

# bird's eye view



issue 29 • spring 2009

  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA



# mepa and trapping

Before Malta joined the EU, it signed an agreement with the European Commission to phase out trapping by the end of 2008. During this time Malta was obliged to reduce the number of birds to be trapped. But it didn't. The government has also done nothing to disseminate information to the trappers and public about the agreement and about why trapping is banned under the Birds Directive.

Aware of these shortcomings, BirdLife Malta approached MEPA in 2007 to apply for an EU LIFE+ communication project on bird migration and trapping. MEPA officials showed interest, and the project proposal was written in close collaboration with the Authority. The proposal, which included a letter of support from MEPA, was submitted to the Commission in 2007.

On 7 July 2008, MEPA signed the official Co-Financer Form, committing itself to the LIFE+ Project. The project was approved by the Commission last November, making MEPA's financial commitment towards the Project legally binding.

BirdLife and MEPA then started working on the first actions of the project. But the Authority's support stopped suddenly in January 2009 when MEPA issued a statement claiming that it had originally based its sponsorship of the Project on condition that BirdLife directly involves FKNK and other trappers' associations in the project activities, and that BirdLife failed to fulfil this condition. There was of course no such condition - the only condition set by the Authority in the co-financer form was that the project be approved by the Commission. In its press release, MEPA also gave the

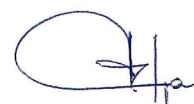
impression that it did not enter into any formal commitment to sponsor the project, a claim it later retracted after BirdLife revealed the Co-Financer Form the Authority signed.

Incidentally, the project does indeed include actions that involve trappers and their organisations - the main aim of the project is, after all, communication with trappers! These actions are scheduled to start in April and will continue till the end of the project. As co-financer of the project, MEPA was fully aware of these facts.

MEPA's sudden change of heart coincides with the fact that the Authority is now under the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). In a meeting with the OPM following MEPA's false accusations, BirdLife showed the OPM officials all the documents MEPA signed and the Grant Agreement approved by the Commission, which includes the project actions involving trappers. Yet, the OPM chose to side with MEPA and distance itself from this information project that has, as a central aim, the protection of the Malta's wildlife and natural environment.

What we think is that the Office of the Prime Minister is just afraid to do the right thing and stop trapping, as it is committed to do.

The overwhelming majority of Maltese wants to see their countryside, and the wildlife they were deprived of, given back by the government. Not only has this government made a commitment to stop bird trapping, but it also promised to safeguard Malta's natural environment before the last elections. We have every right to expect that these commitments be honoured.



**Tolga Temuge**  
Executive Director



Greater Flamingo

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Aron Tanti

## city whites

This year broke the all-time record for roosting White Wagtails in Valletta. The latest BirdLife wagtail survey, held on 10 Jan, logged a total of **7761** birds flying in to roost at Great Siege Square. This is a 43% increase on last year's figure. White wagtails are common winter visitors, and while they spread out in the countryside by day, they group up in the evenings to sleep in large sheltered trees. The Valletta site of this annual winter congregation is the largest in Malta, for which reason it is a national Important Bird Area.

◀ White Wagtails were visibly more common this winter



Geoffrey Saliba

## wetlands day

2 Feb marked this year's celebration of World Wetlands Day, an annual event that raises awareness about wetlands and their ecological value. BirdLife together with partner in education Bank of Valletta, this year organised a special set of activities for children at Ghadira and Is-Simar nature reserves. During the visits, schoolchildren experienced the rich biodiversity of these locally-rare habitats, and learned about wetlands' role in ecosystems. Ghadira and Is-Simar are internationally recognised Ramsar sites.

◀ Schoolchildren enjoying the sights at Ghadira on World Wetlands Day 2009.



Geoffrey Saliba

## book launch

BirdLife Malta's milestone publication *Malta Breeding Bird Atlas 2008* was launched on 27 Feb 2009 at the National Museum of Natural History. During the event, author André Raine gave an overview of the scope, content and work that went into the creation of the book, while co-author Joe Sultana gave a presentation on the history of Maltese ornithology. The event was attended by Hon. George Pullicino MP, Minister of Resources and Rural Affairs. (See also pp 6-7)

◀ BirdLife President Joseph Mangion, flanked by the authors and the Minister, addressing the audience.

## upcoming events

### • birds, bins and bullets

date **Monday 6 April 2009**

time **7pm** place **Eden Cinemas, San Ġiljan** admission **free!**

Members, friends and family are invited to watch *Birds, Bins and Bullets*, a documentary about illegal hunting in Malta and BirdLife's work to stop it. International documentary producer Steve Cummings will be present for this one-night event. Booking essential. Please contact Ms Victoria Caruana on 21347644/5 (office hours) or email [office@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:office@birdlifemalta.org) (see also pg 9)



Desirée Falzon

### • spring watch members' activity

date **Sunday 19 April 2009**

time **3pm** place **Buskett Forest Aparthotel, I/o Had-Dingli**

Take an active part in Spring Watch Camp this April. Meet us at the aparthotel for the talk *Identifying Common Spring Birds* and a brief explanation of the camp's objectives. The group will then enjoy a nature walk along Dingli Cliffs with BirdLife volunteers who will point out the different species of flora and fauna. After the walk, members can join the Spring Watch international ornithologists at one of the birdwatching observation points. To book your place, please contact Ms Victoria Caruana on 21347644/5 (office hours) or email [office@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:office@birdlifemalta.org) (see also pg 8)



BirdLife Malta

### • annual general meeting

date **Wednesday 20 May 2009**

time and venue to be announced at a later date

Members are invited to attend BirdLife Malta's 47th AGM. The meeting will include reports about progress in the various fields of the Society's activity over the past year, including a Financial Report. During this meeting, a new Council will also be elected for the next two years. Members wishing to stand for election please contact the office for an application form. Prospective candidates must be seconded by 5 paid-up adult members. Applications must be received by the BirdLife Electoral Commissioner (BirdLife address pg 2) by not later than 15 April 2009.

  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA  
**47th AGM**





# a rough start but still in the running

**Geoffrey Saliba** Campaigns Coordinator

With spring just starting, not many people realise just how special 2009 is for migrating birds. Starting this year, bird trapping is illegal, and all birds can now fly safely across Malta. But can they?

Bird-trapping is illegal in the EU. As the use of clapnets is a highly effective method of catching birds, it is very damaging to wild birds populations, and also destructive on habitats. When Malta joined the EU, it negotiated a five-year phasing out period for trapping, subject to certain conditions. This period of grace was given to allow Malta time to prepare for the change by disseminating information on trapping and the upcoming changes in the law. Unfortunately this didn't happen. Still, as of 1 January 2009 trapping should be illegal as set out in the Accession Treaty.

## confusion tactics

There is some confusion among trappers as to whether or not trapping has been stopped. The government hasn't amended the law to render trapping illegal, nor has it publicly announced that it will honour the Accession Treaty. This is

giving some trappers false hopes that trapping will continue despite the fact that the Accession Treaty made it clear that trapping had to stop on 31 December 2008. To make matters worse, the FKNK is lobbying for the continuation of trapping. Not only is the federation asking for trapping to continue, but it is also asking for more species to be added to the trapping list, a longer trapping period (including spring), and licenses for nearly double the number of trappers previously licensed.

It is very clear that the dissemination of the correct information on Malta's legal obligations is needed. Spreading such information is one of the aims of the EU Life+ Project on Bird Migration and Trapping.

## a launch, a fire... and a u-turn

The project was launched in January, with six billboards erected around Malta. Within days, the first billboard was set on fire (photo above) and 375m<sup>2</sup> of vegetation at Ghadira nature reserve burnt. Thanks to the quick response of the police and civil protection department the fire was rapidly controlled. Had it not, the damage would have been much worse.

On the day of the arson attack, the FKNK issued a statement criticising MEPA for supporting the project and accused the government and the EU of using BirdLife to "provoke" trappers. Unbelievably, MEPA's response was to claim



Some trappers are even upgrading their sites - note the new brick extension being added to the trapper's *dura* pictured above.

publicly that it had never officially supported the project (see also the editorial on pg 2)

BirdLife promptly called a press conference where the press were shown the Grant Agreement, clearly showing MEPA's commitment to the project.

On 16 February, BirdLife filed a judicial protest against MEPA, calling for the Authority to withdraw its allegations about BirdLife and to honour its legal obligations, rather than use its failings to undermine a conservation project.

## still in the running

Despite the hiccups, however, the project is progressing. Talks and presentations to university students have already been given and several more are planned. The project is now moving into an exciting phase: meeting the trappers! Several meetings have been arranged as spring migration gets under way. The intention is to create dialogue between project staff and trappers to help make the transition of Malta from a trapping to a non-trapping country as smooth as possible.



BirdLife Executive Director Tolga Temuge (left), with lawyer Franco Vassallo, on the day that BirdLife lodged the judicial protest.



Ghadira managing warden Charles Gauci surveys the vegetation destroyed by the February arson attack. The species were mostly Shrubby Orache, African Tamarisk, Common Reed and Golden Samphire. It will be many years before the vegetation will regrow to its former state.





Charles Coleiro

# it's out...

André Raine Conservation Manager

In February 2009, BirdLife Malta launched the *Malta Breeding Bird Atlas 2008*. This was the first ever breeding bird atlas published for Malta. This ambitious book maps every breeding bird species in the country on a 1km<sup>2</sup> grid. From Spanish Sparrows to Common Chaffinches, the atlas considered every bird recorded exhibiting breeding behaviour over the 2008 breeding season. With over 54,000 birds counted by our fieldworkers, that's a lot of birds...

## mammoth task

To undertake such a task required serious amounts of fieldwork. Thirty-one ornithologists and birders, both local and international, teamed up for the project and no corner of Malta and Gozo was left unexplored. The Atlas used standardised methods compatible with other atlas projects throughout Europe, breeding codes adopted by the European Bird Census Council, and was carried out in collaboration with the British Trust of Ornithology.

## mixed fortunes

So how did Malta's breeding birds fare in 2008? Common species such as Spanish Sparrow and Sardinian Warbler

were found to be widespread throughout. The same was true for Zitting Cisticola, which was first recorded breeding in Malta in 1973. This species has made up for lost time and was recorded in 83.5% of all surveyed squares.

The importance of BirdLife's nature reserves was also highlighted in the Atlas. G'adira remains the only site in the Islands with a breeding population of Little Ringed Plover, while Is-Simar held the only breeding pair of Common Coot. This species nested for the first in Malta last year.

Twenty-nine bird species were confirmed breeding in 2008.

## immediate impact

As I am sure everyone is aware, spring 2008 was the first year with no hunting, thanks to BirdLife's hard work and an interim measure from the European Court of Justice. The ban had an immediate impact on our breeding birds. The Atlas showed that Common Swift was seen exhibiting breeding behaviour in seven different squares in Malta and Gozo - its best year to date.

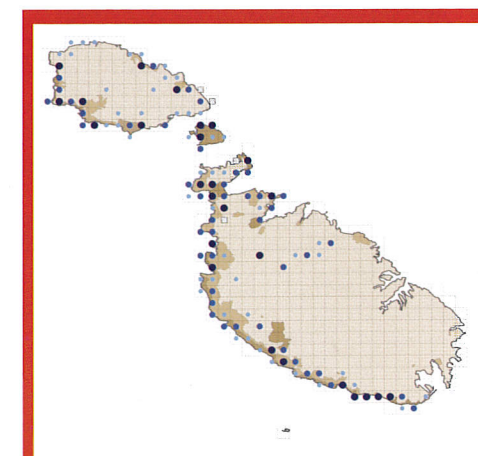
The same was true for Collared Dove, cousin of the Turtle Dove, which was found in 19 squares as it used a hunting-free spring to expand beyond the confines of its traditional Mellie'a breeding area.

What of our fabled Turtle Dove? During the Atlas fieldwork, we found prospective breeding birds - including displaying

males and birds paired up in the summer - in a total of 14 squares in both Malta and Gozo making 2008 the best year for this species in a very long time. Unfortunately, the opening of the rabbit-hunting season on 1 June meant that hunters again used this loophole in the law to shoot birds, and one by one the would-be breeding Turtle Doves disappeared.

## stark reality

The Atlas also emphasised the stark reality regarding bird species targeted by poachers and trappers. Malta in 2008 is still devoid of breeding Peregrine Falcon and Barn Owl, despite plenty of nesting habitat and an abundant food supply. A probable breeding pair of Common Kestrels was the only glimmer of hope for the raptors. At



Every species in the Atlas is accompanied by a distribution map. The map above shows the 2008 distribution of breeding Blue Rock Thrush.

the same time, only a few finches struggled to breed in a countryside filled with trapping sites. The fact that one or two pairs of finches, such as Common Chaffinch and Serin, did actually attempt to breed in 2008 shows that these species can indeed start a population in Malta, if only they are given a chance.

These surveys represent an important step forward for conservation and ornithology in Malta. The *Malta Breeding Bird Atlas 2008* provides us with an effective and rigorous way to assess population changes in the future. Hopefully the future will involve healthy breeding populations of finches and Turtle Doves, and

pairs of Peregrine Falcon reclaiming their roles as the apex predator in Maltese skies.

*This publication was funded by the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs.*

Sean Gray (www.grayimages.co.uk)



Given the chance, Common Chaffinches (male bird pictured above) would soon establish a stable breeding population in Malta.



The Yellow-legged Gull's breeding population is largely restricted to a sizeable colony on Filfla. Above, nest with newly-hatched chick.

André Raine



## Get it now!

Don't miss your copy of the latest BirdLife publication.

The *Malta Breeding Bird Atlas 2008* is...

- the result of a season-long survey by 31 ornithologists and experienced birders
- collated, analysed and written by three professional ornithologists
- produced in an attractive, easy-to-follow manner
- illustrated with 100 photographs and over 50 maps
- printed in A4 format and in full colour throughout
- for sale from BirdLife's office<sup>1</sup> in Ta' Xbiex, from G'adira and Is-Simar nature reserves, and leading bookshops
- priced at €10.00 (for BirdLife members at just €7.00<sup>2</sup>)

Don't wait too long - availability is limited.

<sup>1</sup>to order by mail, please add €1.25 (local) or €6.88 (EU) for postage and packing  
<sup>2</sup>only from BirdLife outlets and on presentation of a valid membership card





The year 2008 was a year of contrasts for illegal hunting and trapping. Spring 2008 will long be remembered as a victory for conservation as it was the first year that a spring hunting season was not opened in Malta. While many hunters ignored the spring hunting ban, particularly in certain areas such as the south and on peak migration days, overall hunting pressure was markedly reduced. This meant that not only could people once again enjoy the countryside in spring, but also that the killing of protected species dropped dramatically.

### significant reduction

At the BirdLife Malta office, the usual spring flood of dead and dying protected birds slowed to a trickle. In 2008, we only received eight shot protected birds in April and May - compare that with the 41 received over the same period last year. This was mirrored by a significant reduction in the number of poachers seen shooting protected birds.

BirdLife expects that spring hunting is now a thing of the past (where it belongs), and that the government will not open another hunting season in spring 2009. To this end BirdLife will be running the Spring Watch Camp (see box) to monitor bird migration and illegal hunting.

### taking their revenge

On the downside, the ban on trapping in spring fell on deaf ears in 2008, with large numbers of trappers merrily continuing to trap birds in spring regardless of the law. Likewise, while illegal hunting in spring was significantly less, the

poachers made up for it in autumn. Hunters on the FKNK website forum wrote that they would take their 'revenge' on birds in autumn and sadly, illegal hunters appeared to put this in to practice. We saw a 148% increase in shot protected birds received in autumn over the same period last year, while the vast majority (92%) of reports of poachers shooting protected species came from this period.

### still serious

So while we have seen some gains in 2008, illegal hunting and trapping is still a serious problem in Malta. It is only when the government takes this issue seriously and provides the ALE with the necessary resources to tackle this widespread problem that we will see a real change in the countryside.



**International volunteers will once again be visiting our shores to record migration and report illegal hunting to the police. Spring Watch is held during the peak migration period and this year will run from 11-26 April. Teams will be deployed throughout the Maltese and Gozitan countryside on morning and afternoon watches. Members are welcome to join any of the teams during these watches. If interested please call 21347644.**



### moussier's redstart

In November 2008, two birders spotted this spectacular male Moussier's Redstart (left) at Xaghra I-Hamra. The news zapped across the birding grapevine like wildfire, and in no time bands of eager birdwatchers descended on the area with binoculars, scopes and cameras, anxious to see whether they were still in time to add this "lifer" to their checklist. As it turned out, there was no need for worry, as the bird stayed in the windswept garrigue area for quite some time, chasing Black Redstarts and Robins from his patch. Moussier's Redstart very rarely occurs in Malta. It is common enough in the western half of North Africa, but does not usually migrate across the Mediterranean.



### cream-coloured courser

On 4 February 2009, two Cream-coloured Coursers were seen in the airport area. The birds stayed there for some days and were seen more than once, then left. On 17 February, a third bird was seen and photographed (left), but apparently didn't stay long, as it was not seen again later in the same day. Coursers are among the less familiar waders seen in the Maltese Islands and while not considered extremely rare, they are very scarce and certainly are not seen every year. Although it belongs to the shorebird group, the Cream-coloured Courser is more usually encountered inland in the flat, dry and semi-desert open country rather than on the coast.

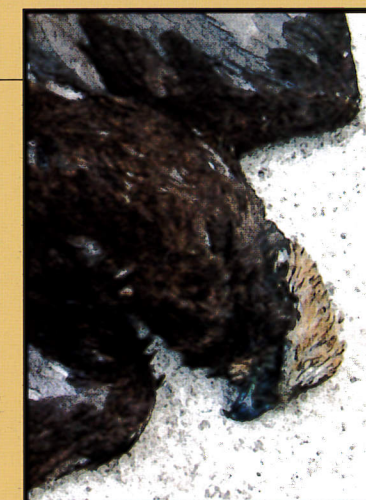
### new film

## birds, bins and bullets!

*Birds, Bins and Bullets* (2008) is a documentary about illegal hunting and BirdLife Malta's work to stop it. The film shows in stark reality what BirdLife's birdwatchers and volunteers go through every spring and autumn, as they face threats, abuse and attacks while the teams work closely with the police to stop illegal hunting.

The 70-min documentary is produced by British film-maker Steve Cummings and will be showing at a special one-night screening for a select audience. Mr Cummings will come to Malta to be present for this unique event, which is being organised with the courtesy of Mr Ian Decesare, Managing Director Eden Leisure Group.

The screening will be free for members, families and friends, but booking is essential as places are limited. To book, please call Ms Victoria Caruana on 21347644-5. The film will be showing at the Eden Cinemas (San Giljan) on Monday 6 April 2009 at 7pm.





## hasankeyf under threat

**TURKEY.** The Euphrates Soft-shelled Turtle is a semi-aquatic freshwater turtle native to Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The species occurs almost exclusively in the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and is on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The turtle is one of many rare species threatened by a massive dam project that the Turkish government wants to build on the Tigris river. It is also the mascot of Doga Dernegi's (BirdLife partner in Turkey) campaign against the Ilisu dam project.

The Ilisu Dam is planned with a power capacity of 1200mW to generate 3.8 billion kW hours of electricity a year. If the controversial project goes ahead it will have serious impact on many rare and protected birds such as Bonelli's Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Lesser Kestrel and Great Bustard; on mammals like Striped Hyena, Eurasian Otter; and several globally threatened plant species around the Tigris.

The project will also cause displacement of tens of thousands of people and the loss of unique cultural heritage sites - the



Lesser Kestrel - threatened by the dam project.



Hasankeyf - the dam project will destroy both the site and the ecology of the river basin.

region is part of ancient Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Civilisation. Of the more than 300 archaeological sites in this area, 83 will be drowned and 14 affected by dam bank erosion. The most important site is the town of Hasankeyf, a 12,000 year old site, which will be partially flooded if the project goes ahead.

Thanks to Doga Dernegi's strong campaign the German, Austrian and Swiss export credit agencies recently declared they have suspended financing of the Ilisu Dam project as Turkey has failed to fulfil the criteria conditional to the release of credits. However the threat is still imminent as Turkey tries to show it can meet the conditions.

The irony is that the very same European countries financing this project wouldn't even dream of building it on their own soil. The dam project will not only destroy one of Turkey's most important cultural sites but may also drive the region's endemic species to extinction.

Doga Dernegi is calling on the Turkish government to cancel the project and to propose Hasankeyf as a candidate UNESCO World Heritage Site, to ensure that the unique ecosystem and cultural sites are preserved for future generations.

more at [www.dogadernegi.org/english/](http://www.dogadernegi.org/english/)

## passing of a friend

**UNITED KINGDOM.** Mont Hiron, from Bloxham, naturalist and BTO bird ringer, passed away on 1 January 2009. Way back in the 1960s, Mont helped BirdLife Malta (then MOS) set up a bird ringing scheme in Malta. In the photo he is seen showing how to weigh the very first bird caught for ringing in Malta - an Icterine Warbler - during the first bird-ringing training session at Pergla (Gozo) in September 1965. BirdLife sends its condolences to his children John, Graham and Ann.



Tolga Temuge

Doga Dernegi

Joe Sullivan



"How about we grow a forest?"

It was the sentence that started it all...

It was 1995, we were seated at a 'Klabb Huttat' committee meeting, and we were discussing ideas for a Millennium Project. The Y2K hype had been hotting up for some time and we too had decided to capitalise on this once-in-a-thousand-years occasion and give a truly practical gift to nature. So, the idea of growing a new forest for the future not only fired our imagination, but it also seemed the proper thing to do. Malta had been losing its tree cover since the Stone Age, and with the woodland we also lost much biodiversity. Now, at the threshold of the third millennium, Malta had no original forest left, and we thought it would be the right thing to regrow some of that lost forest.

And so, we made this the club's pet project, and called it **Foresta 2000**.

The original idea was to plant two thousand oak trees somewhere. Well before thinking about a site where all this could happen, we had to begin at the beginning: two thousand pots had to be bought for the acorns. To raise funds we started *Bolli għall-Ballut* (Stamps for Oaks) in 1996 - a regular appeal in *Il-Huttat* magazine where we asked young members to send us used stamps, which we then sold from Ghadira. Within a year, Lm50 (€115) were raised and the pots were bought.

Next, we collected a few thousand acorns from the Holm Oak groves at Mgjebaħ and Wardija, and schoolchildren from Fgura added more from Buskett. In 1997 and 1998 we organised acorn-sowing activities for young members at Is-Simar, where we had a nursery ready to receive the pots. Eager young hands made short work of the job, and soon the pots were under the drippers.

Foresta 2000 is a joint project of BirdLife Malta, Dinl-Art Helwa and PARK.

Phase One was now accomplished with total success: a humble beginning, young members' full participation, voluntary work

<sup>1</sup>Klabb Huttat is BirdLife's junior section.

at all stages, and a nursery full of acorns germinating in their pots. Soon the young oaks would be outgrowing their pots and wanting to spread their roots.

It was time to start looking for a site...

To be continued



▲ Klabb Huttat members present pots to the managing warden at Is-Simar.



▲ Young members preparing the pots to receive the acorns.



▲ By spring of 1997, the tree nursery at Is-Simar was already filling up.

Victor Falzon

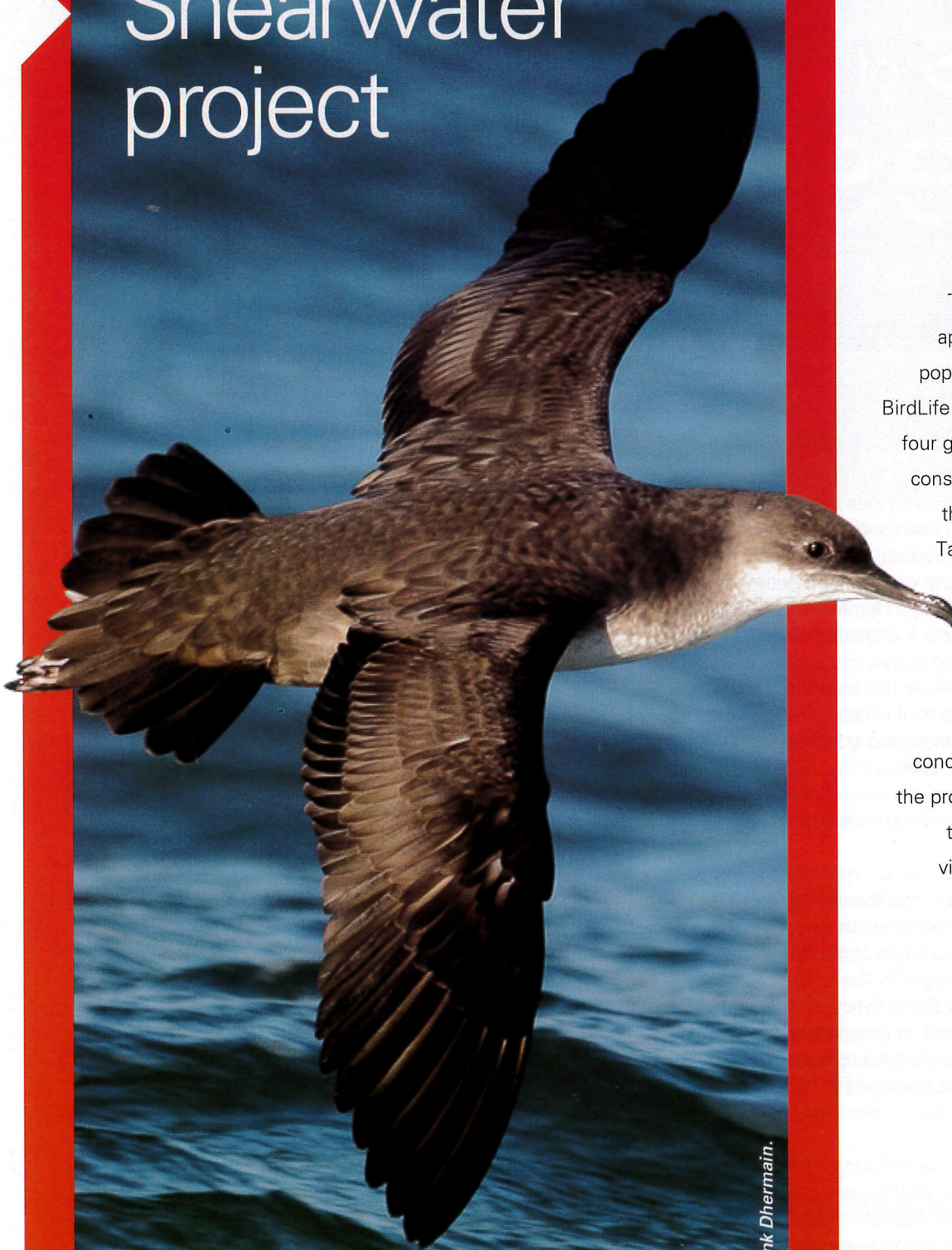
Victor Falzon

Victor Falzon

Agnes Scicluna



# The Yelkouan Shearwater project



**Supported by  
HSBC Cares For The  
Environment Fund.**

Photo courtesy of Frank Dhermain.

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

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

  
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