

Bird's Eye view



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BirdLife
MALTA



comment

After my first five months as Executive Director of BirdLife Malta, I can truly appreciate the complexity and the challenges that this position entails as well as the achievements behind the good work that Tolga did before me.

Unfortunately this spring was in the news for the wrong reasons. The government's imposing of a spring hunting derogation has led, predictably, to the shooting of protected birds. Despite concerted efforts by our Spring Watch teams and the police it was not to be a safe passage for many migrating birds. Fortunately the Spring Watch camp suffered only one aggressive incident this year, a welcome relief to us all after last year's ugly incidents.

As we go to print we are compiling our derogation report, which will challenge the key points put forward by the Maltese government. We hope that the 2011 spring hunting season will remain the exception rather than the rule. Our members, as well as our European BirdLife Partners, have all been particularly upset by the Eurasian Spoonbill and White Stork shootings that occurred on our islands.

One of my main aims is to communicate more with our members, especially via email. Please send us your email address if you have not done so already. I would also like to thank you for your support and appeal to you to make it go further by voicing your feelings over such incidents as the stork shootings in media blogs, on our Facebook page, and even in direct letters to the European Commission.

Together we will put an end to spring hunting.

Paul Debono
Executive Director

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BirdLife Malta was set up in January 1962 as the Malta Ornithological Society (MOS). It is the oldest and the largest environment movement in Malta, with over 3000 members.

BirdLife Malta's mission is the protection of wild birds, their habitat and biodiversity. To this end, the organisation has over the years used approaches ranging from street protests, educational campaigns and habitat restoration projects.

BirdLife Malta spearheaded the creation of the wetland nature reserves at Ghadira and Is-Simar - which it manages today - as well as Foresta 2000, a re-afforestation project on Marfa Ridge.

BirdLife Malta publishes various educational material such as books, posters, guides and leaflets for use by schools and other institutions. It is also active in the media, as part of its ongoing effort to raise public awareness. The organisation issues regular magazines/newsletters for its membership.

BirdLife Malta studies migratory and breeding birds to expand scientific knowledge and to further establish the ornithological value of the Maltese Islands. It also studies threats to birds and ways to mitigate these problems. As part of its research, the organisation runs the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme.

BirdLife Malta is a Partner of BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of bird and nature protection organisations, with over 10 million members and supporters in more than 100 countries and territories.

BirdLife Malta is a charity and depends on subscriptions and donations.

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Two Little Ringed Plovers bicker over breeding territory at Ghadira. Photo by Denis Cachia

Nick Galea



The female Black-winged Stilt and her four chicks.

new kids on the block

A pair of Black-winged Stilts are breeding at Ghadira nature reserve. This is a new breeding bird for Malta, and BirdLife is very proud of this event. When a wild bird breeds of its own accord in a new site, it is certification that the site in question can provide it with enough food and shelter to spend an entire breeding season, and raise a family safely. The wetland habitat and round-the-clock protection at Ghadira seem to fit the bill. As we go to print, four recently-hatched chicks are taking their first steps under the watchful eye of their highly protective parents.

Raymond Galea



A Barn Swallow flits across the photographer's lens.

snapping birds

In April 2011, BirdLife Malta organised its first-ever exhibition of local bird photography with a focus on migratory birds. *Snapshots From a Marathon Flight* featured photographs of a range of birds, including Grey Herons, Bee-Eaters and Honey-buzzards. Seven photographers - Ray Galea, Aron Tanti, Nick Galea, Joe Sultana, Matthew Borg Cardona, Mark Sultana and Nadja Tschovikov - had their work exhibited. On a different note, the exhibition also included some X-rays images of protected birds that had been shot in Malta, a reminder of how migratory birds are often received here. The exhibition was held at the Maritime Museum in Birgu and Bay Street Centre in St Julians.

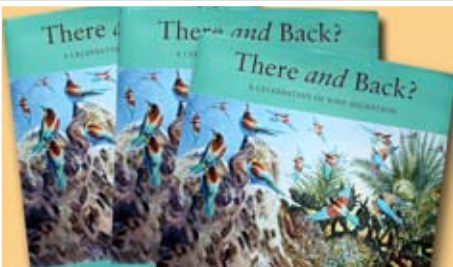
Mark Thomas



BirdLife Malta Campaigns Coordinator Geoffrey Saliba collects the cheque from the Akers family.

oriental treasure

Off-course and in a continent it isn't usually seen, an Oriental Turtle Dove was lucky to land in a keen UK birdwatcher's home garden. There it found food and shelter... and attracted over 600 birdwatchers! Steve Akers, the proud owner of the garden, had a great idea: he charged visiting birders a small admission fee, and then donated the money - over €3000 - to BirdLife Malta. The funds will help sustain further our fight against the slaughter of migratory birds. A little presentation ceremony was held in front of the Malta embassy in London, organised by the RSPB, our BirdLife Partner in the UK. BirdLife Malta is very grateful to Mr Akers and his family for their generous gift.



The book is a visual tribute to bird migration.

there and back?

On 10 April 2011 was the Maltese launch of the book *There and Back?* at St James Cavalier (Valletta). The book was compiled by Ian Langford, a regular BirdLife camp volunteer but also the owner of Langford Press, a renowned publisher of wildlife art books. *There and Back?* focuses on Mediterranean bird migration, with an entire chapter devoted to Malta. Contributors include works by renowned bird artists as well as illustrations by local artists Nimrod Mifsud and 15-year-old Askya Pizzuto, and photographs by Raymond and Nick Galea. The book is available at €50 from the BirdLife office.

Victor Faizon



Part of the flock seen over Ghadira on 19 May 2011.

never seen before

Late in the afternoon on 18 May 2011, thousands of Maltese looked skyward in wonder as a spectacular flock of over 200 White Storks flew low over village cores and countryside. Every year, thousands of White Storks return to Europe to nest after spending winter in Africa. Some of them take the Central Mediterranean route, and normally make the short sea-crossing between Tunisia and Sicily; very few cross over Malta, so no wonder this large flock caused such a sensation. Within minutes of the birds' arrival, BirdLife lines were busy with excited but also concerned calls from people calling on BirdLife to protect the flock. BirdLife staff and volunteers followed the flock, which that evening landed to roost around Ta' Kandja and Żurrieq. To stop hunters from killing the birds in their sleep, BirdLife set up all-night vigils near the roosts, and followed the flock closely over the next two days. But the inevitable diehard killers made it through the surveillance and police net, and killed an unknown number of these graceful, iconic birds. Early on Saturday (21 May) morning, a flock of 89 were seen leaving Gozo. Widespread international condemnation for the Maltese way of welcoming the storks are still pouring in.

On 10 April 2011, 34 volunteers marched out into the countryside with mobile phones, cameras, notebooks and watchful eyes. Their mission: to spot, document and report bird crime during the spring open hunting season. For two weeks, BirdLife staff coordinated local and foreign birdwatchers into teams to cover as many of the island's hunting hotspots as possible. This is Spring Watch, the camp that BirdLife has been running for the past four years to guard birds as they pass over Malta on their northbound migration.

team effort

The job is simple but gruelling: every watchteam stays at a specific location from early afternoon till dusk. This is when most birds of prey reach our islands, and when many of them decide to spend the night in wooded areas such as Buskett or Il-Mizieb. By dawn the next morning, the teams are already back at their post: their presence deters hunters from shooting the birds as these fly off to continue migrating. When a roost involves particularly large flocks, or spectacular birds like Eurasian Spoonbills, teams mount an all-night vigil. This is because, incredibly, hunters will go



Stopping the

with floodlights and scarers to disturb the sleeping birds and pick them off as they fly about in confusion, or simply shoot them point blank as they sleep. This is the ugly part of Spring Watch when, despite BirdLife's best efforts, the police arrive too late on the scene to prevent the crime or to catch the perpetrators, and birds die.

But the situation is not always bleak. Over the years, Spring Watch teams have become more efficient and wiser to hunters' tricks. New night vision equipment and higher-quality cameras allow camp volunteers to record bird crime more effectively and produce evidence for prosecution. BirdLife also coordinates efforts with CABS,

Victor Falzon



Marsh Harrier

Baptism of fire 2011

This year's Spring Watch volunteers received their baptism of fire at the very start of the camp, when the night team watching over roosting Marsh Harriers at Burmarrad were startled by flashing torches followed by the sound of shotgun fire. Police were alerted and they gave chase to a vehicle that fled as they pulled up on the scene. The vehicle got away. Only two of the 42 Marsh Harriers that roosted were seen leaving the islands the next day.



Veronika Ferdinandova

Hotspot. A Spring Watch team doing an afternoon watch from Ġnien L-Gharusa tal-Mosta. This watchpoint overlooks the fields between Mosta and Burmarrad, the site of the horrible night slaughter of Marsh Harriers (see box at left).



Denis Cadhla

the facts speak

year	days of open spring season	number of birds
2007	31 days	19
2008	0 days	1
2009	0 days	7
2010	boycotted by FKNK	5
2011	15 days	20

Facts and figures clearly show that as soon as armed hunters are allowed to roam the countryside, illegal activity spikes: in the past three years (2008-2010) the spring season was not opened (or was boycotted by the hunters' federation). This spring, even with an open season of just 15 days, the number of protected birds seen with shotgun injuries was much higher than in previous years. As the above table shows, the number of dead protected birds received by BirdLife was nearly double the birds received in the previous three years COMBINED!

abuse

Geoffrey Saliba

a parallel operation run by German volunteers. Such cooperation ensures that our limited human resources cover as big an area - and for as much of the migration period - as possible. Encouragingly, it is now more than evident that where surveillance teams are present, illegal hunting is greatly reduced. Most bird crime is committed outside these areas.

silly season

But 2240 man-hours, police protection, transport, equipment, as well as replacing vandalised equipment and repairing damaged vehicles cost money. Why must BirdLife invest so much, every spring, to control an activity that persists in being a national embarrassment that draws so much international criticism?

The reason is that the government keeps caving in to the aggressive hunting lobby. Despite the fact that spring hunting is illegal throughout the EU, and that Malta was found guilty of breaching the Birds Directive for four years, the government has opened

an 18-day hunting season this spring, and licenced 5600 hunters to shoot Turtle Dove and Quail.

The government's defence is that EU member states can apply exemptions from EU directives as long as there are exceptional circumstances, and as long as they satisfy the rigorous conditions imposed. In an attempt to satisfy Brussels that the season is being strictly controlled, the government implemented one of the most ludicrous hunting legislations on record, including the laughable system that required hunters to send an SMS to MEPA after every bird they shot, up to a total of four birds per season. The absurdity of such a monitoring system is summed up by the hunters'



Lars Soerink / www.wildphoto.net

Depleting the declining Four dead quail. Although still not of grave conservation concern, the Common Quail has declined across most of its range.

own representative on the Ornithological Committee, who wrote: "Who in his right frame of mind would declare a bird caught, say, at 6 am, knowing that he has to then pack up and leave? Who would record the fourth bird knowing that his season is over?"¹

depleted and declining

Apart from the illegal hunting issue, BirdLife will also continue to fight hunting in spring in defence of the "legal" species themselves: the Turtle Dove and the Quail. Any derogation (= exemption) from the Birds' Directive must not affect birds whose populations are depleted or declining in Europe. Both Turtle Dove and Quail fall in this category, so Malta should never have applied to hunt these species in the first place.

This month (June) BirdLife is sending a report to the European Commission to challenge the government's decision to open a hunting season in spring 2011.

Geoffrey Saliba is Campaigns Coordinator of BirdLife Malta.

¹The Times, 30 April 2011

the blue songster

joe sultana

"It is supposed to be the 'sparrow which sitteth alone on the house-top' of the Holy Scriptures; and from what I saw of it in Malta, where it was frequently to be seen perched solitary on the front wall of the flat-roofed houses, I think the supposition is probably correct."

This is what the great 19th-century artist-ornithologist John Gould wrote about the Blue Rock Thrush in his landmark book *The Birds of Great Britain*. A century and a half later, the bird still visits rooftops in suburban towns, churches and fortifications, especially in autumn when young birds move inland for the winter.

But without doubt the Blue Rock Thrush's favourite haunts are the high cliffs along the coast. There, in flight or from an exposed rocky perch, this blue-feathered gem delivers its melodious and somewhat melancholic song. From a distance the male may look black, but only until the sun lights up its deep prussian blue. The female, on the other hand, has an overall dark brown plumage.

In spring the pair build a rather flat, rough nest in fissures in cliffs and boulders, sometimes in stone walls, or even inside churches, ruins and disused buildings in remote areas. There they normally raise two broods during the breeding season (March to July). The female lays three to five pale blue, often finely red-spattered, eggs. She incubates them for a fortnight while the male keeps nervous watch nearby, uttering anxious calls on anyone's approach. After the chicks hatch, the parents spend another two weeks feeding them insects and small reptiles. Even after the young fledge, they still oblige their parents to care for them for a few more days.

The Blue Rock Thrush's range spans across the Mediterranean and Middle East region, extending to the Far East. In Malta, *il-Merill* has always been very popular - even more so since it was raised to National Bird status - and has figured on coins and postage stamps.

Despite being protected by law since 1911, young Blue Rock Thrushes are still frequently stolen from their nests to be raised in captivity. This illegal practice together with other human pressure, especially development along our coasts, has depleted the numbers of this iconic bird, and its population has been in decline for the past forty years.

May our sea cliffs ever resonate to the haunting song of the Blue Rock Thrush.

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist and the author of several books.



Photographs

A. A male Blue Rock Thrush. *Photo by Denis Cachia*

B. A female Blue Rock Thrush carrying grubs to her nest. *Photo by Joe Sultana*

C. Blue Rock Thrush eggs are a stunning pastel blue. *Photo by Victor Falzon*
Background. Typical Merill country: coastal cliffs, rdum and here near Ġnejna. *Photo by Victor Falzon*



in a derelict building.
photo by Joe Sultana.
and boulders, such as



While the battle rages on in the field of bird protection, what is BirdLife doing in schools? Quite a lot, actually. More than eighty primary schools are this year taking part in Dinja Wahda. Dinja Wahda teaches children - in a fun and practical way - a lifestyle that cares for the fragile natural environment and its plants and animals. Below are three (out of 30) activities taken from the teachers' Action Guide. They are a snapshot of what BirdLife is doing in schools to teach children love and respect for birds from an early age.

desirée falzon

early birding

bringing children to birds, birds to children



Birds I view!

School grounds are great places to learn about our six most common urban birds. Children take in the birds' colours and sounds from a slide show teachers can download from the BirdLife website. Together they learn some quick guides to spotting a Robin, Black Redstart, White Wagtail, Starling, and Spanish Sparrow. A follow-up exercise takes the children out in the ground where they hop, strut and chirp as they imitate the different species in a game that turns them into foraging birds.



Out of Africa!

A girl concentrates on the outline of a swallow drawing she has coloured in. With her classmates, she is making cut-outs of a flock of swallows that will be strung across the classroom during spring or autumn, and moved along, step-by-step daily, between a map of Africa and another of Europe on the facing wall. The journey represents migration and gives children an idea that birds fly between these continents at specific times of the year. As a follow-up game, children themselves pretend to be swallows on migration.



Let's do the Tables!

Stocking the bird table: after making bird tables, children learn what to put on them throughout the winter in order to keep birds warm and alive. Seeds, dried fruit and fatty foods are all excellent to build up those fat reserves so vital to keeping Robins, Spanish Sparrows, Sardinian Warblers and Black Redstarts going over the cold months. In a separate activity, children also learn about the birds that visit their bird table.



Dinja Wahda is BirdLife Malta's environmental education programme for primary schools. The programme is run together with Bank of Valletta - our partners in education - with the collaboration of the Education Directorate (DQSE).

Desirée Falzon is a teacher and is also Education Coordinator of BirdLife Malta.

mark gauci

the kemmuna project

Kemmuna has always held a special place in the hearts of BirdLife's founding members, who eagerly looked forward to their annual spring birding trip there. But this small and largely undisturbed island is not just another charming day-trip destination: it is also an important stopover for migratory birds. And a wealth of science for ringers.

Lying between the two main islands, Kemmuna holds a strategic position for bird migration. Ornithologists have often wondered at the sheer number of birds that appear there, compared to the low numbers or even absence of birds on the main islands. The wave-like influx of birds on Kemmuna posed questions about migration, and this got BirdLife Malta to consider setting up a ringing station on the island. The fact that Kemmuna was a bird sanctuary (the largest in the country in fact) - where no hunting or trapping was allowed - further prompted the ringing group to start using the island as the base for a European study of bird migration on small islands in the Mediterranean. The study kicked off in 1990 and for the past 21 years bird ringing has been carried out daily for an entire month in spring. Every year, the Kemmuna bird ringing project attracts local and foreign ringers alike.

The site used for the ringing project is Wied l-Ahmar, a few hundred metres up from Santa Marija Bay. This low-lying valley holds sparse vegetation, with Almond trees and alien acacias dominating. The valley's garrigue is a patchwork of Giant Fennel whose yellow flowers are irresistible to insects, which in turn draw hundreds of hungry passage birds. Over the years the habitat has been slowly changing: the short-lived acacia trees have virtually all died out, and their space has been taken over by the spreading Lentisk shrubs,

'planted' by Starlings in winter after feeding on berries of established specimens. Tree-planting efforts by volunteers over the years are now showing up in clusters of young trees whose foliage draws tired migrant birds to rest in shade and safety.

The success of the spring project led BirdLife to start a parallel three-week bird ringing project in autumn. Kemmuna is now one of the few sites in the Maltese Islands where birds are ringed during both migration periods. Such a constant effort with consistent procedures and timing allows researchers to analyse results better.

Kemmuna's status as a Special Area of Conservation has not discouraged repeated speculation for the development of the island, which many consider a lifeless rock. The Kemmuna Project has shown how vital it is that such a unique migration stopover is left undisturbed.



Richard Cachia Zammit

Kemmunifying. Ringer Justin Vassallo explains ringing to avid onlookers during a members' outing to Kemmuna.

Mark Gauci is a licenced bird ringer, and Head of the BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme.

Garrigue habitat dominates Kemmuna





BirdLife in Bulgaria (BSPB)



Dalmatians on the Danube

The Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB), in partnership with the Persina Nature Park and WWF-Bulgaria, are monitoring the ecological effects of an exciting wetland restoration project. Thanks to this project, the Belene Marshes - situated on the largest island on the Danube - are reverting to a bird paradise. To encourage rare Dalmatian pelicans to breed, a fixed platform of reeds has been built. And just two months later it was already in use by a group of 20 Dalmatian pelicans for roosting. Public access to the island is still very limited; this helps ensure minimal human disturbance which is critical for the pelicans to start breeding. BSPB hopes that the pelicans will adopt the marshes as a breeding site next year when a second, bigger platform will be built. The site has one of the largest breeding concentrations of grebes, herons, ducks along the lower Danube, which is an important stopover for many migratory birds, and wintering site for thousands of geese.

BirdLife in Spain (SEO)



Imperial Guard

SEO/BirdLife (BirdLife in Spain) is inviting the world to follow the first days of the life of three eagle chicks in the Mediterranean forest of Castilla La Mancha via a webcam trained onto the nest of a family of Spanish Imperial Eagles, the most threatened bird of prey in Europe, the populations of which are mainly located in Spain. The images show the ups

and downs of the daily fight for survival of the chicks in the Parque Nacional de Cabaneros, as they are brought up by their parents as part of SEO's conservation programme for the Spanish Imperial Eagle started in 2006. To check out the live webcam, visit the website at www.aguilaimperial.org

BirdLife in Germany (NABU)



Fishing for Litter

On 5 May 2011 NABU (BirdLife in Germany) started *Fishing for Litter* projects in two fishery harbours in north-west Schleswig-Holstein. About 15 vessels are joining this Baltic Sea pilot scheme which is a first step in addressing the problem of litter contamination in the Baltic Sea. In this initiative, NABU provides big

bags to fishing vessels in which to deposit marine litter. In both harbours large containers have been placed for disposal of these bags. The collected litter will be analysed for information on the composition of litter contamination of the Baltic Sea. Key stakeholders are also involved, to raise awareness of the significance of the problem. Marine litter is not only harmful to the ecology but is becoming more and more an economic and aesthetic issue. The *Fishing for Litter* initiative is part of the NABU project *Seas without Plastic* which includes coastal clean-up activities, beach litter monitoring, public relations and educational events.

Il-Merill out

Some months ago, BirdLife Malta published the latest issue *Il-Merill*, its scientific bulletin. This bumper 120-page issue includes several ornithological papers and short notes of scientific interest. Members wishing to receive their free copy are kindly asked to contact the BirdLife Malta office. This is the 32nd issue of *Il-Merill*.



Nimrod Mifsud

Nimrod Mifsud is an active volunteer with BirdLife. For this issue of *BEV* Bethan Hull grills him about what it means to volunteer for us.

How did you start volunteering with BirdLife Malta?

I've always enjoyed visiting Ghadira and Is-Simar and have been interested in birds for many years but I'd never realised I could make a contribution without having an ornithology qualification. Three years ago I happened to talk to Nadja Tschovikov, who also volunteers for BirdLife, and she encouraged me to get involved with the Spring Watch camp. This year was the third camp I have been involved with and I look forward to many more.

What do you do as a volunteer?

The main events I help with are the Spring Watch and Raptor Camps where I get to go out with teams of international volunteers and show them both the birds migrating through Malta and the hunting and trapping which we're trying to prevent. I've also done some work on the Life+ project to engage in dialogue with trappers. I've been able to help in showing people that there are other ways to enjoy birds without removing them from the wild.

What's the best thing about volunteering with BirdLife Malta?

The thing I most enjoy is meeting the staff and other local and international volunteers. It's great to spend time with people who share my passion for wildlife and to show the international volunteers the best that Malta has to offer, as well as the darker side which is the hunting and trapping. I also love the feeling that I'm making a contribution to conserving the wildlife I'm so passionate about. It would be great if more Maltese people could work on the frontline of conservation as I've had the opportunity to do. You really don't need a degree or anything: to make a difference, it is enough to have the passion.

out and about

richard cachia zammit

BirdLife's new Activity Team has set high goals for keeping members out and about with binoculars and nature guides this year. The volunteer team is made up of a group of experienced birdwatchers, and by April 2011 they had already organised six activities, ranging from talks to country walks. During our leisurely outdoor walks members can watch, photograph and learn about Maltese flora and fauna, and get to know what birds are about. We also give geology its due attention: after all, it is the different land formations that gave rise to the rocky garrigues, the deep winding valleys and the steep cliffs where our wild plants and animals live.

From the encouraging response, it is clear that neither the country's small size nor the constant threats to its countryside has spoiled the enthusiasm of members and their families to learn nature's secrets and surprises. Here's a taster of what is in store for the rest of the year:

"I have been a member of BirdLife Malta for years and I am thrilled that so many activities are being organised this year!"

member's comment



July 2011 • BOAT TRIP

The shearwater boat trip has become an annual event sought by many of our members. Spectacular cliffs and hundreds of shearwaters guaranteed.



August 2011 • SHEARWATERS LIVE

A presentation about the breeding cycle of Cory's Shearwaters to be held *on site* - yes, right there on the cliffs where these birds breed! And after that, we listen to the awesome chorus of the shearwaters as they fly to their breeding colony in the dark.

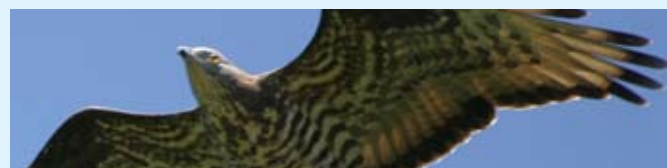


August 2011 • IN SEARCH OF THE KINGFISHER

Although some Common Kingfishers are present throughout winter, mainly at Għadira nature reserve, this colourful bird has eluded many of our members, who are more than keen to glimpse it. Late August is a good time to watch these birds, so an outing to Għadira is a must. Waders are also present at this time of the year.

Leader Volunteer team

Richard Cachia Zammit • Sivie Cauchi • Michael Grima • Paul Portelli • Ray Testa • Joe Vella.



September 2011 • THE WINGED ARISTOCRATS

September is dominated by the migration of birds of prey. Just sit down and watch the skies, and if raptors are migrating you are bound to see Marsh Harriers, Honey-buzzards, Hobbies, Common Kestrels and Lesser Kestrels plus others. At least two outings to Buskett will be organised this month. For those of you who missed the colourful European Bee-eater in spring, September is the best month in autumn to watch this bird, and at Buskett we sometimes see flocks of a hundred or more.



October-December 2011 • WALKS, WALKS WALKS!

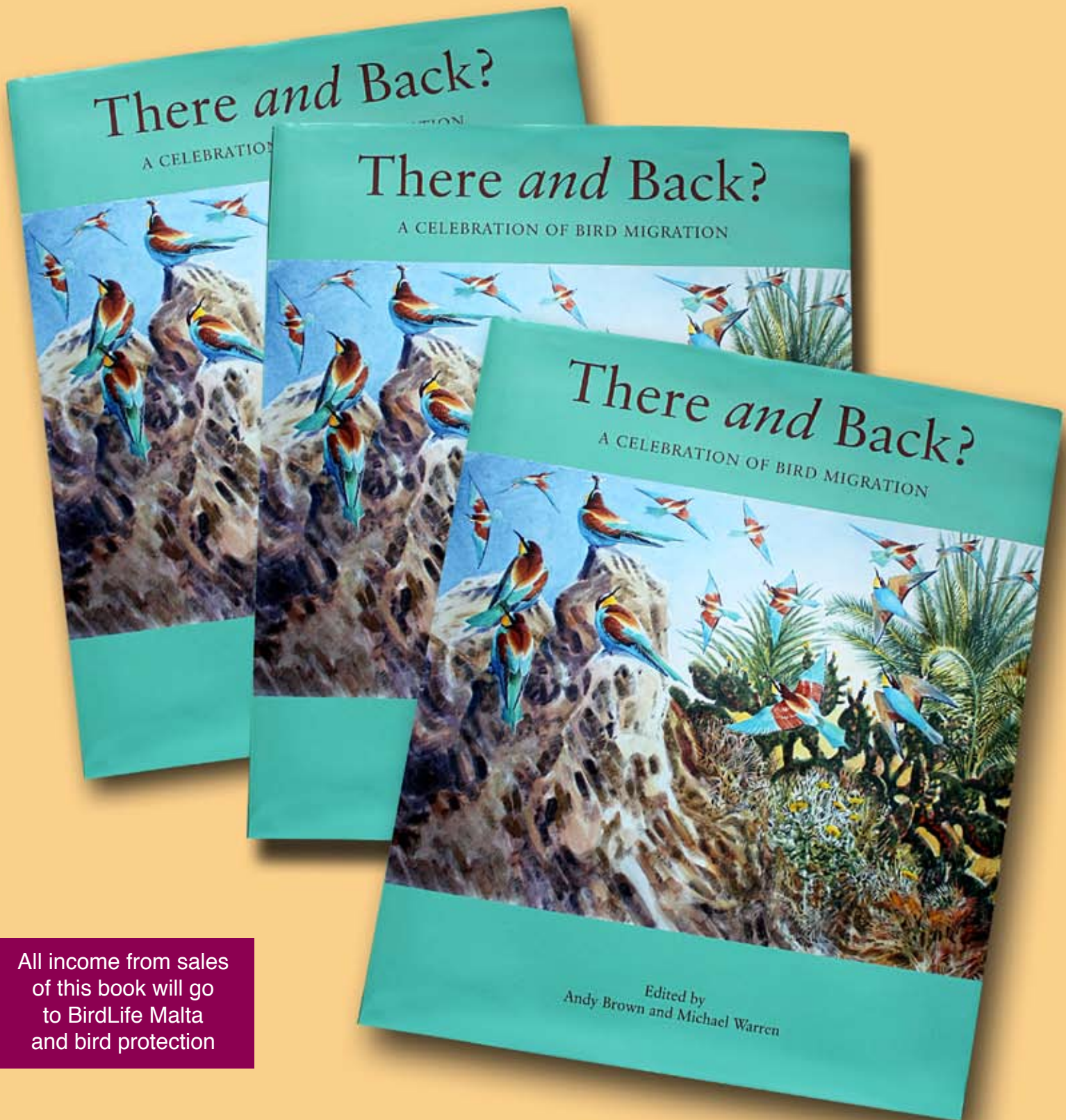
With the return of cooler weather, we will be back in the countryside walking. Birds, reptiles, insects, wild flowers and spectacular scenery. A day trip to Gozo looks promising, and how about Kemmuna?

For dates and other details, please contact Richard Cachia Zammit (email and phone below)

Richard Cachia Zammit is a veteran birdwatcher and BirdLife volunteer, and presently coordinates BirdLife's adult activities.

If you're not already on our Activities Mailing List, get in touch and come share a nature experience with us. In this way, you will receive details and reminders by email of forthcoming events. Write to rcachiazammit@gmail.com or call 21672939.

When art celebrates nature...



All income from sales
of this book will go
to BirdLife Malta
and bird protection

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