

~~Zitting *Cisticola Cisticola juncidis* in an urban area~~

~~In spring 2000, a male Zitting *Cisticola C. juncidis* was observed apparently attempting to set up territory in Fleur de Lys, a highly urbanised area which is entirely built up. The bird spent long periods in private gardens and singing in flight above the rooftops. This behaviour increased steadily from one to twenty song flights during the period 9 to 22 May, after which there was an observation of three song flights on 23 May. Thereafter the bird was not heard singing in the area.~~

~~The species inhabits wet as well as dry habitats almost always dominated by grasses or other plants; although basically a bird of tropical grasslands, in Europe most habitats are coastal and low-lying, often modified by man (Snow & Perrins 1998). In the Maltese Islands, since breeding was first confirmed in 1973 it has rapidly colonised new areas, mainly marshy areas, cereal and clover fields, as well as other areas where grasses grow, cultivated and otherwise (Sultana & Gauci 1982).~~

~~References~~

- ~~Snow, D.W. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (Concise edition). Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.~~
~~Sultana, J. & Gauci, C. 1982. *A New Guide to the Birds of Malta*. The Ornithological Society, Malta.~~

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~~Editorial note: A Zitting *Cisticola* was noted singing in an urban area (Gzira) on 21 June 2002 (D. Cachia pers. comm.). This species has also been noted nesting in close proximity to built-up areas in at least one locality; in this case however, suitable habitat was available right adjacent to buildings.~~

First record for the Maltese Islands of the dark morph Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

On the morning of 22 October 1998 whilst bird watching at Qawra, we observed a raptor coming in low over the sea. The first general impression was that of a dark brown raptor with two white patches at the base of the primaries not unlike the markings of a juvenile Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. Upon closer inspection we noticed that it was a Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* with unusual plumage. From above it was uniform dark brown with a pale grey tail. The underwings were also all very dark brown with a wide dark trailing edge and with white bases to primaries and secondaries. The body was also completely dark brown, the same colour of the wings except for the pale grey tail. The head was also completely dark and without any markings.

The bird was a dark morph male Marsh Harrier. It was properly identified after consulting various raptor guides that were published after the sighting, as the bird was not illustrated in previous guides.

According to Forsman (1999), the Marsh Harrier also occurs in a rare dark form; this form occurs among eastern populations migrating through the Middle East and only exceptionally further west.

This was the first record for the Maltese Islands but a second dark morph bird was observed on 17 September 2001 at Tigne (D. Attard & E. Bonavia pers. comm.).

References

- Clark, W. S. 1999. *A Field Guide to the Raptors of Europe, The Middle East and North Africa*. Oxford University Press
Forsman, D. 1999. *The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East*. T & D Poyser, London
Porter, R. F., Willis, I., Christensen, S. & Nielsen, B. P. 1981. *Flight Identification of European Raptors*. 3rd edition. T & D Poyser, London.

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Editorial note: It seems that although it is infrequent, the dark morph Marsh Harrier is not so rare in western Europe (see Fouquet, M. & Yesou, P. 1991. Dark-morph Marsh Harriers in western France. *British Birds* 84 (10): 438.).