

bird's eye view



issue 34 • autumn 2010


BirdLife
MALTA



investing in the future

Over the past few years, our organisation has grown both in size and in its operations. In addition to the management of Ghadira and Is-Simar nature reserves and the co-management of Foresta 2000, we have taken on two major EU LIFE projects, launched an international campaign against spring hunting, carried out significant surveillance and advocacy work to clamp down on illegal hunting, produced the first *Breeding Bird Atlas* of Malta, and done annual research work on farmland birds and much more scientific and advocacy work.

But one area of our work stands out in terms of success and importance: our Dinja Waħda (One World) environmental education programme. This amazing project was developed by BirdLife Malta's dedicated Education Committee in the 1990s. It used to be run by volunteers and part-timers every two years, until Bank of Valletta became BirdLife's education partner in 2007. Since then, thanks to the bank's co-financing and its committed staff - whose involvement goes beyond just providing funds - Dinja Waħda has become an annual event that reaches over 90% of all state and private primary schools in the country.

Dinja Waħda's professional structure provides expert help for teachers who voluntarily dedicate part of their busy schedule to do its activities. The aim of Dinja Waħda is to instil in children a love for wildlife and an understanding

of nature conservation. Each year we aim to get more schools, more teachers and more children to take part in Dinja Waħda, and this we do by investing more resources and creating additional activities. Thanks to support from the Directorate for Quality Standards in Education, a teacher now visits schools regularly to help out and advise on Dinja Waħda activities. Thanks to BOV's financial input, we now have a full-time project coordinator who oversees the implementation of the programme.

In forthcoming years, BirdLife Malta not only aims to maintain the momentum of Dinja Waħda, but also to expand its reach and effectiveness. As in everything we do, support from our members is central to the success of our projects. This year we are therefore launching an appeal to our members who are willing to provide additional funds for what is probably the most important work we carry out as a nature organisation: education!

With your support and the commitment of our staff and volunteers we are aiming for future generations who will stop seeing wildlife as a resource that can be exploited for self interest, but instead as a treasure that needs to be preserved for all.

Thank you for being part of BirdLife Malta. Best wishes.

Tolga Temuge
Executive Director



Little Egret

Bird's Eye View
6 Dec 2010
Issue 34

Executive Editor **Tolga Temuge**
Associate Editors **Victor Falzon, Geoffrey Saliba, Chloe Swann**
Publisher **BirdLife Malta**
Printer **Poulton's Print Shop**
Contributors to this issue **Nicholas Barbara, Victor Falzon, André Raine, Geoffrey Saliba, Joe Sultana, Chloe Swann, Tolga Temuge**
Photography by **Adrian Aquilina, Ian Balzan, John J. Borg, Denis Cassia, Matthew Borg Cardona, Victor Falzon, Nicholas Galea, Mark Gauci, René Rogninaud, Joe Sultana, Aron Tanti, Giulia Valentini.**
Design **Victor Falzon**
Front cover photograph by **Nicholas Galea**



BirdLife Malta
mailing address
57/28, Triq Abate Rigord,
Ta' Xbiex XBX 1120, Malta
tel +356 21347644/5 fax +356 21343239
email office@birdlifemalta.org
website www.birdlifemalta.org

© 2010. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.

All information reported in this publication is correct at time of going to press.

This magazine is printed on Total Chlorine Free paper.

contents

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| editorial | 2 |
| news | 3 |
| upcoming events | 3 |
| the dread wood | 4 |
| a september to remember | 6 |
| no place to rest | 7 |
| filfla rock of life | 8 |
| dam of destruction | 10 |
| a year of birding | 11 |



BirdLife Malta

world tourism day

27 September was World Tourism Day, an annual themed event launched by the UN's World Tourism Organisation. This year, Tourism and Biodiversity was chosen in order to raise awareness of the world's fragile biodiversity. In Malta, a programme of 17 different activities was organised, with BirdLife Malta and other NGOs focusing on various aspects of our natural environment. The events began on 19 September with a Biodiversity Fair at the National Museum of Natural History in Mdina. This was followed by, among others, walks at Il-Majjistral national park, birdwatching at Ghadira and Is-Simar nature reserves, raptor watches, snorkelling at Qawra and a tour of Ta' Ċenċ. The programme was well attended, with about 1600 people enjoying the varied and instructive events in connection with Maltese biodiversity.

Ghadira was one of the destinations on the Tourism and Biodiversity programme.



Nimrod Milsud

international fairs

Last summer BirdLife Malta attended two international bird fairs: the British Birdwatching Fair in the UK, and the Falsterbo Bird Show in Sweden. European Voluntary Service intern Jess Chappell, assisted by local and international volunteers, engaged with more than 600 visitors to the BirdLife Malta information stand at the two fairs. Focusing on the illegal hunting campaign, support was gained through sales, donations and new memberships. Public response was extremely positive, and our talks on illegal hunting given at each fair were well attended.

Jess Chappell manning the BirdLife Malta stall at the British Birdwatching Fair.



Adrian Aquilina

dinja waħda launched

On 13 October 2010, the Dinja Waħda launch and prize-giving event was held. Dinja Waħda is BirdLife Malta and Bank of Valletta's annual environmental education project for primary schools, and the October event awarded participating schools for their commitment. Speaking at the event, BirdLife Education Coordinator Desirée Falzon said that a record 97 (out of 105) primary schools took part last scholastic year. Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism, Environment and Culture Dr Mario DeMarco then presented the trophies to the winning schools. With support from the Directorate for Quality Standards in Education, we deliver Dinja Waħda each year to ensure that today's children grow into adults with a sound environmental ethic.

Hon. DeMarco chatting with children from one of the winning schools.

Mrs Elizabeth Broadbent Jones of Farnham, Surrey (UK), who passed away recently, has bequeathed a legacy of **£St.1000** to BirdLife Malta. BirdLife is grateful for this generous gift.

upcoming events

• film: the crimson wing

dates **24-28 january 2011**

venue **eden cinema paceville** • time **10am** • price **FREE**

In a remote and forgotten wilderness, one of nature's last great mysteries unfolds: the birth, life and death of a million Lesser Flamingoes. Against a dramatic backdrop of never-before filmed landscapes, these secretive birds survive and prevail over danger and fate. Set in the extraordinary Lake Natron in northern Tanzania

this inspiring story reminds us that here on earth is a universe waiting to be discovered. *The Crimson Wing, Mystery of the Flamingos* will be screened daily during a Cinema Week organised in conjunction with Dinja Waħda. Members are welcome to attend any of these screenings, but please call 21347644/5 to book a place. **Eden Cinemas** and **Disney Productions** have kindly waived all expenses for this activity, and BirdLife Malta is very grateful for their support.



Disney

See also page 11 for more forthcoming activities.

the dread wood

Geoffrey Saliba

The remains of more than 200 dead birds were found there in 2009, and a search this year uncovered carcasses of more than 80 birds. A survey revealed 256 hunting and trapping hides, all built on public land. This is **Miżieb**: Malta's largest wooded area spreading across an entire ridge from Xemxija to Manikata.

history repeating

One evening back in September 2009, BirdLife Raptor Camp volunteers saw many raptors roosting at Miżieb. Next morning a team saw three men shooting at harriers as the birds left their roost. So once the shooting subsided the team, together with a CABS team, started looking for injured birds. That is when the gruesome discovery was

made. One dead bird was quickly followed by the second, third, fourth - numbers just kept climbing. The police were called, and by Dead Bird No. 20 so was the media. Over a two-day search the remains of over 200 dead protected birds were found and handed over to the authorities.

This was Malta's worst wildlife crime in recent history and it drew national and international outrage. BirdLife demanded an official investigation and sent reports to MEPA, the police and the OPM. But no investigation was made.

On 20 September of this year, a half-day search by BirdLife Malta and CABS teams uncovered *another* cache of carcasses, this time with the remains of over 80 dead birds. This search marked the first anniversary of the 2009 find, and the lack of investigation. These remains too were handed over to the authorities, and a report filed.

The aggression conservationists have been facing in the last few years did not lack during this search. Fiona Burrows, a 27-year old CABS volunteer, was pushed around by two men who also took her bag and destroyed the evidence within. Shortly after, an FKNK council member approached the searching teams and slapped Axel Hirschfeld, CABS media officer, on the face, shouting obscenities at him and other team members - he was later fined a paltry €100. CABS are waiting for court summons regarding the other case.

sitting unpretty

Shortly after last year's find at Miżieb, BirdLife fieldworkers mapped the woodland. They found a total of 256 hunting and trapping *duri* (hides), some made of concrete with locked metal doors, and all of them built on public land. Entire areas of Miżieb are gated off and marked with signs saying PICNIC AREA END (sic) HERE, cutting off people's access to land that by right belongs to everyone. Other

Giulia Valentini



Digging up the dead. BirdLife Malta Conservation Manager André Raine passing the evidence to the ALE at Miżieb.



Gaia Valentini



Sign language. Hammering in a right-of-way sign to counter the arrogance of the FKNK picnic sign.

signs appear overnight, some spray painted on rock faces. On checking, BirdLife found no management plans for the area and the authorities have so far failed to produce a single document that legally transfers this land to the FKNK, who claim to manage the site as a private hunting reserve. A report was presented to the OPM and MEPA. Again, no action was taken.

To drive home the message about this blatant and illegal occupation of public land - and to tell everyone about it - BirdLife staged a symbolic protest in Pjazza San Ġorġ in June (see box at right).

And in September, BirdLife also put up its own sign at Mizieb. It was placed right next to the lead-shot riddled "picnic area" sign. BirdLife's sign read PUBLIC RIGHT OF WAY: RECLAIM YOUR COUNTRYSIDE.

Needless to say, BirdLife's sign disappeared overnight!

And so, as protected birds fly into Mizieb, BirdLife volunteers continue to monitor the illegal activities.

Like many other parts of our countryside, Mizieb is public land. This woodland was created with the help of NGOs including the Malta Ornithological Society (as BirdLife Malta was known at the time) in the 1980s. BirdLife is committed to keeping the pressure on the politicians to put an end to the illegal killing of migratory birds, and reclaiming the countryside that has been stolen from the public.

Geoffrey Saliba is Campaigns Coordinator of BirdLife Malta

Hide in the City



Ferns Flossbraud

Last June, BirdLife Malta built a *dura* in front of the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta. The point of this action was to protest against illegal occupation of public land by hunting and trapping hides. When the police asked - as is their duty - for the *dura*'s removal, BirdLife removed it. But out there and all over the countryside of Malta and Gozo, thousands of *duri* continue to sit on public land, with little action taken to remove them.

Just as the authorities asked for the *dura* in Pjazza San Ġorġ to be removed, BirdLife expects the same authorities to take steps to remove all illegal *duri* that litter our countryside.

a september to remember



Honey-buzzard by Nicholas Galera

Nicholas Barbara

Another autumn migration ends, and with it another September soaked red with rampant slaughter. This year's Raptor Camp again witnessed the spectacle of the autumn migration, but also the horrors of wanton bird killing.

a total of 64

Raptor Camp 2010 ran for two weeks (11-26 Sep), with no less than 64 participants, including 13 Maltese and Greenhouse, a local university-based NGO. The camp coincided with CABS's Operation Safe Passage, with whom we coordinated on logistics.

The camp took off with a casualty - a European Roller - on the very first day. The hunting season was already in full swing for Turtle Dove and Common Quail, so hunters were all over the countryside. Our indispensable camp teams were heading out twice daily - before daybreak and in the afternoon - with the odd night out watching over roosting birds. Several wader trapping sites were also tracked down and reported.

spoonbill saga



Giulia Valentini

On 21 Sep, a flock of 22 Eurasian Spoonbills landed at Salina, a notorious poaching hotspot, prompting surveillance from Raptor Camp teams, the Animal Welfare Department and the ALE. Despite the watch, shots were heard that night, and only 14 birds were alive the following morning. Three more birds were killed the following night, and another two injured birds rescued. At the end of the three-day saga, just nine spoonbills are believed to have resumed their migration. Photo shows part of the flock, with at least one bird clearly injured.



Giulia Valentini

The Message. Raptor Camp and CABS gave a press conference at Mizieb to condemn lack of commitment from the authorities.

a total of 461

The hunting ban after 3pm from 15-30 September was again indispensable for raptor protection, as hundreds of raptors converged every afternoon to roost in the Buskett area. Raptor migration increased in the second week of the camp, peaking on the 21st, with scores of Marsh Harriers and Honey-buzzards, and several Hobbies and Common Kestrels seen in a single afternoon.



Chris Cecilia Zammit

Downed. A Honey-buzzard shot from inside Buskett.

A total of 461 illegalities were recorded from 51 locations during the camp, mostly in the Rabat/Dingli area. Twenty-seven protected birds were seen shot down, with a further 75 shots fired at protected species. This is only a fraction of the scale of the slaughter, as our teams could only patrol a portion of the countryside.

Illegal hunting and trapping are still major threats to birds, but this September we registered a slight improvement on previous years. Thanks to the strong participation in these camps, we can pride ourselves in seeing many of these birds continue their migration south in safety.

Nicholas Barbara is Conservation and Policy Officer of BirdLife Malta.



BirdLife Malta

André Raine

no place to rest

valletta natural heritage destroyed

It may seem strange that a small group of trees in the middle of Malta's capital city could be a national Important Bird Area (IBA), but that is exactly what the large ficus trees in Great Siege Square are. For decades, these trees have provided safe roost site for thousands of White Wagtails that converge on the island every winter.

At least they did until May of this year when the Environment Landscape Consortium (ELC) removed the entire canopy in one fell swoop (photo above), without permit and in defiance of police demands to stop. Some re-growth that was just starting to appear on the trees was again removed in November.

When concern was raised some time ago that the roots of one tree were damaging an underground cistern next to St John's co-Cathedral, BirdLife immediately agreed to the removal of the 'problem' tree and a second tree to make it symmetrical. This was in no way related to the trees in



BirdLife Malta

Greener days. The ficus trees in Great Siege Square before they were given their obscene pruning.

Great Siege Square IBA, but round the corner in another square. But with the damage caused to the trees in Great Siege Square by the excessive pruning, the natural heritage and IBA status of the roost site has been destroyed. It is obvious there are people who can still break the law with impunity and get away with it repeatedly.

The effect of this pruning on the birds is very clear to anyone who visits Great Siege Square before dusk these autumn days: the sky is full of wagtails, flying about in confusion and trying to land on the few pathetic tufts of foliage left on the trees. Those birds that fail to find a new safe roost site will die of exposure.

This whole issue was entirely preventable, and both natural and national heritage could have been protected equally, setting an excellent example in urban landscaping. In this, the Year of Biodiversity, we have a duty more than ever to ensure that the consequences of our actions on nature are carefully considered.



Artem Tanti

Tail not wagging. Last winter, over 7600 White Wagtails were sleeping in the trees at Great Siege Square every night. Not any more.

Dr Raine is Conservation Manager of BirdLife Malta



Filfla

Rock of Life

Joe Sultana

It has an aura of mystery. Standing alone and forlorn, as if banished forever from the southern shores of mainland Malta, Filfla looks bare, shattered and lifeless, an eternal victim of battering, raging storms. Its years of serving as target practice by planes and warships of British and Nato forces are long gone, but the scars remain in the shape of rubble and scattered boulders below its limestone cliffs. But the impression of lifelessness fades when one comes in for a closer look.

the sentinels

Filfla's plateau hosts a colony of yellow-legged gulls. These are the raucous sentinels of the islet, constantly patrolling the island's natural ramparts, immediately protesting with persistent alarm calls at anyone's approach. The gulls nest on the ground among the thick, low vegetation dominated by shrubby sea-blite, tree mallow, a giant wild leek, and a few scattered caper plants. The young gulls look different from the adults, and it takes them up to four years to attain their parents' plumage.

In the last few decades, Filfla has become the last gull stronghold: it is the only place left in the Maltese Islands where these birds can thrive and nest without persecution from humans.

biodiverse

On this lonely stack lives a fairly healthy population of the dark, endemic nominate race of the Maltese wall lizard, which is slightly larger than its mainland congeners and

very impressive with its black-bronze colour adorned with tiny blue-green spots. It used to be rather tame and somewhat curious at human visitors, but since the increase in numbers of predatory gulls, it has become wary and at the slightest movement will immediately dart for cover of rocks or vegetation.

Despite its small size and isolation, Filfla is relatively rich in biodiversity. Even the Moorish and Turkish gecko found on the main islands persist on the islet, while a good number of resilient insects and other invertebrates are in evidence, particularly in the vegetated areas. The island supports a population of an endemic Maltese tenebrionid beetle, as well as an endemic subspecies of a land snail of the genus *Trochoidea*.

they come in the night

The scree and large boulders below the cliffs support one of the largest known colonies of European storm-petrels in the Mediterranean, as well as a colony of Cory's shearwater. Shearwaters and storm-petrels are pelagic birds. They

Matthew Borg Cordona



The Wailers. Cory's shearwaters come to Filfla at night.

spend most of their days at sea, flying relentlessly, riding the waves. During their long breeding season they visit

Filfla and the law

In **1988**, after lengthy discussions in the House of Representatives, a legal Act established Filfla as a **strict nature reserve**, with access only permissible for education and science. This rock's rich biodiversity is fortunately now secure.

their colonies at night to court, mate, incubate their egg and raise their chick. When Filfla is shrouded in darkness the storm-petrels arrive like feathered bats in their hundreds, flitting about the boulders before settling in their nesting areas.

On moonless nights, loud wails begin to echo around the islet's limestone cliffs: the Cory's shearwaters have arrived! After waiting for darkness offshore in large groups (called rafts), these large gull-like seabirds fly to their burrows, emitting their weird cries before landing and crawling into their nests. Cory's shearwaters' faithfulness to their nesting site is very strong, and they often use the same spot for several years. For centuries, these birds they have been faithful to their island home,

Filfla and BirdLife

BirdLife has been studying birds on Filfla since the mid-1960s. Every year, a team of BirdLife researchers lands on the islet to ring and monitor the health of its seabird populations. Filfla is a global **Important Bird Area**.

and every year after spending all winter out on the high seas and far from land, they keep their annual spring appointment and return to raise yet another family.

May it remain so for as long as Filfla stands.

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist and author.

Citizens of The Rock. (from top) Yellow-legged Gull, European Storm-petrel, land snail *Trochoidea spratti* var. *despotti*, Maltese Wall Lizard (nominat race) *Podarcis f. filfolensis*.

Avon Tait



John J. Borg

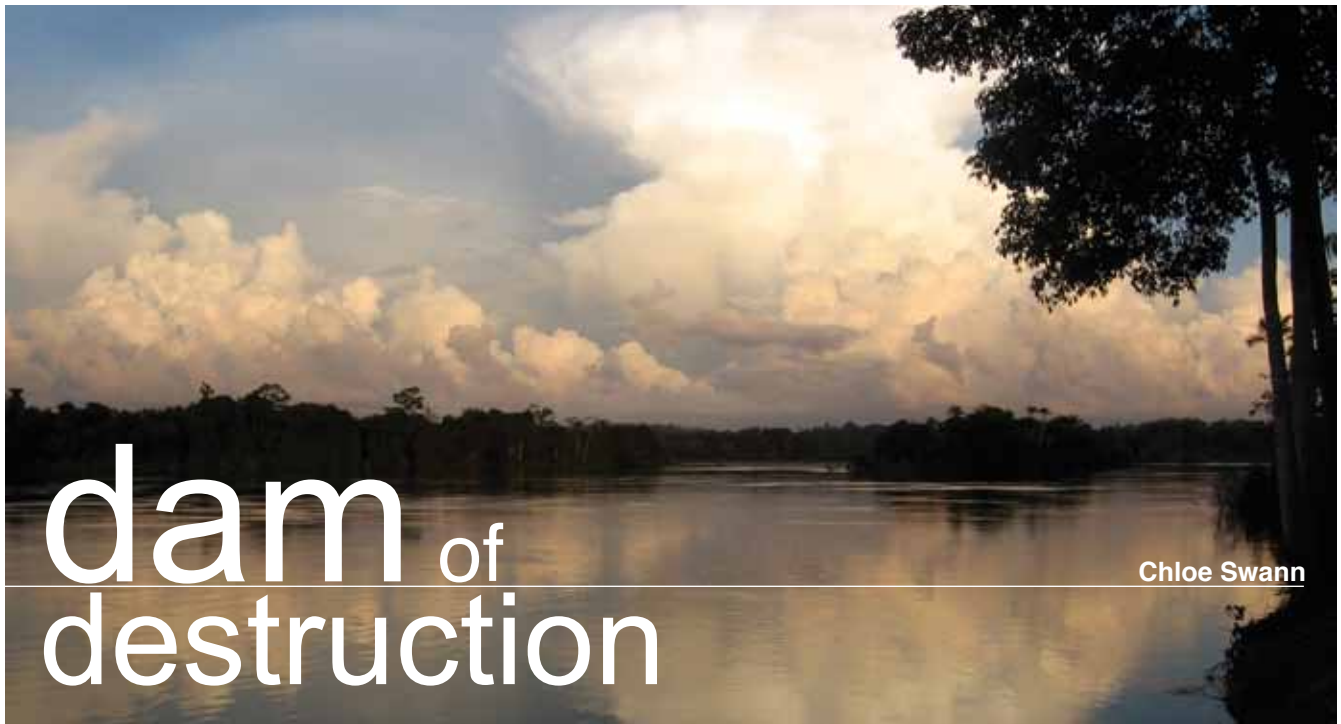


Joe Sultana



Joe Sultana





dam of destruction

Chloe Swann

Brazil is overwhelmingly the most biodiverse country on Earth, with more than 56,000 described species of plants, 1700 birds, 695 amphibians, 651 reptiles and 578 mammals. It holds a third of the world's rainforests, including most of the Amazon rainforest.

But it is in this biological paradise that the Brazilian government is moving ahead with plans to build the third-largest dam in the world: the Belo Monte Dam.

This project is one of the Amazon's most controversial developments and has raised much opposition. In April 2010, famous Hollywood actors joined indigenous groups in their struggle against this project. Environmentalists aided by *Avatar* director James Cameron achieved a victory when a judge suspended bidding on the construction and operation of the dam. But neither celebrity sway nor a top court's injunction have stopped the Brazilian government from forging ahead with the dam project, which will displace thousands of people and damage the Amazon ecosystem.

To feed the powerhouse of this dam, up to 80% of the Xingu River will be diverted from its course. To achieve this, two huge canals will be excavated, each 75km long and 500m



Celebrity support. Director James Cameron and actress Sigourney Weaver added their voices to the opposition.

wide, moving more land than was moved to build the Panama Canal. Belo Monte's two reservoirs and canals will flood 668km², of which 400km² is standing forest, and will force 20,000 people from their homes. On the other hand, the Xingu's diversion will cause a permanent drought for wildlife and for the native groups that live on the river's Big Bend. Meanwhile, no assessment was made of how the dam would impact the 600 species of fish that occur in the Xingu river.

Hydroelectric production is touted as both a solution to Brazil's periodic blackouts as well as a "clean development" approach to global climate change. But building a project of such magnitude right in the middle of a complex rainforest ecosystem will throw up more complications than all the scientists in the world can fathom. One effect, for instance, will be that the rotting trees in the newly-flooded areas will generate huge amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas 25 times more potent than CO₂. So much for clean development!

Clearly, the Belo Monte Dam Project is going to be another monument to human short-sightedness.



Threatened. The Sunshine Pleco *Scobinancistrus aureatus*, one of several fish endemic to the Xingu River.

a year of birding



After almost 50 years of fighting to make Malta safe for birds, BirdLife is detecting signs that the page may finally be (slowly) turning. Yes, it seems more birds are surviving their flight across our islands - this is most evident in spring. So BirdLife will make 2011 a special year full of activity for members who wish to really start enjoying birds. It is high time we get out there and learn what it is that makes birds so fascinating. Here goes...

activities for january-march 2011

Friday 7 January 2011

indoor

Il-Berdwoċing: l-ewwel pass!

A short video highlighting what birdwatching is all about and what is needed to get started. Followed by...

Is-Seba' Xitwin

A presentation about Malta's seven most common wintering birds.



Sunday 27 February 2011

outdoor

Nisimġhu l-għasafar

Buskett and its environs are especially beautiful in winter. In woodlands, birds are easier to hear than see, so we need to learn to identify them from their call or song. Still, we should spot some birds too, like Blackcaps, Dunnocks, Chaffinches, Song Thrushes and others.



Victor Falzon

Sunday 23 January 2011

outdoor

Il-Berdwoċing: l-ewwel pass... live f' Selmun!

Following the indoor meeting on the 7th, for those taking up birdwatching, this will be the first step in the field. Apart from enjoying the beautiful Selmun scenery, we also hope to spot the seven top wintering birds and more.



Denis Cachia

Wednesday 9 March 2011

indoor

Minn kontinent għal ieħor

Bird migration has always fascinated mankind. Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean, Malta is visited by numerous birds of different species during this period. Migratory birds over the Maltese Islands will be the topic of this presentation.



Thursday 10 February 2011

outdoor

Ix-xitwa fir-riservi naturali

A special visit to Is-Simar and Għadira nature reserves. Apart from the common wintering birds, we also hope to see some specialities of the areas, such as Moorhens, Coots, Little Grebes, Black-necked Grebes, Water Rails and Kingfishers.



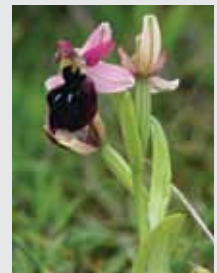
Mark Gauci

Sunday 27 March 2011

outdoor

Ir-rebbiegħa hawn!

Il-Majjistral national park is at its best in spring. Wild flowers, including orchids, are everywhere. Hopefully, we will also spot the first spring migrants, maybe a Northern Wheatear or a Hoopoe. This is the magic of spring in Malta: you never know what you may encounter!



Victor Falzon

For more details email Mr Richard Cachia Żammit on rcachiazammit@gmail.com or call him on **21672939** (5-7pm).

So keep these dates free...

| January 2011 | | | | | | | February 2011 | | | | | | | March 2011 | | | | | | |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|---------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Mo | Tu | We | Th | Fr | Sa | Su | Mo | Tu | We | Th | Fr | Sa | Su | Mo | Tu | We | Th | Fr | Sa | Su |
| | | | | | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 28 | | | | | | | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | | | |
| 31 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

- All outdoor activities will be led by experienced birders eager to make your outing an enriching birdwatching experience.
- If you have binoculars bring them along.
- Talks will be in Maltese but if non-Maltese speakers attend, these will be given in English.
- Many more activities are planned for the rest of the year.
- All activities are **free of charge**.



Give a gift that lasts beyond Christmas.



Invest in the future,
support our education work.

See leaflet inside