THE FOUR SEASONS OF A CONSERVATIONIST

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Spring in Malta starts somewhat earlier than it does in the more northerly regions of Europe. The first tiny flowers bloom in February and a general awakening of Nature happens in a rising crescendo throughout the month of March; the country rambler may be suddenly surprised by a migrating wave of butterflies sweeping majestically in a long straddling line across the fields. Birds are far more plentiful, flocks of linnets abound (and so does their trapping), swallows and martins glide in the shallow depressions of our valleys and the waders are far more evident. But the more significant change is the sudden burst into song of the passerines, especially by warblers, the blue rock thrush and the corn bunting.

The more gentle day temperature may have a lot to do with all this, but subtly we are all urged into a more generous mood, a more open and franker disposition and, one hopes, a clearer discernment of the beneficial balance engendered so prolifically by Nature.

On second reflection no discovery is more repugnant and more saddening than to find lurking among all this living abundance the dark tall shadow of Man the wanton destroyer, the ultimate embodiment of intelligence, capable of indifferent but methodical annihilation and supremely incapable of replacing a single butterfly from that long straddling line crossing the green fields.

This is the basic aberration all conservationists are up against — for indeed it is an aberration which we need paint no darker than it really is — and as consequence, the trend of progress is all in our favour.

Late March and early April often bring about one of those climatic convulsions typical of most seasonal transitions. Furthermore, we habitually associate Good Friday with drab, grey, cloudy skies and an uneasy stillness. Even the tall stalk of the asphodel along the inclines of the valleys, bears at its upper half the melancholic violet flowering, sadly contrasting with the greyness above.

Two years ago, on Good Friday, I paid a hasty visit to Ghadira Pool, then still filled with waters from previous copious downpours. Not a reed moved in the heavy air; there were only a few warblers among the tamarisks, with a couple of martins swooping over the still waters every now and then. Then my companion caught a swift movement at the edge of the further shore. "A rail!" he whispered excitedly. For the next thirty minutes we eagerly spied on the spot. The rail darted out from the undergrowth a couple more times, always the same furtive foray, a hurried timid exposure to the outside world and swiftly back to the safety of the undergrowth. For all I know, it might be the correct sort of tactics for a clever bird to resort to while resting in Malta. But we were baulked from identifying it properly, even though we walked over to the spot in a futile attempt to flush it out. On our notes, it had to remain simply, "a rail".

The time of the season brings out these depressing recollections, for often the times suggest the mood. Therefore I will permit myself a single diffident reflection. True conservationists just cannot afford to lie low or shrug the responsibility of publicising their convictions. Although it means that we, conservationists, may have to step on other people's toes and possibly make enemies in quarters where we would rather not, still we cannot hide in the undergrowth like the rail and risk remaining an unidentified nucleus of progressive thinkers. If that were to happen, it could only mean that we have failed through fear of exposure to the world outside where our ideal of toleration to Nature is twisted purposely, or at best, is misunderstood.

The spring migration of birds, on their way to their breeding regions in the north, is a phenomenon of inspiring dimensions. For the period March to mid-May, our islands become in fact a haven and an important stepping stone for many birds using the mid-Mediterranean route. If they elude the roving bands of sportsmen and trappers scattered throughout our countryside, they will very likely raise their brood of fledglings and return in Autumn or the next Spring to the "haven" in the Middle Sea.

The weakest premise in the above statement is the assumption that the same birds return at all. A minor controversy has for long raged over this issue, for the necessary proofs were not forthcoming. Now, we can with confidence say that many species of birds do return. Thanks to the valuable research carried out by the M.O.S. Bird Ringing Group, the evidence is piling up impressively. Although this is not the most spectacular of their finds, nor their most valuable contribution to Maltese ornithology, the hard-working members of this Group have finally solved a vexed problem of utmost significance.

All of this pin-points the wisdom of the Committee of the Malta Ornithological Society when 3 years ago, they set aside all objections to the idea of organising a ringing scheme in Malta and proceeded to lay the ground work. Some of the objections were real, some of them still persist. But thanks to the whole-hearted and generous help received from the British Trust for Ornithology, the Banbury Ornithological Society, the Malta Bird Reserve Overseas Committee, and the continued generosity of all our members, the M.O.S. now has a nucleus of trained and efficient field-workers. Outside the immediate circle of the Society's members, local help and aid has not been forthcoming. It is a regrettable situation. No such active work of research has ever been undertaken in Malta and we are not aware of any scientific research in the field of the Natural Sciences taking place in Malta at present either. The people who should know better appear to be deaf and dumb and unappreciative. The patina of lethargy and torpitude has settled too thickly on the sterile shell of our academic establishment.

But we will not be discouraged for we can wait for them to wake up to their responsibilities. Meanwhile, the sterling work of the MOS will go on relentlessly, defying all difficulties and reaping splendid results. To the band of the dedicated workers go our very best auguries for all their future endeavours. Their problems are great, but their reward is a permanent niche in the history of Maltese Ornithology.

Over the ages poets have sung in praise of the glorious floral explosion of Spring, of the "fruitful mellowness" of Autumn, while finding enough breath to lament the harshness and rigours of Winter. But have you ever noticed how they steer clear of Summer? Perhaps the merciless heat of the summer days and its oppressive nights are not conducive to a good strain of lyricism. I think there is a grain of truth in all this; for the bright ruthless sky of summer enforces a regimen of lethargy and restfulness. Life then gradually gravitates towards the sea, which is even truer of our small island.

In summer the resident birds suffer most of all, for with the drying up of springs and pools, their water supply becomes extremely scarce. (It would be a splendid idea if all bird-lovers were to leave a trough of water out in the open — in gardens or on the roof.) But somewhat they survive, restricting most of their flying to the early and late hours of daylight. The one exception is the Herring gull. With its wide wing-span, it clings to the cliffside, wisely utilising the rising thermals of hot air to keep itself air-borne, often stationary, and at the same time saving its energy. Its young, dressed in downy brown, wait for their food perched on some projecting ledge along the face of the cliff. The

parents are jealous and scrupulous guardians of their brood and if they detect human disturbance, will circle overhead barking angrily a rhythmic "Ga, Gaga-ga".

One fine day early in the summer, the juvenile Herring-gull will take his first plunge from that ledge high up on the cliff; more likely than not, he will end up sitting scared stiff on the crest of some incoming wave. But a kindly, benevolent Nature has already equipped him for that sort of mishap: an oily film permeating his feathers. His next flight will be considerably more confident until he has mastered the air and learnt to ride high over the turbulent sea.

For all this promise of life and bloom to be cut short by a single thoughtless gunshot, is a cruel act by any standard available. A dead sea-gull, its tiny body riddled with buckshot, can hardly be of use to its killer; to the naturalist the whole affair is a dastardly, sickening cowardly act, the end product of a selfish, misguided mind.

Sometimes the south Mediterranean summer may linger right through the month of October and then continues to wane benignly throughout the month of November. But not infrequently, a sudden storm, borne on the wings of the N.E. winds, will signal a curt transition. In the depth of the night we listen to the wind buffeting the tree-tops, or we catch a glimpse of a coursing cloud carving up the moon; then we are all aware that its Autumn.

At such time I always say to myself: "The yellow wagtails have arrived!" Sure enough the next morning they can be found in some open flat meadow, their slender form and ridiculously long tails beruffled, but still retaining their stately gait as if to emphasise that dignity and grace are inseparable traits. Unfortunately these guileless little birds are so easy to catch in spite of an old-standing legal ban! Children can trap them in droves, only to languish for two or three days and die miserably so intense is their attachment to the free wild life.

The total Autumn migration is always notable; for what it lacks in numbers is more than compensated in quality. The range of birds to be seen throughout the season is vast, while not a few that are met with are quite rare. A British ornithologist, about three years ago, came across a flock of Squacco Herons near Marsaxlokk and for days on end would talk of nothing but the rare experience of watching dozens of Squacco Herons fluttering to the ground around him. Herds of cranes, large and powerful birds, generally overfly our islands; occasionally one can spot them with the naked eye flying high over l-Ahrax tal-Mellieha.

As the season advances, the number of birds diminishes, while the days shorten startingly. Then one night we might be disturbed by the confused cries of geese and ducks, those notorious night migrants who frequently lose their bearings in pitch darkness. At dawn the falling song of the robin echos hauntingly in the back-garden, while in the fields a whitish film of hoary dew settles over every blade of grass — the cold season is evidently round the corner!

"Winter kept us warm" wrote T.S. Eliot, the renowned bard, who is consequently suspected of failing to inspect his fuel bills for the winter quarter.

At least once every winter I get drenched to the skin in a heavy, cold downpour and invariably, I'm caught without adequate protective clothing. Within an hour comes the first sneeze and by the evening I would be running a slight fever. Well?! Another feverish cold!

It's far from being a unique experience, for the habitual mildness of our Maltese winter can easily betray and lull us into a false confidence that the weather will hold for yet another day.

In the local sequence of seasonal variations, Winter is in fact *the* rainy season; and the lack of rain during the wintry months can be of serious con-

sequence to our health and pockets. Our Island is blessed, not only by an overall mildness of winter, but further by the fact that real icy cold weather holds sway only in brief spells. Still the discomforts, which the country rambler may experience, often discourage frequent wanderings in the countryside. But to the initiate, a closer look is not at all unrewarding.

The germinating wild flower plants clothe all open expanses in a rich mantle of intense green — such a deep hue! — soon to fade somehow, when the temperature starts to climb. The foliage by the wayside is thick, luxuriant; every stem surfeited with life-giving sap — another ephemeral sight. Over low-lying grassy areas lingers the early morning mist, all too soon to be distilled in an imperceptible dewy shower by the slanting rays of a lukewarm wintry sun.

The robin is as yet wintering with us, chasing all rivals from his territory with curving furious flights of pursuit. Chiffchaffs hop from twig to branch in an incessant search for grub and insects. In the sheltered part of a bay, you might come across some lone grebe — an intrepid diver — impatiently shaking dry his long neck before plunging down again, head first, and last.....that funny little tuft which passes for its tail.

While crossing some field on the way back home, through the failing twilight, you may be caught off your guard by a full-throated trill high over your head. It's the timid, retiring sky lark returning to roost beneath the leaves of some shrub in the vicinity. Starlings are mostly plentiful; swarms of them arrowing straight through the air to assemble in large numbers on the tallest trees in every public and private garden. Noisy birds those starlings, but then what wonderful mimics. (Once I chanced to hear a starling clucking gleefully like a well-fed chicken.)

Soon daylight fades with unannounced abruptness. The chilly night air falls like a hood over the land, curtailing all human movements. On clear moonless nights, it might even cheat us of the grandest of Nature's wintry sights: a pellucid brilliant firmament aglow from the glint of thousands upon thousands of stars twinkling with unperturbed diamond-like sharpness. Yet another fleeting phenomenon though; for presently, the mellow diffuseness of starlight will herald the birth of Spring.

1968.

TO A ROBIN IN MY GARDEN

Sweet little bird, I love your happy strain,
I love the colours on your throbbing chest
But this is not a healthy place.
Go back to your nest!
Take the freckled grapes
from the withery vine and fly away.
Pray, do not sing aloud
lest the trapper should hear your sound.
He will keep you in a tiny cage
where you will pine and die
so soon of rage.
Fly far away to the forest green
where you may sing by day
and rest by night;
where man cannot show
his arrogance and his might.

Randon, Lija.