

~~alarmingly the number of breeding Shearwaters and accounts for a large number of dead Storm Petrels and a larger number of addled eggs.~~

~~Though breeding profusely on Filfla, it has not been confirmed that the Storm Petrel breeds also on Malta and Gozo as Despott had stated, though it gets near the shores at night. And it is not surprising, considering the abundance of rats all along the coastline of both Malta and Gozo. The ground nesters, namely the Short toed Lark and the Corn Bunting, and the two Warblers which prefer to nest just above the ground suffer immensely. Rats, snakes, herds of grazing goats, dogs and children destroy a large number of their nests. On the other hand the larger breeding birds often fall victims of the shot gun. The Shearwaters are continuously pushed to the farthest corners through disturbances, while~~

~~large numbers are slaughtered in summer off Marsaxlokk and Wied iż-Żurriq in Malta, and off Marsalforn in Gozo, during 'pleasure' shooting boat trips. Erroneously, the Peregrine, the Kestrel, and the Barn Owl, like all other birds of prey, are looked on as man's enemies and end up in a show-case.~~

~~It is a sad fact that very few of our breeding birds are protected. Ironically, the laws that protect these few are not entirely respected. A clear example is that of the Jackdaw. It is of urgent importance to protect, not simply on paper, all our breeding birds. 1970 is European Conservation Year and it would be befitting if Malta, being a member of the Council of Europe, would conserve this neglected part of our National Heritage for future generations who would then one day call us enlightened.~~



Malta . . . Birds . . . & European Conservation Year

by J.M. Attard

1970 is European Conservation Year. All the member countries of the Council of Europe are taking part, as well as Spain and Portugal which have expressed a wish to be associated with the year.

The theme of 1970 is Conservation with a stress on different influential aspects arising from urban conglomeration, industry, agriculture and forestry and leisure in the countryside.

Last February 300 participants from 27 countries met in Strasbourg for a conference to discuss on the Management of the Environment in Tomorrow's Europe. This was an inter-governmental conference and its object was action. Its process, however, was educational. The Strasbourg Conference had been well prepared and after studying and debating four thick reports — on urbanisation, industry, leisure, farming and

forestry — came out with a powerful document of 30 guidelines for Europe's decision makers. It was acclaimed unanimously.

The Council of Europe is now demanding a conference of senior government ministers as a matter of urgency which means that it should meet this year. The point will be to put European Governments on the spot as to what they are actually proposing to do about the policies and measures agreed last month.

The Strasbourg Conference meant action. The experts have even recommended that the Council of Europe should guarantee the right of every individual primarily as a voice and a voter.

If parliaments ratify this, Governments would be liable to legal action from citizens in the European Court

of Human Rights for any failure to enforce it. Besides this, the Conference unanimously declared that field sports make a considerable contribution to preserving wild life. But surely, the delegates never meant the indiscriminate shooting and trapping of birds which is carried out round the whole year and regarded as a sport in Malta.

How is Malta involved in all this?

Malta is one of the member countries of the Council of Europe. The Ministry of Agriculture is the official body responsible for European Conservation Year in Malta. Last year the Department of Agriculture formed a committee from representatives of interested bodies under the chairmanship of the Director of Agriculture to give their advice and voice their opinions on how Malta can give its contribution to this year dedicated to conservation. I represent the Malta Ornithological Society on this national Committee and together with the other representatives, our Society submitted its report to the Chairman. This included protective, administrative and educational recommendations on how to protect our few remaining breeding birds and the many thousands that migrate or winter in Malta and which come from European countries where they are usually protected.

This is an extract from the Report of Malta submitted to the European Conservation Conference last February:

"It is a great pity that Malta has been blacklisted as another country where undesirable bird trapping and killing still persist. It is high time that the question of destruction of wild fowl be seriously studied. It is indeed impossible to prohibit totally the hunting of birds. What is needed is the establishment of a closed season for game hunting. The bi-annual hunting season is almost a national passion. The following places might be declared bird sanctuaries (a) Ghadira (b) Salina (c) Ta' Qali (d) Ta' Cenc (e) Xlendi Bay (f) Comino and

(g) Filfla. Protective measures, such as prohibitions of fire-arms and clapnets in bird sanctuaries might also be adopted. Legislation for the protection of birds might also be carried out in the near future".

The greatest contribution that Malta can give to European Conservation Year is to stop the indiscriminate slaughter and control the trapping of those birds coming from other member countries of the Council of Europe. On no other aspect of conservation can Malta meet so close with her member states.

Wild birds are our national heritage and that of Europe. They know no boundaries and they belong to no particular country. They belong to all Europe. Wild birds are a social resource because of their value in recreation, an educational resource because of the importance of biology and ecology in an agricultural country, a cultural resource because of their significance in Maltese and European literature, art and folklore, and an economic resource because of the value to farmers of many species which provide biological control of pests instead of necessitating the use of the deadly and toxic agricultural pesticides.

Our avifauna is paelarctic. Our geographical position in the middle sea between the two continents makes our Islands of great importance in the study of the movements of European birds. This has been realised by other countries since the last century when ornithology was yet in its infancy. In 1884, the first International Ornithological Congress was convened in Vienna and here it was resolved that Malta was an important observatory station for migratory birds. This congress, therefore, requested the Governor of Malta to permit ornithological observations from the lighthouses in Malta and Gozo by day and night. These observations covering the years 1886 to 1894 were compiled and published by the German Professor Blasius.

In no other field of study can Malta help directly other European countries as Ornithology. Most of the birds that ornithologists study in other European countries are the same birds that are shot or trapped here or, if they are so fortunate, trapped, ringed and released by members of the Malta Ornithological Society Ringing Group.

During the last four years of ringing our Society has put Malta on the Ornithological map. Our Bulletin is finding itself in the libraries of Europe's best field study centres and ornithological institutions. The recoveries of ringed birds in Malta and of other birds ringed by us here and recovered on the continent show the mutual contribution in this field of study. We had recoveries from nearly all European countries where bird ringing is carried out. On the other hand, England, Finland, Sweden, Poland and Italy had recoveries of birds ringed in Malta.

The Malta Ornithological Society has been trying for some years to create a public conscience and to work in the direction for better protective measures to be taken by the authorities. Whilst the size of the countryside is increasingly shrinking, the number of licensed shooters has reached the figure of 8000. The number of motor vehicles on the road is 62,000 and the mileage of roads is 750 miles. Though the birth rate has fallen down in the past years, the population is still increasing substantially for the size of Malta. Agricultural pesticides are being used indiscriminately. Many old trees especially the Carob are being felled and precious soil wasted. This is the result of the building boom. Sea is being polluted with oil and sewage. Litter and building material is thrown and dumped in the valleys. Uglier buildings are appearing like monsters in every part of the Islands. Both breeding and migratory birds are decreasing, while conservation problems are increasing. This is

Malta in 1970. What will Malta look like in the year 2000.

With every passing year sitting and doing nothing, we shall need five years of reparation to bring nature and environment back to normal if we ever are successful. Our few breeding species are today regarded as Cindirellas. Responsible Maltese opinion should become aware of the political and prestige value of our natural heritage during this year of European Conservation. In this modern world, a country without a nature reserve or a national park can hardly be regarded as civilised. And for Malta to pursue a negative and 'laissez faire' policy on the few bird sanctuaries in existence and those proposed by the Malta Ornithological Society, and to permit the indiscriminate shooting and netting of birds in this European Campaign of conservation, would shock Europe and put Malta as a black spot on the Map.

In the past, in the present and in the near future, the cause of wild birds protection has been fighting and usually losing a series of rear-guard actions against economic, political and social pressures, and the general human thoughtlessness and blindness. I am afraid that it is already late now to realise what we had lost.

We should therefore rouse a public opinion during this year with the ultimate aim of seeing wild life conservation and bird protection stepping into the centre of the political stage and demanding action. Unless we are ready to learn the harsh lesson we must start now. The interest is there, only waiting to be aroused. The Council of Europe and a number of the member countries have already showed their backing in the struggle to save Ghadira for birds. Now is the time to give our share to the cause of European Conservation.