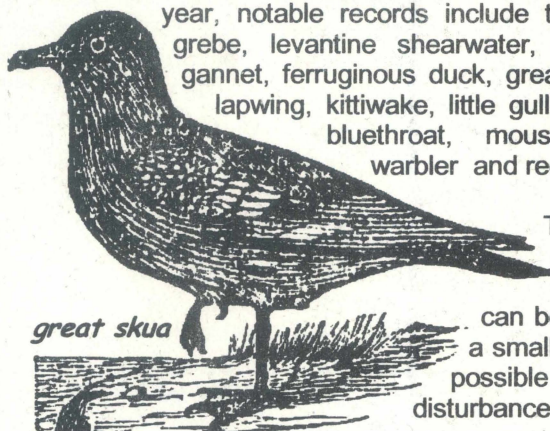
The study is being carried out systematically and it is intended to cover the entire land area of Malta and Gozo and count the individual sites as they appear on the photos. The aim of this exercise is to have a basis on which to assess the environmental impact of trapping and to find out which areas have the highest load of trapping sites.



BirdLife International BirdLife International is supporting the initiative by channelling to our Society the necessary funds which were kindly provided by Mr Duttenhofer. We will be keeping our members regularly updated on the developments and eventually on the results of the survey.

Bird Sightings

Although, traditionally, winter is not the best time to observe birds in Malta, our members and birdwatchers have reported a number of interesting records. Besides the usual species found at this time of the year, notable records include the following: great crested grebe, levantine shearwater, great cormorant, northern gannet, ferruginous duck, great skua, water rail, northern lapwing, kittiwake, little gull, sandwich tern, wood lark, bluethroat, moustached warbler, Dartford warbler and reed bunting.



great skua

These and other records show the variety and abundance of birds that can be found in Malta and is only a small indication of what would be possible if only there was less disturbance.

BirdLife International victory for migratory birds

The European Union Commission has finally withdrawn a proposed amendment to the Birds Directive on hunting, which would have threatened migratory birds. BirdLife International has lobbied hard against the amendment and this success is an excellent example of the Partnership's ability to achieve conservation results.

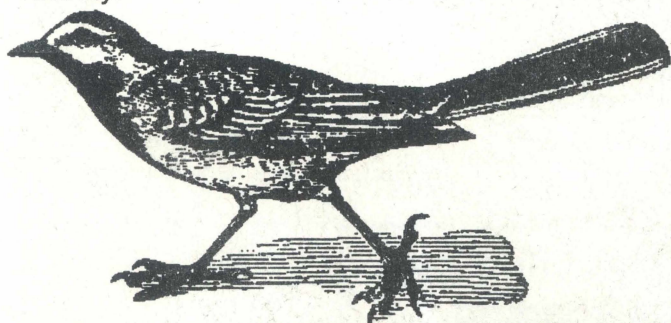
The proposed amendment would have tampered with the principle of the ban on spring shooting; the European Union has now supported BirdLife's call for 31 January to be recognised as a universal closing date for the hunting season.

This success demonstrated how close co-operation between Partners and the BirdLife European Community Office (BirdLife's office in Brussels) can achieve an outcome that is beneficial for European birds.

White wagtails counted

During an organised roost-count held by the BirdLife Malta Research Group on 13 January, over two thousand (2350) white wagtails (*Motacilla alba alba*) were counted.

It is believed that all the white wagtails on the island of Malta congregate in Valletta each evening to spend the night there. They roost in the large mature *Ficus nitida* trees in the centre of the city which are thus of significant environmental importance and should be protected even though they are not, strictly speaking, indigenous trees. Twenty three BirdLife members participated in the activity.



Fined for hunting at Buskett

A hunter from Rabat was fined Lm 200 - a relatively high fine for Malta - after he was found guilty of hunting at Buskett. The man was arrested last September while hunting in the area surrounding Verdala Palace at Buskett, part of a bird sanctuary.

Preparing for spring

In a few weeks, the spring migrations - birds going north to breed - will be starting in earnest and BirdLife is determined to ensure that the Hunting Regulations will again be enforced as they were - more or less - during the last autumn migrations. The task will this time be rather more difficult as, in spring, migrating birds are not concentrated in particular spots such as Buskett but may be found all over the country. The police will therefore have a much greater area to cover on their patrols.

Nevertheless, with goodwill and commitment from all concerned, it should still be possible to enforce the law. The Environment Monitoring Board - on which there are representatives of BirdLife and the hunters' Federation as well as Government bodies - has been meeting regularly and plans are in hand to take the necessary measures for an effective law-enforcement. After the success of this Board's action last September when the lives of thousands of birds of prey were saved, the Environment Monitoring Board will be working on new plans for spring.



Smuggling of songbirds still going on

A Tunisian man has been fined Lm 606 after he was found guilty of illegally importing songbirds in Malta. The man was also given a one-year jail term suspended for two years. He pleaded guilty to failing to declare 69 songbirds and failing to pay custom duty on his arrival from Tunis at the Malta International Airport. He was also charged with keeping birds in a cage smaller than specified by law to allow the birds to stretch their wings.

Meanwhile, on a different occasion, about 600 greenfinches were discovered abandoned at the Malta International Airport. Sadly most of the birds were dead. They had been brought over illegally from Tunisia and were crammed in small cages which were placed inside four luggage bags. The smugglers apparently



abandoned the bags on the luggage carousel when they noticed that there were a number of officials from the Customs Anti-Drug Squad carrying out luggage inspection. Obviously the smugglers had removed all tags or other means of identification on the bags. The police are investigating the case.

These two separate cases show the extent of song-bird smuggling that is taking place in Malta, with the birds being brought over mainly from North Africa. BirdLife Malta is in contact with the Police and the Government and is suggesting that an effective strategy has to be urgently drawn up and implemented to combat this particular crime.

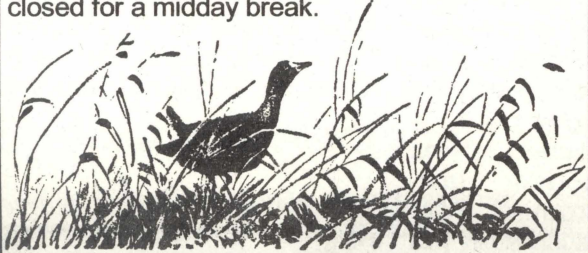
New Opening times for Ghadira reserve

At weekends, the Reserve is open for the general public at these times

January
9.30 am to 3.30 pm

February -- May
10.30 am to 4.30 pm

This means that the Reserve will no longer be closed for a midday break.



Volunteers needed

The innovations being carried out at the reserves - with new staff being engaged - is meant to enhance the educational value of these sites. Besides being crucial for nature conservation, both nature reserves of Ghadira and Simar serve as important educational tools.

In order to fulfil this role properly, however we need volunteers who will guide the many local and foreign visitors at weekends. These volunteers need not be knowledgeable about birds as they will have more experienced birders to help them. All that is needed is the will to spend a couple of hours each week in the peaceful surroundings of the nature reserve, helping visitors find their way around the place.

Interested persons can call the office and leave their name and telephone number. We will then contact them ourselves.

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Assistant Librarian
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Number of New Hunting Licences Down

The number of new hunting licences issued in Malta during the year 2000 was 413. The figures for the two previous years were 429 for 1999 and 480 for 1998. The total number of licensed hunters last year stood at 11,313 while the number of trapping licences was 3,461. This means that although the number of hunters continues to rise marginally, this increase is gradually becoming less marked.

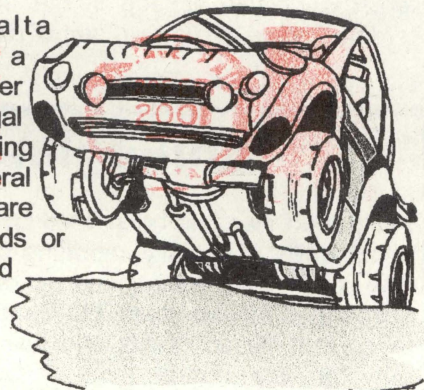


Meanwhile, the police apprehended 326 persons over offences related to bird hunting and trapping during the year 2000. These offences included the illegal hunting of protected birds, hunting inside bird sanctuaries and during the close-season, and hunting by unlicensed persons. These details were given by Home Affairs Minister Tonio Borg in Parliament.

BirdLife Malta condemns offroading

BirdLife Malta has issued a press release condemning the illegal offroading that is taking place at Buskett and at other sites in Malta. Offroading is causing a lot of damage in ecologically sensitive sites like Buskett.

BirdLife Malta pointed at a number of other sites where illegal offroading is taking place and several areas that are important for birds or other fauna and flora.



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BirdLife Malta is the Society for the protection of birds and the natural environment
BirdLife Malta is the partner of BirdLife International in the Maltese Islands