

~~If Italy the Razorbill is rare and irregular like it is in Malta. The type commonly taken there is that of *Alca torda islandica*, although even more rarely the *Alca torda torda* may occur (Avifauna Italica - Augusto Toschi). In the Birds of North Africa, Etchecopar and Hue state that the wintering birds off the coasts of the Canaries, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are of the type *islandica*.~~

~~This record of the Northern Razorbill is very interesting as it is the only documented occurrence so far south recorded and may give future evidence to the winter migration of the Northern race.~~

~~J. Vella Gaffero~~

~~(*) Bill measurements do not agree with lengths given by Witherby; but this is because Razorbills take a year before they grow their bills to the proper length.~~

RAPTORS IN MALTESE SKIES

(This is the last article on diurnal birds of prey which appear in Malta. The accidentals and rare visitors have not been included. The first three appeared in "H-Merill" Nos. 3,4 and 7 respectively.)

Merlin *Falco columbarius* Seger ta' Denbu

Merlins are nowadays scarce and irregular in our islands. They occur during March and early April and from mid-October to mid-November. They have also been recorded in January, September and December.

Both females and immatures have much the same plumage: the upper parts are brownish and the underparts are creamy-buff with dark brown markings; the tail is brown with a white tip and bands. Adult males are slate-grey above and heavily striped with rufous below; the slate-blue tail has a black terminal band.

In the air Merlins fly low and erratically over the ground as they chase the small birds on which they feed. Their flight on migration is not different and they have been observed to migrate only singly.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* Zumbrell

In spring Red-footed Falcons are normally seen frequently from mid-April to mid-May; in autumn they are scarce though fairly regular, occurring from late September to mid-October. Birds have also turned up in late March, June, July and early September.

With its dark blue-grey plumage, except for chestnut on its thighs and under the tail, the adult is a very handsome falcon. Adult females have a rufous head, with short chestnut moustachial stripes, barred greyish upperparts and sandy underparts. Immatures resemble the female, but do not have the rufous head and are browner. Both sexes have reddish beak and feet, which in juveniles are yellower.

This falcon in the air looks and flies much like a Hobby, but its wing-base is broader and it is less agile. When perched, its wings reach almost to

the tip of its tail. It feeds on large insects and occasionally small mammals and birds.

In Malta, the Red-footed Falcon is seen solely on migration, usually singly or in small parties of up to about 15 birds.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* Spanjulett Sekond

This falcon occurs irregularly in Spring, from mid-March to mid-May. In autumn, it is quite regular, appearing frequently from mid-September to mid-October.

In plumage the Lesser Kestrel looks like a bright edition of the Kestrel. It lacks the moustachial stripe, the spots on the adult male's back and has white claws and whiter underwings, but otherwise it looks like a brightly coloured Kestrel.

Lesser Kestrels, when hunting, circle above the ground, and on sighting prey hover momentarily with its body angled then stoops obliquely. It takes mostly large insects with an occasional small mammal or bird. A great favourite (also of the Kestrel) are the large flying ants that fill the air in autumn after the showers.

Migrating Lesser Kestrels keep quite high, having a direct flight composed of very long intervals of gliding with a few wing beats now and then. They are also seen sometimes soaring leisurely over the hillridges, much like Honey Buzzards which they sometimes accompany.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Spanjulett

Kestrels are very frequent in spring from early March to mid-May, and rather common in autumn, when they appear during September and October. A few winter here while a bird or two is always met with during the summer.

Male Kestrels have a slate-blue head with a black moustachial stripe, rump and tail, the latter having a broad black sub-terminal band. The upper parts of his wings and back are rufous, spotted with black. Females are rusty brown barred with black above, with the brownish head having a dark moustachial stripe. The underparts are buffish, spotted with brown. Juveniles look like females but they are darker. Both have a rusty tail barred with black, as is the sub-terminal band.

Hunting Kestrels are easily identified by their habit of protracted hovering with the body carried horizontally as they survey the ground for their prey — large insects, rodents and small birds. If a strong wind is blowing, the hunting bird 'hangs' on the wind, motionless, except for a flicker of its wing and tail as the need arises to compensate for changes in wind-speed and direction.

Migrating Kestrels have a direct flight with a few wing-beats followed by a short glide; they usually travel singly, though small parties of up to 5 may be seen.

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