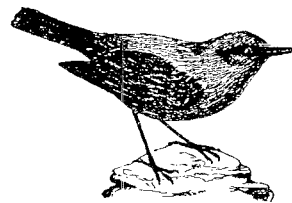


OF THE  
MALTA  
ORNITHOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY



# IL-MERILL

January - June 1975  
No. 15



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an M.O.S. publication  
P.O. Box 498, Valletta, MALTA

Lux Press

'IL-MERILL' is a Malta Ornithological Society publication. The Editor welcomes articles, and other features treating aspects of the Ornithology concerning the Maltese Islands and the Mediterranean.

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Cover Picture: Speckled Warbler.

(Photo by S. Borg)

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## EDITORIAL

Civilization and progress are the products of Man's ingenuity at harnessing the forces of Nature to yield him an increasing measure of comfort and leisure. The main casualty is unfortunately the countryside. Over the centuries enormous inroads have been made and this ruinous process is ever accelerating due to the headlong pace of modern urbanisation.

Conservationists, aesthetes and the ordinary lovers of Nature are bewildered the instant a familiar nostalgic landmark goes by the board, or every time some well-loved landscape is marred. Protectionists raise an anguished cry of protest whenever a species of animal or some variety of plant-life arrives at the point of extinction and not infrequently proceeds beyond that point. Clearly the problem is grave; equally clearly an answer must be found and pretty urgently too.

But first of all we must get our priorities right, for nothing can be more damaging to the cause of conservation than the oft-repeated charge of impracticability and effete idealism. The march of material progress is always overwhelming. All objections placed in its way, *unless they are well-founded*, are bound to come to naught. But it is equally manifest that mere material welfare, unmatched and unproped by a higher cultural structure, is doomed to decay into a shoddy vulgar scramble. The decline of once stately rows of houses into grubby smelly slums should provide ample warning to all responsible men. For no less is at stake than the health, culture, morals and future ambition of all nations.

Slowly this realisation is gaining ground all over the world. Only the pace is slow and often a corresponding comprehension is lacking even in high places. We all need to work harder, to use all our influence and power of persuasion in order to avert in our own times the calamitous repetition of the same old errors perpetrated by former generations.

The fondest hope of all conservationists in our Island is that this new enlightenment does not pass as by, and that the little ring of light from the beacon we lighted six years ago, will continue to shine brighter and steadier, diffusing tolerance and an intelligent understanding of Nature.

Dominic Cutajar

(Note: The above was written in 1968; we are reproducing it unchanged for the hopes and fears expressed in it are still very topical.)

## Honorary Life Membership

The Committee of the Malta Ornithological Society has awarded an Honorary Life Membership to Mr. Rodney Ingram of Headlands, Northampton, who very generously donated a large number of line-drawings of birds to be used in future Society's publications.

## EIGHT ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES — 1974-1975

Joe Sultana & Charles Gauci

### 1. The Tristram's Warbler (*Sylvia deserticola*) —

An addition to the List of European & Maltese Birds.

In George Fauré's bird collection at Luqa there is a specimen of a male Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola*. It was taken at Il-Miżieb on 8th March 1974. This occurrence is the first for Malta as well as for Europe. At first glance it looks like a pale Dartford Warbler with a Spectacled Warbler's wings. It has dark grey upper-parts washed with brown on the back, scapulars and rump. The wings have a strikingly rufous patch because the greater coverts, the tertials and some inner secondaries are broadly edged rufous. The lores are slightly darker and the eye ring is whitish. The under-parts, from the chin, which has some white, to the under-tail coverts are dark terracotta, except for the central lower belly which is whitish. Its graduated dark brown tail has whitish outer feathers. The measurements of the specimen in mm. are: wing — 54.5, tail — 57, bill — 10.5 and tarsus 18.5.

According to Etchécopar and Hübner (The Birds of North Africa — 1967) the nominate race breeds in Algeria and Tunisia in the Aures and Saharan Atlas and winters in the Sahara. Obviously the specimen which occurred in Malta must have overshot its breeding area on its return journey from the south. Incidentally 2 Moussier's Redstarts *Phoenicurus moussieri* also occurred on the same date in Malta. The Moussier's Redstart breeds in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and moves altitudinally in winter and a little way into the Sahara. One may hypothetically conclude that some unusual weather condition at that time of the year made some birds of these North African species overshoot their breeding areas.

The Maltese name given to the Tristram's Warbler is *Bufula ta' Tunezija*.

### 2. The Peregrines at Ta' Ċenċ.

The pair of Peregrines *Falco peregrinus brookei* at Ta' Ċenċ, in Gozo, have successfully raised 2 young this year. The adults were initially seen copulating on 9th February about 600 yards away from the eyrie which is situated some 200 feet above sea level and 200 feet below the cliff-top. The female was seen gliding towards the male which had settled on a ledge a few minutes earlier. She glided directly towards him, pushed him off the ledge and settled instead of him. After gliding in one huge circle the male approached the female and mounted her while calling repeatedly. In early May their 2 young, which by then had no trace of down left, could be seen frequently at the entrance of the eyrie where they often practised their wings, scattering about their prey's feathers. Some of their prey consisted of Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* as could be seen from the feathers. In fact the latter half of the fledging period coincides with the peak migration of Turtle Doves. On the 12th May one of the young left the eyrie and settled a short distance away while a parent could be seen plucking the prey with which it had just arrived. At the end of May when the area was last visited the young could not be seen but they could still be somewhere near considering the alarm calls of one of the parents.

### 3. The Cetti's Warbler & Fan-tailed Warbler colonizing new areas.

Since our contribution on the Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* and Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* in Il-Merill No. 12:7-9 and No.13:11-13 respectively, both species have spread to new areas.

The Cetti's Warbler is now breeding at Bahrija, San Martin, Xemxija and

possibly Bingemma, where a male was heard singing this spring. The pair at Xemxija arrived in July 1974 and remained there throughout winter. This spring they bred in the thick Tamarisk grove and raised 3 young which left the nest on 15th May. Xemxija is the only area without bramble *Rubus ulmifolius* where this species is presently breeding.

The Fan-tailed Warbler is spreading quicker and has established itself firmly in various localities. At least 10 pairs have been noted breeding and the new areas include Bahrija, Buskett/Girgenti area, and Ghajn Tuffieha where there are 2 pairs. The pairs at Ghadira and Xemxija have increased to 3 and 2 respectively. Singing males have also been heard at Mtaħieb, Ghajn Rihana and Siggiewi. All the nests found so far were built in grasses (also in corn fields) within 2 feet of the ground but a nest found last year in a tamarisk tree was about 6 feet above the ground.

Both the Cetti's Warbler and the Fan-tailed Warbler have also spread to Gozo where they were found breeding for the first time this year (1975). 2 pairs of Cetti's Warbler were present in Lunzjata and Xlendi Valleys where they had arrived the previous autumn. The young of the pair at Lunzjata left the nest in late May. The first nest of the Fan-tailed Warbler in Gozo was located in a cornfield at is-Sanab on 29th March. It contained 5 eggs which were different in colour from the 2 types described in our previous contribution. They were bluish but were sparsely spotted with very dark purple markings round the thicker end. Another pair was present at Sarraflu (Kerċem) while singing males were also heard at Ta' Ċenċ and at Għarb on 10th May.

### 4. An unusual occurrence — Swallows breeding in Malta.

Last year (1974) a pair of Swallows *Hirundo rustica* bred in a house in the village of Mqabba. This was indeed an unusual occurrence. In fact the only mention of Swallows breeding in Malta was made by Antonio Schembri in 'Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta' — 1843 — wherein he stated that some pairs breed with us. None were recorded since then. The only resident in this Mqabba house was an old man, Toni Ellul, who on noticing the swallows entering the house, left one of his back windows open day and night. The pair built the saucer-shaped nest with mud and dry grass in the corner where one of the beams entered the wall. They successfully raised 4 young which left the nest on 2nd August.

### 5. Influxes of Sardinian Warbler.

Few people realise that our common resident the Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* established itself as such during the last century. Previously it was a winter visitor. Major Fielden was one of the first to note that Sardinian Warblers may have started to breed. He wrote to H.E. Dresser, who was working on his 'Birds of Europe', to inform him that he found Sardinian Warblers in Malta in summer 1874 and that he had little doubt that they remained to breed here. Dr. David Bruce also wrote to Dresser to inform him that during the summer the Sardinian Warbler was moderately common and that he had found 2 nests (Dresser, H.E. 1885 — Letters, Announcements, etc. Ibis (5) 3:453-454). Schembri in his Catalogo (1843) listed it as a winter visitor. So did Wright in his List of the Birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo (1864); however, in his 5th appendix (1874) he remarked that the Sardinian Warbler may have started to breed.

Presently the Sardinian Warbler is very common and inhabits both rural and suburban areas. The numbers in late autumn and winter seem still to be augmented by some winter visitors. The number of fresh arrivals in 1974 was exceptionally notable and 111 new birds were ringed from 26th October to 15th

December in 4 localities — Xemxija (26), Salina (19), Haġ Far (12) and Lunzjata (54). Most of these birds kept passing through and only 6 were retrapped after more than a fortnight. There were no significant retraps at Lunzjata; however, 3 at Salina remained in the area for at least 24, 56 and 62 days respectively. Two others at Xemxija stayed for 49 and 55 days. There were no other retraps after the 3rd week of January suggesting that the few which wintered in those areas had also left by then.

#### 6. A Spotted Flycatcher's nest.

We had earlier stated that the Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* can be added to the list of our rare breeding birds (News and Views — 12. Another addition to the Breeding Species of Malta — Il-Merill 10:10). We mentioned the family parties seen at Buskett and at Wied il-Kbir in 1971 and the juveniles which were recorded at Buskett in 1972.

Last year (1974) a nest with 3 almost fully fledged young was located at Buskett on 13th July. It was built on the lowest horizontal branch of a cypress tree among the twigs, sheltered by the foliage. It was about 10 feet above the ground. It was rather loosely constructed with fine grasses lined from the outside with moss and some patches of cobweb. From the inside it was scantily lined by finer grasses, a piece of cotton thread and a little vegetable down, however, the cup was almost non-existent and it looked nearly flat on top. The young left the nest on 15th July and were still seen about with their parents on 24th July when the area was last visited.

#### 7. A Corn Bunting's nest with a difference.

The Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* usually builds its nest on the ground under some herbage or in the herbage itself. A nest containing 5 eggs found on 1st May 1975 in Xlendi Valley was about 3 feet above the ground. It was built among the dry stalks of a Fennel *Phoeniculum vulgare* and was totally covered by the growing fresh foliage. G. Despott (The Breeding Birds of Malta — The Zoologist 1916) had stated that sometimes, but very rarely, the nest is found on the lower branches of the carob tree.

#### 8. All five Hirundine species together.

The Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris* is a vagrant to our islands, appearing mostly from October to March. However, for the last 2 winters, a few Crag Martins were present in Gozo and this year 1-5 were frequently seen up to March. One was still present on 12th April at Lunzjata and on this last day it could be seen with the Swallows, House Martins, Sand Martins and 2 Red-rumped Swallows.

## BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Alfred Baldacchino

#### New Chairman for ICBP Malta Section/The XVI World Conference.

Mr. Dominic Cutajar, Editor of 'Il-Merill' and co-founder of the M.O.S., is the new chairman of the Malta Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation. He has taken over from Mr. Joe Sultana, the Hon. Secretary of the M.O.S. and Ringing Officer of the Bird Ringing Group, who had to relinquish the post due to the increasing volume of work of the M.O.S.

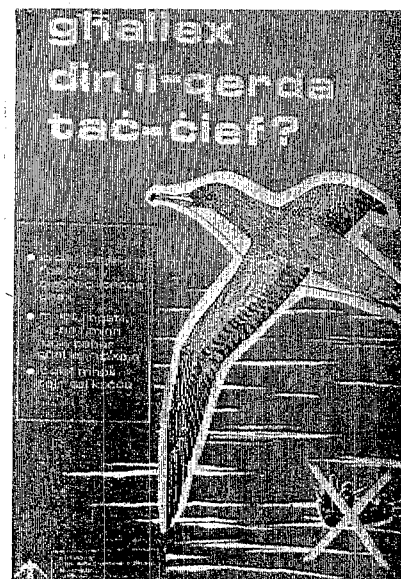
Mr. Cutajar is at present co-ordinating initiative dealing with the natural environmental work amongst the local societies.

At the XVI World Conference of the ICBP, which was held in Canberra, Australia, in August of last year, thirty-three resolutions were adopted. Two of these concern Malta directly. The first urges a number of countries, including Malta, where bird migrants from northern Eurasia are still killed in large numbers, to take legislative measures to reduce this slaughter and provide refuges for birds on migration. The other resolution urges the Government of Malta to consult with the Maltese Section of the ICBP to secure better protection for birds of prey and other birds on the Maltese Islands. The latter resolution was adopted because the Conference was informed that all countries in Europe, except Malta, protect some or all species of birds of prey. Copies of these resolutions were sent with a covering letter to the Prime Minister and other Ministers.

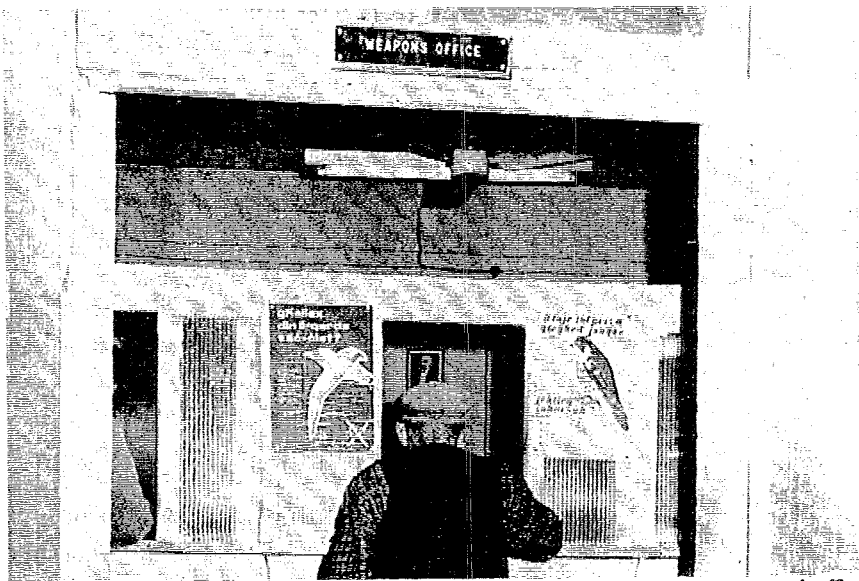
The European Section of the Birds of Prey World Working Group will be holding the meeting next October in Austria. Mr Joe M. Attard, the M.O.S. President, will be attending and will read a report on the Birds of Prey in Malta.

#### M.O.S. Posters.

The M.O.S. has continued to publish posters as one of the media to reach



the public. The 'Shearwaters' poster, which was launched last summer, proved quite successful. It deplored the yearly killing of many Cory's Shearwaters at sea by indiscriminate shooters who go out purposely on boats to indulge in such barbaric fun. The other poster (the 6th poster to date) which was published early this year point out that what happened to the Jackdaw, once a common breeding resident — now exterminated, may happen to other breeding species such as the Barn Owl, the Peregrine and the Blue Rock Thrush. Both posters were designed by Alfred Baldacchino and Joe Sultana and were exhibited in the notice boards of the Department of Information, outside all Police Stations, and at schools.



Copies of M.O.S. posters have also been displayed outside the weapons' office at the Police Headquarters, where all shooting licences are renewed annually (see photo).

### The Visible Migration of Raptors over the Maltese Islands.

The Journal of the British Ornithologists' Union — 'The Ibis' (No. 4 Vol. 116) carries a paper on the visible migration of raptors over Malta by Mark Beaman and Charles Galea, both members of the M.O.S. The paper reports observations of the visible migration of birds of prey whose movements in central Mediterranean have been relatively neglected, unlike the large migrations at the Bosphorus and Gibraltar which have been well documented. The largest number of raptors were recorded both in spring and autumn during contrary winds or overcast conditions mostly seen in the afternoon at either season. The authors show that large passages occur in winds with easterly or westerly components and conclude that eastward drift does not greatly affect the number seen in Malta, as had been earlier suggested by a paper in the same Journal (Ibis 111 — 1969) 'Bird Migration over the Maltese Islands' by C. De Lucca. During favourable meteorological conditions migration was probably above visible range. The authors also provide evidence suggesting that the volume of Honey Buzzard migration across the Mediterranean may be larger than formerly realized.

The previous number of the 'Ibis' had also carried a correspondence by 2

Senior M.O.S. members, Joe Sultana and Charles Gauci, who stressed the 'potentially damaging effect of collecting rare or scarce species in a place like Malta' in their contribution treating the newly-found breeding species — the Fau-tailed Warbler.

### Archbishop's Statement on Shooting.

When the proposals concerning firearms, shooters, birds and bird protection were published last year, a copy was also sent to the Archbishop of Malta. Later His Lordship issued a statement encouraging the efforts of those societies which are doing their best to safeguard wildlife. The Church here has a role to fulfil and it will be most appropriate if the appreciation and respect of our natural environment is occasionally stressed in sermons. The clergy can help to bring about a change of the local destructive mentality by pointing out the example of St. Francis D'Assisi who habitually showed great love and respect towards wildlife.

### Young Members' Protest.

The Young Members Section held the second successful protest again bird shooting and trapping in October, last year, outside the City Gate of Valletta. Various placards calling for bird protection were displayed. Members distributed leaflets on the M.O.S. and explained to the people the motive of the protest.

### St. Aloysius College Exhibition.

The students of St. Aloysius College held an exhibition on the need to safeguard the natural environment. The M.O.S. helped the students with the section regarding birds and 2 illustrated talks were given to the college students. Various other schools visited the exhibition.

### The M.O.S. & the Mass Media of Communication.

A memorandum, 'The Natural Environment — Directions for a better tomorrow' was sent jointly by M.O.S., ICBP Malta Section and other societies to all Editors of local newspapers, to Heads of programmes of the Radio, Rediffusion and Television and to the Malta Broadcasting Authority. The aim of the memorandum was to bring to the attention of all corporations and individuals, involved in the media of mass communication in Malta, their responsibility in re-orientating the public 'mind' towards a positive outlook to nature and the general environment in which we live.

The M.O.S. have also acquired a weekly half page in the Times of Malta and a fortnightly column in the Maltese Sunday paper — It-Torċa. Members of the M.O.S. and the Natural History Society are contributing articles in these columns entitled 'Our Natural Environment' and 'Nghixu man-Natura' (Living with Nature).

Joe Sultana, on behalf of M.O.S., also took part in six Television programmes 'Studio għat-tfal' which were aimed for children between the ages of eight and fourteen. This brought a shower of requests for ornithological information from many young children who were encouraged to choose a subject on birds for their school projects. The film 'The Private Life of a Robin' was also shown with a Maltese introduction on the Robin's migration and stay in Malta. Various other interviews were held on Radio and Rediffusion and opportunity was always taken to propagate the Society's ideals. Six other programmes on Rediffusion's Gozo magazine were prepared by V. Vella Muskat, M.O.S. Gozo representative.

## THE FOUR SEASONS OF A CONSERVATIONIST

Dominic Cutajar

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 torpidity 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 startlingly. 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.

## THE 1975 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The annual general meeting was held in February 1975 in the main hall of the British Council which was used with the kind permission of the Council's representative. Before the President addressed the meeting the films 'Wildlife in Danger' and 'The Starling' were shown to the members present. Following is the President's address and the Secretary's report which were read at the meeting.

### President's Address:

This annual occasion is of special importance to our Society. It brings into focus the range of practical measures, ideas and activities which were implemented during the past year and to seek to develop and to further the same in the years to come in conformity with the scope of the M.O.S. With great satisfaction to all hard working members of this Committee, the past year was as usual very busy with activities — filmshows, talks, outings, bird-ringing, planning, interviews and airing our views on radio and TV and in the press. It is also a joy for us all to see the Young Members Section flourishing and increasing steadily in members. They have organised various activities and issued their own leaflet. To the YMS we say 'well done' and promise them our full support and encouragement. It has been now an annual event for the past few years to launch a poster on the protection of birds. This year's poster will carry the message of certain dwindling breeding species in Malta like the Peregrine and the Barn Owl.

It is hoped that in the not too distant future the M.O.S. will publish some important ornithological and educational publications. The manuscripts for a comprehensive Checklist and a Maltese bird book are being finalised. Nowadays printing is very expensive and the Committee will have to take a very bold decision whether to publish the afore-mentioned works. Perhaps some of the members will be kind enough to donate towards this venture, some have already done so. My long participation in the activities of the M.O.S. enables me to state with confidence that the production of an up to-date book on the birds of Malta with a scientific layout presents a formidable task. Since 1965 we have been compiling ornithological information which in many respects brought much of the previous works out of date, especially where the status of small passerines is concerned. This compilation has been regularly published in the Society's literature and it is there for the ornithological world to use if it is acknowledged properly. We do not want to monopolise the 'imprimatum' of such ornithological knowledge, but we neither except anyone to carry out what we may call ornithological 'piracy'. The knowledge that we have attained is there to crown the Society and its dedicated members and not individuals who may have never undertaken any such studies.

The National League for the Preservation of Birds and their environment which was formed in January 1973 and of which the M.O.S. formed part, has published the proposals governing firearms, shooters, birds and bird protection. As this was the primary scope for which this league was formed, our Society opted out soon after this report was published. As from January 1975 the Chairmanship of the International Council for Bird Preservation — Malta Section was entrusted in the good hands of Mr. Dominic Cutajar. The Birds of Prey World Working Group is holding its European meeting next October in Vienna and we hope that our Society will be able to send its representative. Preparations are already in hand in compiling a detailed report on the local situation.

I would like to end this address by thanking all the members of this Committee, all those members who have collaborated in the activities of the Society,

those local and foreign Societies which have assisted in some way the work or the scope of the M.O.S., the ringers of the Ringing Group and anyone who has had the courage to make his voice heard in favour of our feathered friends.

**Joe M. Attard**  
**MOS President**

### Secretary's Report:

#### Report for April 1974 — February 1975

The 12th Annual General Meeting was held on 3rd April 1974. The President's address and the Secretary's and Treasurer's reports were subsequently published in Il-Merill No. 13. The Committee for the years 1974-75 was elected as follows:

President: J. Attard  
Secretary: J. Sultana  
Asst. Sec./P.R.O.: A. Baldacchino  
Treasurer: B.K. German  
Committee Members: C. Gauci & M. Grima.

During the first Committee meeting J. Azzopardi was co-opted to serve on the Committee and V. Vella Muskat was appointed to be the Society's representative in Gozo. Eight meetings and two bird-watching outings were held for members. The mass media of communications, namely local papers, radio, Redifusion and Television, were used as much as possible to propagate the Society's views and ideals. A weekly column in the Times of Malta entitled 'Our Natural Environment' and another in the Maltese Sunday Paper 'It-Torċa' entitled 'Nghixu man-Natura' (Living with Nature) was acquired for the use of M.O.S. and the Natural History Society through the efforts of A. Baldacchino, J. Azzopardi and D. Cutajar on behalf of M.O.S. The M.O.S. was also taking part once a month in a Television Programme for youngsters. Committee members have also been giving illustrated talks to school children while attending field studies at Ghadira. Two numbers of Il-Merill were published and two posters appealing for bird protection were also issued. Various proposals have been made to the Government and M.O.S. delegations met various Government Ministers and heads of Departments to discuss matters relating to the Society and its aims. The M.O.S. has also maintained close contacts with International and European Ornithological bodies and exchange of literature has been continued.

The two main branches of the M.O.S., namely the Bird Ringing Group and the Young Members Section, continued to flourish and results of non-stop efforts by the members in charge are already being reaped. The Bird Ringing Group ringed over 8,100 birds of 85 species during 1974 (a new record for one year), and the grand total of about 45,000 birds ringed since ringing started in 1965 have been reached. Details of the activities of this group and the results (recoveries, retraps, etc.) including a systematic of birds logged during the year will be published as usual in a special issue of Il-Merill. The Group's Committee has been composed of Ringing Officer — J. Sultana, Secretary — C. Gauci, Treasurer — B.K. German and Gozo Representative — V. Vella Muskat.

The Young Members Section has been very active. They have organised no fewer than 11 outings, two tree planting sessions and a protest with placards against bird-shooting. Five numbers of the young members' leaflet L-Ghasfur (The Bird) were issued. The Young Members Committee was composed of a



Young Members Officer — M. Grima, Secretary — J. Azzopardi and Committee Members — E. Cachia Zammit and V. Cilia.

## M.O.S. YOUNG MEMBERS' SECTION

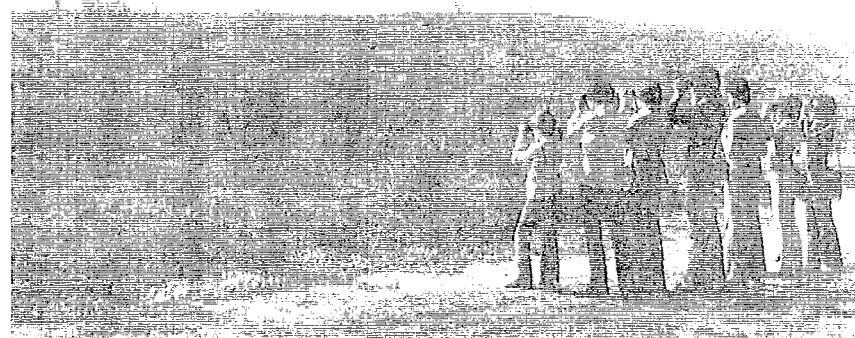
John Azzopardi

Following is a list of the main activities by month:

- April 1974 : 12th Annual General Meeting  
Filmshow — The Kites are flying  
2nd Filmshow — The Lonely Level, Sea Eagles for Fair Isle and After the Torrey Canyon.  
Proposals governing firearms, shooters, birds and bird protection were submitted to the Government jointly with other local bodies.
- May : Il-Merill No. 13 and the Birds of Prey Poster were published.
- June : Publication of the M.O.S. 5th Poster condemning the shooting of Shearwaters which takes place from boats during summer.
- July : New proposals regarding the setting up of a field centre and bird reserve at Ghadira.
- August : Report on the local situation sent to the XVI World Conference of the I.C.B.P. Two resolutions concerning Malta were adopted during the Conference. Copies of the the resolutions were sent by M.O.S. to the Prime Minister and various other Government Ministers.
- September : Screening 'The Private Life of a Robin' on Malta Television with an introduction by M.O.S. The Film was subsequently shown in various schools and colleges.
- October : Bird-watching outing to Buskett.  
Filmshow to members Private Life of a Robin.  
Tree Planting at Ghadira by YMS.  
Protest with placards against bird shooting held at City Gate, Valletta by the YMS.
- November : Illustrated talk — Bird Life in Japan by Dr. Walther Thiede.  
Publication of Il-Merill No. 14.  
Memorandum — The Natural Environment — Directions for a better to-morrow — sent by M.O.S. and other bodies to persons running the local mass media of communications.
- December : Bird-watching outing to Gġgant,.  
Illustrated Talk — New breeding birds and rare species by J. Sultana.  
Tree planting at Xemxija by YMS  
Proposals for the Ghadira project were sent again to the Prime Minister.
- January 1975: Filmshow at the Boys Scouts Headquarters in Gozo — Highland Herony and Private Life of a Robin.  
Two illustrated talks by Mark Beaman — Birds of the Scottish Islands — A Walk in the Himalayas.
- February : Discussion on Radio Malta by M.O.S. and Natural History Society on the need of Bird Sanctuaries.  
Filmshow — Way of a River & Operation Osprey.

Joe Sultana  
MOS Hon. Secretary

It is heartening to learn that, in a country like Malta where the general public is totally unconcerned about the deterioration of the natural environment and where there are many who purposely seek to destroy the limited wildlife of the Island, there is a band of youngsters who are conservation-minded. Although



M.O.S. Young members bird-watching at Ghadira. (photo: A. Baldacchino)



Young members planting trees at Ghadira. (photo: J. Azzopardi)

still in their teens, these people have already understood the grave loss which would be incurred by the destruction of the flora and fauna — especially the avifauna — in the Maltese Islands. These youngsters make up the Young Members' Section of the Malta Ornithological Society.

The Section enrolls people up to the age of eighteen years. Members are mostly school children and students. It is run by a Y.M. Officer and a Secretary who are appointed by the Main Committee of the MOS, and by other committee members who are chosen from among the young members themselves.

Bird watching outings are organized at least twice a month. These are mostly held at Ghadira — Mellieha, which is a unique tract of land in the centre of which forms a large pool of rain water. There is also a grove of mature tamarisk trees as well as a reed bed and areas of low vegetation. This plot of land, situated in the north-western part of Malta is ideal for educating the public in environmental and nature conservation. The large variety of bird species which may be seen here is amazing. Besides, many rare species of plants are to be found.

The MOS recognizes the great potential of Ghadira as a bird sanctuary and its educational potentialities for young people. The establishment of a field centre at Ghadira has been the target of the Society for the past 12 years. The Young Members' Section has helped to emphasize the importance of Ghadira where, on 12th October 1974, the first tree-planting session was held. Similar tree-planting sessions have become part and parcel of the activities of the YMS. These help to arouse a public conscience — especially amongst youngsters — towards the appreciation of nature.

In recent years it has been discovered that appreciation of nature by youngsters is best learnt by observing nature at close quarters. With birds, bird-ringing provides unparalleled opportunities for close observation. And this has proved a great help in teaching young people more about the need of preserving birds. Consequently, members of the YMS have on several occasions attended bird-ringing sessions organized by the MOS Ringing Group. The activity has proved



Placards exhibited at the City Gate, Valletta, during one of the protests organised by the Y.M.S.

worthwhile because several young members have shown a promising inclination towards bird-ringing, and a few already possess the Trainee Permit of the B.T.O.

The YMS believes in the dire need for the conservation of birds in the Maltese Islands. And its members stand up for what they believe in! For the second year running they staged a protest with placards, once at Buskett — a supposed bird sanctuary, where bird shooting still takes place openly — and another time in the centre of Valletta, the capital City. They called for the introduction of closed seasons and for adequate legislation protecting all breeding birds as well as the birds of prey. Birds know no boundaries and many species which are strictly protected in Europe are shot down as they migrate over the Maltese Islands. They also stressed the need for the enforcement of the legislation which proclaims certain areas as bird sanctuaries, still however often ignored.

A new activity which the YMS organized was a three-day Field Study Camp at Ghadira which was held from 31st March to 2nd April 1975. Activities during camp included bird-ringing and bird-watching as well as a survey of the flora and fauna of the area. No less than three rare species of plants were discovered as well as rare species of snake, other reptiles and insects were also observed. This, together with the great variety of birds seen and ringed during the three days proves the great potential of Ghadira as a nature reserve and bird sanctuary.

The YMS also publishes a monthly leaflet in Maltese under the title of "L-Ghasfur" (Bird) for its members. It carries essays, reports of outings, notes and observations contributed by members themselves, as well as prize competitions. This also has become a symbol of the Young Members' Section's autonomy and self-support which is a tribute to the eagerness of the Section's own members.

These activities are helping to fulfill the aims of the YMS to foster among youngsters the need to preserve the bird-life and the natural environment of the Maltese Islands.



A bird-ringing training session. Front row: Charles Gauci (Ringing Sec.), Michael Grima (Y.M. Officer), Joe Sultana (M.O.S. Sec. & Ringing Officer) and John Azzopardi (Y.M. Sec.). Back row: Four of the young members who hold a bird-ringing training permit. (photo: J. Azzopardi).