

bird's eye view



issue 28 • winter 2008


BirdLife
MALTA

was it all an election stunt?

By 1 January 2009 trapping has to become a thing of the past, but will it really?

Before Malta joined the European Union, the government negotiated with the Commission and obtained a transition period to continue to allow trapping of only seven finch species until the end of 2008. According to this accession treaty agreement signed by Malta and the EU, the government had to meet certain conditions and report the progress to the Commission.

However, the government has so far not only missed most of its deadlines but also allowed the trapping of four additional species in direct breach of the agreement it signed with the EU. Campaigns Coordinator Geoffrey Saliba explains the current situation and the impacts of trapping on our wildlife in his article on page 8.

The shortcoming of the government on the trapping agreement is just one of many examples of Malta's failure in its obligations to safeguard and manage its natural

environment, which is now legally part of a greater community.

The full designation of protection areas under the EU's Natura 2000 network has taken almost four years. The government first gave full protection to only four of the 11 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) that met the Natura 2000 protection criteria. Only recently, and after pressure from the Commission and

work of dedicated individuals in the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, were all of these sites given full protection.

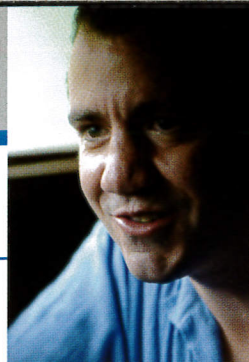
But unfortunately they are only protected on paper, as many of these sites are under threat from road, hotel projects and other development. There is absolutely no proper management plans for most of the so-called protected sites. Furthermore the government has done nothing to clear the illegal hunting and trapping hides on Natura 2000 sites so far.

On paper, environment is a top priority for the government and Malta has designated all its IBAs as protected areas. In reality though, there is almost nothing done on the ground in spite of the fact that Malta joined the Union almost five years ago. This leads us to conclude that the promises made by the government about protecting our natural environment were nothing more than an election stunt.

I would be very glad to be proven wrong by the Prime Minister, who has taken environment under his office. But until we see concrete actions on the protection of the few remaining habitats and sites in the Maltese Islands and sincere cooperation with environmental organisations, we have no reason to be satisfied with the current policies and actions of this government.



Tolga Temuge
Executive Director



Lesser Kestrel

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visiting vips

Head of the European Commission Representation in Malta, Dr Joanna Drake visited BirdLife Malta office on 4 September. Dr Drake and the BirdLife team discussed several issues including the ongoing EU Life Yelkouan Project and the illegal hunting situation in Malta. On 13 October, Italian Ambassador Mr Paolo Andrea Tralbalza paid our offices a visit. He expressed his support to BirdLife's campaign against illegal hunting.



◀ Mr Tralbalza (third from left) visited BirdLife on 13 October.

pretty flamingo

A Greater Flamingo has been drawing crowds to Ghadira since it came in on 18 September. Flamingoes rarely make a landing in Malta, and the few that do never stay long, so the Ghadira bird's long stay is a unusual event. It is an immature bird that still has to grow the characteristic adult pinkish white plumage. This bird too has had its brush with hunters. Some weeks ago it flew off, but soon returned with blood on its face and neck. Luckily it appears the injury was superficial.



◀ This young flamingo has been at Ghadira for more than 10 weeks.

world conference

Our EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater project (Progett Garnija) was one of the topics selected for a presentation by BirdLife Malta at the opening of BirdLife International's World Conference this year. The conference, entitled *Taking on the Millennium Challenge*, was held in Buenos Aires (Argentina) from 22-27 September, and hosted over 550 delegates from more than 110 countries and territories. The event was also attended by HIH Princess Takamado of Japan, Honorary President of BirdLife International.



◀ Joe Sultana, former BirdLife Malta President, meets Princess Takamado.

herons away

On 12 September, Moira Delia and the *Puss in Boots* film crew came to Ghadira to film the release of a rehabilitated Grey Heron. The release went well and the bird was filmed walking off into the sunset. Two weeks later, Moira joined BirdLife staff at Is-Simar, this time for the release of a rehabilitated Night Heron, which flew off strongly.



◀ A rehabilitated Grey Heron regains freedom at Ghadira.

one world

On 24 November, Dinja Wahda 6 came to a close with a prize-giving event held in H'Attard for teachers and children from all primary schools. Seventy-six trophies and certificates were handed out to the schools that had participated in Dinja Wahda, BirdLife's environmental education project, now an annual school project. Present for the event were members of BirdLife's Education Committee as well as officials from Bank of Valletta, BirdLife's partner in education. Also present was Mr Ray Camilleri, Director Curriculum Management, who gave out the trophies to the eager children representing their schools. During this event, Dinja Wahda 7 was launched for the scholastic year 2008-2009.



A student receives the Dinja Wahda trophy for her school from Mr Ray Camilleri.

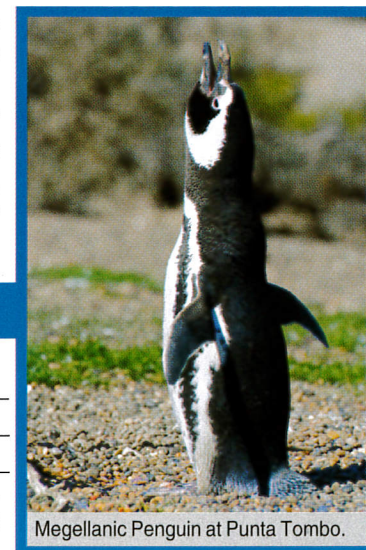
upcoming events

• nature in argentina

date **Wednesday 4 February 2009**

time **6pm** place **National Museum of Natural History, Mdina**

Members are invited to attend a presentation *Nature in Argentina*. Veteran birder and ornithologist Joe Sultana, who has recently returned from a wildlife holiday in Patagonia, will be giving an illustrated talk about his recent experience.



Megellanic Penguin at Punta Tombo.



Tolga Temuge Executive Director

road to perdition

Transport Minister Austin Gatt's sudden interest in Ghadira's sandy beach comes as no surprise to BirdLife Malta.

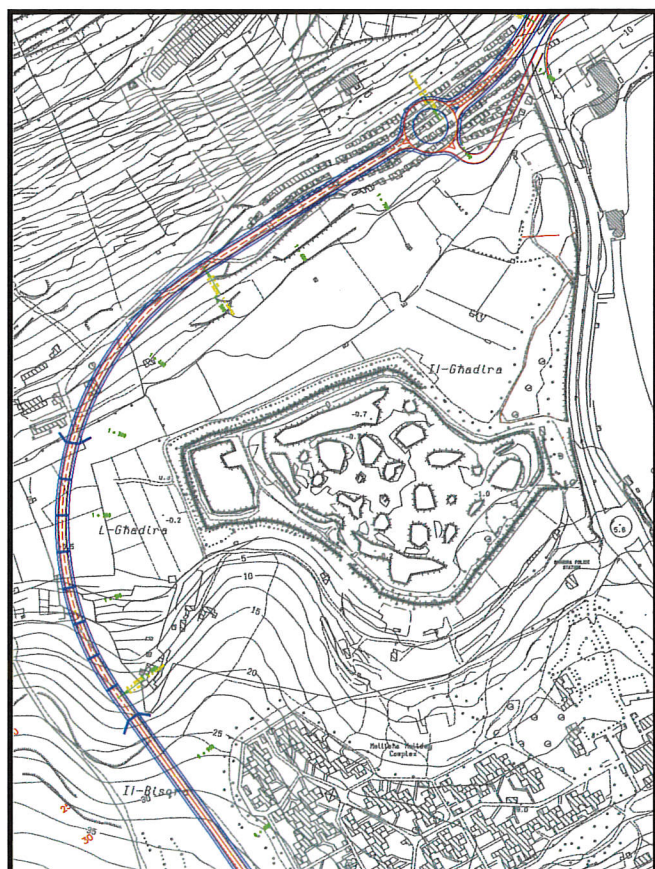
The argument put forward by Dr Gatt that the Ghadira beach would be lost because of the existing road is simply a smokescreen to cover the ecological impacts of building a new road in a protected Natura 2000 site.

no study

The Transport Minister himself admits that there are no studies to back his claim, but at the same time tries to minimise the impact of the new road on the protected habitats at Ghadira. According to the Transport Ministry "the garigue is by definition the lowest grade of natural habitat in our islands" (The Sunday Times, 30.11.08). The shocking thing about this outrageous statement is that garigue happens to be one of the richest and most biodiverse habitats in the Maltese Islands. And ironically enough, the specific garigue area that the proposed road will destroy is one of the main reasons why this area was designated a Special Area of Conservation under EU law.

permanent disturbance

The planned road will not only cause loss of habitat in the protected area but will also cause permanent and irreversible disturbance to the Foresta afforestation project site and Ghadira nature reserve. Furthermore, the new road - unlike



The proposed road cuts right across the rich garigue outcrop known as Il-Biskra (Phase 2 - Foresta), through agricultural fields in Ghadira valley (Phase 3 - Foresta), then swerves and runs north east along the lower contours of Marfa Ridge (Phase 1 - Foresta) to rejoin the main arterial road to Marfa/Cirkewwa.

the existing road - will be elevated and therefore its visual impact on the ecosystem is very likely to be much higher than the existing road.

open to destruction

In addition, opening the presently undisturbed habitat - particularly behind the Danish Village and Ghadira nature reserve - to road development is a major concern. There is no guarantee that once the road is built, there will be no further development next to the new road. Roads of this nature, which are built in hitherto undisturbed habitats, are known to provoke further development.

Since this road project is likely to have adverse impacts on an EU protected Natura 2000 site, the planning process for this TEN-T project must comply with the provisions of the EU Habitats Directive. However the Transport Ministry's approach has so far shown that it will be almost impossible for the project to meet the requirements of EU environmental legislation. Therefore the Minister's statement that the project will be paid for by EU funds is nothing more than wishful thinking at this stage.

biggest test

Prime Minister Gonzi's public announcements and promises that the environment will be the top agenda for this legislature now appear to be nothing but an election stunt. Designating ecologically important habitats as protected areas alone is not enough. It is just the first critical step towards giving Maltese wildlife effective legal protection.

The Ghadira road project is a symbol of how this government looks at nature conservation even when EU protected areas



The proposed road will cut across farmland and smallholdings that occupy the western part of Ghadira valley.

are in question. The Ghadira road project - like many other development projects in the pipeline - poses yet another threat to the limited protected areas in the Maltese Islands, and they are the biggest test this government will go through. Whether it is serious in nature conservation or not is likely to be seen pretty clearly in the near future.



The garigue area south of Ghadira valley is one of two or three sites where the very rare Giant Orchid occurs.



An elevated road that circles the nature reserve on two sides will deter incoming migratory birds especially shy species like Little Egrets.

Raptor Camp 2008

keeping the watch

André Raine Conservation Manger

Short-toed Eagle - a scarce but annual spectacle.



Chris Cutha Zamm

The young Lesser Spotted Eagle glided past the Raptor Camp team stationed at Laferla Cross and settled in a tree in Buskett. It ruffled its feathers and began preening, tired after its long journey and in great need of rest before its onward migration to Africa. As the team watched it through their spotting scopes, they saw two individuals creeping towards the bird...

The team immediately called the ALE, but within minutes there was a single shot, the bird shuddered and struggled out of the tree, flapped briefly and then plummeted into a field. The rest of the incident was caught on video camera - one of the poachers stuffing the bird into his shirt, the pair of them scurrying to the roadside and the dead body being crudely hidden under a rusting barrel. Communication was rapid with the ALE and within minutes the poachers had been caught and the dead bird retrieved.

effective deterrent

This was one of many incidents that BirdLife teams observed since the opening of the hunting season on 1 September, and it amply highlighted the situation in the countryside this autumn. On the one hand, poachers were being more brazen following the first spring without an official hunting season. They were seen shooting protected birds in bird sanctuaries

and despite police presence. On the other hand, it showed the effectiveness of the Raptor Camp teams and the importance of close communication with the police. Others were caught by the police as a result of Raptor Camp reports, and the incidences of shooting on protected species declined as Raptor Camp 2008 kicked in.

During this year's Raptor Camp, 48 participants from seven countries and 11 local volunteers were active throughout the countryside, in both Malta and Gozo. While migration was relatively slow this year, large numbers of raptors were recorded. Indeed, over the two-week camp period, a total of 1529 birds of prey of 14 species were recorded at Buskett



Graham Mudge

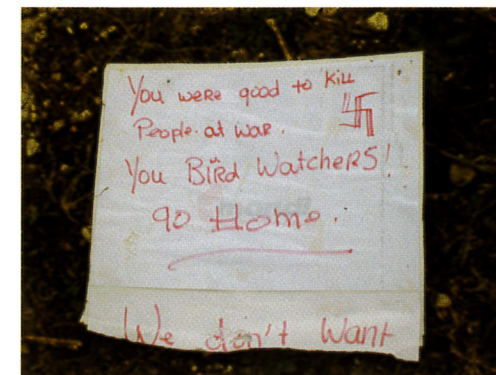
One Honey-buzzard that didn't make it to Africa this autumn.

alone. This year also saw a larger than normal number of rare species such as Lesser Spotted Eagles and Black Storks, both of which were unfortunately often targeted by poachers. In the case of a flock of 12 Black Storks, there were so many hunters driving around the Rabat area chasing them that there was almost a traffic jam. At least three of the storks were unfortunately shot down over the morning, and one of the birds seen leaving the island had its foot blown off - an injury that would probably result in it bleeding to death over the ocean.

"the birds will pay..."

Overall, illegal hunting increased this autumn compared to last year. Between 1 September and mid-October (covering the peak migration period), BirdLife recorded a total of 626 illegal hunting incidents. This represents an increase of 111% from last year's total of 297 incidents in the same period. The number of shot protected birds received by BirdLife also increased this year. Between mid-August and the end of October, BirdLife received 61 shot protected birds - a 144% increase on the 25 received in the same period last year.

The reason behind this increase in illegal activity may be related to the banning of spring hunting. Posts on the forum of the Hunter's Federation (FKNK) website, for example, had hunters openly stating that they would take out their 'revenge' on birds in autumn. These included quotes like "I will 'burn'



Hunters resorted to xenophobia, such as this pathetic comment left for the Raptor Camp teams to find.



Others vandalised public property.

anything that comes in front of me..." and "...the birds will pay for it, my friends". The increase in the number of shot protected birds received by BirdLife may also be in part due to the continuing visibility of our organisation in the media. As more and more people hear about BirdLife's work, the organisation is more likely to get them coming to its offices with the injured birds they find.

While the increase in illegal hunting this autumn shows that there is still a lot more work to be done, it also highlighted the effectiveness of the Raptor Camp in reducing illegal activities. Illegal hunting incidents peaked on either side of the Raptor Camp period, with numbers of incidents dropping sharply during the camp, particularly in the second week.

However, it is ultimately the government's duty to safeguard Malta's wildlife and birds. In spite of the promises made by the Prime Minister before the March election that his government was making the environment a priority, no serious action has been taken so far to put an end to illegal hunting. The fines have to increase, licenses for repeat offenders should be cancelled and a wildlife crime unit that operates all year long must be established.

Otherwise we will continue to witness the same scenario over and over again in the future.



The Raptor Camp 2008 participants make their message amply clear.

BirdLife Malta Images

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To kill a habit

Geoffrey Saliba Campaigns Coordinator



Trappers in Malta mostly target songbirds (finches), using clap nets and live decoys to catch them. They lay fine-mesh nets on the ground and surround them with caged or tethered decoys. Attracted by the decoys, wild birds land within range of the nets, which are then sprung over them by the trapper concealed in a nearby hide. Birds that manage to avoid the nets the first time round are likely to visit the site again and fall victim then. In this way, one trapper alone can easily catch all the target birds in an area leaving none free. This effectiveness is one of the main reasons why trapping is illegal under the EU Birds Directive.

habit of destruction

Apart from removing birds from the wild population, trappers cause huge destruction to natural vegetation and soil by clearing the sites using hoes and rakes, burning the vegetation or spraying toxic herbicides to open space to lay their nets. With over 4000 licensed trappers, that is an awful

lot of our precious little countryside being destroyed year after year.

five-year countdown

During the accession treaty negotiations, Malta obtained a five-year transition period to phase out the trapping of seven finch species. This transition period expires at the end of 2008. When the EU granted this exemption to Malta it also laid out conditions, such as the setting up of a captive breeding centre, so that any trapper who wishes to continue breeding the birds after the ban could purchase captive-bred finches and breed them. The captive breeding programme, however, was established eight months late and so far has failed.

Furthermore, not only has the government done nothing to phase out trapping over the last five years, but it has allowed the trapping of a further four species - including Turtle Dove - in direct violation of EU law and the accession treaty agreement.

a new project

Earlier this year BirdLife Malta submitted a LIFE+ communications project to the European Commission. The aim of the project, which recently received approval, is to inform the Maltese public - including trappers - about the negative impacts of trapping and the benefits we stand to reap once it has ceased completely.

Only when trapping in the Maltese Islands becomes a thing of the past can finches establish healthy breeding populations. Only then will we be able to enjoy our walks in the countryside full of birdsong by Malta's very own songbirds.



A trapper burning garrigue vegetation to clear a patch where to set up his nets.

seeing Seabirds off the Seashore

Helen Raine Project Manager



Andie Raine

By the end of July, the colonies of Yelkouan Shearwaters are deserted in Malta. The adults stop coming back and finally the fledged chicks take the plunge from the cliffs to explore the seas for the first time. These young birds will not come back to land for about four years, when they first start breeding. The EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater project team is investigating where they go through satellite tracking devices. For the adults, however, the pilgrimage back to Maltese waters is annual.

Outside the breeding season, these graceful seabirds spend all of their life on the wing at sea. They have evolved to be able to cope with this harsh existence and lack of access to fresh water. They are masterful fliers and fishers, able to dive to 30m in pursuit of prey. Their eyes are adapted to low light levels so that they can fly and fish at night. Most ingeniously, they also have a special gland on their beak which allows them to filter out excess salt from their bodies.

seagoing search

In order to research such a sea-going bird, it's essential to get out into the marine environment. The Project team has been carrying out boat-based observations for over a year now with the aim of finding out the shearwaters' fishing and rafting (resting) grounds at sea. Ultimately, this will help the government to identify Marine Special Protection Areas and ensure that fishing is well managed in areas that are critical for birds.

Observations on a calm day are perfect; Cory's Shearwaters glide over the water, their wings almost dipping into the waves. Yelkouans are easily identified by their rapid wing beats. Occasionally a Loggerhead Turtle bobs by or a pod of dolphins bow ride for a few minutes. However, in rough weather, the visibility drops and spotting the birds gets difficult, but this can be when the best observations occur. As well as the target shearwaters, the team also spot skuas,



Andie Raine

terns, gulls and, in migration, huge flocks of herons and tired raptors coming in to land.

standard study

The observations are following a methodology which is standard across Europe so the results go into a much bigger database, revealing trends at a European level. Observers record the number of birds seen and also their behaviour. For example, the project team has seen Cory's Shearwaters associating with dolphins and picking off the fish that the dolphins corral. We also know that Yelkouans often raft in small numbers with much larger rafts of Cory's Shearwaters.



Andie Raine

Marine wildlife observed included this Devil (or Manta) Ray.

The team's findings are already re-confirming that Malta is an internationally important location for seabirds. Designation of Marine Special Protection Areas cannot come soon enough and the project will be working with the government and MEPA to achieve this.

Visit our website at www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt

The EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project is a partnership project with BirdLife Malta, Malta Maritime Authority, Malta Centre for Fisheries Sciences, Heritage Malta, Armed Forces of Malta, BirdLife UK (RSPB) and BirdLife Portugal (SPEA). It is 50% funded by the EU LIFE Nature Fund, with contributions from partners, MEPA and HSBC.



Lesser Flamingo - situation still critical.

thinking pink

TANZANIA. In 2007, the government of Tanzania and Tata Chemicals proposed to build a facility on the shores of Lake Natron to extract and process soda ash from the lake to turn into washing powder for export.

Lake Natron is a shallow saline lake in northern Tanzania. Its highly alkaline water chemistry harbours a unique ecosystem that attracts up to 2.5 million Lesser Flamingoes to find safety, sustenance and nesting ground in its waters. Natron is the only breeding site for this bird in East Africa, and for this reason is a listed Ramsar Site of international importance.

The proposed soda extraction project - which would include peripheral development like a coal-fired power station and housing for a thousand workers - will alter the mineral balance in the lake water, destroy the lake ecology and sign the flamingo's death warrant. Although numerous, the Lesser Flamingo is listed as Near Threatened (IUCN, 2008) because of its highly-restricted breeding range.

The proposed development drew immense criticism from a wide spectrum of society, both national and international. BirdLife International condemned the proposal and has repeatedly asked the Tanzanian government to withdraw the project entirely. Together with several other institutions, including 23 BirdLife partners in Africa, BirdLife International is spearheading an advocacy campaign to save Lake Natron and the Lesser Flamingo. Numerous high-level meetings were held to find ways of stalling the project, and media events organised to publicise the issue worldwide. BirdLife's *Think Pink* awareness campaign was launched, as was *The Crimson Wing*, a film about flamingoes by DisneyNature.

Feeling the mounting pressure, the proponents of the soda plant recently made changes in the project, which now requires a fresh EIA. Meanwhile, BirdLife International is sustaining her efforts to defeat the whole project.

For more information and updates go to www.birdlife.org/flamingo

Victor Falzon



the case of M393

On 6 November 2008 a juvenile Greater Flamingo was seen and photographed (photo at left) at Salina by birder Ray Galea. The bird was carrying a plastic ring coded M393, thanks to which the bird's history could be traced. It resulted that the flamingo had hatched - and was ringed as a chick - at Saline Macchiareddu (Sardinia, Italy) on 26 July 2008. It was later seen on four dates from 6-14 October at Saline di Priolo in Siracusa (Italy), after which it turned up at Salina. But the story didn't end there. Six days later (12 November), BirdLife was informed that the intrepid M393 was back at Priolo!



Joe Sultana

monitoring the lesser crested tern in libya

Last October BirdLife Malta was informed that a Lesser Crested Tern was seen roosting on a mussel farm at Ceuta, on the North African coast of the Straits of Gibraltar. Nothing unusual... except that this bird had a BirdLife Malta ring!



A Lesser Crested Tern adult and chick.

The bird was one of 288 chicks ringed on El Ghara Island (Libya) just 58 days earlier by BirdLife Malta ornithologists Joe Sultana and John J. Borg. Joe and John while on an international expedition researching Lesser Crested Terns.

The expedition in Libya last August had an international scientific team involving Italian, Tunisian, French, Libyan and Maltese ornithologists on a seven-day expedition to visit the three tern colonies to continue surveying and monitoring this rare seabird. The Maltese ornithologists were mainly responsible for ringing the birds. The researchers also investigated the terns' diet and breeding ecology. The team spent some days researching this colony and ringing as many chicks as possible. This study may throw light on the species's post-nuptial movements and help researchers trace their migration route to the west coast of Africa.

The researchers then visited a small colony of about 80 pairs on a small muddy islet in Benghazi lagoon, and an even smaller colony of about 20 pairs on the island of Elba (Italy).

This was the second year this expedition was organised by the Libyan Environment General Authority, and sponsored by

the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (RACSPA) in Tunisia. The Lesser Crested Tern is a priority species in the RACSPA action plan, and the Libyan authorities are keen to implement the action plan to study and protect this unique population in the Mediterranean.

BirdLife Malta's ornithologists are looking forward to returning to Libya next year to continue taking part in this important international project.



The **Lesser Crested Tern** *Sterna bengalensis* is a resilient seabird. Its entire Mediterranean population belongs to the race *emigrata*, and the largest breeding colony is on El Ghara Island in Libya, which supports over 1500 pairs. After the breeding season the birds desert their colonies and winter along the coast of Senegal and The Gambia.



BirdLife Malta ringer Joe (centre) shows Libyan officials how to ring the chicks.



El Ghara - site of the biggest Mediterranean colony of Lesser Crested Terns.

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