

# Bird's Eye view



issue 41 • sep 2013

  
BirdLife  
MALTA



## your voice can count...

This is a very difficult time for bird conservation in Malta. The Labour Party made a deal with the FKNK (the hunters' federation) before the election to secure the votes of hunters. Now the Labour government is delivering on its promises to the hunting lobby and removing or rolling back many of the hard-gained controls over bird hunting.

During Spring Watch last April we witnessed the impact of removing the spring hunting registration fee that resulted in 50% more hunters in the countryside than 2012. As you read this, our Raptor Camp volunteers will be seeing for themselves the aftermath of

the roll back of the two-week September curfew on hunting from 3pm to 7pm. We expect to see many more birds of prey shot in the afternoons now that the peak time for raptor arrival is not protected by the 3pm curfew.

BirdLife Malta has been critical of every government that made concessions to hunters, regardless of who has been at the helm. However, the new government's approach so far is allowing little chance for BirdLife to lobby for sensible policies that protect birds while allowing controlled, legal hunting. This is why we and 12 other organisations have formed the Coalition for the Abolition of Spring Hunting. Together we are working for a referendum where the 60% majority of Maltese who oppose spring hunting can be

empowered to end it once and for all.

Spring is of course the time when the birds that have survived the winter in Africa are returning to their breeding grounds in northern Europe. It makes no sense to kill the birds that will breed and replenish wild bird populations. Spring hunting is actually prohibited under the EU Birds Directive. Malta is apparently now the only country in the Mediterranean and perhaps the whole of the EU to use a derogation to allow it.

Together we can end spring hunting in Malta.



**Steve Micklewright**  
Executive Director

**BirdLife Malta** was set up in January 1962 as the Malta Ornithological Society (MOS). It is the oldest and 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 including 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 woodland restoration project on Marfa Ridge.

**BirdLife Malta** publishes various educational material such as books, posters and leaflets for use by schools and other institutions. It is also active in the media, as part of its 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 non-profit organisation and depends on subscriptions and donations.

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Reg. Vol. Org. VO/0052

## editorial



Enclosed with this issue of *Bird's Eye View* is a copy of the petition form demanding a referendum to ban spring hunting. To make this happen we need the signatures of at least 34,000 Maltese eligible voters. Please ask your friends

and family to sign the petition and pass the form back to us as soon as you can. Where possible avoid the post and return the filled-in forms by hand to the office, through friends, at BirdLife events or nature reserves. If you need more copies to get even more signatures, you can either photocopy the form or contact us at the office and we will send you more.

For our overseas members who will also want to support the Coalition, our next *Bird's Eye View* will include details of how you can help our campaigning at the European level.

**This is our big chance to use the power of the vote for bird protection.** Please use it!

**Desirée Falzon**  
Editor

*Bird's Eye View* • 22 September 2013 • Issue 41

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Publisher **BirdLife Malta**  
Printer **Printit Ltd**  
Design and production **Victor Falzon**

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Printed on Total Chlorine Free paper



The Honey-buzzard is synonymous with autumn raptor migration  
Photo **Nicholas Galea**

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Emile Vaassallo



Head of EC Representation in Malta Martin Bugelli presenting the cameras to BirdLife Executive Director Steve Micklewright.

## cameras for dinja waħda secondary

On 15 May 2013 the European Commission Representation in Malta presented six digital cameras to BirdLife Malta. The presentation was made at the end of a tour of Buskett's flora and fauna led by students of St Theresa College Girls' Secondary Mriehel. The activity was part of a pilot programme for Dinja Waħda in secondary schools, focusing on Natura 2000 sites and biodiversity. The cameras will be used by students to record observations during visits to Natura 2000 sites and later to create presentations or films to spread awareness of these sites' ecological value. The EC Representation in Malta supports BirdLife in various educational initiatives.



Aron Tanti



Four of this year's seven young Black-winged Stilts, a few days before they all migrated to Africa with their parents.



Minister Brincat at Ghadira, flanked by BirdLife Director Steve Micklewright and Mellieha Mayor John Buttigieg.

Victor Falzon

## bumper summer at the reserves

It was a bumper summer for birds at the two wetland reserves managed by BirdLife. Seven young Black-winged Stilts successfully fledged at Ghadira this year, and several broods of Little Ringed Plovers were raised, of which 00 fledged. Meanwhile Reed Warblers, Coots and Little Grebes bred again at Is-Simar in the spring. Is-Simar is still the only place in Malta where Little Grebes are known to breed in the wild. On 26 June, Minister for Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change, Leo Brincat, paid a visit to Ghadira to join BirdLife Malta in celebrating the 'birthdays' of so many Stilt and Little Ringed Plover chicks.

Raymond Galea



Flamingo sightings were particular good this summer.

## days of the phoenix

At the end of August, Malta and Gozo came down with flamingo fever after a flock of more than 50 Greater Flamingoes, including adults and young birds, was spotted by birdwatchers. Many young birds, exhausted by the flight and struggling in the bad weather, were separated from the flock and were forced to land or even ditch into the sea. Members of the public were quick to report and help any weak and struggling birds and several young flamingoes were taken to the Ghadira wetland to be released, including one rescued by Hibs Under 17 football players after it landed in the middle of a training session!

John J Borg



Seabirds, like this Scopoli's Shearwater, are surprisingly long-lived.

## venerable old lady

In August this year, researchers from the LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project recaptured Malta's oldest known Scopoli's Shearwater at her nesting site. The bird, a female, had been ringed (ring number FF00712) way back in 1985 by ornithologist John J. Borg along the southern cliffs of Malta. Dr Benjamin Metzger, Head of Research, said "We know this bird is at least 30 years old, as she was already a breeding adult when she was first ringed 28 years ago." This bird breaks the previous record for Malta's oldest Scopoli's Shearwater by six years. Considering that these seabirds can fly out into the Atlantic and as far south as Senegal after the breeding season, one wonders how many tens of thousands of kilometres this venerable lady must have clocked in her lifetime. Seabirds are well known for their unusually long life.

Aron Tanti



Kemmuna lies right in the middle of the new IBA. The island's cliffs harbour substantial shearwater colonies.

## first marine IBA

Malta has its first Marine Important Bird Area (IBA): the Malta-Gozo Channel. Thanks to the efforts of local ornithologists and researchers from the LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project (2006-2010), BirdLife Malta and representatives from project partners RSPB and Transport Malta could now announce this milestone in seabird conservation. The Channel is an important foraging and congregating area for Malta's breeding seabirds, and some of the country's main seabird colonies (including Ta' Ċenċ and L-Irdum tal-Madonna) are in the cliffs along this stretch of coast. Thousands of birds also funnel through the Channel while on migration, including several species of duck, which often rest in large flocks on the surface.

Chris Cachia Zammit



Most birds of prey are killed late in the afternoon. Above, a shot honey-buzzard plummets down right inside Buskett.

## four more hours of kill-time

In a move that may result in more birds of prey being killed this autumn, the government has made another concession to hunters and removed the 3pm curfew on hunting during the peak afternoon raptor migration. The ban has been replaced with a token 7pm curfew that BirdLife warned would be ineffective, as birds of prey will have largely roosted (or been shot down) by then. Raptor Camp volunteers have had their work cut out this month monitoring afternoon hunting when raptors, storks, herons and other broad-winged birds are at their most vulnerable.

Victor Falzon



The osprey's size and majesty often proves fatal for this bird, and many are shot as they migrate over Malta.

## tagged osprey goes missing

A juvenile Osprey fitted with a satellite tracking device in Corsica as part of a project studying dispersal and migratory movements of these birds of prey went missing after arriving in Malta at the end of August. BirdLife Malta has been helping researchers from the project to reconstruct what happened to the young bird, using data downloaded from the tracking device via the GPS satellites used to 'communicate' with the bird. It is likely that this Osprey was shot down at in the Delimara area some time after 7am on 25 August. Delimara is a notorious hunting black spot.

Mike Downham



His blue balaclava didn't stop this hunter from being caught and penalised.

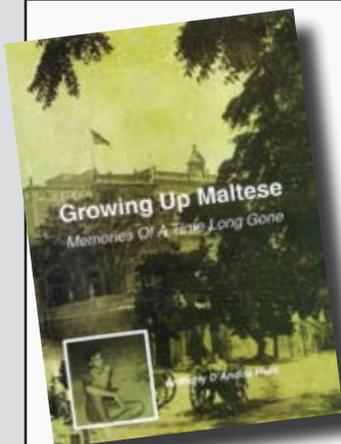
## masked hunters convicted

Two men from Mellieħa – Chris Gauci (27) and Carl Borg (30) – were convicted of hunting at Foresta 2000. The young woodland falls largely within the Għadira Bird Sanctuary where hunting is prohibited. The two men were filmed and photographed last April by Spring Watch Camp 2013 volunteers and BBC journalists as they hunted and fired their guns at birds in the protected area while wearing balaclavas to hide their faces. Both men were fined €4650, had their guns confiscated, and banned from hunting.

## growing up maltese a book by anthony d'andria hunt

Ever wondered what life was like in Malta in the aftermath of World War 2? Anthony D'Andria Hunt's short autobiography brings to life how Malta used to be. He describes the joys and dangers of exploring the Maltese countryside and coast before the building boom began, as well as all of the adventures associated with growing up. Tony is also a keen birdwatcher, and the book highlights how serious the hunting problem was back then, and some of Tony's own attempts to protect birds – such as scaring away seabirds when they tried to fly to Salina, still a notorious black spot for illegal hunting. No doubt Tony's most lasting legacy to bird protection was that he co-founded BirdLife Malta in 1962!

Proceeds from Tony's book go to BirdLife Malta and the Lighthouse Foundation in Australia, where he now lives. You can buy a copy of his book from the BirdLife office. Send a cheque (or make an online payment) for €5 (+ €1 p&p for Malta and €2 for Europe).





# keeping a neighbourly eye

rupert masefield

Salina is overlooked by residential areas along both its north and south sides.

Victor Falzon

The flamingo has to be one of the most recognisable and charismatic birds in the world. So when a lone adult Greater Flamingo, bright pink in its breeding plumage, landed in the historic salt pans at Salina in June, it was no surprise that it drew crowds.

But mingled with the excitement of seeing this visitor was apprehension at the danger it faced if it decided to stay: inevitably such a spectacular bird would also draw the attention of poachers, who would need no press releases to know that a 'trophy-bird' had landed. These fears proved real when Salina residents watched in horror as hunters shot the magnificent bird, then calmly waded into the water to collect it.<sup>1</sup>

## changing times

Salina has the unfortunate reputation of being one of the worst black spots for illegal hunting in Malta. Although most of the area is (on paper) protected as a Bird Sanctuary, numerous incidents of shooting at protected species are reported to the police every year, especially in spring and autumn when migration is at its peak. Despite this, arrests have been

<sup>1</sup>Despite the testimony of multiple eyewitnesses and the presence of feathers in a vehicle found by police, the body of the flamingo was never found and none of the suspects arrested has yet been charged for the crime.

few and far between, and prosecutions practically non-existent.

Recently, however, a growing number of local residents are taking action by watching over protected birds that come to the salt pans, reporting illegal shooting to the police and giving evidence to help prosecute the perpetrators. This kind of community-led action is a new phenomenon in Malta, and one that offers more than a glimmer of hope. It is a sign that people are no longer afraid to stand up to illegal hunters.

A more recent incident galvanised many members of the the public into action. On 1 September 2013, flocks of more than 50 flamingoes were seen flying offshore, and several young birds, weak from their long flight and facing bad weather, separated from the flock and landed around our shores. Many who witnessed the scene remembered what had happened to the Salina flamingo some months ago, and called BirdLife and the police to report these weak and struggling birds. Happily, several were recovered and released into the relative safety of Ghadira nature reserve.

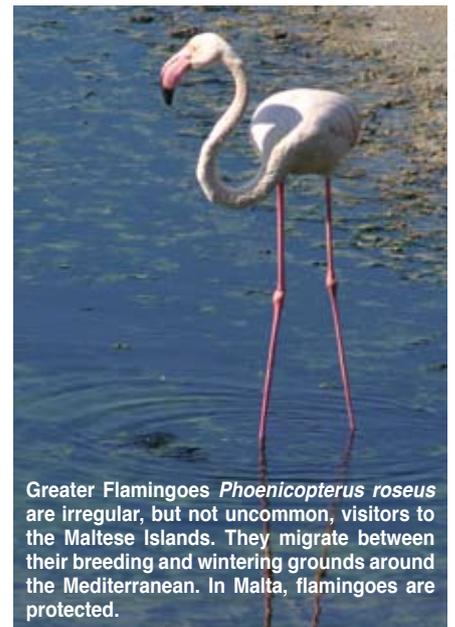
## community birdwatch

After the killing of the Salina flamingo, the residents who reported the incident to the police spoke to BirdLife, and the idea for Malta's first community bird protection group was born. An appeal to members was sent out, asking for donations to fund the purchase of equipment for the Salina Community Birdwatch group. This appeal raised more than €1200, for which BirdLife is most grateful. The Salina Community Birdwatch can now be

set up to coordinate the local residents' efforts to stop the killing of protected birds on their doorstep. BirdLife will provide the group with equipment and training in recording evidence.

Now that autumn hunting has started and migration will soon be reaching its peak, the presence of the Salina Community Birdwatch will hopefully help make Salina a safer refuge for protected migrating birds. It is hoped that these people's initiative will encourage other local communities to tackle illegal hunting taking place on their doorstep.

Rupert Masefield is BirdLife Malta Communications Officer.



Victor Falzon

Greater Flamingoes *Phoenicopterus roseus* are irregular, but not uncommon, visitors to the Maltese Islands. They migrate between their breeding and wintering grounds around the Mediterranean. In Malta, flamingoes are protected.

To find out more about the activities of the Salina Community Birdwatch and about how you can help, please contact BirdLife Malta by email on [office@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:office@birdlifemalta.org) or call 21347644/5/6.



# watching the autumn sky

rupert masefield

It's 6.30pm, an hour before sunset. I am sitting with a group of birders on a rocky cliff overlooking Buskett woodland below us. But most eyes are on the sky scanning the clouds for black dots that, through binoculars, can be identified as birds of prey, storks or other migrating birds.

"Broadwing!" Six pairs of binoculars look the way Edward is pointing: it's a male marsh harrier, unmistakable as it glides towards us on striking grey wings with black tips. The bird half-folds its wings, drops out of the air and disappears in the dark foliage of an oak.

Edward Bonavia is one of the birdwatchers monitoring raptors and other birds as they migrate over Buskett this autumn. I ask him how long he has been doing this.

"I first started coming here in 1990 with my father," he says, "I was eight then."

Today Edward is one of Malta's leading ornithologists, and administers *WorldBirds Malta*, the official scientific database of all reliable bird sightings for the Maltese Islands.

But monitoring of bird migration at Buskett began much earlier than Edward's first visit here. The systematic recording of migrating birds in autumn at this woodland site started in 1968. But why Buskett?

## best spot

"This is the best site for raptors in autumn," says Ray Galea standing nearby. Ray is another veteran birder who has been watching and logging raptors for the past 37 years. "It's the last area of high ground in the south-west of the island before the sea, so birds heading south in autumn gather here in large numbers before crossing to Africa."

Birds of prey and other broad-winged birds like storks and herons use thermals – columns of rising warm air – to gain height before flying out to sea. Thermals provide these birds with an easy ride, as the warm air holds them aloft without too much effort. For

thermals to form, however, you need the sun to heat up the land and the air above it, so birds arriving from Sicily and mainland Europe in the late afternoon (when the thermals are gone) cannot gain height and will need to look for a place to stay for the night (this is when they are especially vulnerable as they fly in low, within hunters' range). After roosting overnight in the woodland trees, the raptors wait for the morning thermals to form before continuing their journey.

## recent increase

Birders who monitor Buskett start observations in the early afternoon and continue until dusk.

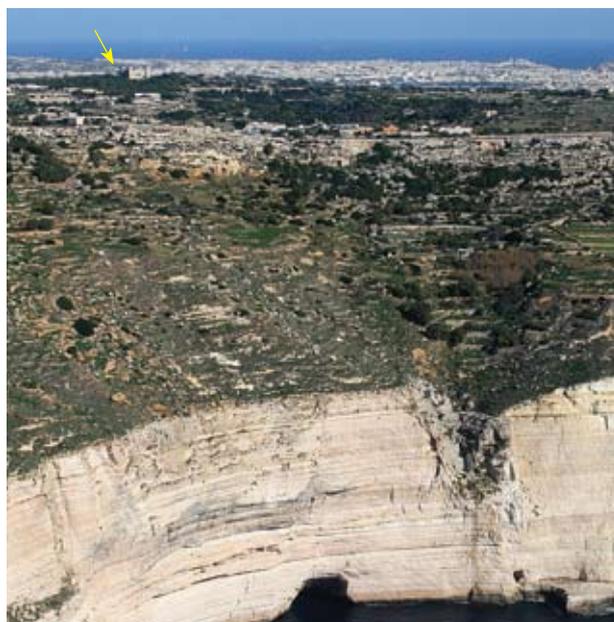
"We normally see between 2000 and 4000 raptors at this location every year," continues Edward, "And it's not only birds of prey that roost here before flying to Africa. Bee-eaters have also increased a lot in recent years and now come through in large numbers. The record was 400 in a single evening."

Other highlights for people coming here to see birds include White and Black Storks, Lesser Spotted Eagles, Booted Eagles and Saker Falcons, all of which have been seen with greater frequency in recent years compared with the past.

## gory past

In terms of the international importance of Malta for migrating birds, Marsh Harriers, Hobbies and Lesser Kestrels all pass in significant numbers most years. But sadly, Marsh Harriers, Common Kestrels and Honey-buzzards also account for more than half of the protected birds killed illegally during the autumn hunting season.

Aron Tanti



Buskett (arrowed) is close to the highest point in the Maltese Islands.

Buskett was first declared a protected area from shooting and trapping in 1932, but the law was never enforced and many birds including raptors in autumn were shot indiscriminately and in large numbers. It was only in the late 1990s that Buskett was given attention by the authorities after years of constant pressure from BirdLife.

“I used to see lots of Honey-buzzards and other raptors getting shot down in Buskett as if nothing was happening. To see 50 Honey-buzzards killed in one afternoon was common during those ugly years,” remembers Ray.

Buskett is today virtually free of illegal hunting. But the sound of shots from the adjacent Girgenti valley is a reminder that elsewhere in this country, away from the eyes of birdwatchers, protected birds are still shot daily, as trophies, for sale to collectors or just for ‘sport’.

### vital camps

Everyone grabs their binoculars as someone spots a raptor overhead.

“Honey-buzzard,” calls Edward. “Injured - it’s not flying properly.”

Raptors with obvious signs of leadshot damage to their plumage are a regular sight, evidence of a close brush with illegal hunters. Illegal hunting is the reason BirdLife has – since the mid-1990s – been organising annual autumn Raptor Camps. Teams of camp participants spread around Malta to detect and deter illegal hunting, and to gather evidence that can be used to secure prosecutions of hunters who target protected birds.

As we go to print, volunteers from all over Europe are in Malta helping BirdLife Malta staff and local volunteers to monitor this year’s autumn hunting season and protect migrating birds.

This year’s Raptor Camp is even more vital, since the government has removed one of the most effective protective measures for migrating birds of prey: a ban on hunting after 3pm, which is the peak raptor passage period.

Meanwhile the government has promised more police in the field, better law enforcement and harsher penalties for law breakers. It remains to be seen how effective these measures will be to counter the infamous curfew rollback.



Matthew Borg Cardona

▲ **Speckled skies.** As the evening advances, raptors start to converge over Buskett, looking for a place to land for the night. Above, part of a flock of honey-buzzards and marsh harriers circle overhead, while the birdwatchers below enjoy (though not without concern) and monitor the spectacle.



Aron Tanti

▲ **Birds of a different feather.** As the birds lose height, differences in their plumage start to show up better, making identification easier for less expert eyes! Honey-buzzards and marsh harriers are by far the most common broadwing raptors that migrate over Malta.



Aron Tanti



Aron Tanti

▲ **The narrow-wings.** Apart from broadwing raptors, several species of falcon also migrate over Buskett in autumn. Some are common, such as the Hobby (at left) and Common Kestrel, and some are rare, such as the Saker Falcon (at right). All, however, are spectacular.



### RaptorCamp 2013

Raptor Camp 2013 is being supported by Carl Zeiss Sports Optics, RSPB, NABU, MAVA, Nature Picture Library and many people who have made individual donations to support our camps.

Rupert Masefield is BirdLife Malta Communications Officer.

To find out more about BirdLife’s activities to protect migrating birds visit our website [www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org) and Facebook page [www.facebook.com/birdlifemalta](http://www.facebook.com/birdlifemalta) and follow posts on our blog.

# Against all odds

benjamin  
metzger

Despite conservationists' best efforts, seabirds globally are experiencing the most rapid population declines of any group of birds. Adapted to a life at sea, birds like shearwaters and petrels spend most of their lives far from humans, but the impact of human activities on these birds is still a major factor in their declining numbers. In the wake of threats on land, nesting sites for shearwaters and storm-petrels in Malta have receded to inaccessible cliffs and strictly protected offshore islets. But even here they face many threats.

## introduced predators

Without doubt the most harmful land predator for seabirds, as for many other threatened birds, is the rat. Everywhere in the world rats are intimately associated with humans, living on the excess food and waste we produce. The litter left on cliffs by campers encourages the growth of rat populations in spring. During the hot summer months, when campers have left, the hungry rats shift their foraging areas down the cliffs into seabird nesting sites. Rats eat seabird eggs and predate small chicks, a situation worsened by their habit of taking more than their immediate need to create food stores, meaning that a single rat can wreak disproportionate devastation on a vulnerable colony of nesting seabirds.



Rats are a major threat to seabird nests.

Seabirds of the tubenose family such as shearwaters and petrels are especially vulnerable to egg and chick predation as they never lay more than a single egg each year. And because they have such a long incubation and chick-rearing period, they have to wait till the following year if their egg is predated.

Helping seabirds in Malta must always be connected to predator control. At the cliffs of L-Ahrax peninsula, which hold the most important Yelkouan Shearwater colony in the Maltese Islands, BirdLife constantly maintains rat-baiting stations to control the rat population close to the nesting sites. This has led to a significant increase in the survival and fledging of young Yelkouan Shearwaters.

## development and light pollution

To avoid land-based predators by day, adult shearwaters and storm petrels have evolved their behaviour into only returning to their nests under cover of darkness, using their acute sense of sight, hearing and smell to locate their nests in the black crevices of the cliffs. But light from large ships at anchor, container terminals, roads, hotels or other development close to where the seabirds breed can light up

the night sky, making the birds easy prey for gulls at night or even causing them to abandon their nests.

Light pollution also affects young shearwaters at fledging time, causing them to become disoriented when leaving their nests for the first time. The young, inexperienced birds often crash-land in illuminated urban areas, where they end up easy prey for stray cats and dogs or are injured or killed on busy coast roads.

When disoriented shearwater fledglings are found by members of the public, these birds are taken care of by BirdLife, ringed and released far out at sea.

Development often also goes hand in hand with increased noise pollution, interfering with the birds' main means of communication at night as their mating calls go unheard. Future development plans, such as offshore wind farms and the proposed bridge across the Gozo Channel, if realised, would cause massive disturbance to the birds at their rafting sites, and disrupt their flyways to the colonies.

As Malta's leading authority on ornithological science, research and conservation, BirdLife Malta acts as a government consultant in the drawing up of Environmental Impact Assessments for development that affect wild bird populations. It makes recommendations on the management of Natura 2000 sites and shearwater habitats. Together with other NGOs BirdLife is campaigning to prevent increased light pollution at dark night heritage sites such as Id-Dwejra in Gozo. Thankfully, some of Malta and Gozo's coastal cliffs are still free of light pollution and small colonies of Yelkouan Shearwaters have been recently discovered in such sites.

## disturbance at sea

In the evenings, shearwaters gather at sea close to their colonies, sometimes forming large rafts. Intense boat traffic, fast speedboats and noisy disco boat-parties can disrupt the rafts and disturb and chase off the resting birds.

To raise public awareness of the shearwaters and the threats they face from human activities, BirdLife organises night walks close to seabird cliffs during the breeding season, where members and the public can experience the forlorn calls of mating shearwaters under a nocturnal sky. BirdLife also organises small-scale boat trips with clear directions on good practice. But national regulation is needed to control marine activity in these sensitive areas.

## unsustainable fishing practices

While seabirds are usually well adapted to small-scale local fishing, general overfishing as well as negligently placed, baited longlines, gillnets and driftnets on an industrial scale can have a severely detrimental effect on seabird populations. Where fishing practices lead to shearwaters getting hooked on baited longlines or caught and drawn in gillnets, populations can collapse.

BirdLife's EU LIFE+ Yelkouan Shearwater Project (2006–2010) assessed the amount of shearwater by-catch in Maltese fisheries, developed seabird friendly long-lines and promoted them among local fishermen. Within the Marine Task Force, BirdLife Europe helps to develop sensitive fishing and baiting techniques, which reduce the amount of by-catch not only of seabirds but also of turtles and marine mammals.

## pollution

Little is known of the impact of small scale oil spills, plastic waste, persistent chemicals and heavy metals on Maltese seabirds, though the threats to seabirds caused by polluting the oceans is well-studied in other parts of the world. Seabirds can easily get entangled in ropes of fishing gear and ingest plastic waste mistaken for food. Being long-lived and positioned high in the marine foodweb, seabirds are at risk of accumulating heavy metals and persistent chemicals, well known to negatively influence reproductive success.



Three major threats to seabirds  
 A. Coastal development, which destroys habitat and creates noise and light pollution  
 B. Destructive and unsustainable fishing practices that cause massive seabird fatalities  
 C. Direct persecution by hunters from seacraft or from land.

## direct persecution

Unfortunately, illegal killing of seabirds in Malta remains a major problem, and Maltese hunters frequently shoot shearwaters from the top of the cliffs when the birds come back from their foraging trips at night. Birds have been recovered from the sea either shot dead or severely injured. Only properly enforced protected areas at land and at sea can put an end to the reckless massacre of these birds.

**Dr Benjamin Metzger** is Head Researcher of the LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project.

The best way Malta can help ensure the local and global survival of Yelkouan Shearwaters, Scopoli's Shearwaters, and European Storm-petrels is to maintain and develop new and existing projects among government authorities, conservation organisations, businesses and volunteers. BirdLife Malta is currently engaged in the EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project that is seeking to identify new marine Important Bird Areas for Malta's three breeding tubenoses, in order to protect the areas at sea where they feed and congregate away from the colonies.



The EU LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project is run by BirdLife Malta, the Ministry for Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change, RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and SPEA (BirdLife in Portugal).

Find out more about the project and volunteering opportunities on the project's web pages at [www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org) (click project logo) or send an email to [benjamin.metzger@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:benjamin.metzger@birdlifemalta.org) **LIFE+ Malta Seabird Project** is also on Facebook.

Matthew Borg Cardona

BirdLife Malta Images

# incredibly swift

joe sultana



You often hear them before you see them. Unmistakable high-pitched shrieks fill the air above your head as a flock of small, dark, sickle-shaped birds appear as if out of nowhere and converge overhead, circling and calling. Meet the swifts, unrivalled masters of the air.

## air aces

Except to nest, swifts never stop flying. Incredibly, they even sleep on the wing, spending the night soaring and gliding high in the air. A young swift will spend two or three years in constant flight, before landing to nest for the first time.

It is easy to see how swifts are masters of the air. Their wings and body shape are aerodynamically perfect, and their mouths open in a wide gape to suck in insects as the birds cut through the air. Swifts are mostly dark, though some species have distinctive white markings (a white belly or rump).

Six species figure on Malta's list, but only two are common: the Common Swift and the Pallid Swift. Both are blackish with a pale throat patch, and forked tail. It is often difficult to tell them apart against the sky; the Pallid Swift is browner when seen up close. They both have similar shrill, screaming calls, though the Pallid Swift's is somewhat lower pitched.

## after the ban

The Common Swift is a very common passage migrant from mid-March to mid-

November, with most passing from May to August, with occasional winter sightings. Common Swifts have been protected since 1911, but their aerobatics have always

made them popular subjects for target practice. Hunting in spring, in particular, has had a most damaging effect on this species. Before 2007 there were only very occasional cases of swifts breeding in Malta, but following the two-year spring hunting ban in 2008-9, Common Swifts have started breeding regularly every year, and have nested or been observed prospecting (looking for nesting sites) in as many as 15 localities. Regular breeding sites now include Mdina, Paceville, Sliema, Msida and Xlendi.

## the pale one

Pallid Swifts were formerly regarded as scarce visitors to Malta. It is possible that they could have been mistaken for



**High achiever.** A Pallid Swift flies near its nest underneath an apartment in Portomaso Tower.

**“A young swift spends its first two or three years in constant flight.”**

Common Swifts, but Pallids have definitely increased considerably in the last 10 years. They too began nesting in recent years, and were first confirmed breeding in 2009 in

a cave at Id-Dwejra in Gozo, and have since spread to at least another four sites. It seems they have been attracted to some areas where Common Swifts were already breeding successfully.

Unlike Common Swifts, which raise only one brood per breeding season, Pallid Swifts raise two broods before leaving our islands. Their breeding season is therefore longer, and extends into June, when the rabbit-hunting season opens. Because of this, Pallids become the target of illegal shooting *twice* in one breeding season. Many of them fall victim.

## the only way

The post-2007 colonisation of our islands by these air aces is clear evidence that the present spring hunting season (supposedly limited to the killing of turtle doves and quails) is restricting swifts from spreading and establishing new breeding areas. There is only one way this annual cull can be stopped: a ban on spring shooting.

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist

Six species of swifts have occurred in Malta:

- Common Swift
- Pallid Swift
- Alpine Swift
- Little Swift
- White-rumped Swift
- White-throated Needletail

Of these, only the first three are seen regularly.



Marcel Tellus

### How did you start volunteering with BirdLife?

I always wanted to do some sort of voluntary work in my semi-retired life even though I have kept myself busy all along. A couple of years back, my friend Sivie Cauchi, who is a Klabb Huttaf leader, invited me to events organised for BirdLife adult members, and there was no turning back. I made friends with quite a few members and was impressed with the work and dedication carried out by the volunteer leaders and members. All this gave me the incentive to help in any way I could.

### What do you do as a volunteer?

I am now the secretary of the committee that organises adult member events, as well as one of the leaders on the team that thinks up activities to places of interest, talks and presentations on various environmental topics.

### What has been your best experience as a volunteer?

More than a specific experience, I must mention the feel-good that comes with receiving so much support as a member of a pressure group that protects our environment. The attendance at most of our activities has been exceptional, case in point being the two weekend trips to the Nebrodi region, Cefalù and Etna in Sicily, which were fully booked. One memorable experience was our visit to the Rocche del Castro on the slopes of the Nebrodi mountains, where griffon vultures breed. These vultures are one of the largest birds in Europe and can reach a wingspan of three metres. Watching these birds is something of a spectacle.



## out and about

### forthcoming member activities

richard cachia zammit



### 5 october 2013 • eurobirdwatch

EuroBirdwatch is an annual celebration by European and Asian BirdLife partners to promote birdwatching and bird conservation. BirdLife Malta will be joining and organising a special activity to celebrate this event. Members and the general public are invited to Buskett to participate in a variety of activities, including a demonstration of scientific bird ringing, observation of migratory birds and games for children.



### november 2013 • day trip to sicily

On our second day trip to Sicily this year, we will be revisiting Cava d'Ispica as well as Vendicari nature reserve but, for those who joined us in May 2012, this trip will be different. First, we will be this time visit Cava d'Ispica Nord, which is the archeological hub of this huge valley. Second, we will be joined by our friend archaeologist Keith Buhagiar, whose knowledge will certainly make this trip more interesting. Most birds at Vendicari in November will be different from those seen in May and the numbers much greater. Flamingoes, cormorants, herons, ducks and many more species guaranteed.



### december 2013 • the victoria lines part 2

After last year's successful walk along part of the fortified Victoria Lines, this year – as anticipated – we will continue our walk along another part of this fortification. Ray Cachia Zammit will again be sharing with us his knowledge about the history of the Victorian soldiers of the time.

### indoor activities

As from November, we will also start our monthly indoor meetings. These will include presentations on various subjects, videos etc.

**Richard Cachia Zammit** is Coordinator of the BirdLife Malta Activity Team.

For more details send an email to [blmactivities@gmail.com](mailto:blmactivities@gmail.com) or call Richard on 21672939 (5-7pm). When you join our Activity Mailing List you will receive email details and reminders of forthcoming events. At our outings there will be **experienced naturalists** eager to help with bird identification and other points of natural interest. While every effort is made to stick to the activities as planned, unforeseen circumstances may force us to revise or cancel some of them. Unless there are travel expenses etc., all BirdLife activities are **free of charge**.

Let's make spring hunting  
**history.**

Sign the  
referendum  
petition.

Thank you.



Please use the form supplied with this issue.

**Coalition for  
the Abolition of  
Spring Hunting**