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● ABOUT THE PROJECT

BirdLife Malta, in partnership with the Office of the Prime Minister, the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and SPEA (BirdLife in Portugal) are starting work on a new five-year EU LIFE project, the Malta Seabirds Project.

LIFE is the EU's financial instrument supporting environmental and nature conservation projects throughout the EU. Since 1992, LIFE has co-financed some 3506 projects, contributing approximately €2.5 billion to the protection of the environment.

The main objective of this project is to identify the Maltese marine areas which are most important for birds (IBAs). These will be included in an inventory, from which some sites will be proposed for designation as Marine Special Protection Areas. These will form part of the European Natura 2000 network. This is important for Malta and will help the government to fulfill EU obligations to protect key marine areas. The public will also benefit as awareness of such sites, the habitat they offer and their importance at a European and national level will be acknowledged. The protection and management of these sites means that they will be sustained for current and future generations to enjoy.

Malta's key seabird species, to be studied as part of this project are the Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*), the Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) and the Mediterranean Storm Petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus melitensis*). Significant populations of these species breed at colonies within the Maltese islands.

'Programmes of measures established pursuant to this Article shall include spatial protection measures, contributing to coherent and representative networks of marine protected areas, adequately covering the diversity of the constituent ecosystems, such as special areas of conservation pursuant to the Habitats Directive, special protection areas pursuant to the Birds Directive, and marine protected areas as agreed by the Community or Member States concerned in the framework of international or regional agreements to which they are parties.'

Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive) Article 13, paragraph 4.

'The aim of the European Union's ambitious Marine Strategy Framework Directive (adopted in June 2008) is to protect more effectively the marine environment across Europe. It aims to achieve good environmental status of the EU's marine waters by 2020 and to protect the resource base upon which marine-related economic and social activities depend. The Marine Strategy Framework Directive constitutes the vital environmental component of the Union's future maritime policy, designed to achieve the full economic potential of oceans and seas in harmony with the marine environment.'

European Commission website, ec.europa.eu/environment/water/marine/directive

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● TARGET SPECIES

The Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* (Garnija) was the focus of a previous EU funded LIFE project, completed in 2010 which using a variety of study methods aimed to identify the main threats to breeding success in Maltese colonies and to identify important offshore sites for the species. The International conservation status of the species is Near Threatened, largely due to decline in breeding success at several significant colonies. One of these risks in Malta was predation from rats and as part of the project rat eradication work was commenced at Rdum tal-Madonna. Several adult and young birds were fitted with satellite tags, geolocators and data loggers all of which provided us with an insight on the feeding and post breeding areas of these birds. This new project will continue to build on these results, thus providing us with a clearer picture of the life of these birds while at sea.



Frank Diermain



Andre Raine

The Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* (Ċiefa) is a larger cousin of the Yelkouan Shearwater. Although locally its breeding biology and ecology has been extensively studied, very little is known about its life at sea. They are a natural spectacle as they gather in great 'rafts' on the sea at sunset, before returning to their nests. In flight, they skim just centimeters from the surface of the sea and at night their cries are sometimes mistaken for the cries of a human infant. They can dive up to fifteen metres for food. It has distinctive tubular nostrils on the top of its bill, the purpose of which is not certain but they could be used to expel concentrated salt water. Like the Yelkouan Shearwater, Cory's Shearwater form strong pairs, usually breeding with the same partner each year. Living for more than twenty years, fledgling Shearwaters may spend their first two to four years without touching land, until they become sexually mature and begin to breed themselves.

The European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* (Kangu ta'Filfla), a much smaller seabird, feeds mainly on the wing, occasionally diving for prey. At only 15-16cm in length it is from the smallest seabird family and not much bigger than a Spanish Sparrow. At sea it often feeds in flocks and will follow in the wake of ships, especially trawlers. At the breeding colonies it has frequently been mistaken for a bat due to its fast and erratic flight. Its legs are set towards the rear of the body and so on land it can manage no more than a short shuffle. The largest known breeding colony in the Mediterranean is found on the island of Filfla with about 5,000 to 8,000 pairs. For many years it was believed that this bird bred solely on Filfla in the Maltese islands, hence its Maltese name, but in 1994 a small colony was discovered in a cave in Gozo. Although more than 22,000 birds have been ringed in the Maltese Islands, there is much more that we still need to learn about this secretive bird. This project intends to discover some of the European Storm Petrel's hidden secrets.



Joe Sultana



Adri Vella

● NATURA 2000, IBAS, MARINE SPAS AND WHY THEY'RE IMPORTANT.

The designation of Marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs) can be allocated to sites using criteria set out in either the European Birds Directive or Habitats Directive. This recognises the importance of birds as bio-indicators, allowing us to monitor the health of the environment. By finding the sites important to these birds, particularly feeding areas, the project will also be identifying sites important for other marine species.

This project will produce an inventory of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) through its research and these will be recommended for designation as marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs). This means they will be managed to ensure they are used in a sustainable way, which protects the habitat for birds and other species. These sites will automatically join the EU-wide Natura 2000 network of sites.

'The Natura 2000 ecological network, set up by the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, is the cornerstone of the EU's nature conservation policy. The marine component of the Natura 2000 Network will be an integral component of the overall Natura 2000 Network.'

EU LIFE and the Marine Environment http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/marine/docs/appendix_4_life.pdf

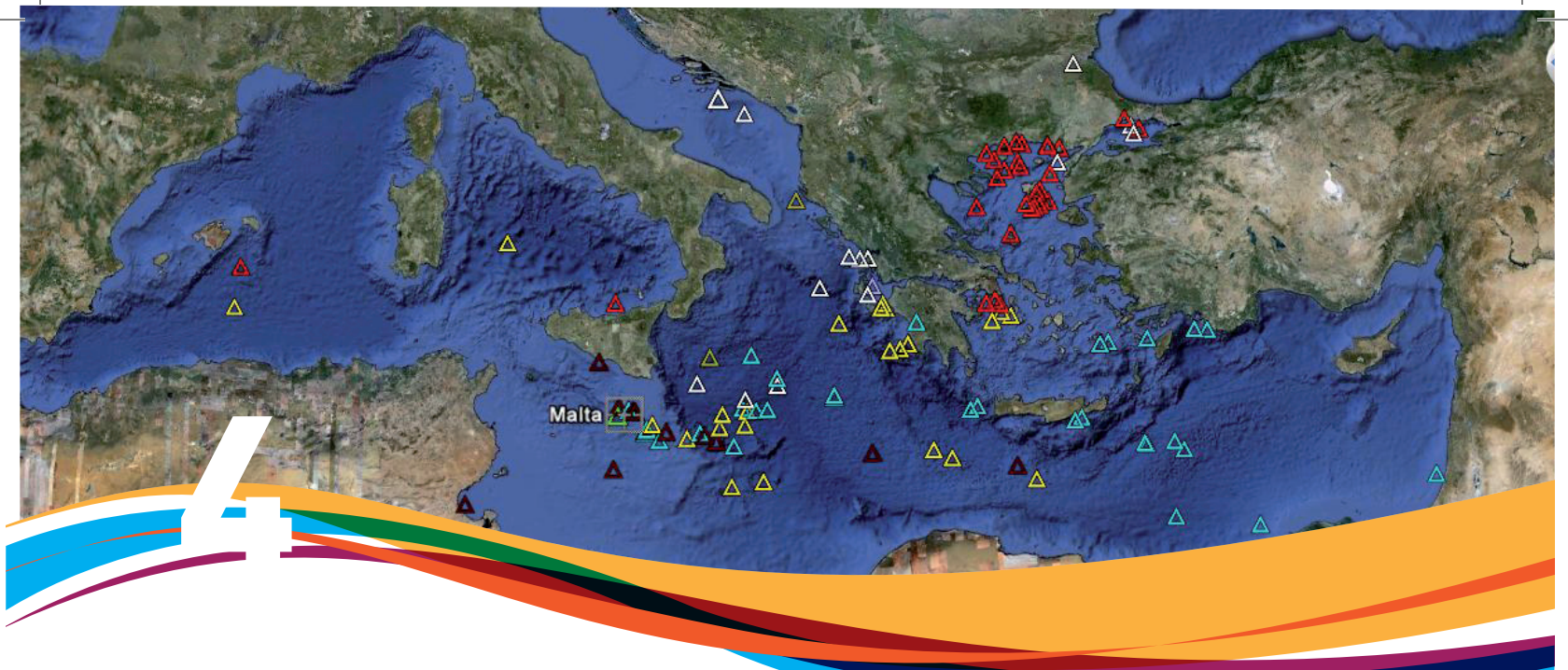


Andre Raine

Here a boat trip allows people to enjoy the site of seabirds in their element. Marine SPA designation should lead to management plans being developed for the areas, sustaining their natural beauty for everyone to enjoy.

'The directive recognises that habitat loss and degradation are the most serious threats to the conservation of wild birds. It therefore places great emphasis on the protection of habitats for endangered as well as migratory species (listed in Annex I), especially through the establishment of a coherent network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) comprising all the most suitable territories for these species. Since 1994 all SPAs form an integral part of the NATURA 2000 ecological network.' EU Website.

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm



● THE RESEARCH

The research stage of the project, which will be carried out between 2012 and 2014, aims to identify important areas for the three target species through several different methods.

- In addition to those birds already ringed by Maltese ornithologists, further adult and young birds will be ringed to allow monitoring of those birds which return to the colony and to assess breeding populations.
- Artificial nest boxes will be installed on Filfla with the aim of attracting Storm Petrels, which will make the individual birds which use them easier to study.

Telemetry devices will be used for several different purposes.

- Geolocators will be attached to adult birds to identify the areas they visit at sea, both before and after the breeding season.
- Data loggers will also be attached to adult birds to identify their feeding areas during different phases of the breeding season.
- Radio telemetry devices will be attached to European Storm Petrels to identify their main feeding areas, which are not yet known.
- Satellite tags will be fitted to a few young birds to identify their movements after fledging their nests.

These methods will be used alongside

- Boat-based observations, which allows researchers to witness concentrations of birds such as for feeding or 'rafting' and to record the numbers of birds sighted in specific areas.
- Diet analysis, carried out to ascertain the prey species of each bird.



Birdlife

Researchers often have to abseil down cliff faces in order to access nest burrows.



Birdlife

This Yelkouan Shearwater is fitted with a satellite tag, one of several telemetry devices to monitor where birds travel to.

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● FROM RECOMMENDATION TO DESIGNATION

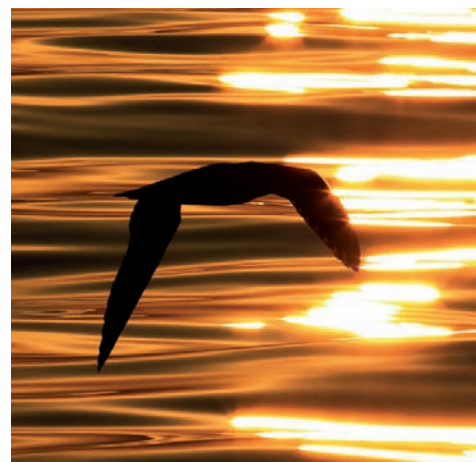
Following the research stage, the project should have gathered all the relevant data about those sites most frequented by the target seabird species and most important for their protection. This will include findings from the research methods described and will have identified which areas each species visits and at what time of year. The information collected by the research team will be compared with data supplied by the fisheries and oceanographic researchers. Compiled into an inventory of Important Bird Areas, these sites will then be recommended for designation as marine Special Protection Areas. This is due to take place in September 2015.

By April 2016 the government is due to designate these marine Special Protection Areas, based on the project's recommendations in line with the established processes of consideration and approval. Once designated, these important areas for birds, now a part of the EU-wide Natura 2000 network will have management plans to put in place. These plans will ensure that commercial and recreational activity, while still permitted, are carried out in a sustainable manner so that the area and the wildlife found there is maintained for the benefit of current and future generations.



Adin Vella

Here Cory's Shearwaters can be seen gathering to feed. It is places such as these that may be selected as marine Special Protected Areas.



Ray Galea

This Cory's Shearwater is joining others at a 'rafting' site, another potential type of marine Special Protection Area due to its importance to these birds.