50 years young

This year BirdLife Malta turned fifty. On 25 January 1962, seven men met around a table and set up the Malta Ornithological Society. Half a century later, we celebrate that day. Many things have changed in those fifty years.

In 1962, killing and catching wild birds was just another hobby. Today, most people look at it as a national outrage and embarrassment. BirdLife was the driving force behind this change.

In 1962, the country had no infrastructure - or indeed interest - to protect nature. Today we have laws, international obligations and government bodies for environmental protection. BirdLife had a strong hand in placing the environment on the national agenda.

In 1962, there wasn’t a square metre in Malta where nature was given protected status. Today we have nature reserves, bird sanctuaries, Natura 2000 sites, SACs, SPAs and other designations for site and species protection. BirdLife set that ball rolling, with Għadira.

In 1962, you never heard the word “environment”. Today even small children will admonish you for trapping robins or for not recycling, and tell you how to look after their natural environment. BirdLife is proud to have sown that seed.

Of course, BirdLife could just sit back and rest on its laurels. But sitting around is not our style. As this issue of Bird’s Eye View shows, we are forging ahead and exploring new territory. For example, our new Life+ project will point the way for the protection of areas at sea that are critical for our seabirds’ survival. But not just for birds: it’s for all of nature, and for people too.

Happy birthday, BirdLife. Here’s to another fifty years!

Desirée Falzon
Editor

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Editor Desirée Falzon
Associate Editor Victor Falzon
Publisher BirdLife Malta
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Contributors to this issue Laura Bambini, Nicholas Barbara, Richard Cachia Zammit, Denis Cachia, Silvie Cauch, Theresa Cremona, Desirée Falzon, Victor Falzon, Mark Gauci, Bethan Hull, Kathleen Mamo, Joe Sultana, Justin Vassallo
Photography by Ian Balzan, Nicholas Barbara, Matthew Borg Cardona, Denis Cachia, Silvie Cauch, Victor Falzon, Mark Gauci, Bethan Hull, Kathleen Mamo, Nimrod Mitsud, John O’Sullivan, Danny Schmetts, Hadoram Sinhrai / The Tubenoses Project, Aron Tanti, Carlos Viveiros / Parque Natural da Madeira
Design and production Victor Falzon

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A Spectacled Warbler perches on a flowering shrub of Mediterranean Heath (photo by Aron Tanti)
On 13-18 October 2011 Malta hosted the EURING General Assembly. EURING (European Union for Bird Ringing) is the central body that co-ordinates scientific bird ringing schemes in Europe. The biennial assembly was well attended, with 55 delegates from 34 ringing schemes (representing 29 countries). The event, held at Mount St Joseph, provided delegates with the opportunity to exchange results and information about current European and regional projects, and also served to launch new projects. This was the second EURING GA held in Malta, the first being in 1992. The BirdLife Malta Ringing Scheme currently has 18 licensed ringers, and is the only such scheme in Malta recognised by EURING.

**dinja wahda** prize-giving

On 23 November 2011, BirdLife launched Dinja Waha for the scholastic year 2011-2012. Following a craft activity for the children present, BirdLife’s Education Co-ordinator Desirée Falzon gave a short illustrated talk about the value of teaching biodiversity. Other speakers were Edward Muscat Azzopardi (BOV Head of Marketing and Public Relations) and Desirée Scicluna Bugeja (EO Biology). Also present for the event was Environment Minister Dr Mario de Marco, who praised the initiative. The event, held at Pembroke Primary School, also presented awards to the 83 schools who took part in last year’s edition. Dinja Waha is BirdLife Malta’s and Bank of Valletta’s environmental education programme in primary schools, run in collaboration with the Education Directorate (DQSE).

**five thousands strong**

On 14 January 2012, BirdLife Malta held its annual White Wagtail roost count in Valletta. Pjazza Assedju is the largest known winter roost for this species in the country, a site that was seriously compromised two years ago when the ficus trees in the square were heavily pruned. Due to the reduced foliage, part of the roosting community was seen to have spilled into the trees in an adjacent street. This year’s total was an encouraging 5554 birds, a much lower figure than the high totals registered in recent years (7761 in 2009, 7600 in 2010), but significantly higher than last year’s 2299. The roost count was organised by Denis Cachia, with input from 13 other observers spread around 11 observation posts.

**seabird project launched**

On 27 January 2012, BirdLife and the Ministry for Tourism, Culture and the Environment launched the new **EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project** at the Phoenicia in Floriana. The Hon. Dr Mario de Marco, Minister for Tourism, Culture and the Environment attended the event and congratulated BirdLife and partners on securing funding for this important project. Project Manager Laura Bambini presented results from a public awareness survey, which revealed that 92% of respondents considered the protection of marine areas around Malta as important. The Project’s main aim is to identify Marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Maltese waters for Cory’s and Yelkouan shearwaters, and European Storm-petrel, for designation as Special Protected Areas (SPAs) in the Natura 2000 network. The project will also raise awareness about these seabirds, and the international importance of their breeding colonies in the Maltese Islands. The other Project Partners are RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and SPEA (BirdLife in Portugal). See also page 7.

**Ms Sheila Pratt** from Sussex (UK), who passed away recently, has bequeathed a legacy of £2000 to BirdLife Malta, for which the Society is very grateful.
Trapping is not permitted throughout the EU under the Birds Directive. The main reason for this is because trapping is a large-scale and very effective method of catching birds. To join the EU, Malta had to adopt the Birds Directive, but the government had negotiated a four-year phasing-out period for finch trapping, which had to stop by the end of 2008.

The trapping of finches was indeed disallowed from 2009 onwards, but an exemption (derogation) was made to allow trapping of Quail, Turtle Dove, Song Thrush and Golden Plover. Derogating from the Birds Directive, however, is only acceptable if it fulfills a strict set of criteria, such as proper enforcement of the trapping season, control on the number of birds trapped, and a justification that no alternative exists for the taking of these species.

The European Commission (EC) in fact warned that Malta had failed to justify these criteria when it allowed trapping of these four species, especially with regards to enforcement and control. It also pointed out that illegal finch trapping was still widespread in Malta, as was made evident in a report commissioned by BirdLife Malta. The EC also noted that the continuation of trapping of these four species was clearly creating a loophole for illegal activity.

Autumn 2011 was another milestone for trapping in the Maltese Islands, not least for the illegal aspect of it. Despite Malta being issued a warning in June 2011 from the European Commission, questioning the legality of trapping seasons since EU accession, the government surprised us on 30 October by announcing a two-month trapping season for Song Thrush. This season has only served as a backdoor to allow trapping of other species, and BirdLife’s work in the field proved this.

Despite the message being clear that Malta had failed to satisfy the derogation conditions, in autumn 2011 a trapping season was again opened, this time for Song Thrush only. The season was announced just a day prior to its start, and it allowed the trapping of Song Thrushes from 1 November 2011 to 10 January 2012. There was no bag limit whatsoever and no extra enforcement measures - so much for the obligatory conditions for derogation!
Nicholas Barbara is Conservation and Policy Officer of BirdLife Malta.

If previous seasons had left loopholes for illegal trapping, this new season was no less accommodating. As expected, it resulted in widespread abuse. 

lawless

As in previous years, BirdLife Malta monitored the scale of illegal trapping through aerial and land surveys, as well as by checking reported trapping sites, using co-ordinated teams of volunteers.

The results show that an average 77% of active trapping sites in autumn 2011 were not targeting Song Thrush at all, but species not permitted by law: 53% were targeting finches, and 24% were targeting waders (mostly Golden Plovers). From a total of 150 active trapping sites observed by the BirdLife teams, just two were legally targeting solely Song Thrush.

The teams also observed at least another two sites - one equipped for finches, the other for Golden Plover - where the trappers switched decoys with live Song Thrushes to disguise their illegal activity.

in short

The law that allowed a trapping season in autumn 2011 specified no extra measures to cater for enforcement of proper trapping activity, and placed no limits on the number of Song Thrushes that could be caught, in direct and clear defiance of the rules that govern derogation from the Directive. And all this at a time when infringement procedures are already ongoing with the European Commission. Once again, and predictably, trappers have abused the season, to trap unknown quantities of finches and waders.

So who is to blame? Surely not the Song Thrush.

Caught in the act. (left) One of seven active finch-trapping sites discovered at Żurrieq (Malta). (right) A trapper at Qala (Gozo) removing Golden Plover decoys from his trapping site, after having replaced them with Song Thrush cages (both photos taken 26 Nov 2011).

A typical day in the 2011 trapping season

26 November 2011
Four BirdLife Malta volunteer teams (3 in Malta, 1 in Gozo) set out to survey trapping activity. Following are sites reported to police:

7.30am Miġra Ferħa (Malta)
2 active finch-trapping sites located and reported to police. Trappers collect cages and run away, one seen hiding in bush. Police arrive and directed to area, 1 trapper apprehended.

7.40am Qala (Gozo)
Team locates Golden Plover trapping site, alerted by use of illegal electronic lures. On seeing team, trappers switch off lure, hurry to replace plover decoys with live Song Thrush in cages. Video evidence passed to Gozo police.

7.50am Bengħisa (Malta)
Team revisits active finch-trapping site raided by police some weeks before. Trapping site found trapping finches again, with a second trapping site close by. Both trappers (faces disguised with balaclava and blanket) hurry to retrieve decoy finches, and flee scene. Police unable to attend as they are responding to another report.

8.00am Daħlet Qorrot (Gozo)
Team locates active finch-trapping site. Trappers collect finches and flee scene prior to police arrival. Police arrive, dismantle nets from site, find Goldfinch (later released).

9.55am Xgħajra (Malta)
Trapper at active finch-trapping site, quickly dismantles equipment, leaves scene prior to police arrival. Police confirm trapper was using nets with mesh size typical of finch trapping.

Undercover. A finch trapper at Bengħisa (Malta) covers himself with a blanket as he hurries to clear finch cages from his trapping site before the police arrived (photo taken 26 Nov 2011).

Quarry. The autumn 2011 open season for Song Thrush trapping led to another free-for-all that resulted in yet another illegal harvest of finches and waders.

Total sites surveyed (26.11.11): 70
Number of sites active: 40
Sites targeting finches: 24 (60%) Sites targeting waders: 13 (32.5%)
**Il-Ħuttafa** is a bi-monthly magazine that is produced and mailed exclusively to our young members (and some subscribed school libraries). It is almost the only - certainly the most regular - junior magazine in Malta devoted entirely to nature. *Il-Ħuttafa* focuses on local flora and fauna, nature news from around the world, local natural habitats and, obviously, birds! Its colourful pages, educational content and unique format make it a must-have for any young nature lover, and even older ones at that: many of our adult members switch their membership category to Family just so as to receive *Il-Ħuttafa* (along with *Bird’s Eye View* of course).

**The Outings**

A variety of outings are organised for Klabb Ħuttaf members and their families. These include nature walks to different locations around our Islands, visits to nature reserves, and tree-planting activities.

Another annual event is the sponsored marathon walk, which will run its ninth consecutive year in 2012. Numerous primary school children participating in Dinja Waħda join our members and their families in this 10km walk. The funds generated are spent on the purchase of useful and practical items, be it a grasscutter for Foresta 2000, a telescope for Is-Simar, nest boxes for swifts, a generator for BirdLife’s ringing station on Kemmuna, etc. This year’s funds will be used to install “nest cameras” at the nature reserves.

Another outing organised for our young “swallows” is the summer boat trip to the area beneath the cliffs of Ta’ Ċenċ. Our members get to enjoy the spectacular beauty of our natural land- and seascape, learn more about Cory’s Shearwaters and experience the magic as rafts of shearwaters gather at sunset.

**Follow the Leader**

Klabb Ħuttaf outings would not be possible without our invaluable team of youth leaders - all volunteers - who guide our young members and their families during the outings and help them strengthen their bond with nature as they experience nature first-hand. Through games, maps, quizzes and information sheets about nature, our leaders help make Klabb Ħuttaf outings an experience not to be missed.

Kathleen Mamo is Co-ordinator of Klabb Ħuttaf and chairs the Klabb Ħuttaf Committee.
Malta holds internationally important breeding colonies of three species of seabirds: Yelkouan Shearwater, Cory’s Shearwater and European Storm-petrel. In recent years these birds’ numbers have declined across their range. While the Maltese breeding colonies on land are protected, areas at sea - where these birds spend a large proportion of their lives - still need to be identified, and protected.

Unknown ground

Most seabirds spend their first few years out at sea, and only return to land to breed. For example, Cory’s Shearwaters start breeding when they are over six years old. They are long-lived but slow breeders, producing just one young in a breeding season. Numbers of breeding pairs of Yelkouan Shearwaters and Cory’s Shearwaters have declined across the Mediterranean. Less is known about the European Storm-petrel, but it too is thought to be in decline.

The EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project, completed in 2010, found that the highest mortality of these birds occurred at sea and outside the breeding season. It is therefore very important to find out where these birds forage and rest while out at sea, and to ensure these areas are protected from damaging human activities. As an EU member state, Malta is obliged by the EC Birds Directive to protect all habitats used by the seabird breeding in the Islands.

Tracking the trekkers

The new 5-year EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project will use the latest tracking technology to study these three species at sea.

The birds will be equipped with different types of loggers, which record locations of birds at sea. These will help us find out where the birds go during the breeding season when they depend on foraging and resting grounds closer to their colonies in Malta. After the breeding season, the loggers will help us discover where the birds spend their winter.

Until now, these types of tags were too heavy for the tiny storm-petrels, which only weigh around 30g, but new very small loggers have just become available, and will now be used for the first time in Malta. Another way to follow these birds is by using radio-transmitters which emit a signal that can be detected from several kilometres away, allowing researchers to locate birds even when they are far out at sea. These devices will also be fitted onto the storm-petrels and observers will search for them onboard small aircraft and boats.

Direct observation of birds at sea will also be carried out on board vessels, collecting information on where the birds go, but also on their behaviour at sea. This information can be added to a growing Europe-wide database (European Seabirds at Sea, maintained by the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee) and can help other research projects around the Mediterranean.

Starting this month

The EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project will go out in the field in February 2012, when the seabirds start returning to their colonies to prepare for the oncoming breeding season.

Laura Bambini is Project Manager of the EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project.
Success stories are merely the crowning effect of years of hard work and management planning. The management plan normally covers a two- to five-year period; it seeks to maintain and, where possible, improve the habitat for the flora and fauna at the reserve. Once the work is completed, it is then left to nature to give the verdict on whether the work was effective and worth the effort. A new breeding bird, an increase in the number of birds recorded, the flourishing of rare flora: all these are signs that a project has been given the thumbs-up!

The past year has been no exception to habitat improvement works. Triggered by a small group of Little Egrets who spent most of spring and summer 2010 at the reserve playing with twigs and mock-building nests, the reserve management resolved to raise the potential for this species to breed.

The plan involved the building of a small artificial island in the main pool area, but an island made up entirely of dead branches and twigs. Herons and egrets love to rest on such islands since they feel safe from predators; at the same time these structures provide excellent nest-building material for the egrets. The work was accomplished in summer by the managing warden with the help of a group of volunteers. Over autumn and winter, the islands settled in the water and naturalised - now we await spring and hope for developments! Meanwhile, this new habitat has been welcomed by other species like Barn Swallows and Yellow Wagtails, who find these islands a safe roosting area during migration.

Island building

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Dune restoration

The twigs and branches used in the construction of these islands were themselves the result of habitat restoration work at the reserve.

Part of the nature reserve was once a sand dune, but this was destroyed when the main road cut through the area and isolated the dune from the sandy beach. The dune remnant was then heavily planted with acacia trees and turned into a grove of alien trees. The reserve management is now trying to restore sections of this dune by gradually removing the acacias and creating open areas of sand. The removal of shade stimulated some dune flora that had somehow survived the acacia onslaught to start spreading again, while other long-gone species are being re-introduced.

These were just two examples of how BirdLife manages the nature reserves. Birds may be our flagship animal group, but needless to say, they do not live in a vacuum. If we want birds to thrive we must protect and improve the entire ecosystem.
When spring is in the air, the countryside blooms and birds get busy. Those birds not already engaged in courting, nest-building or feeding their young, are participating in a phenomenal adventure: migration.

Migrating birds pass through our Islands singly or in flocks. Some stop for a rest or to feed hungrily, to restore their strength and to top up the ‘fat fuel’ expended on their tough flight from Africa; then they resume the marathon trip to reach their breeding haunts on mainland Europe. About a hundred species of these spring travellers appear in our country, and among them, one thrush-sized bird has a golden touch.

A yellow flash darts among the trees: it is a male golden oriole, looking for juicy spring fruit to gorge on, such as white mulberries or loquats, or searching diligently for caterpillars among almond leaves. This bird is hard to miss, even when resting among the foliage of a carob tree. The female too is relatively easy to spot, despite her more greenish, less conspicuous plumage. This contrasts with their behaviour in their breeding sites in Europe, where they keep themselves rather concealed in the high deciduous trees in which they nest.

The adult male golden oriole has strikingly bright yellow plumage, with jet black wings and tail, both with a yellow patch on each side; the bill is reddish. When out of sight it makes its presence known by its beautiful song: a far-reaching fluting whistle, and very different from its nasal screeching calls. The female’s colours are more subdued, with much less yellow than its mate, a whitish belly and throat and usually some streaking on the flanks. Juveniles and first-year birds have more streaking on the underparts.

The golden oriole’s attractive plumage has always been, unfortunately, detrimental to this feathered gem during migration over Malta, where it often gets killed by men whose way of showing prowess and machismo is by shooting down these and other protected birds. In 1916, Giuseppe Despott, curator of the Natural History Museum, wrote that most golden orioles appear from April onwards, “when it is a common occurrence to see the carob trees quite full with these birds, and when great slaughter is wrought by sportsmen, both licensed and unlicensed ones.” It may not be as bad nowadays as it was in Despott’s time, but many of these golden gems are still shot or caught every year.
Back from the brink

Zino’s petrel *Pterodroma madeira* is one of the rarest and most endangered birds on the planet. Half the global population spends the winter in Myanmar, where the birds are regularly decimated by human hunter-trappers. To reduce this problem, BANCA (BirdLife in Myanmar) has identified most of the hunters involved, many of whom are subsistence hunters, and with aid from BirdLife International has provided these individuals with funds to start an alternative form of income in return for giving up hunting. The project has so far been considered a success, with many of the ex-hunters registering an improvement in their livelihood. BANCA will now extend this programme to another region where more such hunters exist. Through this and a special breeding programme in its Siberian nesting grounds, it is hoped that the status of the spoon-billed sandpiper will improve in coming years.

Saving the spoon

With less than a thousand individuals worldwide, and fast diminishing, the spoon-billed sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* is one of the rarest and most endangered birds on the planet. Half the global population spends the winter in Myanmar, where the birds are regularly decimated by human hunter-trappers. To reduce this problem, BANCA (BirdLife in Myanmar) has identified most of the hunters involved, many of whom are subsistence hunters, and with aid from BirdLife International has provided these individuals with funds to start an alternative form of income in return for giving up hunting. The project has so far been considered a success, with many of the ex-hunters registering an improvement in their livelihood. BANCA will now extend this programme to another region where more such hunters exist. Through this and a special breeding programme in its Siberian nesting grounds, it is hoped that the status of the spoon-billed sandpiper will improve in coming years.

Bustard blues

The Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* is protected in Tunisia, but for the past 20 years of Ben Ali rule, rich gulf state emirs have regularly been allowed to visit and hunt the species, which is now on the edge of extinction in the country. In November 2011, the Association Les Amis des Oiseaux (AAO - BirdLife in Tunisia) informed the authorities of new and impending poaching risks, and raised awareness through a press conference in collaboration with other environment groups. The new authorities, however, have not yet reacted or responded to this warning. The AAO have therefore launched an online petition (visit [www.aao.org.tn](http://www.aao.org.tn)) to press for proper protection of the last Houbara Bustards of Tunisia. With a world population of about 50-60,000 individuals, the Houbara Bustard is rated Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List.

Hope for the warbler

For the very first time, a bird rated as Critically Endangered stands a good chance of being awarded happier status through sheer conservation work. Through habitat destruction and predation/competition by introduced species, the Seychelles warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis* had, by the 1960s, dwindled to a world population of just 26 individuals, all crammed on the tiny island of Cousin. Through the work of BirdLife International - who purchased the island - and Nature Seychelles (BirdLife in the Seychelles), the species has gradually and very carefully been re-introduced to other islands of the archipelago. The latest re-introduction has been on Frégate, with high hopes that the bird will breed and flourish there as well. This brings to five the islands that now harbour the species.
It is a year since BirdLife revived regular outings for its adult membership. Judging by the encouraging numbers that turn up for these activities, it seems these events are going down very well with our members. So here are some more!

25 March 2012 • Day-trip to Gozo
We will start with a walk along the coast between Qala and Nadur, followed by lunch. As we celebrate BirdLife’s 50th anniversary this year, we thought to connect our afternoon walk with some BirdLife history: our route will take us along the area where the Society’s fledgling ringing scheme ringed its very first bird way back in the 1960s.

April 2012 • Outing to Kemmuna
After last year’s success, a day outing to Kemmuna is a must. As we did last year, there will be short and long walks, so everyone can enjoy the day at their leisure. Wildflowers and spring migrants galore.

May 2012 • Day-trip to Sicily
Sicily here we come! We are going on a day-trip to Sicily, to visit the Cava D’Ispica, a spectacular gorge rich in nature and history, maybe also a visit to the nearby Vendicari Nature Reserve. This will be BirdLife Malta’s first overseas activity for our adult membership. Will it become a tradition?

June 2012 • Seminar Birds and Urban Areas
Think of the trees in Valletta, Msida and Sliema promenade, Mellieha, etc. The current spate of excessive pruning or outright uprooting of mature trees from our towns and villages makes you wonder: why is the country waging a war on greenery? Why this obsession with stumps? This and more will be the subject of our discussion at this half-day seminar.

Unless specific expenses are involved (ferry tickets, etc.), all BirdLife activities are FREE OF CHARGE. At all outings there will be experienced naturalists and birders eager to help out with bird identification and other points of natural interest.
We have all enjoyed an experience with nature: a flock of honey-buzzards soaring overhead, a field of poppies swaying in the wind, the echo of a blue rock thrush song, or simply a sparrow scavenging on the beach.

Unfortunately, many of our treasured wild creatures are under threat. We believe it is important to leave a thriving natural world for future generations to enjoy. When you leave a legacy to BirdLife Malta you will be helping us do just that.

Your legacy will help BirdLife continue to
- protect local and migratory birds
- manage nature reserves as havens for wildlife, and for people to enjoy
- involve and inspire children with nature
- learn more about our natural heritage

Leaving a legacy to BirdLife Malta, no matter how big or small, will help ensure that our children and grandchildren can experience the wonders of nature - and create their own, special memories of the natural world.

For more information and an informal chat about how to leave a legacy, or simply to find out more, please contact our director on (+356) 21347646.

Thank you