

~~Activities for members were held regularly. Four coloured films — Severn Wildfowl Trust, Winged Aristocrats, Birds of a Hampshire Garden and Jungle Feathers — were shown to members at the British Council. A successful day outing was held on Comino while two afternoon walks were held to Buskett and Girgenti. Eight talks were also given at the British Council and at the 4Ts Headquarters. All the members were regularly informed about the activities by circulars. Outings for young members were organised separately by the Young Members' Section.~~

~~The Malta Television, the Rediffusion and the local papers were frequently used to air the M.O.S. aims and to educate the public in conservation ideals. Three more numbers of Il-Merill were printed, with numbers 5 and 6 as special issues. Number 5 carried a Systematic List of Birds noted in the Maltese Islands during 1967-70 while number 6 reported on Bird-ringing for 1967-70. The first number of 'L-Ghasfur' appeared in January, 1,500 copies of this leaflet for young members were sold to young people in Secondary Schools. Contacts were regularly held with local societies and with most of the European bird societies to which the M.O.S. publications were sent regularly. Communications were also frequently held with various Government departments re Society matters and scope. A sub-committee was formed to prepare a draft for better bird protection laws to be presented to the Minister concerned. (As we go to the press, the Agricultural Department has asked for a copy of this draft).~~

~~The M.O.S. Bird-ringing Group was again very active during 1971. Over 7,500 birds of 91 species were ringed. A daily log of all birds noted was also kept by this group.~~

~~J. Sultana, M.O.S. Secretary.~~

RAPTORS IN MALTESE SKIES

By C. Galea

(This is the third of a series of articles on diurnal birds of prey. The first article appeared in 'Il-Merill' No. 3, Dec. 1970).

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Kuċċarda prima

Buzzards, though they come annually, are scarce but irregular in the time of year they appear. They do not occur from June to late September.

Their plumage varies but it is generally dark brown on the back, while the under-parts are a variable brown. Their tail is buffish, with narrow, regularly spaced bars and a dark subterminal band.

Like so many other birds of prey, it is seen mostly on the hill-ridges. Its food consists of small mammals, insects, reptiles, carrion and occasionally small birds.

This bird of prey, though of a sluggish flight, makes optimal use of thermals, soaring and wheeling on motionless wings for long periods. On migration they do not appear to mix with other birds of prey and seem to appear singly or in pairs.

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Ajkla bajda

This predator is a regular autumn passage migrant, a very few passing over between mid-September and mid-October. One was also recorded at the end of August in Gozo by Wright (List of Birds observed in Malta and Gozo — Ibis 6.42-73, 137-157). A most curious record is of one at Mistra in mid-December, 1970.

The upper-parts of this species are grey brown, sometimes with a pale crown. Its under-parts, including the under surface of the wings are white except for a dark throat and upper breast. Some individuals may have lighter markings while in others the dark colour is more extensive, reaching the flanks. Juveniles are paler than adults, tawny below with brown markings. Its tail has three or four dark bars. It has an owl-like head with a relatively small beak; its greyish brown feet have stubby toes.

The preferred habitat of this bird is heath and bogs near woods and forests where its reptile prey abounds. It is thus not surprising that it finds the Buskett-Salib tal-Gholja area attractive.

Its elegant flight, though powerful and easy, is not fast; and like most other large broad-winged birds of prey it soars expertly on level wings. When hunting it hovers heavily keeping its body horizontal with feet dangling, looking just like a gigantic hovering Kestrel.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Bughadam abjad prim

This harrier is a passage migrant, scarce in spring and rare in autumn. In spring it occurs in March and April, while in autumn it comes over from about late August to late September. Males are very rarely seen.

The adult male is pale grey on back, throat, and upper breast, with the remaining underparts white. Females have dark brown upper-parts, with the heavily streaked under-parts being a lighter colour. Its head is brownish with a white facial ruff. Young birds resemble the female but their underparts are a streaked rufous. Both adults and juveniles have a conspicuous white rump, which in females can be streaky.

Flying Hen Harriers are quite buoyant, gliding effortlessly and unhurriedly for good distances. They have not been noted to soar much. They migrate singly.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Bughadam abjad

A frequent spring passage migrant, being met with from mid-March to mid-April; it is rare in autumn, when it appears in October. An early bird was noted on 21st February 1971.

The underparts of the adult male are a shining white, with the primaries forming a contrasting black wedge. Above, it is a soft pale greyish-blue, with its rump being barred with black and white. Females and juveniles look like the Montagu's, but they are somewhat paler and duller.

In flight this harrier is much like the Montagu's, but it is slightly heavier and slower. The adult male, ghosting its way over the silla-fields, its delicate colouring contrasting with the crimson of the clover, must be one of the finer sights of a Maltese spring.

When migrating, this harrier flies low and singly, though now and then two or three birds may be noted together.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Bughadam griz

In spring, this harrier is not infrequent, appearing in early April and continuing to be met with for about a month. In autumn a few are seen from late August to late September.

Male Montagu's Harriers are a grey-blue on their upperparts, throat and breast. The rest of the underparts are white flecked with red. They have two black lines on their secondaries. Females are rich brown above, streaked buffish brown below; juveniles have brownish upperparts and brick red underparts. Their facial pattern is quite well marked.

On the wing Montagu's Harriers are very buoyant and quite fast. Flapping, with a few deliberate wing-beats, alternates with longish glides. When migrating, they fly at low to medium heights, but rarely can be noted very high up.

Small parties, up to five birds, can be seen though they are few and far between.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* Bughadam ahmar

The Marsh Harrier is very frequent in spring, from early March to early May; sometimes it continues to be met with till the end of May. In autumn, it is very irregular: very scarce in some years and very frequent in others. At this time it occurs during September and October, but can occur also in August and early November.

Adult males are dark brown on the back with a grey tail and a greyish patch on the upper surface of the wing. They are a variable shade of brown on their underparts, which are streaked. Females are a dark brown all over, with a creamy crown and throat. Young birds resemble the female, but lack the cream on the head.

These hawks have a leisurely flight, with some wing-beats followed by long easy glides. It often indulges in a lazy soaring flight, frequently at great heights. On migration it usually flies at medium height and travels chiefly singly, but small parties (largest one recorded of seven birds) may also be seen. In autumn, they can sometimes be seen accompanying the flocks of Honey Buzzards.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* Bies

Up till a few years ago, a few peregrines on passage could be met with quite regularly at each migratory season, especially in the autumn. Nowadays, the only Peregrines about belong to the resident pair or two and their progeny. An odd migrant or two may still come over, but it is impossible to tell whether a bird is a migrant or a resident.

Adult peregrines are a slate-blue above, with a heavy moustachial stripe; their underparts are whitish closely barred with blue. Juveniles are brownish above and streaked below; they also have a moustachial stripe.

These falcons have a powerful flight, a few strong wing-beats being followed by a long glide that frequently leads to a display of masterful

soaring. They feed almost exclusively on birds, which are captured mostly by their famous stoop during which it is said speeds of nearly 200 m.p.h. can be reached.

It is worth digressing a little here to mention the connection this falcon has with Maltese History.

In 1530, these Islands were ceded by the Emperor of Spain, Charles V. to the Knights of St. John, with the nominate yearly rent of two falcons, one to be sent to the ruler of Spain and the other to his Viceroy in Sicily. In Grand Master Pinto's time, the custom was introduced of sending a falcon to the King of Portugal also. These falcons were caught by nets, to which they were lured by tame falcons.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Seqr tal-Hannieqa

Hobbies are frequent in spring (from mid-April to early June, occasionally appearing as early as late March) and common in autumn (early August to mid-October). It occurs sporadically in July.

Both sexes have the same plumage: adults are slate-blue on the head, back, wings and tail, with white underparts striated with thin black markings; thighs and under-tail coverts are a bright chestnut. Juveniles are a dull brownish-black with buff-tipped feathers above and buffish with coarse black streaks below. Adults and juveniles have a heavy dark moustachial stripe.

In the air this falcon has a very distinctive silhouette -- it looks just like a crescent moon with a tail. Its flight, so effortless and agile, is a wonderful sight, as the bird soars and glides with such consummate ease. Its food consists of large insects and small birds.

On migration, this falcon flies rather fast and high. Birds usually journey singly, but on several occasions, very small parties (of two or three) have been seen. It has been seen with Sparrow Hawks and Honey Buzzards.

Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonorae*

Bies tar-regina

One of the many birds overlooked by previous Maltese ornithologists was this species. It occurs as a scarce passage-migrant from mid-April to early June and from mid-August to late September. There is some evidence that it is also a summer visitor.

This bird is dimorphic. Light phase birds are slate-brown on the upperparts with a buffish-white breast becoming increasingly rufous towards the tail and heavily spotted with black. Dark-phase falcons are a uniform dark brown, scalloped and blotched with buffish and white; some individuals are all black. All these different plumages have been recorded.

While other European falcons nest in spring, this bird nests in the late summer, to coincide with the return migration to Africa. Its favourite habitat is small Islands and sea-cliffs, so it would be quite conceivable that it would nest here, if left undisturbed.

Its silhouette is like that of a Hobby, except for the longer tail. It has also much the same kind of flight, but is more powerful and less agile. Its food consists of small birds and insects.