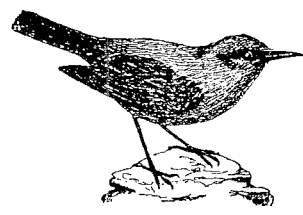


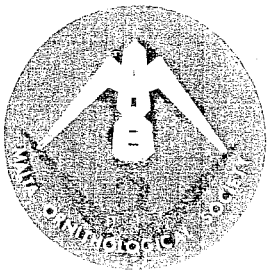
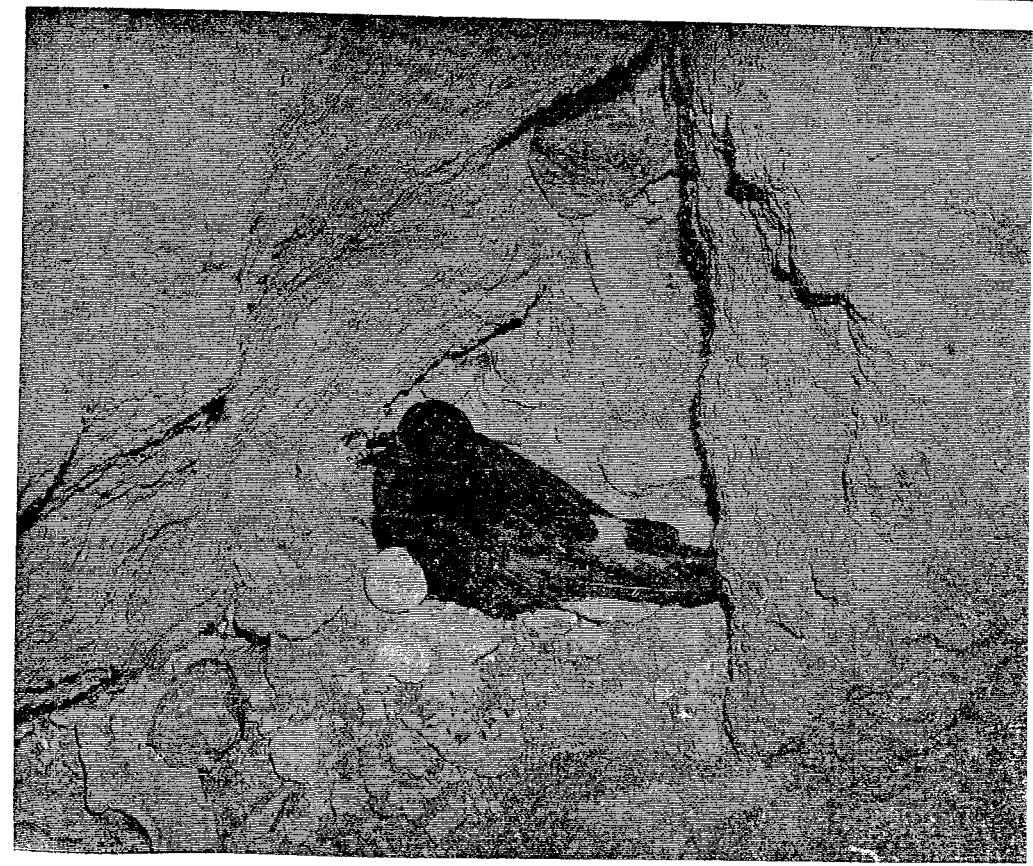
ORNITHOLOGICAL
SOCIETY
P.O. Box 498
Valletta Malta

OF THE
MALTA
ORNITHOLOGICAL
SOCIETY



IL-MERILL

January-December 1976
No. 17



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

Lux Press

25c

THE H.C. MORRIS MEMORIAL ISSUE

'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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IL - MERILL

No. 17

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Cover Picture: Storm Petrel brooding its newly-hatched young.

Photo by J. Sultana

IN MEMORIAM

It was not the gods, but the birds, who were formerly masters and kings over men.

"The Birds" — ARISTOPHANES

Out of the wilderness surrounding the house to which we had moved in the beautiful Sussex village of Anstye my husband created a wonderful garden which was visited by many people and hundreds of birds.

The birds became so tame that it was not uncommon to see a robin alight on the spade when my husband was digging or for thrushes and blackbirds to follow with self-interest his progress with the hoe. In the eaves beneath our roof swallows nested and returned with their young; a kingfisher was a frequent visitor to the pond, and a pair of magpies made our garden the scene of their fleeting comings and goings.

One incident, among many, comes to mind. A blue tit flew fearlessly on to my husband's hand one lovely summer evening. A farm-labourer on his way home stopped at the sight and said, "Now that's how it should be. That's how it was meant to be!"

Because my husband felt that's how it was meant to be, when we came to live here he joined the Malta Ornithological Society, that valiant David which fights a seemingly invincible Goliath. He believed that against all odds and with the passing of time the efforts of the Society would one day transform the Maltese Islands from a bird cemetery to a bird sanctuary. To these efforts and to my husband's memory this issue of *Il-Merill* is dedicated.

Marjorie Morris



H. C. Morris

When dealing with old, ingrained, seemingly intransigent problems, almost all of us instinctively feel that something ought to be done to remove ancient wrongs, to wipe out some deep injustice, or merely to put matters right.

But unfortunately such wrongs will not simply disappear because we placidly make a mental note; we have to act, we need to intervene even if it means -- as in the case of nature conservation -- that we must collide with deep psychological situations on a national scale. It does not mean that we discard democratic opinion but rather that we seek to regenerate interest where it has been allowed to wither and stamped out of the national consciousness.

The Malta Ornithological Society is committed to remove this blight which afflicts Maltese society and seeks bravely to face up to it. In the course of time this struggle has not wasted us away but we have gathered momentum and gone from strength to strength.

Of course it has been possible because others have decided to do something about it too — each within the limits of his ability and possibility: people who have found within themselves the rare sensitivity and generosity of heart to offer a helping hand.

Among the noblest at heart, we came across Mr. H.C. Morris, a gentleman serenely at peace with himself because he was at peace with nature and appreciative of its inspiration. He is now no longer among us to strengthen our resolve but in tribute of his aid, we will keep the memory of this friend alive.

This H.C. MORRIS Memorial Issue of *Il-Merill* will ensure that his name will always be associated with the Malta Ornithological Society.

Dominic Cutajar
Editor
Il-Merill

THE 14TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 14th Annual General Meeting was held on 5th February 1976. Here is the Presidential Address which was delivered at the meeting and the Hon. Secretary's report for the year March 1975 — January 1976.

President's Address

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to welcome you again for this annual general meeting. The past year was a time of great activity for the Society. Many members have contributed a great deal to the aims of the Society. Others have been very generous towards its funds. Many others have shown their appreciation and encouraged us in our difficult task. It would take me long to mention all these members by their name, but I would like to bring to your notice the sterling work done by the Young Members Section, the way they have been organising themselves, the harmony they are keeping with the Executive Committee and the propaganda they are spreading amongst other youths about what we believe is beneficial to our avian fauna and ornithological studies. To many other youths they have proved to be a beacon of light in a world darkened by indiscriminate shooting and vandalistic acts. On several occasions they collaborated with the Department of Agriculture in planting hundreds of young trees at Ghadira and Ta' Qali.

Two years ago we announced in a general meeting that the Society had undertaken to publish a book on the birds of Malta. It is my great pleasure, this evening, to announce that this book under the title "A Guide to the Birds of Malta" is ready and will be launched in a Press Conference in the very near future. As stated by the authors themselves this guide is not intended to serve as a descriptive and illustrated handbook when standard European field guides and much wider works are available, but it provides a comprehensive, unambiguous baseline for future ornithological studies. It is a great credit to

the Society and the three authors J. Sultana, C. Gauci, M. Beaman, whose coordinated work has produced this much needed publication not only for the local ornithologist but for anyone interested in the birds of the Palaearctic Region.

During the last months of 1975 our hard working Secretary Joe Sultana in collaboration with the Society's P.R.O. Alfred Baldacchino, produced a series of seven programmes on Malta T.V. under the heading "Wirt in-Natura" (Our Natural Heritage). These featured different important aspects of our natural history and were prepared by Malta's leading authorities on each relative subject. We must say that birds were one of the main features in these programmes and we were glad to view the message of conservation being conveyed to the Maltese public, loud and clear.

Not very long ago the Government announced the amendment of the Regulations for the Protection of Birds. The inclusion of a 200 yards non-shooting zone round six areas in Malta including Buskett and Kennedy Grove makes more sense in the enforcement of the law. This is a reintroduction of a clause which was included in the 1932 Bird Protection Regulations and repealed some years later due to the enormous pressures exerted on the Government by the big noises of the shooting community. It is a well known historical fact that in Malta birds have been spared a certain degree of protection whenever the element of danger to life and limb arose to those living and quite surprisingly when those who have already passed away were flagrantly disrespected by the discharging of shot-guns on and around their graves. This is why we have some public gardens and cemeteries on the list of bird sanctuaries, but not Ghadira and Filla which after all have the greatest potentialities as nature reserves.

The Malta Ornithological Society has over the years established itself as one of the leading national societies. It has always been the policy of the M.O.S. to see new blood in the vanguard of its uphill struggle and therefore I feel I should surrender my place on the committee. I am sure that whoever will occupy the place of president will receive the co-operation and respect which has never failed from the committee members since 1967. On the other hand I assure the president to be elected and the incoming committee that they should continue to count on my support and co-operation. To all those who have shown confidence in me and given me their support in these last nine years, I say 'thank you'.

Joe M. Attard
President

Secretary's Report March 1975 — January 1976

The 13th Annual General Meeting was held at the British Council on 11th February 1975 at 5.50 p.m. After the President's address, the Secretary read the minutes of the 12th Annual General Meeting and the report for the year April 1974 to February 1975. The Financial Report as on 31st December 1974 was also presented at the meeting by the Hon. Treasurer. The President's address and the Secretary's report appeared in "IL-MERILL" No. 15 while cyclo-styled copies of the Treasurer's financial report were sent to all members. No election was held during the meeting because the Committee had been

lected to serve for a period of two years during the 12th Annual General Meeting. The Committee members during the past year were the same as in 1974; however Mr. Vincent Sammut was co-opted during 1975 to serve on the Committee, bringing the total of Committee officials and members to eight.

1975 was again another year full of activities. 11 Committee Meetings were held while 7 indoor meetings and 3 outings were organised for the members. The mass media of communications was frequently and regularly used. 10 interviews and discussions by M.O.S. officials were broadcast on Radio Malta and Cable Radio, while for the first time programmes on local Natural History and Conservation, entitled 'Wirt in-Natura', were screened on Malta Television. The programmes were produced by the M.O.S. with the help of various members of both the M.O.S. and the Natural History Society. This series which was well received, carried conservation ideals into thousands of Maltese homes. The weekly articles 'Our Natural Environment' in the *Times of Malta*, which were started in 1974 jointly by the M.O.S., I.C.B.P. Malta Section and N.H.S.M. were continued during 1975, while the articles 'Nghixu man-Natura' (Living with Nature) in the Maltese Sunday paper *'It-Torca'* continued to appear though not regularly. Press releases were frequently issued and were given good coverage by Radio, TV and the Press. 2 Posters and Car Stickers were also issued while one number of 'IL-MERILL' (Jan.-June 1975) was published. The other issue (July- Dec. 1975) which carries the annual report of the MOS Ringing and Research Group for 1974, is in press. The Society's major publication 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta' was finalised and taken to press during the year. Its publication is being announced at this meeting. Illustrated talks were also given at schools and to various associations. The Commissioner of Police was frequently informed officially of law infringements as was the case in the trapping of Yellow Wagtails in Gozo, the shooting from sea-craft, bird shooting and trapping on Comino and in and around Buskett, bird trapping at Pieta Glacis and the trapping of Robins. Both independently and through the Malta Section of the ICBP, the M.O.S. forwarded proposals to the Government for better bird protection legislation. A survey of birds of prey shot in spring 1975 was carried out and a report on the situation of these species in Malta was prepared and submitted to the European Meeting of the Birds of Prey World Working Group, through the National Section of the ICBP. Contacts and exchange of literature were maintained with various International and National Ornithological Bodies.

Both the Young Members' Section and the MOS Ringing and Research Group were also continually active. The Young Members Section held several outings, helped in carrying out habitat management at Ghadira, took part in TV programmes, organised an Essay Competition in Secondary Schools, contributed a fair share in the MOS Ringing and Research Group's activities and organised another protest with placards against the indiscriminate shooting. This Section also issued its own newsletter "L-GHASFUR".

The Ringing Group's hard work was rewarded with a record total for one year. 10,176 birds were ringed apart from controlling a large number of retraps and some recoveries. The grand total of birds ringed since ringing started in autumn 1965 now numbers over 54,500 birds. As in previous years, a daily log of birds recorded was also kept. The Group organised four expeditions to Filfla and issued regularly newsletters to its ringing members.

Following is a list of the main activities by month.

- March 1975: MOS delegation's meeting with the Director of Agriculture re the areas of Ghadira and Xemxija.
Day outing to Comino
Outing to Ghadira and tree-planting at Ta' Qali by the YMS.
- April: 3-day field study at Ghadira by the YMS.
2nd day outing to Comino.
Screening 'Life of a Robin' in various schools.
MOS and ICBP. (Malta Section) meeting with the General Workers Union re the latter's project at Ghadira.
Proposals re Ghadira as a Field Centre presented to the Prime Minister.
2 illustrated talks to school children at Ghadira camp by A.E. Baldacchino.
Illustrated talk to members on the Lea Valley and Rye Meads by W.F. Chapman.
Illustrated talk to members on the functions of the Wildlife Youth Service by J. Hiron.
- May: Proposals for better bird protection legislation forwarded to the Government through the ICBP (Malta Section).
2 filmshows for members: The Private Life of a Kingfisher — Avocets Return — Welcome in the Mud — Winged Aristocrats — Flying Birds.
MOS 6th poster pointing out the danger of losing our scarce breeding birds.
Two illustrated talks to schoolchildren at Ghadira Camp by J. Sultana.
4 bird watching outings to Ghadira by the YMS.
Essay Competition — L-Ghasafar x'ifissru ghalik? (What do birds mean to you?) — in Secondary Schools organised by the YMS.
Illustrated talk on the potentialities of Ghadira as a bird reserve by J. Sultana at the Mellicha Youth Centre.
- June: Issuing Car Stickers with the MOS emblem and with the slogan 'Help us to help you protect your birds'.
Il-Merill No. 15.
- July: Two expeditions to Filfla by MOSRRG.
3rd expedition to Filfla.
An appeal to bishops and archpriests of Malta and Gozo by the MOS, ICBP and NHSM pointing out their responsibilities for conveying to the public the need for nature conservation and appreciation.
- August: 4th expedition to Filfla.
Erection of a giant reed fence at Ghadira by the YMS to protect tree saplings. (This activity was also carried out in the following month).
- September: Two outings to watch migrating Birds of Prey at Buskett by the YMS.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Alfred E. Baldacchino

- Report on the situation of Birds of Prey in Malta sent jointly with the ICBP Malta Section to the European Meeting of the Birds of Prey World Working Group. YMS helped Dr. W. Thiede in counts at Spanish Sparrow's roosts.
- October: First and Second TV programmes 'Wirt in-Natura' Illustrated talk to members—Birds of Nepal and India—by Dr. W. Thiede. Discussion on Radio Malta — Bird Shooting in Malta — by Dr. P. Muscat MP and MOS Secretary. Protest with placards by the YMS at the City Gate Valletta against the indiscriminate shooting of birds. Two bird watching outings to Buskett and Ghadira by the YMS. Prize giving ceremony of the Essay Competition. YMS Officer (M. Grima) and Secretary (J. Azzopardi) taking part in a seminar on youth organisation at Dar Hidma Ghall-Paci. YMS members taking part in a TV programme for teenagers 'Werqa' on bird shooting in Malta.
- November: Tree planting at Ghadira by the YMS. Illustrated talk to M.U.S.E.U.M. youngsters at Qrendi by M. Grima and V. Cilia. Illustrated talk to members — Migration Survey Spring 1975 by C. Gauci. Bird watching outing and bird ringing demonstration to members at Buskett. Third and fourth programmes of 'Wirt in-Natura' on MTV. Filmshow — Wild Highlands and Between the Tides. Fifth and sixth TV programmes 'Wirt in-Natura'. Publication of MOS 7th poster pointing out the way to appreciate birds.
- January: Two outings to Hal Far and Ghadira by the YMS. Seventh programme of 'Wirt in-Natura' on MTV. Illustrated talk to local shooters at Haz-Zebbug Band Club by J. Sultana. Illustrated talk by youngsters at Haz-Zebbug by V. Cilia and M. Grima.

I would like to end this report by putting on record the help I received from the President, officials and members of the Committee and to thank all the MOS members, both local and overseas, for their continual help and support both morally and financially. I would like also to extend the outgoing Committee's thanks to Mr. D. Cutajar, Chairman of the Malta Section of ICBP and Editor of *Il-Merill*; to the Representative of the British Council for the loan of films and hall; to the Malta Bird Reserves Overseas Committee (in the persons of E. Coxon (Mrs.), G. Davies, J. Hardman, M. Hirons and M. Taylor) for their continued support and to the British Trust for Ornithology (in the person of Robert Spencer) for continuing to help the Society's Ringing Group.

Joe Sultana
Hon. Secretary

1. MOS Executive Committee and Sub-Committees for 1976/78

After the General Meeting held on February 9th, 1976, the new MOS Executive Committee for 1976/78 was appointed as follows: *President*: Joe Sultana; *Hon. Secretary*: Alfred Baldacchino; *Assistant Secretary*: John Azzopardi. *Treasurer*: B.K. German; *Public Relations Officer*: Tony Meli*; *Members*: Victor Cilia; Dominic Cutajar; Charles Gauci; Michael Grima; Vincent Sammut.

Mr. Joe Attard who has been MOS President for the last nine years, has been nominated an Honorary President.

The following members on the sub-committees were also appointed: *MOS Bird Ringing and Research Group*: *Ringing Officer*: Joe Sultana; *Ringing Secretary*: Charles Gauci; *Treasurer*: B.K. German; *Gozo Representative*: John Grech.

Rarities sub-committee: *Chairman*: Joe Sultana; *Members*: Charles Gauci; Vincent Sammut; Martin Thake; Frank Smith.

Young Members Section: *Chairman*: Michael Grima; *Secretary*: John Azzopardi.

Fund Raising Committee: *Chairman*: Tony Meli; *Members*: Guido Bonnett; Joe Azzopardi; Mrs. A. Rosamond Williams; Tony Gauci.

MOS Gozo sub-committee: *Chairman*: Mrs. Veronica Grech; *Members*: John Grech; Mr. E.F. Nicholas.

2. I.C.B.P. European meeting and subsequent appointment

Mr. Dominic Cutajar, Chairman of the International Council for Bird Preservation, Malta Section attended the ICBP XI European Conference at Radolfzell, Baden; he was elected Vice-President of the European Section of the ICBP. Subsequently he was appointed "ex officio" member of the Steering Group — ICBP European Committee for the Prevention of Mass Destruction of Migratory Birds.

3. I.C.G.W.C. General Assembly

The International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation held its XXIInd Triennial General Assembly in Chambord Paris from 2 to 4 September 1975. Three recommendations were passed, the most important one concerning Malta being that regarding the protection of birds of prey, both diurnal and nocturnal. The I.C.G.W.C. insists that in view of their continuing decrease, protection of birds of prey should be enforced especially during the migration when they visit countries other than those where they breed and raise their young. When shall birds of prey — afforded total protection in all Europe — be given

* Mr. Tony Meli was eventually appointed Chairman of the Fund Raising Committee, while Mr. Michael Grima has taken over the duties of PRO.

legal protection in Malta as well?

4. The Peregrine on the coin

The Maltese Falcon (the Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*) has figured on the £M10 gold coin in the Malta Numismatic issue for 1975. The Peregrine Falcon is a fast declining species in Malta, in fact there is only one known breeding pair. Although its depiction on the gold coin will help the Falcon to be remembered when eventually wiped out, we would be happier to have it both depicted on the coin and still alive in the Maltese natural environment — or whatever is left of that!

5. 'Wirt in-Natura'

'Wirt in-Natura' (Natural Heritage) was the name of a series on Malta Television produced by Joe Sultana and Alfred E. Baldacchino. These consisted of eight programmes of six five-minutes items on the Maltese natural environment and also on past Maltese naturalists. It was televised fortnightly and ran from October to December. Many local naturalists took part in this programme.

6. New Bird Protection Regulations

New regulations regarding certain protected areas in Malta came into force by Legal Notice 158/1975 published in the supplement to Government Gazette number 13,170 dated 19th December 1975. The following new regulation was inserted to the principal regulations, published in 1937. It reads: "No person shall discharge any fire-arms within two hundred yards from the boundaries of the following localities: Addolorata Cemetery; Buskett Gardens; Civil Airport at Luqa; R.A.F. base at Luqa; Kennedy Grove at Salina; The Radio Transmitting Station at Xrobb il-Għagin".

Two new localities have been added, the Civil Airport at Luqa and the Radio Transmitting Station at Xrobb il-Għagin.

If these regulations are enforced, it will certainly help in the protection of birds, especially birds of prey at Buskett.

7. MOS Stickers

During the past year, the MOS issued four stickers. The first sticker issued appealed for help towards the protection of birds. This was followed by two smaller stickers which were eagerly sought after and displayed by young members.

The fourth sticker depicting the head of a hobby, emphasised that birds of prey are not game birds (something which unfortunately the local 'shooters' have still to understand). This was kindly sponsored by the Hawk Trust of the U.K. and the Society for the Preservation of Birds of Prey of California, USA. Both Societies contributed towards a part of the stickers' expenses. Stocks of the latest small stickers were completely exhausted after a week at the MOS stand at the Malta International Fair (see below). Other similar stickers are in the pipeline and these will be launched as soon as the necessary funds are available.

8. MOS Posters

Two more posters were launched by the MOS. The seventh MOS poster



M.O.S. Stickers and (below) Posters.
(photos by A. E. Baldacchino)



appealed for the appreciation of birds in their natural habitat. The design and expenses for this poster were kindly seen to by a local MOS member.

The other poster was issued by the MOS in conjunction with the ICBP Malta Section. This poster was issued in connection with the campaign by the Council of Europe for the conservation and management of wetlands. It was kindly designed by Mr. Saviour Mallia.

9. 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta'

We are glad to say that the MOS publication 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta' has been a great success. Our appeal for funds in the very initial stages was well received and handsomely contributed. After hard weeks of printing and

proof reading under the charge of Joe Sultana, the 'Guide' was launched on March at a Press Conference held at the Hotel Phoenicia and was well-received both locally and abroad. The 'Guide' has already been very favourably reviewed in the IBIS and 'British Birds'. A few hard-bound copies are still available for sale (price £3.00 sterling).

A big thank you must go to all those who aided in some way or other; to those who contributed financially; to those who saw to the printing and the proof reading; to Dr. W.R.P. Bourne for writing the foreword; to M.D. England for supplying the front cover photo and to Rodney Ingram for supplying all the line drawings found in the 'Guide'; thanks most of all to the three authors, Joe Sultana, Charles Gauci and Mark Beaman, for contributing the manuscript without which the 'Guide' would not have been possible. A big thank you to all those concerned.

This MOS publication is a tribute to all MOS members, who without outside help from any source, have succeeded in overcoming all difficulties, financial or otherwise. If you are an MOS member, you should be proud of your effort.

10. A Blessing in disguise

The MOS in connection with the Natural History Society of Malta and the ICBP Malta Section had sent an appeal to all the Parish Priests in Malta and Gozo to draw the attention of all clergy to emphasise to their parishioners the need for safeguarding and affording protection to birds which are discriminately shot at in Malta, while being afforded protection overseas. This appeal was sent in 1975.

It was therefore with great surprise for us to read in the papers that Rev. Archpriest of Xaghra, Gozo celebrated mass in the open for more than 100 shooters, who were told in a brief sermon that the scripture speaks of the right to kill and consume animals and birds. A gun, cartridges and turtle doves were presented during the offertory. After the mass, the Archpriest blessed the guns, and the shooters shot in the air a final fusillade!

The MOS and the ICBP Malta section protested strongly against such behaviour by a person in his position, especially since no distinction was made of birds which constitute game, for everybody knows the local shooters' definition of game is 'all that flies'. Many readers of the local papers deplored this sermon to shooters. Only one shooter, claiming to be a 'true sportsman' came forth and congratulated the Archpriest. The following extract is from a letter which the Chairman of the ICBP Malta Section, Mr. Dominic Cutajar, wrote to the Press.

"It is reported that the Archpriest cited the Scripture to justify the annual slaughter of many thousands of migratory birds in the Maltese Islands under the pretext that all living creatures were given to man for his own use.

The ICBP Malta Section disagrees entirely with this interpretation of the scriptural passage in question, which to start with ignores the fact that for some 500 million years there were animals in the world and nothing resembling a human-being to exploit them. The divine injunction referred to is a *commission* to mankind, first of all to tend the living creatures, and then *where advisable and necessary*, to harvest the *surplus* according to the need but without impairing the very existence of these creatures.

Shooting as practised in our country observes none of these restrictions and

as a result degenerates into a wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter of bird-life that happens to be merely passing over the Maltese Islands.

Consequently the Archpriest's remarks could only have an adverse effect since they cater for the old prejudices and vested bias. We deplore that the rites of the Church were made to serve such a cause and specifically to invest with an aura of sanctity such symbols of brutality and violence as shotguns and ammunition cartridges."

11. Publicity Stand

The MOS was among those exhibitors who had a stand at the XX Malta International Fair. The main theme was the appreciation of birds in their natural habitat, without the need to shoot or trap them. Many shooters called at the stand to express their feelings and most important of all, to admit to the indiscriminate shooting going on in the island. MOS stickers were greatly in demand and all stocks were exhausted. The stand was designed by Alfred E. Baldacchino and set up by MOS members. (see photo on page 39).

12. Official contact

In its efforts to further stress the importance of the appreciation of birds in their natural habitats, and the need to protect certain declining species, the Malta Ornithological Society on the 25th of May, 1976, wrote to the Director of Museums requesting a meeting between the two bodies to discuss ways and means of furthering bird appreciation and protection in Malta. The MOS hopes that as a result of similar expanding contacts, more educational material appreciative of wildlife in its natural setting will gradually become available to the people of Malta.

31.8.76.

YOUNG MEMBERS' SECTION: PUBLIC RELATIONS

John Azzopardi

The age-old tradition of bird-catching is so well embedded in the mind of the Maltese people, and the best way to alter this mentality is through education.

Most of the activities of the YMS are organised with the aim of reaching young people. During 1975 two major activities of this kind were launched.

1. Essay Competition

In May an essay competition was organised for secondary school students. The topic was bird protection and the title was "L-Ghasafar: X'Ifissru Ghalik?" (What do Birds mean to You?). Considering that this was the first time such an activity was being held, over 130 entries could be well considered an excellent response. 98 girls and 39 boys took part from ten schools, 5 boys' and 5 girls' schools. The standard reached was quite high and in addition to the first three prizes, an extra three consolation prizes were offered. The winners were as follows:

1st Prize of £M5 book-token:

Miss Carmen Dalli — Maria Regina Secondary School.

2nd Prize of £M3 book-token:

Miss Bernardette Gauci — Zurrieq Secondary School.

3rd Prize of £M2 book-token:

Miss Mary Cachia — Zurrieq Secondary School.

Consolation prizes: of £M1 book-token each.

- a. Mr. Raymond Mifsud, St. Aloysius College
- b. Miss Sandra Theuma, Maria Regina Grammar School
- c. Miss Colette Cumbo, St. Louis Secondary School.

The prize-giving ceremony was held on 10th October at the Cultural Institute, Floriana. The event opened with an illustrated talk on the breeding birds of Malta by Mr. J. Sultana, then Secretary of MOS. After an opening talk by the Secretary of the YMS, the Asst. Director of Education Mr. L.A. Farrugia distributed the prizes. When he addressed the audience, Mr. Farrugia praised the work of the MOS as well as the bold resolution of the YMS. He emphasised the fact that education should be instrumental in the MOS effort to make the public conscious of the need to conserve the natural heritage of our country. The evening closed with the reading of the winning essay by Miss Carmen Dalli.

An exhibition of the work and publications of the MOS was held in the entrance hall of the Institute. The Press was invited for the occasion.



The Asst. Director of Education presenting the first prize to the winner of the Essay Competition. Looking on are J. Azzopardi YMS Secretary (on left) and R. Cachia Zammit YMS Committee Member.

2. Bird Conservation Campaign

For the third consecutive year the YMS staged a protest with placards in Valletta on 4th October. A set of hand-painted posters carrying telling slogans were displayed. The posters appealed for the protection of all breeding species and all birds of prey, as well as for the establishment of bird sanctuaries at

Ghadira and Filfla. The posters also called on the local shooters to be more discriminate in their quarry and to spare beneficial and rare breeders such as the barn owl, as well as those birds which do not constitute game. Leaflets about the MOS were also distributed.

The views of the general public watching the protest were varied. Many agreed with our cause, others dismissed it with sarcasm. Others still did not bother. However, it is certain that the effort was never lost — some good will always result.

3. Habitat Management at Ghadira

A lot of voluntary work is carried out during the year by the YMS in the management of the habitat at Ghadira. This is a long-term policy which the YMS has adopted in trying to save Ghadira from disappearing for ever under steel and concrete, as well as improving the habitat which had started to degenerate through the random parking of cars and pitching of camps. The work which is being carried out in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture under the guidance of Mr. Joe Borg, Afforestation Officer, involves the planting of several hundred trees (mostly tamarisk and pine) as well as the erection and maintenance of a reed fence to protect the saplings from the wind. Recently a stretch of land along the outer border of Ghadira has been planted with prickly pears to form a natural barrier thus impeding cars from entering and causing the erosion of the soil.

Several tree-planting activities have been held at Ghadira and others are projected for the near future. Tree-planting sessions have also been held on other occasions at Xemxija and Ta' Qali.

TAXONOMICAL POSITION OF THE TREE SPARROW OF MALTA

Andrew Keve (Budapest)

The occurrence of the Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* in Malta has been known since 1843, but even Despott (1917), Roberts (1954), De Lucca & De Lucca (1959) and De Lucca (1967) have taken it for a sporadic straggler. Its breeding in 1967 was published for the first time by Sultana (1969). Since that time larger flocks have been observed, smaller ones more frequently, although the Tree Sparrow is not a regular visitor to Malta (Gauci & Sultana 1971).

Some specimens were collected, but it seemed not valid enough for a taxonomical determination, as the populations of South-Italy and Sicily had been determined for *P.m. montanus*.

The IBP meeting in Leningrad in 1973 decided to prepare a monograph on the Tree Sparrow, and it was an honour for me, that Dr. Pinowski invited me to write the taxonomical chapter.

Till now 33 subspecies of the *Passer montanus* have been described, but many of them synonymized, so Moreau and Greenway (1962) accepted only seven

MIGRATION OF THE SUBALPINE WARBLER *Sylvia cantillans* THROUGH MALTA

Charles Gauci & Joe Sultana

subspecies. Studying the literature, one can see that in the synonymization the opinions of the different authors are not uniform.

This was the reason for preparing a new revision, which I could undertake with the kind help of 32 museums and institutions on 1411 skins.

According to this revision the Spanish *P. m. hispaniae* (v. Jordans 1932) has proved to be a valid subspecies.

With the kind aid of Prof. Dott. E. Moltoni (Milano), of Dr. I.H.F. Lyster (Edinburgh), of Dr. H. Schifter (Vienna), of Dr. J. Reichholf (Munich) and of Dr. G. Mauersberger (Berlin) I could compare a bigger series of Italian Tree Sparrows, on which results I have written in another paper. The *Terra Typica* of *P. m. montanus*, Linne 1758, was fixed by Clancey (1948) in the region of Ravenna, North Italy, and my results have shown that the South Italians are not identical with them. The southern limit of the area of *P. m. montanus* reaches down to Rome. In Calabria, Sicily and Sardegna lives the Spanish *Passer montanus hispaniae*.

So it seems expedient also to ascertain to which subspecies belongs the population of the Island of Malta. Mr. J. Sultana was so kind to send me a skin which I have compared with Spanish ones. As it was to be expected it proved to belong to the brighter *P. m. hispaniae* with small wing-sizes (65 mm). Because of the scarcity of Tree Sparrow in Malta one cannot expect bigger series of skins and the proof from this single specimen can be regarded as the logical conclusion.

Perhaps the Tree Sparrow is in Malta as part of its area-expansion towards the South, to the southern part of Asia Minor, Iraq and Israel where it was found recently; 20 years ago the Tree Sparrow was unknown in such countries.

I'm very obliged to acknowledge the help of my Colleagues, who made possible my successful revision.

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Note: The wing-length of 44 Tree-Sparrows measured (maximum chord) by the MOS ringers range from 62.5 to 72 mm. (mostly 65-69) with a mean of 66.9 mm.

Between the years 1966-75 the M.O.S. Ringing Group ringed 1,375 Subalpine Warblers *Sylvia cantillans* trapped on passage through the Maltese Islands. The great majority of these were aged and sexed, measured and weighed. This paper discusses some aspects of Subalpine Warblers' passage through Malta based mainly on the data collected.

Breeding range, winter quarters and passage:

The Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* breeds in the Mediterranean basin. Its range extends from the Iberian Peninsula through southern France, most of Italy, Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, Crete and Western Turkey, on the European side, and from Morocco east to Tunisia in North Africa. It also breeds on the major Mediterranean Islands. Three sub-species are recognised — the nominate *cantillans* in western Europe east of Italy; *albistriata* in SE Europe, from Yugoslavia eastwards; and *inornata* in northern west Africa. The Subalpine Warbler is essentially a summer visitor and after breeding migrates south to winter in the dry scrub zone of West Africa, along the southern borders of the Sahara, from Senegal in the west to eastern Chad in the east. Moreau (1961) discussed the controversial migration of the different populations of this species. On autumn passage the Subalpine Warbler is very scarce on the north-eastern coast of Africa but in spring becomes common and is seen as far east as Cyprus. In autumn, therefore, birds from the eastern Mediterranean breeding population either migrate west south-west across the Mediterranean or overfly the north-east African coast.

Passage through Malta:

The Subalpine Warbler is a spring and autumn migrant through Malta. The main spring passage is from the last week in March to the last week in April with a few in mid-March and May. In autumn it is the first migrant to appear, some arriving in mid-July but with a peak from mid-August to the third week of September. It is much more abundant in autumn than in spring. Table 1 gives the first and last dates in spring and autumn in the years 1968-74, while figures 1a and 1b show the number of Subalpine Warblers in Malta during the ten years 1966-75. They clearly show the relative abundance of the species and the time of migration.

Habitat and food in Malta:

In spring Subalpine Warblers are seen mainly around the coast with only a few moving inland. The available food is made up of insects. The berries of the Ivy *Hedera helix* are abundant in late March, and though these form the staple diet of Blackcaps preparing to move north, they are mostly ignored by the Subalpine Warblers.

In autumn Subalpine Warblers feed almost exclusively on fruit, principally bramble berries, figs, *Myoporum serratum* berries and grapes. Autumn passage, therefore, coincides with substantial 'fruit' food and birds are concentrated mostly in areas with plenty of brambles *Rubus ulmifolius* and figs *Ficus carica*. Only a few are noted in other places, mainly where there is Fennel *Phoeniculum vulgare*, which hosts many insects.

Spring and autumn weights and retraps:

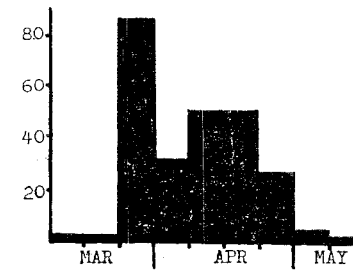
Spring birds have a range in weight of 7.2 to 15.8 gm (mean 10.8), most weighing between 9.0 and 12.9 (231 birds weighed). Autumn birds are much heavier, with a range of 8.4 to 18.9 gm (mean 13.0), most weighing between 10.0 and 15.9 (1,068 weighed) (fig. 2).

The weight of birds in African winter quarters, prior to the spring migration is not known but judging from the light weights of most birds trapped here, Malta might be their first stop after leaving winter quarters, after covering a distance of about 2200 km. Assuming an average winter weight of ca. 11 gm (*), then birds departing with a weight of 16.0 are capable of this crossing (calculated after Nisbet, Drury and Baird — in Mead 1966). It is unlikely that birds stopping to refuel on the North African coast, would stop again in Malta, unless encountering adverse weather. Probably the Subalpine Warblers seen in Malta during spring had intended to make a direct crossing from their winter quarters to the southern shores of Europe but either were too weak to continue, or encountered adverse weather conditions. This theory finds support in the fact that most Subalpine Warblers are seen when weather conditions are: (a) clear skies with moderate to strong headwinds (NE to SE), (b) overcast skies (with or without rain), (c) both conditions. Rushforth (1973) discussed some aspects of the spring migration in Malta of small passerines and one of his tentative suggestions was that small birds appear in Malta after finding themselves too weak to accomplish the flight from south of the Sahara to mainland Europe.

Only 10 out of 251 Subalpine Warblers ringed in spring have been retrapped. The initial weight of these birds ranged from 8.5 to 13.5 gm. After being retrapped within a period of 7 days they showed a mean increase of .34 gm per day; but the pattern of increase was very variable ranging from 0.1 to 0.9 per day.

In autumn the Subalpine Warbler is much more numerous (see fig. 1b). The weather in the central Mediterranean is usually calm and settled in late July, August and also throughout most of September. Most Subalpine Warblers arrive in Malta on clear nights with very light winds (Beaufort 1-2). The weight of these birds indicates that they had accumulated some fat before starting their south-

(* An overwintering bird in late November weighed 10.9 gm. A month earlier its weight was 13.2. This bird showed no external signs of maladies and seemed perfectly fit. Another bird which weighed 14.0 gm in mid-September (evening weight), retrapped and reported by the ringer to be in heavy moult in mid-October weighed 10.7 (in the morning). Both were first year birds.



Figs. 1a & (below) 1b: Numbers of Subalpine Warblers ringed in spring and autumn with the time of ringing grouped in 'quarter-month' periods.

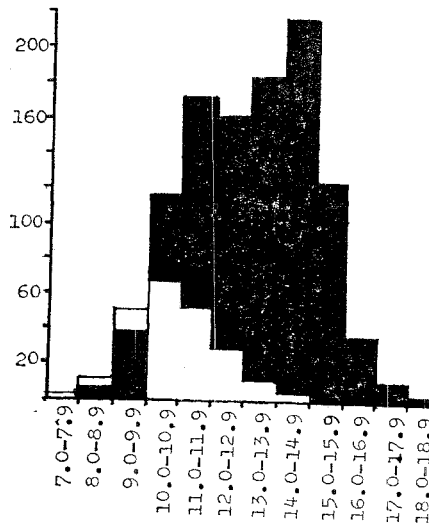
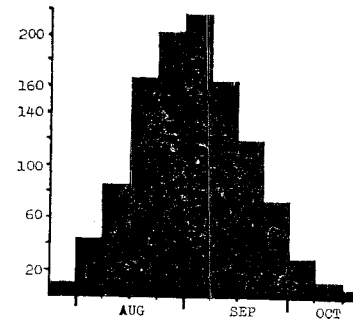


Fig. 2: Spring (blank) and autumn (shaded) weights of Subalpine Warblers.

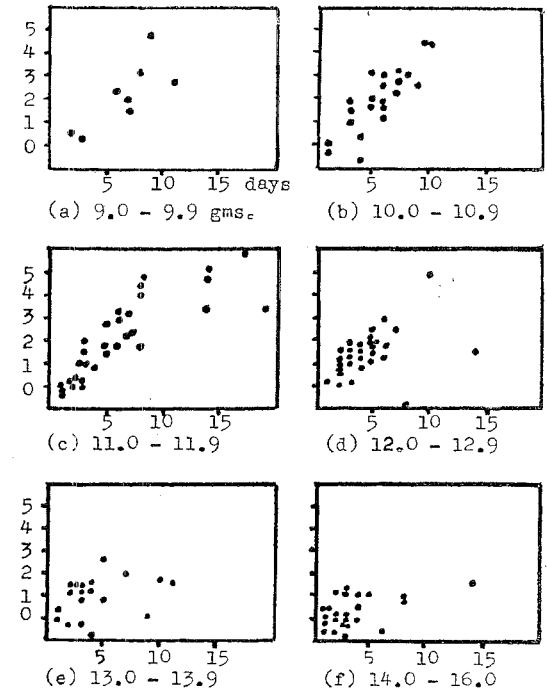


Fig. 3 (a-f): Increase in weight by day of autumn migrants retrapped within a period of 19 days, grouped in different initial weight categories.

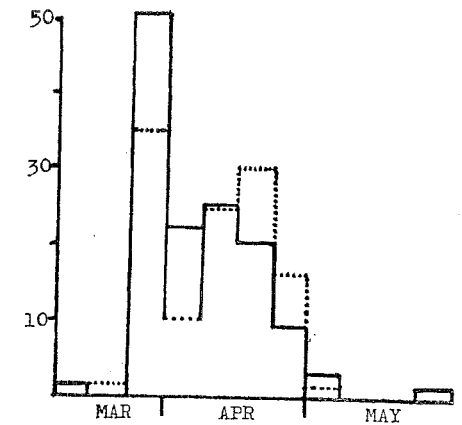


Fig. 4: Distribution of sexes in spring. Solid lines = males, dotted lines = females.

ward migration. Malta, where fat-producing food is abundant at this time of the year, appears to be a refuelling centre for a large number of Subalpines. These birds would then presumably make one direct flight from Malta to the southern edge of the Sahara; at least they have enough fat reserves to undertake the flight. (A first year bird trapped on 3.9.72 at Buskett was retrapped in the same locality the following year, on 25.8.73, and identified as an adult male).

Out of a total of 1,124 ringed in autumn 131 (i.e. 11.65%) have been retrapped. The number of birds retrapped does not represent the true number of birds staying to refuel in Malta because (a) with the exception of one place, other areas are not visited regularly by ringers and (b) birds tend to get used to the position of the nets and avoid them. As suggested earlier the weights of autumn birds show that they have enough fat-fuel to make one direct flight to winter quarters. Birds with a low weight at trapping time are therefore likely to stay longer than those with higher weight. Fig. 3 (a-f) shows the length of stay and increase in weight of birds of various weight categories. In general most retraps show an increase in weight, though decreases of up to 1.0 gm were registered in a few cases. Birds were retrapped up to 19 days after ringing. Those whose initial weight was between 9.0 and 12.9 show a more or less uniform increase in weight with a mean increase per day of 0.33, 0.37, 0.34 and 0.32 respectively. Birds whose initial weight was between 13.0 and 16.0 gain less weight though they may linger here for up to fourteen days. As already stated the weather at this time of year is usually settled so there is no question of birds lingering due to weather conditions.

Ratio of males and females in spring:

The number of Subalpines sexed in spring amounts to 249. Of these 131 were males and 118 females. As is the rule with most summer visitors to Europe, males arrive a little earlier than females (see figure 4). During the main migration period, i.e. last week of March to end of April, males predominate during the first two weeks, females during the last two. In the week in between, the sexes are equally represented. Approximate ratios for these five weeks are (males: females) -- 10:7; 2:1; 1:1; 2:3; and 1:2. Of the four birds ringed in May three were males and one female.

Composition of ages in birds trapped in autumn:

In autumn birds can be aged according to the amount of white on the tail feathers. In first year birds, only the outermost pair shows white and this is sullied with brown. Adults show clear white on the three outermost feathers. Adult males show a very variable amount of pinkish-brown on the breast and only very rarely are they colourful as in spring. In most cases first year birds cannot be sexed in late July — early October, but it is possible to sex some males on account of the grey coming out on the upperparts and traces of pink on the breast.

As expected first year birds are more numerous than adults in autumn. Of 1,005 birds aged during the years 1969-75, 621 were birds of the year and 384 adults giving a ratio of 2.07:1.28. Most birds handled in mid-July to mid-August are first year birds: adults showing a sharp increase after mid-August and reaching a peak in early September (see figure 5). Adults have a complete

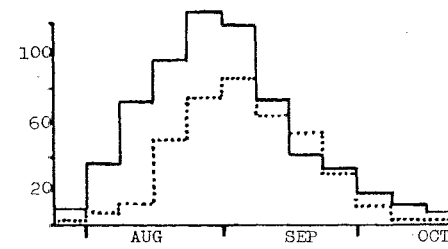


Fig. 5: Numbers of first year (solid lines) and adult (dotted lines) Subalpine Warblers trapped in autumn.

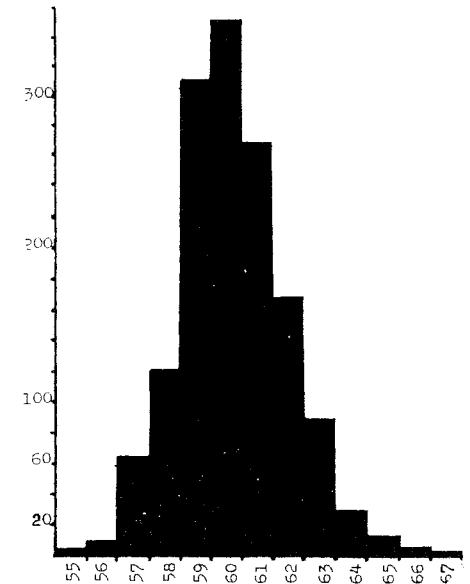


Fig. 6: Distribution of wing-lengths (in mm.) of Subalpine Warblers (both sexes).

post-nuptial moult and therefore cannot leave their breeding grounds before this is complete. In spring many Subalpines show a clear mixture of old juvenile remiges and newly moulted ones. This suggests that many first year birds have a partial moult in winter, in a similar way to Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* (Sultana and Gauci *in prep.*).

Wing-length:

Williamson (1968) gives the wing-length for both sexes of the nominate *cantillans* as 53-62 mm (mostly 57-60), and for *albistriata* as 56-65 (mostly 59-63). Svensson (1975) gives 54-65 without mentioning the races. 1,371 (both sexes) measured (max. chord) in Malta give a range of 55-67 mm, mostly 59-62 (see figure 6). During the past ten years no attempt has been made to determine the races of Subalpine Warblers passing through Malta on plumage characteristics. In all past literature of the Maltese avifauna the nominate *cantillans* has been listed as the race occurring in Malta and the only references made to *albistriata* were of two specimens obtained on 4th September 1914 (Wardlaw Ramsay 1923) and 'a few others' trapped for ringing in both spring and autumn since 1965 (Sultana, Gauci, Beaman 1975). If wing measurement is a reliable criterion in separating these two races, then *albistriata* must occur at least as frequently as the nominate *cantillans*.

Summary

The number of Subalpines ringed during the years 1966-75 shows that this

species is much more abundant in autumn than in spring. In spring Subalpines are more in evidence around the coast while in autumn they are found mostly inland where they feed on fat-producing fruit-food. Spring and autumn weights and retraps are discussed.

It seems probable that many Subalpines seen in spring are those which had failed to make a direct crossing from their wintering quarters to the southern shores of Europe. On the other hand it appears that in autumn many Subalpines use Malta as a refuelling centre from where they presumably make a direct flight to the southern edge of the Sahara.

Males in spring predominate during the earlier part of the main migration period while females are more in evidence during the latter half. First year birds are more numerous than adults in autumn.

In spring many birds show a mixture of juvenile remiges and newly moulted ones suggesting that many first year birds have only a partial moult in winter.

Albistriata occurs at least as frequently as the nominate *cantillans* if wing-lengths given by Williamson are a reliable criterion to separate these races.

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Table 1

	Spring Passage		Autumn Passage	
	first date	last date	first date	last date
1968	10 March	21 April	5 August	10 October
1969	15 March	5 May	27 July (*)	13 October
1970	12 March	24 April	31 July	19 October
1971	21 March	6 May	9 July	10 October
1972	18 March	24 May	9 July	14 October
1973	21 March	27 April	29 July	24 October
1974	20 March	25 April	13 July	26 October (**)

(*) One was seen on 24th July on the boat 'Tirrenia' leaving towards Malta when ca. 4 miles offshore.

(**) One stayed at Xemxija till 24th November.

The period 1969-1973 has received adequate coverage by Beaman and Galea (Ref. 1). The present contribution deals with the autumn passage of 1975.

Observations were made between 13.00 hrs and sunset (circa 19.00 hrs) on twenty-seven days in September and six days during the first two weeks of October. Visits in October were made whenever the opportunity presented itself, and not when the weather appeared favourable. Birds were observed through 8x30 binoculars from the vantage-point used by Beaman and Galea. The relevant statistics for the various species are tabulated (Table 1).

Honey-Buzzards accounted for 48.16% of the total number of raptors observed, rather close to 47.2%, the mean for 1969-73, calculated from Beaman and Galea's data. However, as the present author could not cover October exhaustively, this value is suspect and becomes even more so when one considers the markedly sporadic nature of falcon passages in mid-October.

The numbers of some species were comparable to or even greater than the typical autumn passage, both in absolute numbers and in relation to Honey Buzzard numbers. Of particular interest are the figures for Black Kites, Short-Toed Eagles and Hobbys (Table 2). Several explanations are possible. Species may have been partially overlooked. Alternatively, if one regards the probable frequency of occurrence of a given species as depending on a sum of contributions from various parameters, interspecific variation of the weighting factors for each contribution could account for the observed anomalies. The variation could, of course, be random, especially in the case of the Black Kite where the tendency to form small parties is more evident.

The paucity of raptors, Honey Buzzards in particular, during September and early October 1975 is evident. In terms of the theory of Beaman and Galea, the number and distribution of days with a southerly wind accounts for the kurtosis (damping) of the frequency distribution. Wind direction was south-west on only one day and of the eleven remaining days with a southerly wind, nine occurred before 15/9/75. Moreover, during late September, an eight-day calm period occurred. This would, according to the theory of Beaman and Galea, have resulted in whatever movement there was over the islands occurring generally at higher altitudes and no concentration of raptors would be observed in such conditions. In the presence of fairly cold air aloft, mild local thunder storms are possible and it is significant in this respect that higher numbers were observed under these conditions than on other calm days.

Although a large passage occurred during mild south-westerly and the number of sightings during north-westerly winds accounted for only 8.05% of the total, correlation between southerly winds and number of *P. apivorus* sighted was poor-56.4% of the reported passage occurred during the eight day-calm. This anomaly may be ascribed, at least in part, to the uneven distribution of wind direction over the period under study.

Analysis of the frequency distributions for skewness may well provide corroboratory evidence for Beaman and Galea's theory. My data for *P. apivorus* in 1975 show a positive skew (Karl Pearson's Index = .05609), i.e. the mean

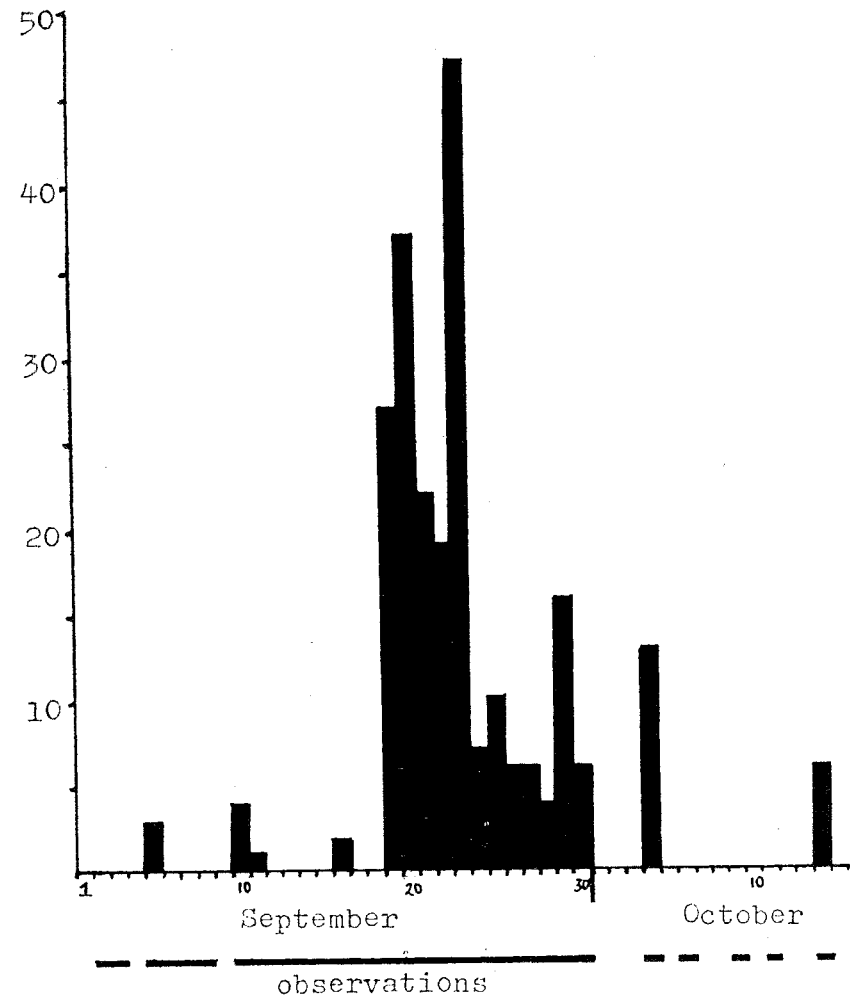
occurs at a higher value than the maximum, showing that more birds are seen after than before the maximum. Although my data for 1974 are less extensive, a positive skew is also observed (K.P. Index = .0779). This could be interpreted as due to a gradual deterioration in weather conditions as the season progresses, resulting in an artificially increased visible migration. The influence of atmospheric pressure on the number of raptors sighted has hitherto only been implied. In the present study 87% of the observed passage of *P. apivorus* in 1975 occurred when the pressure was above the mean for the period in which observations were made. A positive partial correlation coefficient (r) of .4456 was obtained. However, with the sample size employed (32) this value is not large enough to show correlation. Although correlation between *P. apivorus* numbers and atmospheric pressure cannot be assumed at the present time, further investigation along these lines should be undertaken.

The concentrating effect of the higher ground of west Malta has previously been reported (Ref. 1). Its greater importance in autumn may be ascribed to the shifting effect of Gozo. Even if one assumes that most raptors approaching the Maltese Islands in autumn do not make for the nearest land (Gozo), any Gozitan contribution to the sightings in Malta is more likely to increase observed numbers in west than in east Malta by virtue of Gozo's lying to Malta's north-west.

The fairly regular sightings of Lesser-Spotted and Booted Eagles in autumn is interesting. The latter species is most likely to reach Malta by crossing the Adriatic. Sightings have generally occurred during heavy passages and the birds were usually in company with other raptors. Autumn recoveries of broadwings ringed on the breeding-grounds shed little light on the matter. There are nine recoveries in this class (Ref 3-6) and of these birds three were ringed in the East Baltic countries or Finland. Although these birds may well have crossed the Adriatic the sample size is much too small for any conclusions to be drawn. More observations on the Adriatic coasts of Central Italy and Yugoslavia are required to determine the extent to which broadwinged birds of prey cross the Adriatic.

The annual shooting of raptors migrating over Malta does not appear to have been evaluated quantitatively to date. The author kept a record of the daily kills observed for all days on which observations were made. The daily percentage kills (based on total numbers seen) ranged between nil and 25%. The highest percentage kills occurred on rainy, overcast days. A total of 38 raptors were shot down within view. This amounts to 7.7% of the total observed raptor passage. Although it would not be suspected from the above statistics, Buskett is, in fact, a bird sanctuary. These observations refer to a relatively small area of these islands and it is significant that of 33 autumn recoveries of raptors ringed abroad (Ref. 3-6), only 3 were shot at Buskett, suggesting that many more birds are shot elsewhere in the islands. It should be noticed that the above data for Buskett refer to one of the lowest raptor passages on record.

CONCLUSION: There is clearly much need for observations in Gozo. Birds arriving there would have had less opportunity to soar above the visible range and observations are less likely to suffer from the distortions postulated by Beaman and Galea. The relationship between the various parameters and the observed numbers will ultimately be established only by multiple correlation analysis of data obtained from combined visual/radar studies. An individual



Histogram of *P. apivorus* numbers against time: 2.9.75 — 14.10.75.

analysis for each species is, of course, necessary. More observations on the Adriatic coasts of Italy and Yugoslavia are required to determine the extent to which broadwinged birds of prey cross the Adriatic.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank M. Beaman, N. Bonavia, C. Galea and J. Sultana for reading the manuscript. Thanks are also due to J. Azzopardi, R. Cachia Zammit, V. Cilia and M.V. Gauci for allowing me to examine their records for localities other than Buskett.

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Species	No. seen	Range	Mean date of appearance	Standard Deviation
Osprey	3	11/9 to 23/9	18.33/9	
Honey Buzzard	236	5/9 .. 14/10	24.35/9	5.8656 days
Black Kite	20	19/9 .. 4/10	21.50/9	4.5000 ..
Sparrow hawk	1	29/9		
Buzzard	3	19/9 .. 23/9	21.67/9	
Booted Eagle	1	23/9		
Lesser Spotted Eagle	1	23/9		
Short-toed Eagle	5	23/9 .. 14/10	4.00/10	8.9666 ..
Hen Harrier	1	21/9		
Marsh Harrier	12	16/9 .. 4/10	21.83/9	4.1399 ..
Egyptian Vulture	1	22/9		
Peregrine	1	4/10		
Hobby	115	5/9 .. 30/10	19.53/9	8.5631 ..
Eleonora's Falcon	7	5/9 .. 30/10		
Lesser Kestrel	29	3/9 .. 4/10	23.59/9	
Kestrel	30	19/9 .. 14/10	26.03/9	
Unidentified Broadwings	8	20/9 .. 14/10		
Unidentified Falcons	15	20/9 .. 14/10		

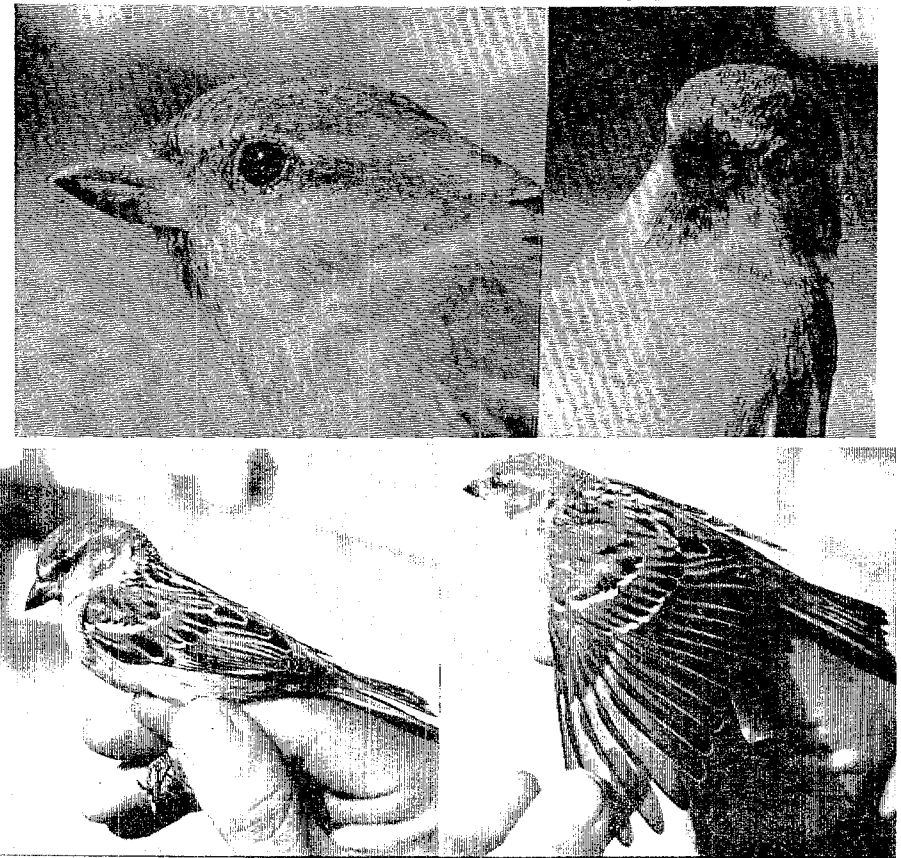
Species (x)	Range of Annual Totals	Total in this study	x/Honey B. (Ref. 1)	x/Honey B. (this study)
Black Kite	7 — 20	20	1.5 — 2.2%	8.5%
Short-toed Eagle	2 — 11	5	.36 — 1.3%	2.1%
Hobby	139 — 233	115	17 — 51%	65.6%

NEW HYBRID *Passer montanus* X *Passer hispaniolensis*

Frank Smith & Sammy Borg

December has always proved to be one of the least exciting months of the year with regard to bird ringing. Ringers may relax and enjoy the festive season before the spring brings forth resurgent bird-life to the Maltese Islands.

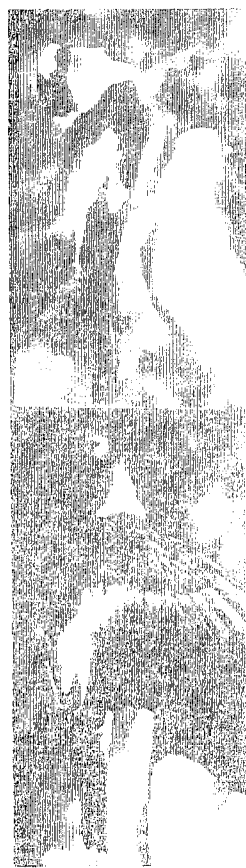
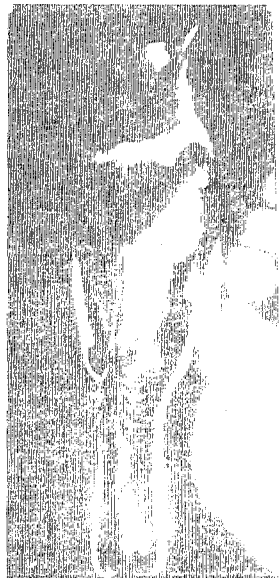
On 7th December 1975 we decided to go bat-netting sparrows at Hal Far during the late evening. The catch was a satisfactory one and thirty-seven sparrows were netted in all. One of the birds in particular showed quite different characteristic features than the rest of the birds. Its devious attempts to escape, its "slippery" smooth feathers and its over all appearance and smaller size were those of a Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*. However, its pugnacious attitude and



Four different views of the hybrid *P. hispaniolensis* X *P. montanus* taken before release. (photos by J. Sultana)

tree before being flushed into the mist-net. It was the second of this species to be ringed by the M.A.S. The Ruppell's Warbler is far more at home in the Aegean when it breeds rather than in Malta where it is scarce: up to 1974 it was recorded in times five A.C.S. publications. A Guide to the Birds of Malta p. 116 (1975).

On the same day (i.e. 27th March) S. Berg and I also witnessed a strange occurrence at Hal Far. We were watching a female Kestrel perched on a rubble wall, when it was noted dropping on something beside the wall. To our surprise the Kestrel's prey was a Hoopoe. On approaching close to the scene of the melee, both birds rose into the air. The Hoopoe was in distress with what seemed to be head wounds and was suddenly carried by the strong wind down beyond the cliff edge overlooking the sea. The Kestrel meanwhile made a circuit of the area on the wing and settled once more on the wall despite the close presence of one of us. It looked very annoyed at having lost its prey. A female Kestrel, possibly the same hungry bird, was observed later in the afternoon harassing other small birds.



Males of *F. hypoleuca* (left), *F. a. albicollis* (right) and *F. a. semitorquata* (top) showing different characteristics.

(Taken by J. Sullivan)

conspicuous whitish eye stripe (supercilium) which passed through, as well as above the eye were indicative of the Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*.

It had a mainly light reddish brown head with the crown feathers greyish brown to grey forming a cap. These grey crown feathers were of even colour from tip to root unlike those of the streaked winter head plumage of the Spanish Sparrow. The latter's crown feathers in the winter plumage are stiff brown though they have broad greyish edges and tips thus concealing the overall brownish appearance. The bill which was of medium size was tipped black with a yellow base. The iris was dark brown while the cheeks were light grey to white with grey ear coverts. It had a greyish black bill similar in width but longer than that of the Tree Sparrow, which reached just to the upper breast. There was a complete absence of any black streaks on the lower breast and flanks. A faint buff to whitish collar was visible. The upper parts and tail were brown with pronounced black markings on the former. The wings had a well defined double white wing bar, while the under-wing coverts were silver grey with dark grey edges on primaries, as found in the Tree Sparrow. The breast and belly were light grey while the flanks were light brown.

The measurements (in mm.) were: length - 123; wings - 68.5; tail - 51; tarsus - 23; bill - 12. The weight was 20.5 gms.

The 1st primary (outermost) was 5.5 less than the primary coverts. Wing-point was 2nd - 3rd - 4th with a notch on the 2nd being 17.0 less than wing-point. 3rd, 4th and 5th were emarginated.

Being a hybrid with an inclination towards the Tree Sparrow, this bird could not be sexed with any certainty. However, after hearing his call on release and observing its behaviour we came to the conclusion that it was more likely to be a male. When released it flew low above the ground continuously calling in what can only be described as a 'soft' Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* like call.

INTERESTING OCCURRENCES (MARCH 1973)

DECAF STAMM

A prevailing NE wind (frequently over 40 knots) and overcast days in late March 1976 produced a number of interesting occurrences in the Maltese Islands. These included the first recorded occurrence of a Coloured Flycatcher's race *Picedula albicollis semitorquata*, mis-named and ringed by the author at Salina on 25th March. It was a male in beautiful condition lacking the complete white collar of the nominate race - *F. a. albicollis*. However, there was more white on the sides of the neck. The extremities of primaries had a slightly brownish tinge; otherwise the complete plumage was pure black and white. The median coverts were tipped pure white.

The nominate race of breeding time extends from south of the Baltic and Moscow in the Balkans, while that of the *semitorquata* is from the Balkans to Transcaucasia (Moscow). The European Great King Migration Systems (1972).

Another interesting occurrence was that of a male Ruppell's Warbler *Sylvia curruca* at Hal Far, on 27th March, seen feeding on the ground at the edge of a scrub

ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES (SPRING 75 TO SPRING 76)

Joe Saltana & Charles Gauci

Polygamy in *Cisticola juncidis*

Since the first nests of the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* were found in 1973 at Xemxija and Ghadira (*Il-Merill* 13:11-13) we have followed with interest the colonization of new areas. In *Il-Merill* no. 15 we reported its establishment in several new localities including Gozo.

During spring 1975 we suspected that one of the three males at Ghadira could have more than one female, as both newly fledged young as well as a nest containing young were present in one territory at the same time. This year there were again three males holding territory at Ghadira; one on the southern side of the pool, one further inland beyond the pool, and the third on the northern side.

The male on the southern side, suspected of being polygamous, had 5 females this year. Two of these laid identical eggs — white ground colour speckled with small brown spots. The other three had different types: white with no spots, white with large terracotta blotches, and very light blue with small purplish brown spots. Eight nests were located in the male's territory from early May to early June. They were all built within 1¼ feet above the ground in *Inula crithmoides* growing amongst the Sea Rush and scattered reeds; the farthest two being less than 150 yards apart. Of these only 4 nests (in all 20 young) were successful; another containing 5 eggs (later 4!) and the other three (2 containing newly hatched young) had their contents robbed probably by a snake.

F. Smith, who helped in our observations at Ghadira, had noted last year that the male builds the outer part of the nest which is then completed by the female. It recurred again this year with at least three nests found in their earliest stages.

This nest-building behaviour and polygamy in the Fan-tailed Warbler is not mentioned by C. Harrison in "A Field Guide to the Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of British and European Birds" — Collins 1975. However similar observations had earlier been reported in Japan by T. Motai, 1973, (Misc. Rep. Yamashina Inst. Orn. 7:87-103). In his paper (in Japanese) the author states that he studied the behaviour of a male *Cisticola juncidis* throughout one breeding season from early April to mid-September. He noted that the male built the outer part of nests which were lined by the females. In all it constructed 20 nests, eight of which were used by different females. He states that only on two occasions did females use more than one nest at the same time. In the paper it is not clear how many females lived in the male's territory. The author also noted that an unused nest may be cannibalized by the same male to build another nest. (Information taken from an abstract by A.S.C. in "Recent Ornithological Publications" *Ibis* 117 (4) 1975).

C. Harrison's Guide gives 'no information' on nesting and the nesting period.

When the young hatch they are atricial and they take 13-14 days to leave the nest. The mouth of the young is orange yellow with two black spots on the tongue.

F. Smith this year observed fully-fledged young eating grasshoppers 1¼

inches long and noticed that the Fan-tailed Warbler 'walks' like a Pipit on the ground.

This species now has spread to many localities and singing males have been noted holding territory in at least five new places, including Rabat where M.V. Gauci has found two nests.

Further notes on the Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia Cetti*)

In *Il-Merill* No. 15 we reported that a pair of Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* had colonized Xemxija where it bred in the thick Tamarisk grove. Unfortunately after raising a second brood the birds deserted the area. The male was last heard in October (1975) and did not return last spring to breed. One of the young which was ringed on 18th May 1975 crossed over to Gozo and was 'controlled' at Ramla Bay on 3rd November 1975.

However this year Cetti's were found breeding at a new area at il-Kuncizzjoni while the three pairs at Wied il-Luq raised successfully two broods each. The young of the second brood (eleven in all) left the nests on 19th-20th July and were still in the company of their respective mothers after 20 days. The three nests were built around bramble strands under a canopy of bramble and other vegetation cover. They were constructed of dry reed blades lined with fine grasses and a few feathers.

Three Interesting Breeding Notes

Spotted Flycatchers *Muscicapa striata* were absent from the 1975's list of breeding birds; however, this year a pair remained to breed once again at Buskett. The nest was built in an arrow-shaped sign-post (approximately 12"x4"x4") whose front glass was broken by a stone which was still in the sign-post. The nest was built between the stone and half of the broken neon-tube inside the sign-post hanging from a tree about 18 feet above the road. On the outside the nest was covered with lichens and hardly contained any cup. When the nest was located on 13th June, it had a 5-day old pullus and 3 eggs of a greenish blue colour speckled all over with reddish brown spots. As expected the three eggs never hatched. When the area was visited on 6th July the fully fledged young was seen being fed by the male not far from the nest-site. In the sign-post we noted that another slightly smaller nest was built beside the old. On closer examination the female was found to be incubating a clutch of five other eggs in the old nest while the new smaller nest was empty. On the latter's edge there was one broken unhatched egg from the earlier brood, probably removed by the parents from the old nest. Unfortunately once again only one young hatched.

A nest of a Quail *Coturnix coturnix* at Ghajn Lukin, in Xaghra, Gozo, had worse fate. It was situated in a cornfield and was only found after the farmer had unknowingly broken all but 2 eggs while the corn was being harvested in the third week of June. When the contents of the two eggs were examined, it was noted that the young would have hatched in three or four days time. The eggs had been laid in a shallow hollow with a few feathers probably shed by the female and had not been put there as a lining. Successful breeding of the Quail in Malta is almost impossible due to gross human interference.

Due to this same interference, the Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*, too, has decreased much as a breeding bird though odd pairs attempt to breed annually.

Last year a pair was seen with fully fledged young in early July at Il-Handaq and this year a pair raised at least three young at RAF Luqa. These were noticed on 16th July one or two days after they left the nest and two of them and the female parent were trapped and ringed. The day before a young bird of a different age was seen with an adult not far away in the same area.

Great Reed Warbler Moulting in August

A Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* which was trapped for ringing at Wied il-Luq (35°51' N, 14°25' E) on 21st August 1975, was found to be undergoing wing moult. According to Svensson's 'Identification Guide to European Passerines', the bird was judged to be in its second year due to its extremely worn plumage.

The moult had just started, with the 1st and 2nd primaries (numbered descendantly) and the 7th secondary (numbered ascendantly) missing. Most greater coverts were also missing but the tail and bastard wing were old. The lesser and median coverts were in active moult while contour feathers were just starting.

The bird was retrapped nine days later (on 30th August). On this occasion the 1st and 2nd primaries were half grown, the third was just out of the sheath and the 4th was missing while 5th-10th were old. The 1st secondary was also missing; the 7th was half grown and the 9th in pin; 2nd-6th and 8th were old. Both wings were proceeding together at the same rate. The tail and alula had not yet started and all the greater coverts had just emerged from the sheath. All the body and the rest of the wing coverts were in active moult. When the bird was released it could barely fly and dropped into the nearest cover twenty feet away.

According to Williamson (Identification For Ringers: I, B.T.O. Guide No. 1) the Great Reed Warbler has a complete post-nuptial moult in winter quarters in Africa. The Great Reed Warbler is a spring and autumn migrant in Malta passing from late March to early June and from early August to early November. Occasional birds are also recorded in July. It has been twice recorded in winter in Malta. The first, which was trapped and ringed on 12th January 1973, was in heavy body moult with old, heavily abraded remiges and rectrices but with the greater coverts in pin. The other, trapped and ringed on 12th December 1975, showed no sign of moult (V. Cilia *pers. comm.*).

The first Lapland Bunting recorded in Malta

During the first three days of November 1975 small influxes of winter visitors occurred in various localities. Chiffchaffs (35+), Dunnocks (42+), Robins (140+) and Stonechats (30+) were recorded on the first at Ramla and Lunzjata Valleys in Gozo. An unusual influx of the Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* also occurred and 15+ were seen on each of the 1st-3rd November at Lunzjata, the highest number ever recorded for 1 day in Malta. These buntings were noted frequenting some fields in which maize was growing. While bird ringing in the area by J. Grech and one of us, a stouter type of bunting was seen on the 2nd in the company of Reed Buntings. It was noted running on the ground in a ploughed field and was flushed towards the maize fields where it was caught in a mist-net. On closer examination it turned out to be a first year male Lapland

Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*.

Its black breast band could be seen when spreading the breast feathers and it had broadly streaked flanks with its underparts and sides white. It had a relatively short-tailed appearance, probably due to the noticeably long upper-tail coverts. Its lesser median coverts were greyish, broadly edged buff unlike the rustic ones of the Reed Bunting with which we could compare in the hand. The buffish edges of the median and greater coverts gave it a double wing-barred appearance. The streaks on the head roughly formed two head stripes running from the forehead towards the nape. It had a rather long hind claw (12.5 mm) which was longer than the toe.

Its wing-point was the 3rd primary which was almost equalled by the 2nd and the 4th, with the 6th primary being 15mm less than the wing-point. It was emarginated on the 3rd and 4th and seemed slightly to be also on the 5th.

The following day (3rd November) a Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* was also trapped for ringing in the same area with other Reed Buntings, providing valuable material for comparative studies. This occurrence of the Rustic Bunting is the 6th dated one for Malta (see MOS 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta' p. 145).

Below is a list of some measurements in mm. and weight in gm. of the Lapland and Rustic Buntings which were ringed.

	Lapland Bunting	Rustic Bunting
Wing	91	75.5
Tail	68	58
Tarsus	21	19
Bill	12	13
Weight	21.2	17.4

The wing-length of 11 Reed Buntings which were ringed during 1st-3rd November had a range of 74-80 mm with a mean of 75.8. Their weight ranged from 15.3-20.0 gm with a mean of 17.3.

The occurrence of the Lapland Bunting (which is an inhabitant of the Arctic regions) in Malta is apparently the farthest south ever recorded.



The Lapland Bunting photographed before release.

(photos by J. Sultana)

Unusual Influxes in Spring 1976

Spring this year, saw influxes of scarce, rare and vagrant species due to unusual meteorological conditions in the latter half of March. A persisting belt

of low pressure along the Mediterranean and the northern coast of Africa east of Malta must have obstructed the northward journey of many species which were pushed westwards towards the Central Mediterranean where the weather was relatively milder. In Malta, a NE moderate wind (Beaufort 2-5) prevailed during the last week of March with an overcast from the 24th to the 30th.

The Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*, usually a scarce spring migrant, was very common on 27th-29th with up to 200+ on 28th in Gozo alone. In the same weekend a male Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia* was trapped in Gozo by a local trapper. The specimen, the fourth known record of the species in Malta was seen in captivity by J. Grech and one of us.

The eastern Collared Flycatcher also made its first appearance in Malta when two males were recorded — the first on the 25th (see F. Smith's article in this issue of *Il-Merill*) and the other was trapped and ringed by J. Grech at Lunzjata on 30th.

Two other vagrant species the Ruppell's Warbler and the Isabelline Wheatear were also frequently observed. Up to 1975 the Ruppell's Warbler *Sylvia ruppelli* had been known to have occurred 16 times (A Guide to the Birds of Malta p. 116). In March and early April this year at least eight were recorded. The Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* was recorded singly or in pairs on up to 7 dates from 27th March to 10th April. Three other birds (S. Borg pers. comm.) had earlier been taken by collectionists in March this year. This species, which was first recorded in 1969, is known to have occurred 11 times up to 1975.

BOOK REVIEW:

ANOTHER VIEW OF MALTESE ORNITHOLOGY

Dominic Cutajar

"BIRDS OF THE MALTESE ARCHIPELAGO": D.A. Bannerman & J.A. Vella Gaffiero, published by the Museums Department, Valletta. Pages xxi + 550. Price £M3.75.

The significance of this new book on Maltese ornithology is not easy to assess as it follows too closely on the MOS's publication "Guide to the Birds of Malta" which had overhauled the scientific status of most Maltese birds. Unluckily the present authors were unable to take this revision in consideration and as a consequence its overall scientific value suffers in comparison; instead it had to rely for such information mostly on *Il-Merill* No. 5 which covered occurrences to 1970 only.

I have to qualify the statement that the present writers were not able to utilise the MOS "Guide" — for suddenly and suspiciously we meet two notices which makes one think. About the Lapland bunting (p. 511) we are told that the authors learned about it through "confidential information" (!) but it appears to have been lifted bodily from the MOS "Guide" complete with its Maltese

nomenclature; there is also the correction of the date of the occurrence of the Dipper (p. 333-335). Among serious researchers, confidential revelations can have no serious scientific standing, still less reliability; to my mind the whole procedure is unethical.

The co-authors of the "Birds of the Maltese Archipelago" divided responsibility for the material; it appears that the descriptions and distribution are the work of Dr. Bannerman, while the local status fell to the lot of Mr. Vella Gaffiero. This division was not always neatly observed, as in the case of the Blackcap (p. 391-401) where Dr. Bannerman trespassed into his colleague's territory and on top of everything, only to contribute a conflicting and tendacious version. This could be confusing to the unwary, but when yet another writer enters the scene to declaim a tiny paragraph of his own — as in the case of the Snow Finch (p. 513-515) — the effect becomes slightly comical.

Perhaps in this instance, one may pardon such eagerness as at stake was a new "record" of a species for Malta which — to heighten the dramatic event — had lain mysteriously hidden for six years in the private records of an active ornithologist who had ample opportunities to publish from several quarters. Why? There lies an enigma which demands forthright explanation if the incident is to achieve scientific credibility.

In spite of such oddities as described above, the book holds much information of value for the enthusiast. Most old publications had interpreted the scene as revealed by shotgun-ornithology, since their sole source of information was the gun. Then the scientific work of the MOS added a new dimension, as the present co-authors acknowledge at almost every page of their book. But the new book appears to emphasise most of all the collectors' point of view, since it culls most new evidence from specimens in private and public collections. In a way this is inevitable for Malta, but it is also a lamentable throw-back to the bad old days. Future scientific work should rely less and less on these unhealthy habits and construct in main its evidence from primary work of research. It will be instructive if from the present experience, we realise and appreciate the importance of our own positive, methodical and planned research. This should be the vista for future work, a challenge to our intelligence which we must not miss.

Unfortunately the two co-authors take on a rather antagonistic attitude to MOS workers which is often unfair as the latter have been the sole group in Malta to have consistently over the years initiated and followed a progressive programme of research. Thus the Sooty Shearwater (p. 528) reported in the MOS "Guide" was rejected in the present work because it "lacks specificity". True enough but the specimen is available for examination, a precaution which MOS have not failed to carry out. By the same standard and reasoning, the present work errs in taking note of many specimens in private collections lacking reliability and all sorts of specificity. In the case of the Sooty Shearwater the co-authors have put "record" in inverted commas and I myself yearn in fact to see more worthwhile original studies in ornithology, rather than this childish craze and rash reportage of new "records" and even priority in inventing new outlandish nomenclature in vernacular — all of which, objectively and at a distance, will one day look pathetically silly.

I was distressed to find traces of apologia on behalf of shooting and taxidermy especially of rare and locally-extinct birds. The account of the Jackdaw

goes a long way to absolve shooters apart from being inaccurate. On the Lesser Spotted Eagle, the co-authors quote Etchecopar & Hue about it being "almost impossible to separate from the Spotted" (p. 69). This is untrue even if coming from such high authority, as the "Flight Identification of European Raptors" will bear out; one has merely to learn about it and try hard. On the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (p. 181) we are asked: "Had it not been collected and preserved, how many would ever have believed in its existence?" Here we have yet another instance where a dead "record" is more important than the live bird. Then on p. 511 the co-authors seem to gasp with surprise that MOS ringers liberated the Lapland Bunting caught in their nets and ringed! Luckily a healthier view of this matter is reflected in the note on the Barn Owl. So there are two approaches, but as dignified human beings unimpressed by the glorification of personal "records", we frankly prefer the humane, the gracious and the life-enhancing rather than the unnecessary butchery which even "scientific" consideration will never justify. E.M. Forster, as I recall, wrote that if a person kills an albatross he calls himself "a sportsman", if he then stuffs it, he calls himself "a naturalist"!

Again the decrease in numbers of turtle-doves is duly blamed on insecticides: have we strangely forgotten the annual heavy toll taken in Mediterranean countries among which our country enjoys some "record"? How is it that these chemicals spared the Collared Turtle-doves?

Dr. Bannerman accuses MOS of including new records without descriptions -- but in each case he is referring to the Systematic List where such descriptions are out of place. Still Dr. Bannerman admitted the Olive-tree Warbler mostly on theoretical grounds on account of "the proximity of some of its breeding grounds". For no one can expect the unreliable Ardoino's mention to be taken seriously while the 1966 record appears to have been acknowledged as in serious doubt. On such slim and doubtful evidence, the species ought to have been relegated to the Doubtful List.

On four separate points the undersigned found himself in violent disagreement. We learn that the Herring gull is increasing rather rapidly and has reached 250 pairs; a recommendation to destroy its nests on Filfla follows. My information is precisely the reverse and that recommendation appears irresponsible. The Sardinian warbler, it is stated, forces its young to leave the nest by stopping feeding; but in fact feeding continues even after the nest is abandoned.

The Blue Rock Thrush is said to migrate, for singles were observed at Salina and around Mdina from October to January which is considered conclusive evidence! It sounds like an ornithological joke. On the Cretzschmar's Bunting, Dr. Bannerman seems to maintain that its occurrence has been overlooked "by MOS active members" (i.e. ringers). If this bird really occurs in the numbers as maintained in the book, it is the Cretzschmar's Bunting which has been evading the ringers' nets -- not the other way round!

One might further add that there never was a Gozo Ornithological Society as referred to twice in the book: also one of the authors claims that one of his "perennial" activity is bird-ringing -- a statement which needs considerable qualification!

All in all and taken with some reservation, the new book is a considerable addition to the subject. The layman is bound to find it of more value especially

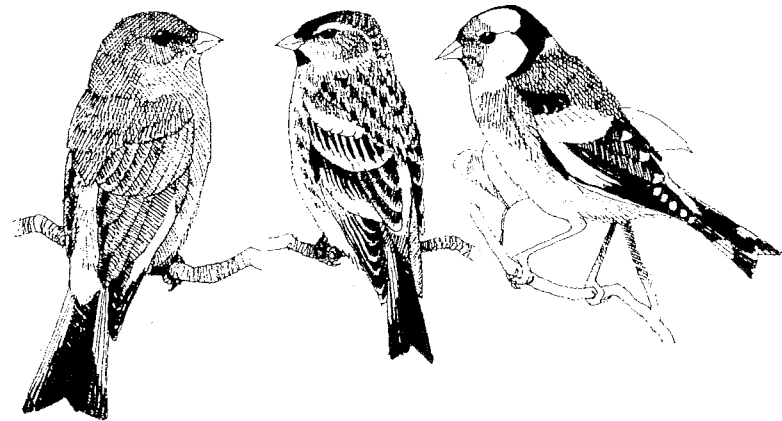
as it is beautifully illustrated in colour -- except for some incredibly short-tailed wagtails as well as some of the warblers. I confess that I was more captivated by the original line drawings many of which are the work of two Maltese bird-artists, Charles Borg and Sammy Borg. The first of these uses a heavy but most accurate touch which vividly creates the bird; Sammy Borg employs a much lighter stroke, suggesting the feathery quality of the bird; most of all I loved his ethereal evocation of the Great White egret. Congratulations to both artists.

The Museums Department too deserves to be congratulated for its enterprise in producing a magnificent book on birds. There is a lot that can be done in the field of natural history and the present experience should help to avoid future pitfalls. Above all we should learn that co-operation between local researchers is most essential especially in those fields where a highly evolved interest already exists. If this lesson is absorbed, then this book will have achieved its most significant objective.

As regards Dr. Bannerman, his knowledge of ornithology is both vast and most impressive, even if at certain points it is beginning to appear slightly dated; but his knowledge of local ornithology is entirely derivative. Thus his forays into the local scene remain unsatisfactory, lacking both in impartiality and critical approach. Mr. Vella Gaffiero was forced to take on the account of Maltese ornithology of which his grasp is not always certain. Indeed it is too vast a subject for one person to tackle even in a life-time as the heroic example of Dr. De Lucca bears out. The days of personal saga -- at least in this field -- are over.

I have indeed been critical of some of Mr. Vella Gaffiero's notes and views, but in fact there is much that one may commend as well. The real point at stake demands a rigorous co-operative effort the need for which will be more pressing in the future than at present. Indeed I feel I ought to say more. What Maltese ornithology now needs is a comprehensive, long-term and methodical rationalisation of future research. The proof of our serious dedication to the scientific aspects of ornithology lies in our ability to translate the above task into reality.

22/8/76.



Greenfinch, Siskin & Goldfinch.

(line drawing by R. Ingram)

HYBRID *Pluvialis apricaria* X *Pluvialis dominica*

Sammy Borg

A hybrid between the Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and the Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica* occurs occasionally on passage. A specimen was taken in Malta on 24th November 1975.

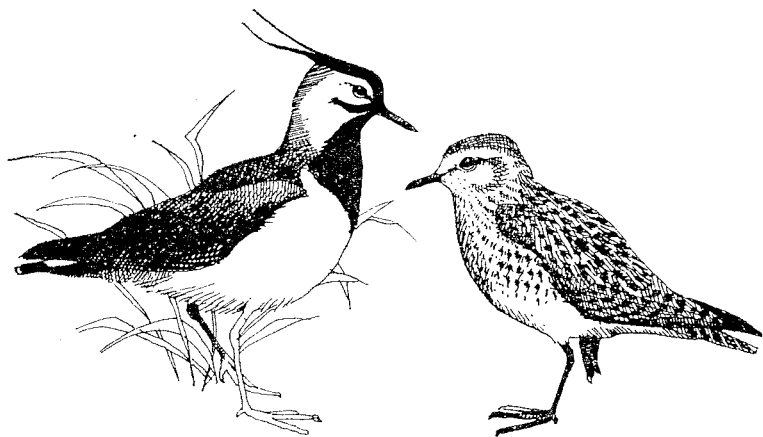
The hybrid looks more golden than the above-mentioned two plovers, particularly on the neck, head, breast and more sparsely on feathers of the flanks; but the markings on the upper-parts are blackish rather than dark brown. The underparts, the chin and eyelids are white, although there is what looks like a faint yellowish eyestripe which continues round between the forehead and the upper mandible, fading into a creamy white colour. The axillaries, which tend to be rather grey than white, are bordered with pearl-grey colouring; it would be on account of these very fine, nearly transparent axillaries which cause the greyish hue. The wings of the hybrid reached the tip of the tail and its legs were long and greyish.

Below is a list of some measurements of the hybrid compared with those of the two plovers, all given in mm.

	Hybrid specimen	<i>P. apricaria</i>	<i>P. dominica</i>
Length	251	270	220
Wing	178	180-195	156-177
Bill	23	21-25	19-23
Tarsus	42	37-42	37-42
Tail	71	70*	59**

* 5 specimens measured

** Only 1 specimen measured



Lapwing & Golden Plover.

(line drawing by R. Ingram)

The above line drawing and the one on the previous page have appeared in the MOS publication 'A Guide to the Birds of Malta'. A few hardbound copies of this publication are still available at £3 each.



The MOS stand at the Malta International Fair
July 1976.
(photo by A.E. Baldacchino)