

bird's eye view

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BirdLife
MALTA



destination malta

Imagine Malta as a tourist destination where visitors can enjoy not only the hospitable climate, warm sea and exceptional history but also witness one of the most amazing miracles of nature: bird migration!

Thanks to its strategic location on a key Central Mediterranean migration route, Malta has an impressive birdlist, with 389 species so far recorded, of which over 170 species occur regularly and often in significant numbers.

Malta can be an excellent destination to millions of European birders. The small size of the country renders it especially easy to observe many species concentrated in a small area. Within a short drive or walk from the hotel in spring or autumn, one can spot Hoopoe, Black-eared Wheatear and Spectacled Warbler in open countryside, or raptors like Marsh Harrier, Honey-buzzard, Hobby, Kestrel or Eleonora's Falcon sailing overhead, while in the trees and shrubs Common Redstart, Nightingale, Pied, Spotted and Collared Flycatchers, Whitethroat and Subalpine Warbler mingle with resident Spanish Sparrow, Sardinian and Cetti's Warblers.

Instead, the present situation is that birders who come to Malta pray that low-flying birds don't get shot! Hearts start racing when a large flock of raptors comes in to roost, and birders worry for the safety of these winged visitors. In many cases, a walk in the countryside turns into

a nightmare when visitors are peppered with falling lead pellets or are told off public land by aggressive hunters; or when they find dead birds lying around.

Instead of capitalising on the multi-million euro ecotourism potential that could draw thousands of cultured tourists, the authorities simply ignore the butchery of migratory birds and the breaching of EU conservation laws. Apparently they are more keen on destroying Malta's few remaining natural habitats with monstrous development projects, such as the Seabank Hotel's enlargement at Ghadira.

And as though this were not enough, the Prime Minister is still considering letting 12,000 hunters open fire again on migratory birds this spring. And this despite a European Court of Justice ruling that found Malta guilty for letting this happen in the past.

With patience running out with the Maltese authorities, BirdLife has launched a Europe-wide campaign against illegal hunting in Malta. One action you can take to support this campaign is to sign the petition addressed to the Prime Minister (see pp. 6-7).

With thousands of Maltese and other Europeans reminding Dr Gonzi the importance of protecting Europe's common natural heritage, we hope one day soon our politicians will realise that the wildlife they are sacrificing for their own political interest is a heritage they are stealing forever from future generations.

Tolga Temuge
Executive Director



Black-headed Gull

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Geoffrey Saliba



camcorders for the police

In January, BirdLife donated four camcorders to the Malta Police, thanks to support from the MAVA Foundation (Switzerland). BirdLife hopes that the cameras - featuring the most powerful zoom and image stabilisers currently on the market - will help the ALE in their work to collect evidence of illegal hunting and trapping.

BirdLife Malta Executive Director Tolga Temuge presenting the camcorders to Asst. Comm. Josie Brincat.

Charles Coleiro



hollywood star at is-simar

Oscar-winning Hollywood star William Hurt was in Malta last November on the filmset of the upcoming *Moby Dick*. Hurt has starred in well-known films like *Children Of A Lesser God*, *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* and, more recently, *The Incredible Hulk*. He is also a birdwatcher, which is why he took time off his busy schedule in Malta... to spend a quiet morning birdwatching at Is-Simar nature reserve!

Actor William Hurt (left) at Is-Simar with managing warden Charles Coleiro.



the oikos factor

OIKOS is a new 13-part documentary series, produced as part of the LIFE+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping, and now showing every Wednesday at 10.15pm on One TV. *Oikos*, which is Greek for *house* or *household* (and which gave us the *eco-* in ecology), will deal with issues relating to several fields of nature conservation ranging from development and planning, to hunting and trapping.

The OIKOS banner.

upcoming events

• rally

date **saturday 13 march 2010** place **valletta**

Environment NGOs, including BirdLife, are organising a national rally to call on the government for effective law enforcement on environmental crimes. NGOs are increasingly concerned about environmental abuses taking place in every part of Malta and Gozo. BirdLife calls on its members to attend the rally and make their voice heard. For more information call BirdLife on 21347644 or check updates on www.birdlifemalta.org



• illustrated talk

date **tuesday 16 march 2010**

time **6.30pm** place **national museum of natural history, mdina**

An illustrated talk will be given by renowned nature photographer **Guido Bonett**. The talk - entitled **A Nature Photographer in French Guiana** - will be about his recent wildlife trip to the lush rainforest of this South American enclave where nature is still largely intact. Not to be missed!



Guido Bonett

• spring watch 2010

date **11-30 april 2010**

International volunteers will again be joining Maltese birdwatchers this spring for the Spring Watch Camp. The Camp will for the first time run three weeks this year. BirdLife Malta members are welcome to contact springwatch@birdlifemalta.org to learn how to join the outings during the camp. More information at www.birdlifemalta.org





mainstreaming the green ethic

Nicolette Falzon

"Once it's broke you ain't gonna fix it!"

Today anyone knows this about climate change, but it was not at all common knowledge 20 years ago. In the early 1990s, however, a group of people at BirdLife Malta realised that action required more than just awareness. It was a matter of habit, and to change habits, you needed a powerful tool. That tool was education.

forming good habit

And so in 1994 BirdLife stepped up its investment in the young generation by setting up Dinja Waħda, a complete environmental education programme.

Environmental education equips children with the habits to *act* for change, rather than *react* to it. It helps them discover the beauty of nature, to understand the need to care for the environment, and to live in a way that keeps a healthy balance between personal comfort and environmental preservation.

killing bad habit

Children may be too young to understand the workings of ecosystems and complex issues like climate change. But they can be shown that they themselves need to act to protect nature, and shown also the way to go about it.

This is exactly what BirdLife aims to achieve through Dinja Waħda. Children who take part in Dinja Waħda discover wildlife everywhere, even in a rubble wall. Through games, they "travel" with birds along their migration routes, and learn what people can do to make such perilous journeys safer for birds. They discover life on the seashore and learn about the value of trees. They listen to *The Paper Story* and learn to cut wasteful habits like skipping lines when writing; and they use the page from both sides because more paper means less trees. They also learn good management of resources: reducing, reusing and recycling.



Teacher Maryrit Zammit was seconded by the Education Directorate (DQSE) this scholastic year to work in Dinja Waħda. As the new Dinja Waħda Co-ordinator, Maryrit is becoming a familiar face with many teachers and children, as she visits schools to ensure the smooth running of Dinja Waħda.



Bin there, done that. Used paper goes into the white bin.

Even from kindergarten age children now know that used paper goes in the white bin and plastic goes in the blue bin. They may be too young to comprehend the full impact of greenhouse gases on our planet, but they are certainly learning the need and the right practices to reduce them.

gearing up for tomorrow

Every couple of years, Dinja Wahda is reassessed and updated to emphasize the most pressing environmental issues. The latest edition of the Action Guide for teachers pays special attention to habitats and biodiversity. This coincides with the United Nations declaration of 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity.

By equipping children with the right habits, we are gearing tomorrow's citizens to act to safeguard our environment, respect all forms of life and each other.

Be it in home economics or business, leisure or politics, we hope that tomorrow's adults will take eco-friendly decisions... out of habit!

Nicolette Falzon is Dinja Wahda Manager



Dinja Wahda is a project of BirdLife Malta and Bank of Valletta, its Partner in Education. Dinja Wahda is run in collaboration with the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE).



Play mode. Through games and cutouts, children become aware of bird migration.



Natural wonders. Through Dinja Wahda, common wildflowers become objects of fascination, and an ordinary rubble wall becomes an absorbing voyage of investigation and discovery.



a voice for birds

international action to stop illegal hunting in malta

“Malta is the only place where you do not want to see a raptor flying low as it will definitely be shot at in the absence of conservationists or police in the area”.

This view was aired by Bob Elliot, Head of Investigations for RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) Scotland at the launch of an international petition campaign by BirdLife International in Europe last January.

demands

The petition is aimed at Maltese Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, and it demands the proper enforcement of the EU Birds Directive, which Malta has largely ignored since EU membership.

BirdLife is demanding an end to the illegal killing of migratory protected birds that are regularly shot over

Malta. It also demands that the government ensure that a spring hunting and trapping season for Turtle Dove and Common Quail is never re-opened (full text on page 7).

international impact

Due to its strategic location on the European-African migration route, Malta has an impressive bird checklist of 389 species. Of these, over 170 occur regularly during migration periods, and many fly over Malta in significant numbers.

According to bird-ringing recoveries by BirdLife Malta, a total of 75 bird species from 35 countries were killed in Malta. Illegal hunting is therefore an international issue that affects the breeding birds of almost all countries in Europe. In particular, many of these species are birds of prey and herons. As these birds are often rare or declining species, illegal hunting can have serious effects on their conservation status, even more so since these birds often have few young and take several years to reach sexual maturity.

Thousands of raptors - including rare species like Pallid Harrier, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Lesser Kestrel - as well as herons, storks and other protected birds are illegally gunned down each year. All these birds have been protected for many years, but law enforcement is at best minimal.

Sign the Petition
against illegal hunting



spring hunting again?

To further tarnish its poor bird protection record, the government is again considering opening a spring hunting season for Turtle Dove and Common Quail. If it does, it will be doing so in defiance of a European Court of Justice (ECJ) judgment. Last year the ECJ found Malta in breach of the Birds Directive for allowing spring hunting of Turtle Dove and Common Quail annually since it joined the EU.

Malta has amply and repeatedly shown it cannot meet the conditions for opening a spring hunting season. Every time the government opens a season for "limited" hunting, it opens the door for hunters to kill protected species. Action has long been overdue. It is now time for the politics to come in line with the law.

The petition can be signed online at www.birdlifemalta.org or by filling the sheet enclosed with this issue of *Bird's Eye View* and mailing it - by 5 March 2010 - to the BirdLife office at

BirdLife Malta
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BirdLife calls on its members and others to make their voice heard.

Dr Lawrence Gonzi
Prime Minister of Malta

Hon. Prime Minister,

Do not bring renewed shame on Malta!

We urge you not to harm EU nature conservation laws for a few votes from the hunting minority.

We urge you to comply with EU law through Maltese legislation.

We urge you to ensure all hunting legislation is fully enforced.

We urge you never to allow spring shooting or trapping of Turtle Dove and Quail again.

Verbatim. The full text of the petition letter to the Prime Minister



Bird, interrupted. Every time the government opens a season for so-called "limited" hunting, it opens the door for hunters to kill protected species, such as this Marsh Harrier, shot down last autumn at Miżieb.



from malta to senegal

maltese
cory's shearwater
migratory route revealed
for the first time

Nicholas Barbara

As the EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project draws to a close, it was decided to test the same research methods and technologies that proved so successful for Yelkouan research, on a close cousin of the Yelkouan: the Cory's Shearwater.

State-of-the-art satellite tags have helped the LIFE project to discover where Maltese Yelkouan Shearwaters migrate to. We now know that the Aegean Sea is a particularly important area for Maltese Yelkouans, who spend a significant amount of time there. The project team, however, was also keen to gain insight into the migratory routes of Malta's other shearwater. So, after some nights at the southern cliffs last October, our researchers saw the very first Maltese satellite-tagged Cory's Shearwaters - three of them - fly off.

signal from senegal

All three birds headed west along the northern coast of Tunisia, the Pelagian Islands and continued further to the

south of Sardinia and on towards Spain. The researchers were pleasantly surprised when one of the tags, which normally drops off the bird's back after three to four weeks, was still transmitting two months later! In mid-November this bird sent a signal from the Straits of Gibraltar, then left the Mediterranean, turned south and followed the Atlantic coast of Morocco and Mauritania towards Senegal (see map).

The last signal was received in the beginning of December, by which time this bird had covered an epic 4500km. It is possible that this bird's journey took it even further, maybe towards southern Africa or across the equatorial Atlantic.

secrets to learn

Documenting this great achievement highlights these remarkable creatures' way of life: a life that knows no borders between countries and continents, and one that requires an international conservation effort to protect. Research from projects like the Yelkouan Shearwater Project makes such conservation possible, as they unveil many secrets of the natural world and extend our understanding of these birds.

But many secrets still remain. We can only wonder how far our shearwaters will go, before they start their arduous return journey to Malta to raise the next generation of winged globetrotters.



Joe Shterna

Like the Yelkouan, the Cory's Shearwater (M: Ċiefa) belongs to the seabird group known as tubenoses. Tubenoses can remove excess salt from their body, allowing them to drink seawater and stay at sea for long periods. In this way, they cover great distances in search of food.



Map Google Earth. Inset André Fiane

Voyager. The 4500km route taken by the shearwater on its maiden migration and (inset) the intrepid traveller fitted with the tracking device.

Visit our website at www.lifeshearwaterproject.org

Nicholas Barbara is Project Manager of the Yelkouan Shearwater Project.

a feast of finches

André Raine

You rarely hear the uplifting song of wild finches in our countryside, and the reason for this is that trappers catch tens of thousands of these birds every year. But last year all this became illegal, as Malta banned finch trapping, in line with the Accession Treaty Agreement and the EU Birds Directive. With finch trapping now illegal, we were finally granted a glimpse of what the Maltese countryside should really sound like.

As part of the EU LIFE+ project on Bird Migration and Trapping, a comparative analysis was carried out on the number of finches recorded in 2008 (when autumn trapping was still legal) and in 2009 (when finch trapping became illegal). The results were eye-opening to say the least.

finches aplenty

In 2009, the number of finches recorded by birdwatchers increased by 213.0% on the previous year. These increases were true for all seven finch species in question.

The seven protected finch species that occur in Malta are **Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Common Chaffinch, Siskin, European Serin and Hawfinch.**

Take the Greenfinch: according to a MEPA report a staggering 37,924 were estimated to have been caught by trappers in 2004 alone. With "legal" finch trapping now over, sightings of Greenfinches in 2009 increased by 319.7% on 2008.

The reason for these increases is not rocket science: if trappers aren't catching them, the birds are free to fly around in the wild for everyone to see.



Singer splendour. A male Common Chaffinch in breeding colours. Chaffinches can easily establish a healthy breeding population.



Green Goblin. A male Greenfinch tucking into seeds of Milk Thistle. If left unmolested, Greenfinches can breed regularly in Malta.

nested interest

While an end to trapping in Malta means more finches in the wild for people to enjoy, what does this mean for our finch breeding populations, which are currently sporadic and pathetically small? We know that Common Chaffinches and Greenfinches are common garden birds throughout their European range, and that most of the seven finch species breed in other small Mediterranean islands. But what about Malta?

In the summer of 2009 (two years after spring trapping was banned) BirdLife analysed all records of rare breeding birds on the Island, with four finch species recorded in the 2009 breeding season. We confirmed breeding by Common Chaffinch and Linnet, while Greenfinch and European Serin were observed showing breeding behaviour that suggested they too had successfully raised young. These birds are proof that if left alone they can find suitable habitat to breed.

control needed

While the news was thus for the most part positive, it must be pointed out that finch trapping - now illegal - was still widespread in spring and autumn of 2009. This is perhaps to be expected in the first year of a year-round ban, and especially since the ALE are so woefully understaffed and under-equipped. However, if these illegalities can be controlled, then we should continue to see serious conservation gains in the future.

In short, if 2009 is anything to go by, we will soon be enjoying these colourful birds singing throughout the year in our countryside, and not simply fluttering pitifully about in small cages.

Dr André Raine is Conservation Manager of BirdLife Malta

not just another celebration



The International Year of Biodiversity is not just a celebration, but a call for action.

The United Nations has launched 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity at an event in Berlin. Speakers included Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, and a video message from UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon.

“BirdLife International welcomes the UN’s decision to choose biodiversity as its focus for 2010”, said Dr Marco Lambertini, BirdLife International’s Chief Executive. “With threats to biodiversity growing faster than ever, this is an important recognition of the urgent need for more action to halt its loss.”

common concern

It was in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro that the world’s governments recognised, for the first time in international law, that biodiversity is ‘a common concern of humankind’. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was created, and adopted by nearly 200 countries.

The CBD set global targets to significantly reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010. These targets, along with national plans to achieve them, have been adopted by most of the world’s governments. BirdLife Partners worldwide have helped their governments to compile national biodiversity inventories, and to develop their biodiversity action plans. Some BirdLife Partners have also joined their government’s delegations at CBD meetings.

For BirdLife International, the world’s largest Partnership of conservation organisations, the International Year of Biodiversity is an important focus of attention on the failure of nations to meet their 2010 targets. The next CBD conference in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2010, will assess international progress towards the target.

uniquely placed

BirdLife is an official partner of International Year of Biodiversity. With its sound base in science, and the BirdLife Partnership’s global repository of information on bird populations, BirdLife International is uniquely placed to comment and report on the state of biodiversity for the CBD. Action for birds has also been shown to benefit other biodiversity, while protecting and restoring the ecosystem services on which people and their livelihoods depend.

The CBD Secretariat has called for countries around the world to raise the profile of the International Year of Biodiversity by celebrating the importance of biodiversity.

“Many BirdLife Partners will undertake events and actions in 2010 in support of the International Year of Biodiversity,” said Dr Lambertini. “These will range from formal education and public awareness programmes to festivals and events celebrating biodiversity.”

Text condensed from BirdLife Europe e-news Jan-Feb 2010





volunteering for wildlife

Niki Rust

Previous to learning about the European Voluntary Service (EVS), Matthew and I had never visited Malta and were unsure what to expect from the project at BirdLife Malta or the country itself. However, as Matt has a passion for seabirds and I wished to broaden my skills working for a conservation NGO, we agreed this would be a great experience for us. Before we started we were very nervous about the untold path ahead, but are extremely glad we decided to venture to this small island in the Mediterranean.

focus and highlight

During our project, Matt has focused on fieldwork with the Yelkouan Shearwaters and the LIFE+ trapping surveys, whereas I have been involved with volunteer management, communications work and conference and event management.

This whole year has had some wonderful moments. Matt's favourite experience was carrying out boat-based observations of seabirds, where he was able to get great views of birds and other marine wildlife such as turtles, dolphins and Devil Rays.

For me the British Birdwatching Fair was a highlight, where I organised and managed a BirdLife Malta stall and was able to meet some of my childhood heroes of the natural history world.

life-changing

This project has been a life-changing experience for us both and will be extremely beneficial in our future careers as wildlife ecologists, with Matt transferring to Australia to work with seabirds and penguins, and myself moving to South Africa to study baboons and cheetahs.

We would definitely recommend the EVS to any youth wanting to learn more about different cultures and life in other European countries, while gaining excellent vocational skills in worthwhile NGOs.

Niki Rust and Matthew Johnson are British graduates in ecology and zoology. Since March 2009, they have been undertaking an EU-funded EVS project at BirdLife Malta.



Niki (left) with renowned British wildlife photographer and TV presenter Chris Packham, who visited the BirdLife Malta stall at the British Bird Fair in 2009. Mr Packham later became a member of BirdLife Malta.



Matthew, back from sea after a full day of boat-based observations searching for Yelkouan Shearwaters.

The Yelkouan Shearwater project

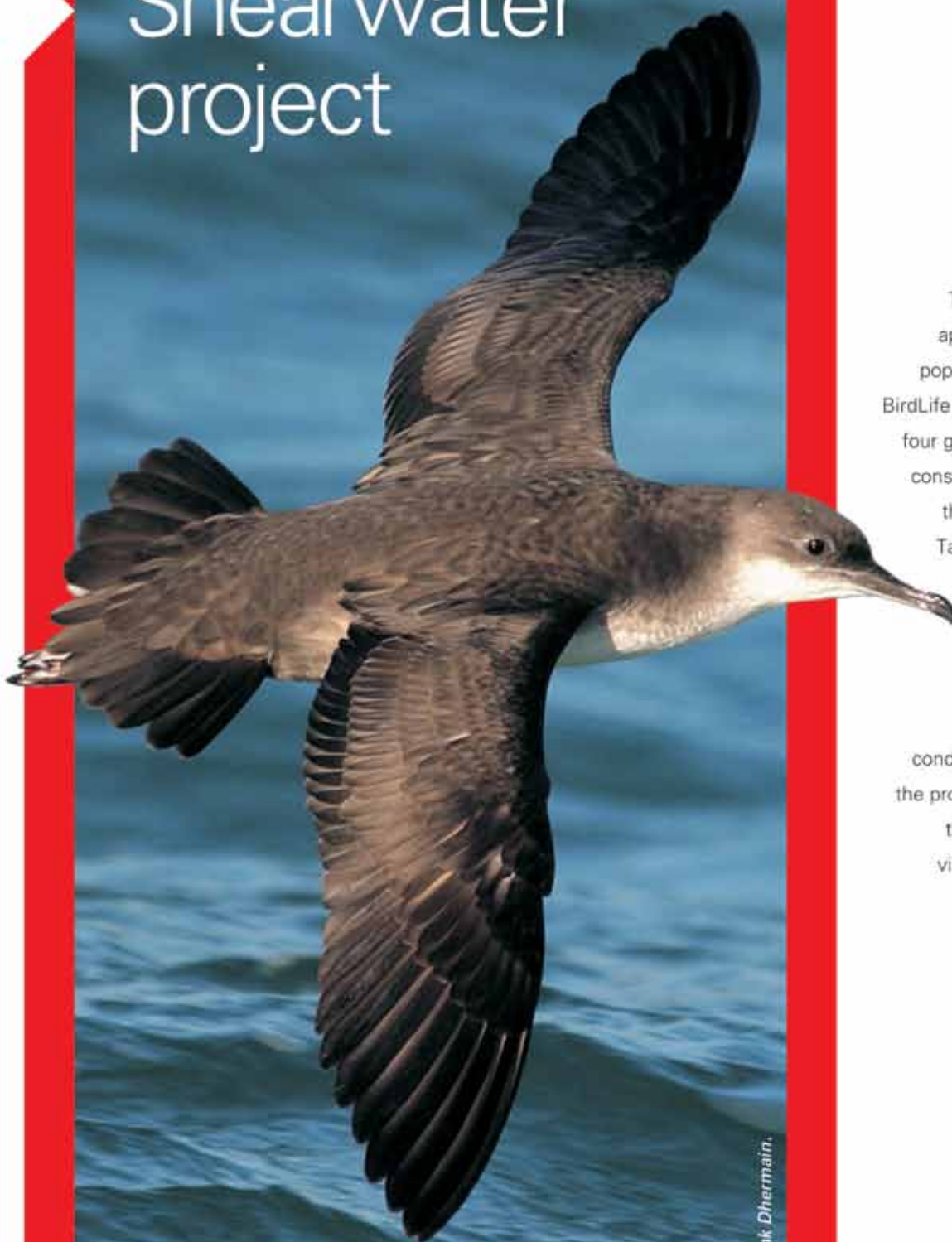


Photo courtesy of Frank Dhermain.

Supported by
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The Maltese islands are home to approximately 10% of the world's population of Yelkouan Shearwaters. BirdLife Malta is leading a partnership of four government authorities and three conservation organisations to protect these secretive seabirds at Rdum Tal-Madonna, the largest breeding site on the island.

The project, Malta's largest conservation initiative of its kind, aims to achieve better breeding conditions for the birds by the end of the project in 2010. It will also improve the protected site for wildlife and visitors, whilst setting an example for the management of other protected sites in Malta.



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