

Bird's Eye View

A BirdLife Malta members' magazine

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BirdLife
MALTA




BirdLife
MALTA

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Bird's Eye View production team:

Editors and Contributors

Nathaniel Attard (editor),
Victor Falzon, Jessica Irwin,
Yanka Milusheva, Nicholas Galea,
Nick Piludu, Iryna Lukashuk (design
and layout)

BirdLife Malta Council

Darryl Grima (President); Saviour
Balzan (Secretary General); Norman
Chetcuti (Treasurer); Nicholas Galea
(Council Secretary); Kathleen Galea,
Raymond Galea, Eurydike Kovacs,
Irene Mangion, Geoffrey Saliba
(members)

Contact BirdLife Malta

Flats 1/2, Xemxija Waterfront Apts,
Triq is-Simar, Xemxija, SPB 9025,
Malta +356 21347644/5/6

info@birdlifemalta.org

www.birdlifemalta.org

Printing Poulton's Print

**Front cover photo - Scops Owl by
Joe Sultana**

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A special spring



Springtime is here and with it comes the spectacle of nature at its best with flowering plants, buzzing insects, and birds migrating to their breeding grounds. This year's spring is special for one particular bird. A bird which needs all the help it can get to start increasing in numbers after heavy declines in the past 30 years. I am referring to the Turtle Dove, which this spring will fly over Malta without being shot at...legally that is.

Unfortunately, the Government will still be opening a spring hunting season for Quail, even if scientific reports and data submitted by hunters themselves show that autumn is a satisfactory hunting period for Quail and that in spring very few Quail are caught. We will be doing all we can with our limited resources to make sure migrating birds have a safe journey over our country.

On a different subject, we are anxiously waiting for the outcome from the European Court of Justice about finch trapping in Malta. While confident that the arguments we have been stating will bring an end to finch trapping in our islands, we have to wait a bit longer to find out the verdict.

BirdLife Malta will keep making solid scientific arguments to protect and conserve our living nature making sure also to engage with people in understanding its beauty and importance. I trust you are one of our ambassadors and urge you to spread our word. Try to get one person, friend or relative to join us. Visit www.birdlifemalta.org/become-member - it's simple but helps a lot. I hope you will find some time to go out and enjoy nature this spring.

Mark Sultana
CEO

Rare birds sighted

January brought some exciting rare sightings. A scarce winter visitor, a Dartford Warbler was spotted in the boulder scree of Qammieħ in the north of Malta, the first time this bird has been seen on the island since 2013. After the sighting of the Dartford Warbler, a Marmora's Warbler was also observed by a BirdLife Malta birdwatcher in Dwejra, Gozo. This is only the 12th record of this species in the Maltese Islands in the last 100 years. Finally, a very rare Olive-backed Pipit was also reported by a hunter. This species is usually found migrating in winter to southern Asia and Indonesia.



Dartford Warbler
Photo by Aron Tanti



Marmora's Warbler
Photo by Ray Galea



Olive-backed Pipit
Photo by Aron Tanti

We are delighted to announce that in January, we hit the milestone of 10,000 likes on our BirdLife Malta Facebook page! We are happy to see so many people supporting and engaging with our work. If you haven't already, please visit and like our Facebook page to receive regular updates on our work, including exclusive video footage and photos. We have also launched a brand new Facebook page for Is-Salina Nature Reserve as well as a Twitter and Instagram account for our Falko group.

-  /birdlifemalta
-  /IsSalinaNatureReserve
-  /Falko_BirdLifeM
-  /falko_birdlifem

European Court Trapping Case

In February, the European Commission court case against Malta for the derogation from the Birds Directive to allow finch trapping was held at the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. The day ahead of the case, BirdLife Malta held a press conference outside the law courts in Valletta in which BirdLife Malta President Darryl Grima explained that against the legal advice of the Attorney General (AG), the Government of Malta still decided to press ahead and open a trapping season of seven species of wild finches. BirdLife Malta CEO Mark Sultana also stated that the AG's advice proves BirdLife Malta right and solidifies that the derogation applied by the Government cannot be justified on many levels.



BirdLife Malta press conference on finch trapping. Photo by BirdLife Malta

BirdLife Malta 2016 AGM

On 15 December 2016, BirdLife Malta held its annual AGM at Salina. The meeting focused on the year's achievements and future challenges, including Malta's EU Presidency in 2017. CEO Mark Sultana explained how BirdLife Malta collected over 180 injured birds in 2016, some of which are highly protected and unfortunately most of which had to be euthanised by the vets. He also spoke about the importance of science and scientific research to advocate change. Presentations on BirdLife Malta's work were also given by the organisation's department managers as well as addresses by President Darryl Grima and Secretary General Saviour Balzan.



BirdLife Malta AGM. Photo by Nathaniel Attard

Together Against Air Pollution from Ships

In December, BirdLife Malta officially launched a new project to raise awareness in Malta and the Mediterranean about air pollution from cruise ships. The objective is to establish a Sulphur Emission Control Area (SECA) in the Mediterranean. The project, which is in partnership with NABU (BirdLife Germany) and several other European NGOs, will work collaboratively to regularly exchange information, knowledge and expertise through periodical conferences which will discuss air pollution from ships.



Together against Air Pollution project launch. Photo by BirdLife Malta

LLN at MCAST

BirdLife Malta will be collaborating with Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) as part of the Lifelong Learning through Nature (LLN) project which provides students with unique learning opportunities whilst benefiting from spending time in nature. Thanks to this new partnership, two new Learning Outcomes related to environmental sustainability have been developed specifically for MCAST which will include an element of outdoor education through a field trip. This will give students the opportunity to undertake investigations during a guided field visit to a natural area.



LLN and MCAST collaboration. Photo by BirdLife Malta

Autumn hunting and trapping season

The 31 January 2017 saw the end of the autumn hunting season, one month after the closure of the trapping season. The hunting season saw a high number of illegalities, including the killing of protected birds such as Booted Eagles. BirdLife Malta and the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) also revealed that over a third of active trapping sites were not registered and illegal, while the remaining sites permitted by the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) within Natura 2000 sites were in possible breach of habitat protection regulations. The results followed an earlier appeal by both organisations against the illegal use of electronic bird callers throughout the trapping season. BirdLife Malta and CABS continue to stress the need for a central authority with respect to enforcement on environment.



Shot Booted Eagle. Photo by Nick Piludu

LIFE project updates

At the end of last year, BirdLife Malta and the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija team urged the public to report any sightings of stranded Scopoli's Shearwaters that may have become disorientated by light pollution during the fledging period. With the help of the public, a record 21 fledglings were recovered and subsequently ringed and released back into safe areas by BirdLife Malta. Moving into 2017, January and February marked the mating period for the Yelkouan Shearwaters. During this time, the LIFE Arcipelagu Garnija project staff were busy monitoring the activity in the different colonies, using methods such as remote camera trails.



Stranded Scopoli's Shearwater. Photo by Joe Sultana

Scops Owl

Kokka

WORDS NICHOLAS GALEA

- **Full English Name:** Eurasian Scops Owl
- **Scientific Name:** *Otus scops*
- **Length:** 19-21cm
- **Wingspan:** 47-54cm
- **Status:** frequent spring and autumn migrant
- **Call:** deep whistle given at night during the breeding season
- **Habits:** roosts by day, well hidden in trees. Hunts for insects at night
- **Habitat:** open woodland and farmland

The Scops Owl is definitely one of the top contenders for the birds' edition of best camouflage award. It's a small owl, one of the smallest in Europe, and the smallest in Malta. It is mostly greyish-brown in colour with dark streaks forming a pattern resembling that of dead-wood. Although it's a regular spring and autumn migrant in Malta it is hardly seen. In countries where it breeds it is mostly detected during the breeding season via its deep whistle given at night. Although no breeding records have been confirmed yet, it is one bird that could possibly breed in future since Malta has suitable habitat for it. It uses holes in hollow tree trunks to breed.

In Malta, when it is mostly seen, it is during early morning ringing sessions when licensed BirdLife Malta ringers catch such birds in the nets to study their migration patterns. Through ringing we know that a few of these birds spend the winter in Malta but usually it is only for a night or two before they continue on their journey. Due to the fact that it is a long distance migrant, breeding in Europe and wintering south of the Sahara Desert in tropical Africa, it has evolved longer wings when compared to other owls of its size.

Its Latin name, 'scops', is an ancient Greek word which when translated means 'the little eared owl', describing this bird perfectly! Its Maltese name, 'Kokka', is the general term for an 'owl' in Malta but is also used to describe a squatting position.

Being nocturnal, the Scops Owl spends the day roosting close to the main branch of a tree. It prefers agricultural land with patches of open woodland. Oak and Carob trees are often favoured given that they offer large, winding branches matching the patterns formed by its feather colours. It stays in an elongated position whilst roosting so that its silhouette does not give it away amidst tree branches. Its ear tufts are also erected while roosting as it uses them to break its owl shape further. At night it feeds on nocturnal insects such as beetles, crickets and moths.

Although listed as a species of 'least concern', studies are showing that the Scops Owl population is decreasing. Even in Malta it used to be more common, with hunters from older generations telling stories of how easy it was to see such birds during the migration period. My grandma tells me how Scops Owls were sold as meat for the pot by street hawkers. Unfortunately, laws in Malta allow hunting of birds for two hours before sunrise and two hours after sunset and many nocturnal birds, including the Scops Owl, are "mistaken" for huntable species.

Many nocturnal birds, including Scops Owls are often disoriented by artificial lights when migrating at night and a good number are recovered by BirdLife Malta every year when found stranded after hitting windows or buildings.

Nicholas Galea, bird ringer and birdwatcher, is BirdLife Malta Council Secretary



EURASIAN SCOPS OWL - Aron Tanti

Nature in focus at Is-Simar

WORDS VICTOR FALZON



Little Grebe **Blongun Żgħir**

Despite their overall resemblance to ducks, grebes are very different birds. Three species of grebe occur in Malta, of which the Little Grebe is the smallest. A scarce but annual winter visitor to Malta, it is almost invariably found in water as fish are its main prey. It is mostly spotted bobbing on the surface in shallow waters in creeks and bays but they also occur regularly at Is-Simar and Għadira. In winter 2005/2006 a pair of Little Grebes made ornithological history when they bred at Is-Simar – the first breeding record of this species in Malta. Since then, other pairs have nested at the reserve, which remains to this day the only known breeding site of Little Grebe in the wild.



Photo by Aron Tanti

Blue Emperor **Mazzarell Sultan**

Malta isn't rich in dragonflies since we don't have the habitat they like, namely lakes, ponds and streams. So a place like Is-Simar with its pools and canals is a magnet to these large insects. King among our dragonflies is the Blue Emperor Dragonfly, a dazzling blue-and-green beauty that earned the royal title due to its large size. The Blue Emperor is also our largest insect. Dragonflies lay their eggs in water where the young grow and hunt small aquatic animals, even tadpoles. The adults also seek water as this is the ideal habitat of their favourite food – mosquitoes – which they grab in mid-air. The pools at Is-Simar are the ideal haunt for the Blue Emperor and related species.



Photo by Victor Falzon

Moorish Gecko **Wizgħa tal-Kampanja**

If lizards are the flashy extroverts of the reptile world, geckoes are their shy cousins. Some tropical geckoes rival any lizard in colour but the two species that occur in Malta are drab-coloured. The Moorish Gecko, which is the larger of the two species, is largely found in the countryside. It hunts mostly in the dark using its good eyesight to home in on moths and spiders that land on their stretch. But these reptiles are also seen by day at Is-Simar, generally basking on dark sun-warmed surfaces to warm up quickly and function better. In winter, the Moorish Gecko hides away under tree bark or in twig piles; such structures are in fact provided for this very purpose at the reserve.



Photo by Guido Bonett

Olive **Żebbuġ**

The Olive is the quintessential Mediterranean tree. Indeed the Mediterranean climate is generally determined by precisely the kind of climate that supports the growth of this hardy species. Olives are very long-lived and at over a thousand years old, a grove of venerable Olives in Bidnija are probably the oldest living organisms in Malta. There's an Olive grove at Is-Simar too but these trees were planted sometime in the mid-20th century. The Olives at Is-Simar are not cultivated for human consumption so in autumn the fruit is gobbled by bands of voracious Common Starlings. The evergreen grove also forms a canopy that is excellent habitat for shade-loving plants and mushrooms.



Photo by Victor Falzon

Victor Falzon is a naturalist and field teacher with BirdLife Malta

Back to the sky

WORDS NICK PILUDU



Merlins are scarce autumn migrants. In 2016 we released Jupiter the Merlin after five weeks of rehabilitation. Photo by Ella Beeson

the sky

In 2016 our Injured Birds programme really took a step forward, with almost 200 birds rescued and some fantastic rehabilitation successes. Clear procedures have now been established with the vets at Vetcare and our colleagues at the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU), and the community is more engaged than ever in reporting injured birds. As the spring migration is now in full swing we are ready to start a new year of rescues and rehabilitation.

But why is this work needed?

Several factors make Malta a tricky place for birds to navigate. Malta's position on a migratory flyway means that birds get to the islands exhausted and weak and often just fall down from the sky as soon as they see land. Water birds like the Black-necked Grebe are especially prone to this and we have rescued them from garages, pools, gardens, and roads. Luckily, these birds are usually okay – after some rehydration and a bit of food they are soon ready to be ringed and released in one of our wetland reserves. Collisions – especially against windows – are also common. European Robins and Scops Owls seem to be the most common victims of this but again, they often just need an overnight stay in captivity, where they can quietly recover from the hit. A short trip to Buskett and then they are good to go.

It is not always this easy. Sometimes when injuries are too extensive or shattered wings would prevent birds from flying again enabling them to live in the wild, the only option is to put them to sleep. A difficult, but necessary choice – wild birds can't live in captivity. Some other times it takes months of care and rehabilitation before a bird can be released. Lots of Common Starlings and Song Thrushes, species that can be legally hunted, end up living with us during winter as they recover from their shotgun injuries. They are strong animals capable of extraordinary recoveries and they can often be released in the wild. But they sure do need a lot of food! Our mealworm colonies are completely exhausted by the end of December.



Robins are commonly seen throughout winter, and often suffer collision injuries. Photo by Nathaniel Attard

Throughout 2016 we had several shot falcons in our care for the first time. Suffering from broken wings and feathers blasted away by pellets these birds are left unable to fly and therefore, to hunt and eat too. It was a tricky journey and a steep learning curve. We had to figure out how to make sure these birds would not further injure themselves, that they would not let themselves starve due to captivity, and most importantly, that they would learn to fly again. So, we spoke with experts across Europe, established a protocol, bought lots of frozen chicks, and learnt how to teach a raptor how to fly. One by one, all our falcons took to the sky once again in Comino.

Hand-rearing Yelkouan Shearwaters

But that was not the only major breakthrough we had in 2016. The recovery of two stranded Yelkouan Shearwater chicks in spring resulted in a frenzied scramble for information on how to hand-rear seabirds. The two very squeaky chicks – Baħar and Carmel – were found in the water at Blue Grotto and required constant attention. A mix of sardines, whitebait, vitamins, and oils was prepared based on the best scientific knowledge available and fed to the chicks through a syringe, mimicking the natural feeding process where the parents regurgitate semi-digested fish in their chick’s throat. Baħar and Carmel were then brought to a nestbox in the cliffs in northern Malta, where they were fed and monitored for another two weeks. They fledged in early summer, an incredible success and a great joy for the rehabilitation team, who worked very hard on them and smelled like sardines for two months.

As the 2017 migration brings the birds back we will be again on the field to rescue the ones that didn’t make it past the islands and make sure they get the best care possible. The support of our dedicated members makes this vital work possible, enabling us to save more birds giving them a second chance of survival. To help us continue this vital work you can donate via our website or recommend a membership and of course, help us to raise awareness.

Nick Piludu is the Conservation Coordinator at BirdLife Malta



Starlings are very resilient, and are often able to bounce back from suffering gunshot injuries. Photo by Aron Tanti



Carmel, one of the two Yelkouan Shearwaters hand-reared by BirdLife Malta, gets ready to be ringed and released. Photo by HSBC Malta



The Scops Owl is a common victim of collisions, especially against windows. Photo by Ella Beeson



In 2016 five Common Kestrels, all confirmed shot, were rehabilitated and successfully released in Comino. Photo by BirdLife Malta



A very displeased-looking Little Bittern gets ready to be released after been rescued in St. Paul’s Bay. Photo by BirdLife Malta

SELMUN

Let's go north

WORDS YANKA MILUSHEVA
PICTURES IRYNA LUKASHUK

The warming sun welcomes you to enjoy the northern regions of Malta and what better place for this than the Selmun area – a perfect combination of a nature walk near the sea and an opportunity for a glimpse at the past.

Follow the signs from Mellieħa bus stop towards Selmun and start your journey from Selmun Palace. On the way take a moment to enjoy the picturesque landscape revealed right in front of your eyes over Mistra Bay and in the distance the outlines of Bugibba and St. Paul's Bay.

The baroque Selmun Palace, resembling Verdala Palace and watching over Mistra Bay, was built in the 18th century and served as a summer residence of the Knights. Believe it or not, there is a rumour that a ghost used to appear in the small bell tower of the palace!

A little before this towering building you can discover the remains of a typical rural farmhouse complex, an old well for collecting rainwater.

Since crossroads are an indispensable part of life, while admiring Selmun Palace you face a crucial decision:

to explore the area in a peaceful, more relaxed manner or accept the challenge for a more adventurous trek!

Following the signs to the left towards Selmun beach and L-Imġiebaħ Bay, you can enjoy a pleasant stroll on the winding paved road fenced in between the typical Maltese rubble walls. Looking around, you will realise that spring in the Maltese Islands has arrived.

All around you you can see several kinds of flowers such as Red Campion, Crown Daisy and Sweet Alison. Here you can also see re-introduced Pine Trees. Along the way, under the road across the valley, there are three arched tunnels for collecting rainwater used by the farmers in the region.

Just before reaching the beach you can see the Pill-box, set up during WWII as a precaution against unexpected

attacks. The rubble stones hide the solid concrete walls and the few openings in them suggest where the machine guns and rifles were placed more than 60 years ago.

The Selmun beach itself offers a tranquil place where you can enjoy peace of mind and the chance to admire the sea.

In case you have decided to continue right from Selmun Palace and explore the area off the beaten track don't forget your hiking shoes! The narrow rural country road, surrounded by neat little farmlands with quaint farmhouses and flower covered meadows, leads to the ruin of the Fort Campbell. This is the last major fortification built in Malta and which now sadly watches over the north parts of the country. From here you find another off-road track heading towards Mistra Bay.





Suddenly your eyes stumble upon a magnificent panoramic view of the terrace-shaped landscape around you! It is so green after the rains that it makes you wonder whether you are still in Malta or in some other exotic place. In front, you can also see St. Paul's Islands covered with the typical maritime garigue flora.

There is no official trail but the outlines of a nature path can be noticed, formed mainly by the locals and nature trekking enthusiasts. Again you will have to choose between heading towards Mistra Bay or making a circle along the coastline to reach Selmun beach. I would recommend the second as you will

have the chance to approach the beach from a different perspective and enjoy the curious shapes of the cliffs surrounding Imġiebañ Bay.

You will also have the chance to explore some old salt pans leaving you to wonder how they were built in such a strange place. On the way you will encounter the typical Maltese garigue flora and a wide variety of aromatic plants like French Daffodil, Romulea, mint, and much more. Without a doubt you will be accompanied by some shy lizards, butterflies and maybe even hidden chameleons!

Yanka Milusheva is the Events Assistant at BirdLife Malta

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR



BEES

Always attracted by the spring flowers aroma



RED CAMPION

Eye-catching spring beauty



ALEPPO PINE

Evergreen trees with needle-like leaves

HOW TO GET THERE

Take any bus that passes by Mellieħa in the direction of Ċirkewwa and get off at Mellieħa bus stop, the first one after the roundabout at the top of the hill.





Darryl Grima is BirdLife Malta's President. We asked Darryl about the NGO's achievements, biggest challenges and his hopes for the future.

Can you tell me a bit about your role as BirdLife Malta's President? What are the most challenging aspects?

The President along with the Council are the trustees ensuring that the organisation acts and reflects the members. BirdLife Malta does not exist to just exist, but because there was a group of people with shared values who came together to form this organisation. The society has been around for 55 years now and Malta and the world have changed in this period, but these values still exist and unfortunately so do the threats to our values.

There are moments which stand out more than others, one being our recent press conference in front of the law courts regarding Malta's case at the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on finch trapping. We drew attention to the Attorney General's contradictory position to the Government's on the trapping issue, and our conservation team revealed the conclusions of its investigation of illegal trapping in Malta. Shocking information! The truth uncovered. The lack of action by the authorities made clear. For those that have not seen it, watch it on Facebook or on our YouTube channel. This is what BirdLife Malta stands for.

BirdLife Malta is fortunate that we have a great council, with Saviour as Secretary General, Norman as Treasurer and all the members that bring in knowledge and experience from different sectors onto the table be it Eurydike, Geoffrey, Irene, Kathleen, Nicholas or Raymond.

What have been the greatest successes you have seen in your time as President?

The biggest thing we are working on currently is the Salina Nature Reserve. We signed the Heads of Agreement last year and are moving towards signing the management agreement. This will be the biggest nature reserve that we manage,

alongside Għadira, Foresta 2000, and Is-Simar. The beauty of this place is that it offers us great opportunities in terms of popular outreach, education and conservation.

On an international note, along with BirdLife Europe and the environmental community, we lobbied on the fitness check of the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive and have helped to save what is basically the best set of environmental legislation in the world.

This year Malta is holding the EU Presidency, what are your hopes for this?

As members of the BirdLife community we need to help bring forward the main topics BirdLife Europe has. Right now BirdLife Europe has made a rally call for the EU partners to lobby on the need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The lobby to save the Birds and Habitats Directives were successful thanks to the massive concerted effort across Europe, including Malta.

Clearly, more than ever we must put pressure as part of a partnership to bring forward European issues in front of our Government, which holds the Presidency whilst still working on matters that affect our patch.



Looking to the year ahead, what do you hope BirdLife Malta will be able to achieve?

There are the usual suspects, being the outcome of the European Court of Justice on finch trapping and better enforcement as this has been very lacking in the last few years. We have been lobbying for the setting up of a Wildlife Crime Unit.

Yet it is good for us to stretch our wings further out and work more actively on habitats and especially the degradation of habitats. We need to see that action is taken to reduce and remove alien species from our countryside. We need to continue building on our success in education and reach out further, a case in point would be Gozo where our outreach has always been low.

To do all this BirdLife Malta needs to grow, and for this reason this year we should aim to grow in membership. Our members and their support are always a priority and essential to our organisation.

Jessica Irwin is the Communications Officer at BirdLife Malta

what's on

FAMILY EVENTS

Walk for nature

26 March 2017, 08:30 – 13:30

Are you ready for BirdLife Malta's annual fundraising trek?

The Walk for Nature is organised every year to encourage children to experience nature and wildlife first hand. At the same time we want to raise awareness about the importance of nature conservation. This year we will walk again from Imdina to Is-Simar Nature Reserve.

Participation is by donation and funds raised during this year's event will be used to buy a birdwatching scope for use by students and other visitors at Is-Simar Nature Reserve. We shall be meeting at the Old Railway Station at the foot of L-Imdina and transport back to the starting point will be available at a small fee.

Please email events@birdlifemalta.org to book your participation with the following information:

- Name and contact number
- Number of people in your group
- Membership number if you have one



Nature Alert action held in Brussels on December 7th. Photo by BirdLife Europe

From the Nature Alert success to CAP

Following the Europe-wide #NatureAlert campaign, EU President Jean-Claude Juncker and his Commission confirmed that the EU's flagship nature laws – the Birds and Habitats Directives – will be saved and not rewritten and weakened. BirdLife Malta, along with our partners were delighted to receive the news ending two years of uncertainty over the laws' future. Now our focus turns to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with the European Commission launching a consultation process for a sustainable food and farming system.

Easter Egg-citement

9 April 2017, 10:00 – 16:00

Join us for our annual "Easter Egg-citement" activity at Is-Simar Nature Reserve!

Here is the perfect opportunity for your children to take part in a guided activity which will include an Easter Egg Hunt, nature detective activities and exploration at the nature reserve. There will be sessions lasting 90 minutes throughout the day.



Easter Egg-citement 2016. Photo by BirdLife Malta

Subscribe to our events on Facebook:

For further information
or for bookings please email
events@birdlifemalta.org
or call +356 2134 7646

 [/birdlifemalta](https://www.facebook.com/birdlifemalta)

 [/falkoblmalta](https://www.facebook.com/falkoblmalta)

Remember to check the members' email
newsletter for further events details

SAVE THESE DATES AS WE ARE ALSO PLANNING:

Falko events

- 19 March, Wild Flower Walk on Gozo
- 14 April, Nature walk from Għadira to Majjistral
- 30 April, Comino bird ringing and walk

External events

- 22 April, Science in the Citadel in Gozo
- 23 April, Clean up with other NGOs at L-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa
- 25-30 April, Valletta Green Festival in Valletta

Rare spectacle of nature starts off the New Year

On the second day of the year, news and excitement quickly spread of a small flock of majestic Mute Swans that had been spotted in Gozo's Marsalforn Valley. Although common across most of Europe, these waterbirds are a rare sight in these parts. Within days, the swans had become local celebrities, with thousands of people visiting the valley to see them – they even dominated the national news for the first week of the New Year. But the overwhelming attention soon began to take its toll on several of the juveniles, which appeared weak from stress and lack of food.

With the help of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit (WBRU) and a feeding protocol set out by the government veterinarian, we began feeding the birds a combination of legumes and cereals to help them regain their strength.

At this point, BirdLife Malta also reached out to the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK) and Kaċċaturi San Uberty (KSU) in the hope of collaborating on the feeding effort and this led to common ground being found for the benefit of wildlife and nature. We all then worked together to ensure regular feeding and the FKNK even helped secure a sponsor for most of the food. While BirdLife Malta may not always see eye to eye with hunting groups, our recent joint efforts shows that collaboration is possible.

The joint feeding of the 12 Mute Swans – four adults and eight juveniles – was eventually discontinued after the swans had built up enough fat reserves to help them fly back to mainland Europe. In fact, on Valentine's Day the swans flew off and left the islands.

