

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

Issue 58 ■ December 2018



BirdLife
MALTA

Sticking to the plan is key for nature protection

I have just attended the Environment & Resources Authority's conference on the 'State of The Environment Report 2018'. ERA have done a magnificent job with this document. It gives out a history of the status of various environmental issues such as pollution, biodiversity, resources and waste amongst others.

During these workshops I managed to get across two interventions which I want to share with you. The first was while discussing the dilemma on whether enforcement is necessary or whether education should be enough to take care of our natural resources. My thought on this was that even if education would enable all our citizens and visitors to appreciate the importance of our evergreen trees, it only takes one person to chop a tree down. That is why enforcement will always be needed irrespective of how much we manage to engage with people to develop a better approach towards biodiversity, and nature in general. Our call for a Wildlife Crime Unit is based purely on these lines.

The other thought I had, when the discussion focused on the level of planning that has been going on by the Planning Authority, was about whether our country is comparing what has been planned in the past years and what resulted in the end. I highlighted my point by asking if there is, in any of the plans done in the past, the idea of having a motor race track in Malta. Of course there were no plans, yet our two main political parties have both promised this massive, out of proportion motor race track. So how strong are the plans being approved, or are they weak and extremely flexible? Are they fragmented, losing the efficiency of a holistic plan? I truly believe that if we could solve this problem and eliminate the political scenario from the scientific results and plans, our country would live healthier and lead a better quality of life.

Hope these thoughts can trigger in you the need to voice your concerns in regard of the state of the environment in Malta and Gozo, but in the meantime on behalf of the management team, staff and volunteers, I wish you and your loved ones a Merry Christmas and a Greener New Year.

Mark Sultana CEO

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What a year it has been!

Last month I was part of a group of BirdLife Malta officials who attended the annual BirdLife Europe & Central Asia Communicators' Workshop in Cyprus which discussed, among other issues, the illegal killing of birds and an upcoming international campaign aiming to make the flyways safe for which we will be contributing too.

Sadly, the topic of illegal bird killing is no stranger to us in Malta with 2018 already a record year in terms of illegally shot protected birds when compared to the past six years, which you can read more about in the news section. We also have a piece about the trapping season, following the Government's decision to allow trapping on Song Thrush and Golden Plover, inspiring this issue's front page and bird profile dedicated to the Song Thrush.

On a more positive note, on the Research page we focus on the fascinating chameleon census carried out at one of our reserves during the summer whilst the Educate spread focuses on our One World Learning (OWL) project, one year on. This December issue's nature walk takes us to the beautiful surroundings of the Chadwick Lakes and the Nature Reserves page showcases Għadira in winter. As usual, on page 11 you can find pictures from our past events as well as the new addition to our online shop!

For the back page we've chosen a photo taken during one of our public events in the beautiful Maltese countryside, bringing more people closer to nature. Hope you enjoy reading this issue, and I would like to take the opportunity to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

The Editor

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Front cover photo Song Thrush by Aron Tanti

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Dinja Waħda Awards 2018

In October and November we held our annual Dinja Waħda Awards for primary and secondary schools that participate in the programme. At the secondary event – held at Salina on 24 October – nine awards were presented to five different secondary schools for their achievements during the last scholastic year for the programme for environmental sustainability education through their curriculum. At the primary awards – held at the Grandmaster’s Palace in Valletta on 6 November – 91 schools celebrated their achievements and were presented their awards by the President of Malta H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca who also became the patron of BirdLife Malta’s Dinja Waħda programme!



Kinga Kupcska

► Dinja Waħda Primary Awards 2017-18

Record of stranded Scopoli’s Shearwaters rescued and swift fledglings rehabilitated

In 2018 we have seen a record number of Scopoli’s Shearwaters rescued during their fledging period. A total of 24 stranded birds were recovered by members of the public, showing the impacts of increasing levels of light pollution across the Maltese Islands on these seabirds. A change in our nocturnal environment has seen shearwater strandings increase dramatically in recent years. However, thanks to an increase in public awareness generated through our LIFE Arċipelagu Garnija project, more birds have been rescued and safely released back out at sea. During the summer, we also received a record number of 10 swifts (both Common and Pallid) after being found by members of the public. The young fledglings, which were found out of the nest, were then cared for round-the-clock by our hardworking staff and volunteers until they were strong enough to be released!



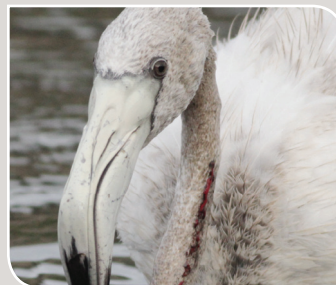
BirdLife Malta

► Rescued Scopoli’s Shearwater fledgling about to fly back to sea

WORDS **Jessica Irwin** BirdLife Malta Communications Officer

Illegal hunting and trapping continue

Over the last few months, the autumn hunting season has continued to bring in casualties with 2018 becoming the worst year for the illegal killing of protected birds in six years.



Aron Tanti

► Shot flamingo at Ghadira

In November, three of the flamingos which had been residing at Ghadira Nature Reserve left the reserve only for two to return – one of which also had a visible gunshot injury to its neck. A month later, the ‘resident’ flamingo which had been at the reserve for more than a year was shot at night and stolen from the reserve. Sadly however, it is not only the hunting season which is showing signs of illegal activity. This year’s trapping season for Song Thrush and Golden Plover opened in October and by the end of November, over 65 cases of illegal bird trapping had been documented by CABS. In response to this, we are continuing to call for better enforcement and environmental protection as well as continue to run our vital injured birds’ service.



Nathaniel Attard

► Protest in front of Parliament held on 8 October

Social Impact Awards

In November we participated as finalists in the Social Impact Awards final event, pitching our new project, Blooming Minds. We are delighted to have come in third place and to be awarded a €17,000 grant to implement Malta’s first ecotherapy programme in collaboration with the Richmond Foundation. Blooming Minds will create opportunities to spend time in nature through a variety of outdoor activities which enhance mental wellbeing and we look forward to seeing the positive change this will bring.



Sean Mallia

► BirdLife Malta and the Richmond Foundation at the Awards

Song Thrush



Maltese name: Malvizz

Scientific name: *Turdus philomelos*

Length: 23cm

Wingspan: 33-36cm

Conservation Status: Least Concern (IUCN)

Local Status: Common autumn migrant and wintering bird

Call: 'Tsik' flight call, varying but repetitive song

Behaviour: Feeds by hopping around in open patches

Habitat: Woodland, scrub and valleys

The Song Thrush is a widespread and renowned bird across Europe and parts of Asia. The species is split into four subspecies, with the nominate race making up the main European breeding populations. The species mostly winters in the Iberian peninsula and Mediterranean basin, which includes our archipelago. It is a locally common migrant in autumn, with much smaller numbers on return passage in the spring season. However, several attempt to spend the winter months with us, until March. Like some countries in our region, the Song Thrush is heavily hunted in Malta. The garden bird of north and central Europe is effectively a game species during the autumn hunting season. Every fall, this results in a decimation of its wintering numbers, an unfortunate fate which Starlings (*Sturnell*) also face.

Aside from being legal quarry, this species is also caught in the autumn trapping season, together with the Golden Plover. These two birds are the remaining trappable species in the continuing clampdown on flawed derogations that successive governments propped up. The ECJ recently banned finch trapping once and for all, dismissing the numerous arguments and supposed data backing finch trapping in Malta as a conservation strategy of sorts. While it is good news that no derogation can be used to allow trapping techniques relating to finch trapping, net mesh sizes have been altered to justify and maintain the use of clap traps used for catching the larger Golden Plover and Song Thrush.

The local enforcement will directly influence how many more seasons are feasible given the annual barrage of court cases that have not gone unnoticed by the EU. The extensive trapping illegalities reported through monitoring by both CABS and BirdLife Malta have continued to wash away the smokescreen of the current trapping concessions.

Both the public and the EU-based monitors are well aware of infringements when it comes to trapping in our countryside (such as illegal wader and finch trapping). Even though it's not at all an internationally threatened species, the Song Thrush has been declining in some of its breeding grounds. While land use and agriculture practices are often to blame for decreases in population, hunting and taking these birds from the wild permanently is damaging and completely unsustainable.

While the Song Thrush may occur in various habitats, they do have a habit of taking snails in more open ground. They quite literally lift and smash snails against stones to open them up, and the many fields and valleys they can currently be trapped in would serve well as foraging grounds. They also consume an array of invertebrates and fruit. As an overall brown thrush with a dark beak and pinkish-brown legs, their plumage is still unique. Black spotting covers much of their paler buff underside, however their repetitive and lovely melodies are what truly distinguishes them from other thrushes. While many thrush species have distinctive songs (such as our national bird, the Blue Rock Thrush), an individual Song Thrush can dispatch well over 100 phrases. It typically repeats such notes and tunes while perching, even calling in urban areas. The flight call is also very useful in the field. Moving alone or in small groups, they often utter separate 'tsik' calls while on the wing. Together with ongoing observations and migration counts at multiple bird observatories, European bird ringing data is constantly monitoring this species. Fluctuations in their biometrics and behaviour are important indicators (e.g. 65-100g weight range and average lifespan of three years at present) which allow researchers to assess the status of this Eurasian songster.

WORDS Tim Micallef Bird ringer and Falko leader

NATURE AT OUR RESERVES

Ghadira

Desirée Falzon

▶ Ghadira Nature Reserve

Friar's Cowl Garni tal-Pipa *Arisarum vulgare*

In countries further north of us, winter temperatures bring a good chunk of nature to a stop; insects hide or die and birds disappear south whilst reptiles, amphibians and furred creatures hibernate. Trees also begin to shed and sleep, and wildflowers wilt under a carpet of snow. Yet in our balmy Mediterranean climate much of nature actually wakes up to life-giving rains after a broiling summer! Much of our flora is now in leaf, some already in flower, and one of these is the Friar's Cowl. The Friar's Cowl grows low on the ground in well-watered, sheltered spots, though not at all averse to winter sunlight. At Ghadira it grows profusely in parts along the nature trail, often forming carpets of bright green foliage. Many are already displaying their flowering bodies: strange tubes striped purple-brown and white. They look a bit like miniature upside-down saxophones... with a long tongue sticking out!



Victor Falzon

▶ Friar's Cowl

Grey Heron Russett Griż *Ardea cinerea*

Hérons are generally big birds with long legs, a slender neck and a wicked dagger-shaped beak, and the Grey Heron fits the bill to a tee! They are migratory birds so we see most of them in spring and autumn, but in autumn especially they are in no particular hurry and often linger in nice spots along their migration route. Ghadira is a perfect haunt for these large, ever-hungry water birds, and the sight of a flock coming in to land in silent slow-motion is always a magical moment. Ghadira's protected status means they can stand around and doze in relative safety, and wade about and snap up killifish from the brackish lagoon undisturbed. Grey Herons are protected birds but hundreds still get shot down by hunters every year, as attested by several injured herons that are handed to BirdLife Malta for hopeful rehabilitation and release.



Charles Coleiro

▶ Grey Heron

Black-necked Grebe Blongun Sekond *Podiceps nigricollis*

If you see a Black-necked Grebe you'd be forgiven for mistaking it for a fluffy duckling. It's small and its rounded, virtually tail-less back end can look rather like a feather duster, especially when it fluffs it up. But this is no dabbling duck but a streamlined killing machine, even if its prey is small fish or large shrimps, which is all that can fit in its slender beak. The Black-necked Grebe doesn't wait for its fish but dives after them and hunts penguin-like underwater, aided by its strange flattened toes. I have often timed this bird's dives and my current record is 45 seconds in apnoea. It doesn't seem much but for a bird vigorously chasing prey using lungs the size of teabags, it's quite a lot. Most autumns (and this year is no exception) a handful of Black-necked Grebes make Ghadira their home for the winter, adding to the beauty of this special site.



Raymond Galea

▶ Black-necked Grebe

WORDS **Victor Falzon** Naturalist & BirdLife Malta Field Teacher

One World Learn

A connection with nature describes the unique, personal relationship that we have with the natural world. Imagine that feeling of deep appreciation and contentment, awe and wonder that can only be created through an experience in nature. It could be being in the right place at the right time to observe an amazing wildlife moment or truly taking time to notice and appreciate the nature around you. This relationship with the natural world is what inspires all of us to protect it and the research tells us connecting with nature is the key for triggering positive environmental value and behaviour changes that lead to more sustainable lifestyles.

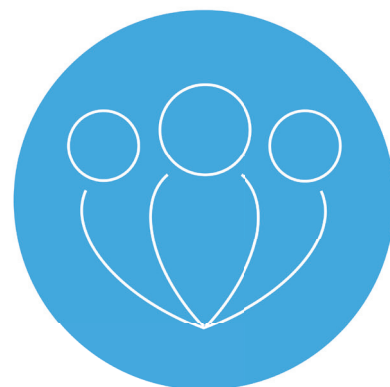
Without inspired people, conservation is only a short-term measure. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to work together to protect the natural world. At BirdLife Malta we work hard to deliver nature education which provides opportunities for children, youths and adults to build that relationship with nature.

One World Learning (OWL) is an international nature education project aiming to inspire and empower individuals and communities to live sustainably. A core principle behind OWL is the belief that environmental and societal issues cannot be contained within borders, reflecting the ethos of the BirdLife partnership: think global and act local. There

is strength in the combined knowledge and experience of many working towards a common goal. Think what we could achieve for conservation and wellbeing of communities if we used that strength and worked together to inspire and empower people to learn through nature.

One World Learning is an international nature education project aiming to inspire and empower individuals and communities to live sustainably

With our partners, Learning through Landscapes, the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds (OTOP), the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (SPEA), the Ministry of Education and Employment (Malta), and the BirdLife Europe Secretariat, we are bringing together organisations across the BirdLife Europe partnership and beyond to create a platform for sharing ideas, learning from each other, providing free high quality resources and discussing topical issues in the field of nature education.



Think what we could achieve for conservation and wellbeing of communities if we used that strength and worked together to inspire and empower people to learn through nature

Funded by Erasmus+, OWL has now been running for over a year and lots of exciting developments have happened along the way! During this year I have been inspired by our partners and discovered new innovative ways of connecting people with nature through our collaboration. It has empowered BirdLife Malta to evolve our Dinja Waħda programme which



ing...

one year on



has been ongoing for over 20 years to emphasise on the human relationship with nature, work with the Ministry of Education and Employment to embed the curriculum in the activities further and focus directly on regular connections with nature for children.

We have carried out a nationwide survey in collaboration with the University of Malta called 'My relationship with Nature' in which 400 8-10 year olds have participated. We discovered that 90% of children want to make nature in Malta better which is a good indication that if children are empowered to make individual decisions and take action to protect nature, they have the motivation and willingness to do so.

90% of children want to make nature in Malta better, according to a nationwide survey carried out by BirdLife Malta in collaboration with the University of Malta

BirdLife Europe and Central Asia encouraged 42 organisations across Europe and further afield to participate in a survey to determine trends in nature education and build our understanding of how others are working on building and implementing nature education programmes.

We have built our capacity to work with schools in developing their grounds for outdoor learning as 15 people from the partner organisations have participated in a week-long training course called 'Transforming Practice' hosted and led by our partner Learning through Landscapes in the UK.

The OWL partners have met in different countries around Europe discussing concepts and best practices in nature education and overseeing the progression of the project, helping us to develop a clear and collaborative version for the future. Not only that, but we have created a new and iconic look for OWL so it can be utilised and recognised across our new platform for networking and sharing high-quality education resources.

Learning through Landscapes, the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds, and the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds have written handbooks with a diverse range of ideas

and expertise on greening school grounds, teacher training and science education.

We are now entering into our second and final year of the project in which our aim is to share as widely as possible what we have learned through our journey to bring together best practices in nature education and make this information easily accessible in one place.

With one year now under our belt, the project is growing in momentum as we spread the word through the BirdLife International partnership, International School Grounds Alliance, Eco Schools, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and more.

There is power and strength in the combined knowledge and experience of many and through working together we can inspire change through nature education that leads to a more sustainable future. We look forward to seeing how OWL can help us achieve this!

WORDS **Sarah Brady** BirdLife Malta Education Manager





Malta is *green!*

A DIVERSE SCENIC ROUTE

In this walk, you will be treated to diverse scenery and explore both natural and historical treasures of Malta. This walk starts at the lovely Chadwick Lakes to the spectacular views at Victoria Lines and finishes at Mġarr. The route is approximately 9km long and it will take you 2-3 hours to complete. Wear your trekking shoes and take along binoculars, snacks and water as there are no shops along the way.



- ▶ Top photo: Ras il-Pellegrini
- ▶ Bottom photo: Chadwick Lakes

Chadwick Lakes

When you get off the bus which stops you in Mtarfa, follow the signs for the walk down towards Chadwick Lakes. At this time of year, the place is full of life! We suggest you start early in the morning and enjoy a picnic breakfast there. You will be surrounded by the plants and animals that this wetland habitat hosts. Explore the area and connect with the wildlife around you, look at the water and notice the Painted Frog tadpoles swimming, the dragonflies flying over the lake and listen to the many beautiful sounds of the wintering birds in the trees, such as Robins and White Wagtails. You might also be lucky to spot some shy warblers, such as Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps!

Chadwick Lakes to Victoria Lines

When you are ready, continue the walk and you will enjoy a completely different scenery. If it is sunny, you could spot some insects along the way, including the colourful wings of the Painted Lady and Red Admiral, which have been quite common this autumn. To begin, head west and at the fork of the road take a slight right uphill until you reach the T-junction and then turn right. Follow the uphill road and at some point you will see the parts of the Victoria Lines on your right. These lines of fortifications span 12km along the width of Malta and were built by the British Empire in the late 19th century as a defence from potential invasions from the north. From here, you can also enjoy a spectacular view as far as Ta' Ċenċ Cliffs in Gozo!

Victoria Lines to Mġarr

Retrace your steps until you find a cross point, where you will go right. Follow the main road and at some point you will be rewarded with a breathtaking panoramic view stretching from Mtarfa to Mdina and Buskett. Continue along the main road and at the T-junction turn right. Then you will need to take the second left and the first right. Follow the road and when you

GETTING THERE AND BACK

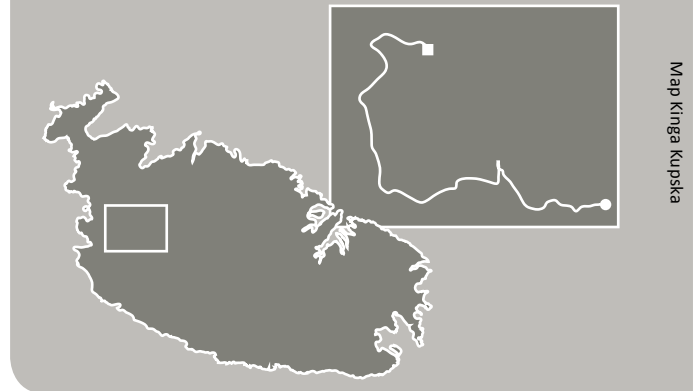
From Valletta to Chadwick Lakes:

- Bus 51 from Valletta C2 to Palma bus stop in Mtarfa (10 minute walk down to Chadwick Lakes)

From Mġarr to Valletta:

- Bus 44 takes you directly to Valletta

<https://www.publictransport.com.mt/en/routes-timetables>



come across two paths, take the one on the left. You will have great views of the west coastal area of Malta as well as seasonal wildflowers such as the purplish Greater Snapdragon and the white Sweet Alison. Walking along the country road, you will see on your left the scenic Ta' Lippija Tower overlooking Ġnejna Bay, one of the many coastal towers built in the 17th century. When you reach the cross point, you should go right. Keep straight and you will reach the Mġarr parish church of Santa Marija, where you can get the bus.

WORDS Eleni Karatzia Communications & Events Assistant



Eleni Karatzia

▶ Greater Snapdragon



Eleni Karatzia

▶ Victoria Lines



Desirée Falzon

▶ Painted Lady



Eleni Karatzia

▶ Violet Drowning

Surveying chameleons at Simar

It is well known that Malta's geographical location, positioned along one of the main European-African migration flyways, gives the archipelago a remarkable importance as a stopover for thousands of exhausted birds during their long journey. During this seasonal movement, BirdLife Malta's reserves play an essential role, offering a precious resting place for these migrants. Besides its importance for birds, the great degree of heterogeneity of these natural enclaves also offers shelter to other wildlife.



Fernando Rivada



Kinga Kupśka

▶ Female with its characteristic pregnancy colour pattern

▶ The study was conducted with the help of volunteers

II-Kamaleont: our subject of study

One iconic inhabitant of these reserves is the Mediterranean Chameleon (Kamaleont, *Chamaeleo chamaeleon*), a species not native to the Maltese Islands but which after less than two centuries has spread all over the archipelago and became part of the local herpetofauna. This reptile, although presenting a wide distribution and tolerance of a degree of habitat modification, has been observed to suffer the effects of loss and habitat fragmentation, which combined with other threats – such as mortality on roads or illegal collection – is able to cause local extinctions.

The Mediterranean Chameleon, protected under Maltese legislation, including under CITES and the Bern Convention, has been barely studied in Malta. With the goal of shedding light on the situation of this species on the Island, we proceeded to carry out a survey*, using Simar Nature Reserve, a location with confirmed presence of chameleons along the years, as the area of study. Parameters useful to comprehend population dynamics, such as relative abundance, sex ratio or age structure were determined. The survey, which was conducted during the breeding season of this reptile, delivered some results that confirmed the importance of Simar for the conservation of chameleons.

The results

Relative abundance, a parameter that does not provide a real population size but is very useful for controlling how a specific population evolves along a period of time in a given area, showed

a total average of 19-20 individuals/ha, indicating a healthy population according to previous studies developed in Spain. With regard to population structure and sex ratio, the results showed a slight deviation towards males, explained by the mating system of chameleons, in which several males gather around a receptive female until only one is chosen for reproduction. Concerning age structure, juveniles (individuals born in the last year) were the age group with the highest representation in the reserve, while adults appeared in low numbers, which is understandable considering the short life expectancy of this species. Furthermore lots of newborns and pregnant females were found, confirming Simar as a breeding ground for chameleons.

In view of the results obtained and the unsuitability of the surrounding habitats, Simar could be an important shelter for chameleons and as a source population, supplying individuals to nearby areas. Nevertheless, the lack of reliable information about Mediterranean Chameleons on the Island and the big population fluctuations that this species can overcome annually, make future research a priority to further understand the situation of this interesting reptile in Malta.

*Study was subject to ERA permit number NP0213/18

WORDS **Fernando Rivada** BirdLife Malta Nature Reserves Assistant Managing Warden

Upcoming Events

Nature Walk around Buskett

Sunday 20 January 2019

08:30-13:00 | Buskett – Fawwara – Girgenti – Buskett

Join our Events & Activities Group for another walk in nature! On this first event for 2019, we will explore the area surrounding Buskett woodland with a 12km circular walk. This is a free event but booking is required so hurry up and reserve your spot! For more information, visit the events page on our website or email activities@birdlifemalta.org.



Eleni Karatzia

▶ Sicily day trip group photo



Kinga Kupska

▶ Guided watercolour workshops with wildlife artist Darren Woodhead



Eleni Karatzia

▶ EuroBirdwatch18



Eleni Karatzia

▶ Open day to celebrate the reopening of the reserves after the summer break



Aron Tanti

▶ Black Terns observed during the seabird boat trips in the south of Malta

Past Events

Wings over Valletta – a White Wagtail celebration

Over a whole month between late October and the end of November we held a series of events in Valletta with the support of Valletta 2018 – European Capital of Culture, to raise awareness about the thousands of White Wagtails that roost in the Ficus Trees at Great Siege Square every late autumn and winter and the importance of urban biodiversity. We held a screening of an informative video, bird roosting activities and an art day for kids. We finished with a surprise – a dance flash mob at the Triton Fountain! We want to thank everyone who helped us and the ones who participated in our activities.



Eleni Karatzia

▶ White Wagtails Art Day

White Wagtail flying over Valletta's skyline pin badge!

We have produced an exclusive collector's pin badge of the White Wagtail to celebrate the urban biodiversity in Valletta! These birds migrate to Malta from Europe during the autumn and winter months and Valletta is their most important habitat! The pin badge shows the White Wagtail flying over Valletta's skyline. You can get yours for €3 via our online shop, from our office or at our events. Apart from pin badges, our online shop now offers a vast selection of merchandise such as magnets, keychains, notebooks, books, and even our #BirdHero adoption packs. All this is available here: <https://birdlifemalta.org/get-involved/online-shop>



Want to help us continue our work?

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Want to join an event?

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CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE

We believe in connecting people with nature and inspiring others to care for our natural environment. Every month we organise events across Malta to do just that! Whether it is fun-filled family days in our nature reserves or adventurous treks across the countryside spotting colourful wildflowers we love seeing so many people join us to enjoy nature, make new friends and make lasting memories.

