

Bird's Eye view



issue 40 • may 2013


BirdLife
MALTA

new government, old issues?

In March, Malta elected its first Labour government in almost a generation.

Just before the election, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat made a deal with hunters, agreeing to allow the return of finch trapping through a derogation from the EU Birds Directive. He also agreed to the removal of controls on hunting that are not required by the EU. This could mean the end of the 3pm curfew on hunting in September that we know prevents very many migrating birds of prey from being illegally shot. However, in the agreement with hunters and in public statements, the new government has made a commitment to a zero tolerance approach to illegal hunting.

For this year's spring hunting season the government removed the €50 special licence fee for hunting as well as the wearing of armbands to identify licenced hunters in the field. The result was over 9500 registered hunters, about 50% more than last year. Our Spring Watch teams monitored the season carefully, recording nearly double the number of shot, injured birds of last year.

BirdLife Malta will be working with the new government to try to ensure that any concessions

given to hunters and trappers do not turn the clock back for bird conservation. However, from what we have seen, it seems likely that pressure from the EU will again be required to ensure Malta takes bird conservation seriously. At the same time, the government has now committed to establish a wildlife crime unit in the police force. We will try to ensure that it is resourced enough to tackle illegal hunting properly.

On a more positive note, when the Labour Leader visited Ghadira nature reserve during the election campaign, he was very interested in helping BirdLife establish a new nature reserve in the south of the island and in other measures that could provide more sanctuaries for birds.

These are issues that we will aim to work collaboratively with the new government upon, but just as we did with the previous administration, we will not be afraid to be critical and challenging when we consider their policies are not in the best interests of birds and nature.



Steve Micklewright
Executive Director



BirdLife Malta was set up in January 1962 as the Malta Ornithological Society (MOS). It is the oldest and largest environment movement in Malta, with over 3000 members.

BirdLife Malta's mission is the protection of wild birds, their habitat and biodiversity. To this end, the organisation has over the years used approaches including street protests, educational campaigns and habitat restoration projects.

BirdLife Malta spearheaded the creation of the wetland nature reserves at Ghadira and Is-Simar - which it manages today - as well as Foresta 2000, a woodland restoration project on Marfa Ridge.

BirdLife Malta publishes various educational material such as books, posters and leaflets for use by schools and other institutions. It is also active in the media, as part of its effort to raise public awareness. The organisation issues regular magazines/newsletters for its membership.

BirdLife Malta studies migratory and breeding birds to expand scientific knowledge and to further establish the ornithological value of the Maltese Islands. It also studies threats to birds and ways to mitigate these problems. As part of its research, the organisation runs the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme.

BirdLife Malta is a Partner of BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of bird and nature protection organisations, with over 10 million members and supporters in more than 100 countries and territories.

BirdLife Malta is a non-profit organisation and depends on subscriptions and donations.

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The black-winged stilt is a regular spring visitor to wetlands like Ghadira. Will it become a regular breeding bird as well? (photo by Denis Cachia)



Out in the field, schoolchildren do a Dinja Wahda activity about rubble walls as important habitats for wildlife.

mia support

BirdLife Malta is delighted that Malta International Airport (MIA) is supporting our Dinja Wahda environmental education work. Their support will help ensure that Dinja Wahda continues to teach primary school children about nature and the environment. MIA Head of PR & Corporate Communications Reuben Sciberras said that "time and time again children have proved to be the best ambassadors for environmental awareness and we are proud to be associated with such an educational programme which is in line with the Company's policy on Corporate Social Responsibility." This support adds to that provided by Bank of Valletta, which has been our main education partner for several years.



Aron Tanti



A typical farmland bird, the corn bunting was once widespread in Malta but has decreased alarmingly over the past decades.

farmland birds in focus

BirdLife Malta has started to work on an update of the national Farmland Bird Index. Throughout spring, BirdLife conservation staff, with local and international volunteers and birdwatchers, have surveyed sample areas around Malta and Gozo. This research will provide the latest information on how our farmland bird populations are changing; such studies will also reflect the health of the wider natural environment in Malta.



To find out more and to participate in the survey, please contact us on office@birdlifemalta.org or call 21347644/5/6

kids walk for solar power



On 24 March 2013, a record 178 members of Klabb Huttaf, friends, and school groups, completed a 10km sponsored walk after raising money for a BirdLife project. The walk from Rabat to Is-Simar took

children through different natural habitats while youth leaders pointed out the season's wildlife. To round up the event, the Klabb Huttaf swallow mascot met the children who then took part in a role play demonstration of bird ringing. The €1178 raised will go towards the purchase of a photovoltaic panel that will provide some electricity for the

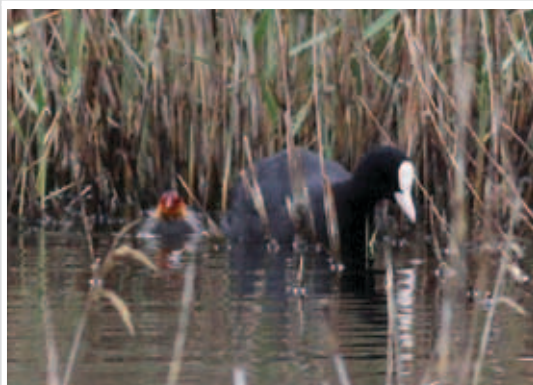


Part of the group of walkers, here tackling the last leg of the walk in Triq il-Pwales.

ringing station on Kemmuna where volunteers spend a month studying birds that migrate over the island in spring. A further €450 was raised by BirdLife adult members who took a different route in a parallel sponsored walk on the same day.

Victor Falzon

Raymond Galea



One of this year's newly-hatched coot chicks ventures out of the nest and follows its parent.

coots breeding again

The common coot is a widespread species across Europe and breeds in all European countries, but its status in Malta has always been that of scarce migrant, with a handful overwintering in protected places like Is-Simar and Ghadira. In 2008, however, a pair nested at Is-Simar. It seemed like a freak occurrence at first, but coots have since nested at Is-Simar almost every year. This year was no exception and early in April a pair hatched four chicks, and a second pair is also breeding. Is-Simar nature reserve is ideal for coots since the reedbed provides both nesting material and seclusion.

Is-Simar nature reserve is open for school visits on weekdays and for the public on Sundays (10.30am-4.30pm) until the end of May.



a voice for birds

Just days after the political parties launched their campaigns in January 2013, BirdLife Malta launched its own campaign. The aim of the society's **Your Voice Counts** campaign was to put the countryside, wildlife and nature conservation on the political agenda. It was a very hectic few weeks and BirdLife is grateful to its staff and volunteers who worked round the clock to raise nature's voice above the electioneering din that pervaded the country. If the media is anything to go by, BirdLife's campaign managed to make itself heard.



- A One of the banners promoting BirdLife's campaign.
- B BirdLife hands a questionnaire to each political party.
- C The second promotional banner.
- D Labour leader Joseph Muscat (now prime minister) visits Ghadira.
- E The third promotional banner.
- F BirdLife action in front of law courts in Valletta.
- G Alternattiva Demokratika leader Michael Briguglio visits Is-Simar.

The fear to tackle the sacred cows

...concern hunting issues not such as the

run-in with the law, why should he

...ived of his

to give Maltese hunters the same treatment as European ones only convinces those completely unaware of the Birds Directive

endum on spring

...ued on page 8

Helen Hall
Rupert Masefield
Rupert Masefield
Helen Hall

spring watch 2013



Amazing grace. A kestrel glides overhead, a picture of grace and beauty. If left unmolested, this species could breed regularly in Malta.

christian debono

David Tipling

This year's Spring Watch Camp was held from 14-30 April 2013 and attended by about 40 volunteers from around Europe. During the camp up to eight teams were out in the field observing the Maltese countryside from different watch points.

During this year's spring hunting season, BirdLife received 20 injured birds, including two pallid harriers, one of Europe's most endangered raptors. Apart from these, 41 other birds were observed in flight by Spring Watch teams with clear signs of gunshot wounds. By the morning of 29 April, Spring Watch teams had witnessed 837 illegal hunting incidents.

One of the worst incidents witnessed was at Gianpula, where six poachers attacked a harrier roost at night, killing at least one of the raptors. The ALE was called on site, but deemed the situation too dangerous to enter the fields.

On 30 April a press conference was held, during which all the evidence collected and preliminary data were presented to the media, and a video with a number of witnessed illegalities was shown.

Unlike what Parliamentary Secretary Roderick Galdes has stated, illegal hunting continues to be widespread in the Maltese Islands.

Christian Debono is BirdLife Malta Conservation and Policy Officer.

For more info and camp blog go to www.birdlifemalta.org and click on **Spring Watch 2013**.

(A) This iconic photograph of a MEPA official chasing a hunter at Foresta 2000 made front-page news; the hunter was later caught and found guilty by the court based on evidence supplied by BirdLife.

(B) Police officers confiscate two illegal live turtle dove decoys.

(C) Police dismantle an illegal turtle dove trapping site.



Fiona Burrows



Rupert Masefield



Rupert Masefield

David Tipling



One of two injured pallid harriers that were handed to BirdLife this spring. Both birds have been sent to the Centro Recupero Fauna Selvatica in Sicily for rehabilitation and eventual release.



Spring Watch is organised every year by BirdLife Malta. The aims of this camp are to monitor bird migration over Malta but also to monitor, record and report illegal hunting, and in this way facilitate law enforcement. A parallel RaptorCamp is held in autumn, with similar aims.

Group photo of Spring Watch 2013 volunteers, sporting this year's distinctive Spring Watch Tshirt.

the continuing plight of the songbirds



Finches, such as this serin, are common spring and autumn migrants through the Maltese Islands. They would also be regular breeding birds were it not for illegal trapping.

rupert masefield

Aron Tanti

Five years since finch trapping was supposed to be consigned to the history books, illegal trapping continues to be a major obstacle in the conservation of these birds in Malta, and one that the government has repeatedly failed to address.

BirdLife Malta's most recent bird-trapping survey revealed the extent of illegal trapping in autumn 2012. This is just the latest in a long list of abuses of European wildlife protection laws perpetrated by bird trappers, with the tacit acquiescence of the government.

autumn 2012

In the most recent bird trapping survey, conducted in the autumn 2012 trapping season, BirdLife Malta found that 95% of active trapping sites in Natura 2000 areas (which account for two-thirds of all active trapping sites) were targeting finches. It was clear that finch trappers were again using the 'song thrush and golden plover trapping season' excuse as cover for their illegal finch trapping activity. In a single day in

Gozo in November 2012, BirdLife teams recorded 38 active trapping sites, of which 22 were targeting finches.

spring 2013

BirdLife Malta staff and volunteers carrying out trapping surveillance this spring have again found evidence of widespread finch trapping and lack of police enforcement. Evidence of illegal trapping has been found on almost every day of the survey. A number of trappers were apprehended on site and several sites dismantled.

The situation in Gozo continues to be worse than in Malta. On several occasions the BirdLife surveillance team had to wait hours after reporting incidents to the police for the officers to arrive at the scene.

BirdLife has repeatedly warned that this level of abuse may prompt the European Commission to take infringement proceedings to the next stage, in order to force Malta to uphold its obligation to protect wild songbirds.

Developments in the trapping saga

2004. Malta agrees to phase out finch trapping over a five-year period on its accession to the EU.

2009. Legal finch trapping officially ends in the Maltese Islands, but government continues to allow trapping of turtle dove, quail, song thrush and golden plover in autumn.

2010. BirdLife Malta's LIFE+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping exposes widespread illegal finch trapping. It also reveals widespread habitat damage in Natura 2000 sites as result of land cleared for trapping.

2011. European Commission warns Malta that autumn trapping seasons for turtle dove, quail, song thrush and golden plover contravene conditions of EU Birds Directive, referring specifically to illegal finch trapping abuses. Government restricts autumn trapping to song thrush only, but BirdLife finds that more than half of all active trapping sites are still targeting finches.

2012. Malta receives second written warning from EC regarding failure of autumn 2011 song thrush trapping season to meet Birds Directive conditions. Government ignores this and opens an autumn trapping season for song thrush and golden plover.

Victor Falzon



Laid out. An active finch-trapping site.

Rupert Masefield is BirdLife Malta Communications Officer.

bringing nature to school

desirée falzon

Ten years into the project, the Wildlife Garden at Mriehel Girls Secondary is today a small haven for trees, flowers and wildlife, and no less of an attraction for the students.

Victor Falzon

While BirdLife tackles the guns decimating wildlife in the countryside, it is also busy bringing nature to schools. It is doing this by creating wildlife gardens where nature can thrive under the watchful eyes of children who are themselves part of the project.

green space

The idea of setting aside land for nature is not widespread in Malta, indeed green lungs in our urban spaces are decreasing. This lack of green is reflected in the layout of many Maltese schools, sadly even brand new ones. But luckily, several schools still have, within their grounds, areas of varying sizes that are still unbuilt. In most of these - a smattering of ornamental plants and the almost obligatory orange tree grove, the areas remain largely bare and unused. These are the kind of areas that BirdLife is using to bring nature to school and schoolchildren.

Wildlife Gardens are not a recent idea: in the late 1980s BirdLife was already doing its first project, at the primary school in

Fgura. Since then, other schools that wished to add nature to their curriculum have asked for help and advice in setting up their own wildlife garden.

basic ingredients

How does a wildlife garden differ from a regular garden? The main ingredient is the indigenous vegetation that is chosen for the site. Not only are native plants best suited for our dry Mediterranean climate, but they are also very attractive to native fauna; what is more, using native flora familiarises children with local nature.

A tailor-made plan of trees and shrubs to be planted kickstarts the process. After a few years of maintenance, nature itself continues most of the work: birds, reptiles, insects and wild flowers take up residence, and soon a mini ecosystem develops. The wildlife garden becomes a showcase of Maltese wildlife.

what's in it for schools?

The best part in all this is that while they increase urban biodiversity, wildlife gardens are also an excellent and dynamic teaching tool. The students who participate in their creation learn how to take real action for the environment.

BirdLife also suggests ideas of how to add discreet nature-friendly structures so that a wildlife garden can be used with subject lessons or simply for recreation and incidental learning.

Through the Wildlife Garden Project, BirdLife is providing schools with a way of drawing children back to the natural world that our increasingly technological life has robbed them of.

Desirée Falzon is Education Coordinator of BirdLife Malta



Victor Falzon

▲ Based on a plan drawn up by BirdLife, students at Hamrun Girls Secondary lay a nature trail in their new Wildlife Garden.



Victor Falzon

▲ Helped by BirdLife staff, schoolchildren at Mtarfa Primary plant trees in their new Wildlife Garden.

Badge of honour. This year's introduction of the Dinja Wahda Ranger badge for students who help out in Wildlife Gardens has added pride to that feeling of belonging to the green squad.



Shear beauty. Smaller cousin of the albatross, a magnificent Scopoli's shearwater spreads its wings.

unlocking the secrets of malta's seafarers

benjamin metzger
rupert masefield

On a narrow rock ledge a hundred metres above the churning sea and clinging impossibly to the face of a sheer cliff, the researchers watch dark shapes dart past with an eerie cry and disappear into the rock wall with a soft rustle. It is night and this is the world of shearwaters and petrels.

risky business

Malta's shearwaters and petrels nest in holes and crevices among precipitous coastal boulders or on sheer cliff faces, places generally inaccessible to anyone not equipped with wings. Since much of the study of these creatures is done on the birds' own turf, scientists and researchers from the Life+ Malta Seabird Project routinely risk life and limb to learn about where these fascinating birds spend their time when they are out at sea.

season 2

This is the second fieldwork season that the project is embarking on. The data collected is building up a picture of the most important areas at sea around the Maltese Islands for the Maltese populations of the Scopoli's and Yelkouan

Shearwaters and the European Storm-petrel. This will lead to an inventory of marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs). These habitats, crucial for the wellbeing of these declining species will then be declared marine Special Protected Area within the Natura 2000 network by the Maltese government. A variety of methods is used to study the birds' habits at various time of the year.

boat-based watch

Boat-based observations are used for mapping seabirds' abundance and distribution. Teams spend 14 days per month at sea counting seabirds and migratory birds on passage (as well as marine wildlife such as dolphins and turtles). From March to October 2012, the Project travelled more than 10,000km of transects. Monthly seabird counts from land during the breeding season complete the information, as birds gather in front of the breeding cliffs at dusk, forming large rafts before they fly to their nests in the cover of darkness.

gps loggers

When these seabirds are away from their colonies, a variety of modern tracking techniques is used to gather information



Day at the office. A project researcher abseils down a cliff in the north of Malta for a routine check on a shearwater burrow.

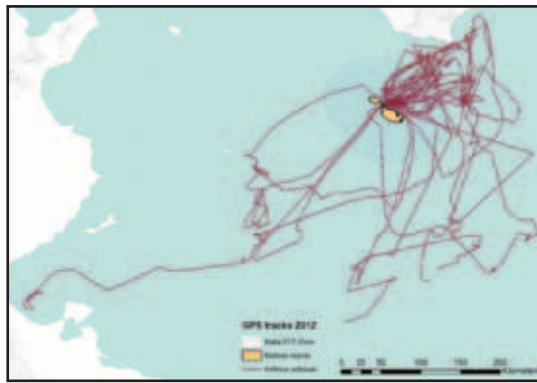
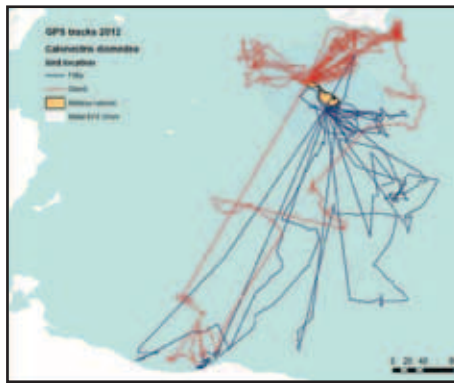
on their whereabouts. During the 2012 breeding season, researchers spent many nights in the seabird cliffs of Malta, Gozo and Filfla, equipping adult shearwaters with GPS loggers and tracking some 30 individuals on their foraging trips. These lightweight devices, taped to the back feathers of the birds, store the location of their carriers at intervals with GPS-satellite accuracy. When the birds return to their nests, the loggers are removed and the tracks can be retrieved.



The EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project is run by BirdLife Malta, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment, the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and SPEA (BirdLife in Portugal). For more information about - and volunteering opportunities with - the Malta Seabird Project, visit www.birdlifemalta.org



Helen Hall



Boat people. Many days of observation at sea help build a more complete picture of seabird feeding haunts.

Distant feeds. (L) Records from two colonies of breeding Scopoli's shearwaters show that the birds spend time feeding at sea around the Sicilian and Libyan shores. (R) Yelkouan shearwaters have been found to forage as far from their colonies as the Gulf of Gabes in Tunisia.

In 2013 the project is continuing to gather GPS tracks, as well as carrying out boat-based transects recording observations of birds seen at sea. Data collection will carry on into 2014, offering volunteering opportunities for enthusiastic birdwatchers and environmentalists, and hopefully more breakthroughs in discovering about the lives of these fascinating birds.

Dr Benjamin Metzger is Head Researcher of the Malta Seabirds Project. **Rupert Masefield** is BirdLife Malta Communications Officer.

Find out more about the project and volunteering opportunities on the project's web pages

<http://www.birdlifemalta.org/Content/LIFEPROJECTS/maltaseabirdproject/1115/>

or contact us by writing an email to benjamin.metzger@birdlifemalta.org

You can also like our facebook page at fb: Life+ Malta Seabird Project.



Maria De Filippo

Legwork. The secrets locked in minuscule geolocators attached to Scopoli's shearwaters - and for the first time to European storm-petrels last season - are only revealed after retrieval. This data will shed light on where these ocean wanderers migrate after abandoning the breeding colonies.

Ben Metzger



▲ BirdLife researchers land on Filfla for an intensive night of bird-ringing and radio-tagging.

Ben Metzger



▲ An adult European storm-petrel freshly radio-tagged and ready for release.



▲ A Cessna wing strut with Yagi-antenna during a radio-tracking flight over Filfla.

breakthrough

During a night on Filfla in July 2012, 34 European Storm-petrels nesting on the islet were fitted with tiny radio tags. That was the easy bit!

The Project team then chartered a Cessna aircraft, which was mounted with an antenna and equipped with a receiver unit. A series of 30 radio-tracking flights were then made on this aircraft in search of the tagged birds. Thanks to the equipment on board, the locations of the birds at sea could be pinpointed. More than 200 signals from 23 individual storm-petrels were received, some as far out as Linosa, an Italian island about 150km west of Malta.

This was the first-ever successful radio-tracking of storm-petrels away from their colonies in Europe!

the purring dove

joe sultana

"Passes in large flocks in April and May, when great numbers are caught in platform-nets. Hooded decoy-birds ... are used to entice the wild ones into the nets. This sport is favourite amusement with the country gentry; and in most of the casals, or villages, the village priest, whose occupations and duties afford him an abundance of idle time, pursues it with assiduity."

"From time to time it has been observed to breed in Gozo in a wild state."

These notes on the turtle dove were made by Charles A. Wright in a paper on birds observed in Malta published in *The Ibis* in 1864. Today, 150 years later, the small and handsome *gamiema* is still harrassed intensively in Malta, nowadays by modern repeater shotguns.

The turtle dove still migrates through the Maltese Islands, but sadly not in "great numbers" anymore and it is certainly never allowed to breed "from time to time". Thanks to the relentless persecution, the few pairs that linger and try to nest have no chance of success.

pretty and shy

A petite, bluish head with striking orange eyes, a pink breast, black and white neck pattern and scaly orange brown and black wing coverts, make this bird the most attractive dove in Europe.



Denis Caehna

Although easy to identify, the bird is very shy and hard to approach for close observation. When alighting, it often picks trees with thick foliage - such as carob or olive - which keep the bird frustratingly well hidden in the canopy. In open, treeless country, turtle doves also perch on rubble walls, high rocky places or power lines to gain unobstructed, long-range view. They often forage on the ground, and when flushed they take off with a loud wing clatter and flashing white on their fan-like tail.

declining dove

The breeding range of the turtle dove in Europe is extensive, covering most countries except the extreme north. Its breeding range also spills into the Maghreb countries in North Africa. The turtle doves that visit Malta belong to the



Avron Tarhi

A turtle dove's slim silhouette in flight.

European population, which winters in the Sahel regions of Africa.

In most of these countries where turtle doves breed, however, their numbers have plummeted, especially in the last 40 years. In Malta, turtle doves were once a very common spring and autumn migrant, appearing in very large numbers, especially in spring, with huge flocks flying over on some days. The numbers seen today are a ghost of what they were in Wright's time. Changes in agriculture and habitat destruction in Europe, and intensive hunting in the Mediterranean countries, have taken their toll.

Eight EU countries, seven of which are Mediterranean, allow hunting of turtle doves in autumn. But only Malta still permits spring hunting. The only time hunting in spring was not allowed was in 2008-2009, and pairs and displaying males immediately started being recorded in various sites on a number of dates from May to July. But in the end ignorance, greed and indifference gained the upper hand again, and seasons have reopened for the slaughter of these birds in spring.

Let us hope that one day the soothing purr of courting turtle doves will grace the Maltese countryside again.

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist



Kathleen Mamo

How did you start volunteering with BirdLife?

I had already been a member for a few years when Desirée (our BEV editor) suggested I join Klabb Ħuttaf's team of leaders. At the time I was already very busy producing and presenting TV and radio programmes but I couldn't resist the idea of learning more about the natural habitat of our islands and then passing this knowledge on to BirdLife's young members. And that was how, in 2004, I became a leader on Klabb Ħuttaf outings.

What do you do today as a volunteer?

At the moment I am the chairperson of the Klabb Ħuttaf committee. We meet regularly to discuss issues related to our young members. This gives me the opportunity to view Klabb Ħuttaf from the organisational angle. We organise the club's bi-monthly outings and discuss our publication *Il-Ħuttafa*. The part I love best, though, is the debating and discussing, especially when we come up with innovative ideas to promote our club.

What was your best experience as a BirdLife volunteer?

I have had countless memorable experiences with BirdLife: representing BirdLife Malta at the British Birdwatching Fair, working on the 50th anniversary video, talking to prospective members at local fairs. However, I will never forget my first shearwater boat trip with our *ħuttaf*. I was terrified of humiliating myself in front of everyone as boats always make me sick. But I will never forget the awe-inspiring scenery of Ta' Ċenċ cliffs at sunset along with the hundreds of shearwaters rafting alongside our boat. I was so captivated, everything else was forgotten.

If you would like to volunteer with BirdLife, call our office on 21347644/5/6 or send us an email at office@birdlifemalta.org.

Members enjoying nature and scenery at Pantalica on a trip to Sicily



richard cachia zammit

out and about

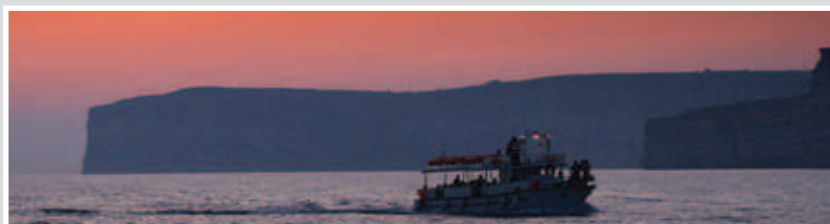
forthcoming member activities

For two years now, BirdLife's Activity Team has worked to organise regular and varied outings for our members, and it is with great satisfaction that we notice increasingly bigger groups joining us in the enjoyment of nature. This great demand for contact with our natural environment encourages the team to continue organising and diversifying our activities.



june 2013 • into the Nebrodi mountains

In last issue of *Bird's Eye View* we announced a trip to the Nebrodi in Sicily. The Nebrodi are a range of mountains that form part of the northern backbone of the island, with Mount Etna a close neighbour to the south. They offer magnificent views, with many breeding birds and other wildlife, and great walks for naturalists. There was much interest in this activity, and in fact we are doing not one but two trips to this beautiful place. Indeed, at the time of going to press the places are already fully booked.



july 2013 • shearwater boat trip

The shearwater boat trip has become an annual event, popular with many members. No wonder, since this activity practically guarantees a spectacle of shearwaters, not to mention the magnificent sunsets. This activity comes with a fee, with booking in advance.

Richard Cachia Zammit is Coordinator of the BirdLife Malta Activity Team.

For details send an email to blmactivities@gmail.com or call **Richard Cachia Zammit** on **21672939** (5-7pm). When you join our Activity Mailing List we'll send you details and reminders of forthcoming events. At our outings there will be **experienced naturalists** eager to help with bird identification and other points of natural interest. Unless otherwise stated, all BirdLife activities are **free of charge**.

While every effort is made to stick to the activities as planned, unforeseen circumstances may force us to revise or cancel some of them.

They would breed. And regularly.



Given a chance.

