

# Bird's Eye View



*The Magazine of the Malta Ornithological Society*  
*Spring 1993*





*Feeling great together*

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Front cover

**Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita*,  
a common winter visitor (Photo:  
Raymond Galea)



As Malta struggles to get in line with the EC, regulations on bird shooting and trapping regularly take the limelight in the conservation sphere. In a memorandum entitled *Bird Hunting and the European Community*, MOS has forwarded a number of proposals for changing the 1980 bird protection laws. In April 1992 MOS also organised a forum on the subject. Feeling threatened by Malta's possible EC membership, the shooters' and trappers' association has stated firmly that it is against such membership. It has moreover attempted to coerce government into reconsidering its moves with a "no hunting, no vote" cry.

Whether Malta joins the EC or not, the extant bird protection laws are by far inadequate in controlling the present excesses of shooting and trapping. A glaring example of this lies in the absence of laws regulating automatic shotguns and high-powered seacraft. Both these hunting aids have tipped enormously the odds against the bird. An equally obvious example is the fact that shooting and trapping of birds is permitted in spring, a time when birds are heading towards their breeding grounds. The obvious need for more stringent laws is borne out by the 1991 parliamentary report on Tourism and the Environment. The report, drawn up by Green Flag International Ltd., states that current levels of shooting and trapping are probably counter-productive to the tourism industry. It adds that the presence of hundreds of shooting hides and trapping sites spoils the landscape and should be controlled.

Yet the government remains silent. Since 1980, the government has taken the proverbial ostrich position in face of the dilemma between saving wildlife and saving votes.

Your voice and your stand will help government decide on taking a stand.

Desiree Falzon  
Editor



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INTERNATIONAL

# Greeted by nets, traps and ... life confinement!

## Finches!

Joe Sultana

The Mediterranean takes a heavy toll on birdlife during the seasonal migration as birds breeding in Europe seek fresh grounds in this inland sea and beyond. Bird shooting and trapping have been for many years a way of life; but what was once a source of food is now a source of pleasure resulting in wanton destruction of birdlife. Each Mediterranean country has its own devious ways and customs. In Malta bird trapping is selective and is carried out mainly for finches, and for caging not for eating. This article tells the story of finch trapping in the Maltese Islands, a pastime which is unfortunately still very popular, widespread and legal.

The sun-parched Maltese countryside has had its first taste of the autumn rains. The air is slightly cooler. The first shoots of grass are emerging from amongst the dry vegetation and the stone coloured landscape is acquiring a green tinge. The air is full of birdsong. You can hear the twittering song of linnets, serins, siskins and goldfinches everywhere. The rapid trills of the greenfinches are intermixed with the calls of chaffinches and hawfinches. The sound is the same throughout the coastal slopes,

hill ridges and escarpments. Yet you do not catch sight of any of these seven finch species flying about.

You soon realise that all the finches you are hearing are confined to small cages. They are all live decoys spread out around clapnets specifically laid down to trap migrating finches. The trapper may have up to 30 or 40 of them. These decoys, usually males, attract the migrating finches by their calls and song. The main lure, however, are the fluttering decoys. These are set in the middle of the catching area between the two outspread nets. They are usually a greenfinch, a linnet and a goldfinch, and are specially trained to fly up and down on a stick projecting out of a small device set up in the catching area. The stick jerks up and down when the trapper pulls



Joe Sultana

The fluttering decoy, in this case a linnet, is harnessed with two loops of cotton thread criss-crossing its body. A small swivel underneath is attached with a piece of string to the tip of the stick. The swivel prevents the loops round the bird's body from getting tight when the bird flies in circles.



Hawfinch decoy with a double wire cage trap



Stefan Rosler

There are always finches for sale at the market

and releases the string attached to this device.

While the calling and singing decoy finches attract the migrating wild birds to the site, the fluttering decoys entice them to fly or settle in the centre of the catching area. Then the trapper brings the clapnets to play by pulling the rope attached to them. Suddenly the two nets, each fixed tightly to two poles, rise almost simultaneously and fall down over the centre, one partly overlapping the other.

The Maltese countryside is dotted with these finch trapping



Raymond Galea

The trapper waits patiently in his hide ready to pull the ropes attached to the two outspread nets.

sites. A close examination of aerial photos of the Islands may reveal about 5000 of these clapnetting sites. These may not all be in use at the same time; the finch trapper may have four or five of these sites in various localities, and the one he uses depends on wind direction.

The southern rocky parts of Malta and Gozo hold the largest number of trapping sites. Finches are not legally protected. A police licence is needed to trap finches, but not all trappers bother to acquire one. The number of licensed finch trappers (1,528 in 1990) does not, therefore, reflect the

exact number of finch trappers on the Islands.

Finch trapping is carried out mainly from mid-October to March, the period during which migrating finches occur on passage or else are overwintering in the Islands. Most finches are trapped mainly in the first and last months of that period. The number of finches trapped annually depends on the quantity of migrating birds, whose numbers fluctuate from one season to the other. Nonetheless the number of finches trapped locally must run into hundreds of thousands every year, the most commonly

caught being linnets, followed by serins, greenfinches and chaffinches in that order.

Some finch trapping is carried out by wire cagetraps, mainly used for hawfinches, greenfinches and siskins. Usually a cagetrapp consists of a centre compartment, where the decoy is kept, with two trapping compartments one on each side. These are baited with seeds and the wild finch is trapped when it goes in for the food and settles on the perch. This releases the spring-powered

*"...aerial photos reveal 5000 clap-netting sites..."*



Joe Sultana

Outside the trapping season, the decoys and newly caught finches are usually kept in aviaries.



Joe Sultana

Decoys are kept in small cages during the trapping season

flap-door. It is not unusual to see this type of trap in villages on rooftops or on specially-made wooden platforms in gardens.

Any surplus of birds trapped is sold to the bird dealers or to other trappers who may need new decoys. The Sunday *monti* is at times flooded with finches for sale during a good catching season. Bartering between trappers is not uncommon, especially before the trapping season when the price of finches is usually higher. Prices vary from one species to another. Hawfinches, greenfinches, goldfinches and siskins fetch much higher prices than the other finch species, and with the exception of the hawfinch, only male finches fetch a good price. Prices also vary within the same season depending on the amount of



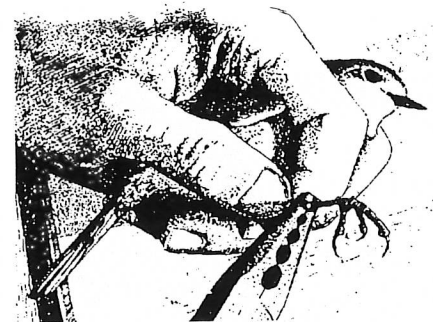
Many men take their pet greenfinch out with them. When these pets utter regularly their prolonged nasal call, they become very much the centre of proud attention.

Paul Portelli

finches trapped. When caught in large numbers, female linnets and serins are sometimes released or may be sold at the market by the dozen for a few cents, while a male greenfinch may fetch Lm10 when the species is scarce. Male hawfinches have been known to cost Lm30 or more.

Since finch importation has been controlled, and in some cases banned, prices have gone up. Some people go to great pains to import finches, mainly greenfinches and goldfinches, and there have been a number of lawsuits filed against people importing them illegally.

**It is most unfortunate that, as the saying goes, traditions die hard.**



Joseph Mangion

## Ringing in 1992

As in past years bird-ringing continued to form the bulk of research carried out by MOS in 1992. Ringing was mainly carried out at the usual established sites such as Ghadira, Buskett, Rabat, Bingemma, Has-Sabtun and Ghajn Zejtuna in Malta, and Lunzjata and Ramla Valley in Gozo. The seventeen authorised ringers managed a total of 14,671 birds of 97 species. At the end of the year the grand total of birds ringed since 1965 stood at 250,297 birds of 170 species. The robin, with a total of 2,826 individuals ringed, once again topped the year's list.

Thirty-five birds were recovered elsewhere during the year, seven of which in foreign countries. The latter were a blackcap on Lampedusa a few days after ringing in autumn, a whitethroat and a garden warbler controlled on Ventotene during the *Piccole Isole* project, a reed warbler and a yellow-legged gull in Sicily (the latter was recovered less than a month after it was ringed as a chick on Filfla), the first MOS chiffchaff in Denmark and the first bluethroat abroad - in Czechoslovakia.

Charles Gauci

## Piccole Isole Project

For the third year running, the MOS ringing scheme took part in the Mediterranean spring migration survey known as the *Piccole Isole* project run by the

# Round Ringing



In action on Comino

*Istituto Nazionale per la Fauna Selvatica* of Italy. About 250 persons were involved in the whole project covering sixteen areas, eleven on islands and five on coastal sites on the mainland. Besides the Maltese site, the islands selected were Palmaria, Capo Corso, Capraia, Montecristo, Giannutri, Ventotene, Capri,

Cabrera, San Pietro and Flumini di Quartu. Gibraltar Point was the most western site while Comino, the Maltese site, was the most eastern and southern.

For the third year, the project in Malta was carried out on Comino. The site was manned daily from before dawn until after dusk for a whole month (16 April to 15 May). Nine ringers and fourteen trainees and helpers rendered this project a success. The total of birds ringed was 1,463 of 33 species which included 99 icterine warblers, 36 woodchat shrikes, 27 collared flycatchers and 4 nightjars.

Raymond Galea



Desiree Falzon

## Vagrant Victim

Two griffon vultures which appeared in October 1991 did not last long. One was shot at Pembroke and the other was shot at sea after a two-hour chase by hunters in three speedboats. MOS could only condemn publicly this barbaric act. As a sign of protest MOS hung a large banner on a main road leading to Valletta.

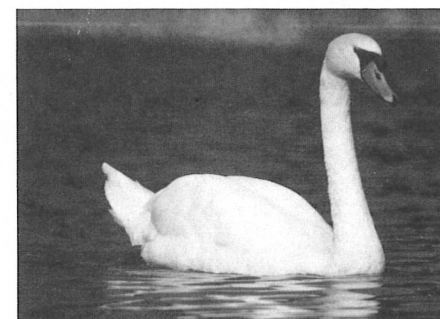
## Swan massacre

Sunday January 10 and the following two days will be remembered as another sad story for bird conservation in Malta: one more black spot on a dirt-covered sheet. Twenty-five graceful mute swans hit the Islands unexpectedly on Sunday afternoon. By Tuesday their pulsating wings had all been silenced by "sportsmen's" guns. The macho men had done it again!

The mute swan is an accidental visitor to the Islands and the species had not made an appearance since 1985. The MOS telephone rang a number of times on Monday to report the shooting of mute swans. Only three persons were arraigned in court on the insist-

ence of the MOS Director who, after receiving a telephone call, rushed to the scene and spotted three shooters with a dead mute swan at Baħariċ-Cagħaq.

Swan-shooting stories were rife for the next two or three days. And yet the Shooters and Trappers Association, which claims that it stands for conservation, did not utter a word of condemnation. Shame!



Desiree Falzon

Apparently swans are not allowed to float on Maltese waters.



Charles Coleiro

## EURING Conference 1992

Mount St. Joseph, Mosta was the venue of a conference which the MOS Research Committee organised for EURING, the Association of European Ringing Schemes. The conference was spread over five days, from 24 to 29 November 1992, including an ornithological symposium and two excursions. Thirty-two participants from nineteen European ringing schemes took part.

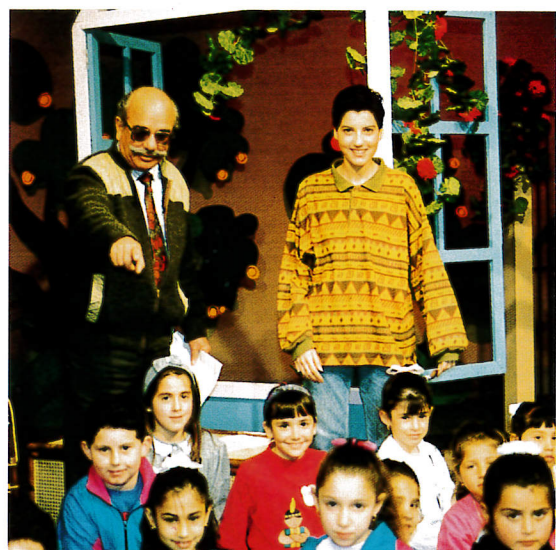
The conference was opened officially by Dr Michael Frendo, Minister responsible for Culture and chaired by Pertti Saurola from Finland and Chris Mead from UK, President and General Secretary of Euring respectively. The items on the agenda varied from Euring's Databank to European Migration Network.

## MOS in pictures

MOS Youths dressed in specially painted T-shirts and armed with banner and hundreds of colourful balloons, posted themselves at Valletta in September 1991 to draw public attention to the annual massacre of raptors. The youths marched to the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Education & Environment and the Archbishop's Palace to present letters of protest regarding the illegal killing of birds of prey.



Joe Sultana



MOS

A weekly children's programme *Park*, which ran for six months on the local TV station, was presented by Ruth Sultana, MOS Youths Secretary together with Lino Grech, a well known actor. MOSY activities and MOS-sponsored nature games and competitions featured regularly in every programme.



Lona Nissen

A four-wheeled yellow donation! Nils Persson of the Swedish Ornithological Society has donated his Opel Kadett to MOS. Pictured above: an SOS member presenting the keys to MOS President Joe Doublet.



Paul Portelli

Selling MOS at the Greenweek Fair. Held from 22 to 26 April 1992, the fair was visited by over 20,000 people. Of these, 304 walked out with an MOS membership card, raising the total MOS membership to over 2,600.



MOS

MOS volunteers were briefed in membership recruitment and fundraising techniques by Trevor Gunton and John Bishop from RSPB, who flew to Malta to hold a Volunteer Training Weekend. The sessions were held at the Meridian Room, Preluna Hotel in July 1992. Pictured above: the participants.

## Youth in Action



Victor Falzon

Youth outings are not simply off-the-cuff picnics. Through handouts and on-site activities, leaders put the environmental message across. Pictured above: youth members learn about the biodiversity of a garigue habitat, at Ta' Cenc in Gozo.



Victor Falzon

Active conservation in the form of tree-planting, an activity which is becoming increasingly frequent with the older MOS Youths. Pictured above: an attempt to create tree cover at Qammiegh, a windswept headland in the North-west of Malta.



Ian Mifsud

Christmas parties are a popular event with Youth members. Even here, games take on an environmental overtone. Pictured above: a bird-colouring contest.

## A short history of MOS Youths



MOS

Youth members, way back in 1980, carrying the foundation stones of what is now Ghadira nature reserve.

The young generation of MOS members are one special segment of which MOS, motherlike, has always been fond.

The youth section was set up in the late sixties to look after a handful of youth (under 18 years) members. That section grew at a trickle for a number of years, but towards the end of the seventies, the group picked up momentum as more people became involved in its organisation. Activities became more regular, as did the youths' newsletter. A name (MOSY) and a bird mascot (the storm petrel) became the signature which gave the section individuality. In 1980 MOSY produced the first issue of its magazine *Storm Petrel*, which over the years underwent considerable evolution. Through its connection with Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), MOSY became active overseas and participated in various projects, such as international camps, with foreign environmental groups.

In the mid-eighties, the group staged a number of street actions which heated up the local hunting issue to boiling point, with violent reactions on more than one occasion.

Eventually sheer membership stretched the seams to the limit and like a healthy and fertile cell, MOSY experienced binary fission! The two offspring units, each geared for a different age category, have since moved along parallel lines, developing separate activities and producing separate literature.

As we go to print, the older section of MOSY opens its upper age limit to welcome and to mobilise environmentalists of 18 years and beyond. It calls itself FALKO and adopts a peregrine as its mascot species. Meanwhile, the younger Under-14yrs section puts out feelers to test the possibilities of establishing regional groups. It too sports a new name: HUTTAF, meaning swallows: birds that love to flock!

Victor Falzon

## Birdshooting and Politics

Prior to last year's Malta general elections, MOS prepared an environmental manifesto and presented it to the political parties. The manifesto clearly set out what the Government should do to make Malta a safer place for birds. It urged the political parties to assimilate the MOS proposals into their own electoral manifesto.

Before the end of 1991, barely four months away from general elections, the new green movement *Alternattiva Demokratika*, launched a campaign against birdshooting. It proposed a two-year moratorium on all shooting and trapping, to be followed by a referendum. To this effect, *Alternattiva Demokratika* began a petition, and to date has collected thousands of signatures.

Meanwhile, the president of the birdshooters' and trappers' association committed the grave error of virtually canvassing for one of the parties contesting the elections. Speaking at a meeting, he urged members of his association to vote for one particular party, explaining that it was the one which had helped them in the past. Such state-

ments clearly reveal the level of desperation which the shooters' association has reached. It is a trap which MOS will never fall into, since it believes that shooting is not a political issue, no matter what the slogans on the walls try to say. The destruction of wildlife for fun is nobody's right and should be deplored by everyone regardless of political colour. Moreover, all parties should resist the urge to use the hunting question for their own political gain.

Indeed the political lobby that birdshooters think they have is rapidly losing ground. Politicians are fast realising that they will they actually lose popularity if they are seen supporting shooters and trappers.



20,000 Shooters - 20,000 Votes screamed the birdshooters on the eve of last year's general elections. These war cries, splashed about in various places, have shown up as empty threats.



*Alternattiva Demokratika* launching their campaign near Buskett.

Should hunting laws be made more stringent?

	MPs	Candidates
Yes	77.3%	97.3%
No	18.2%	2.7%
Don't know	4.5%	.....

In a referendum, would you vote for hunting, against, or would you abstain?

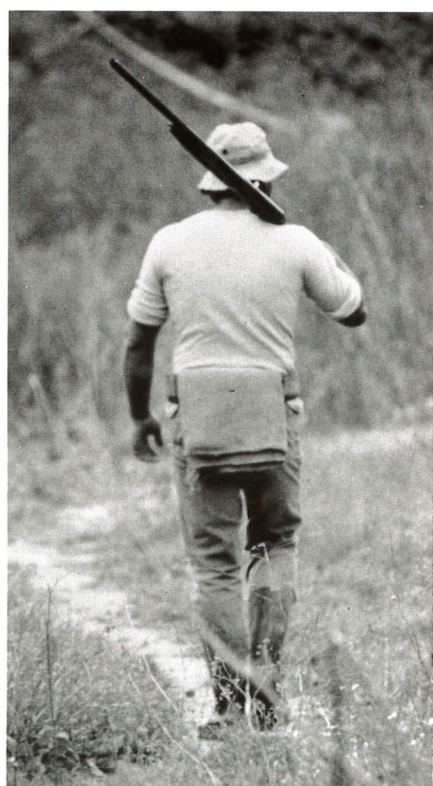
	MPs	Candidates
Against	54.6%	70.3%
For	36.4%	21.6%
Abstain	9.1%	8.1%

Did you have any pressure from hunters before the election?

	MPs	Candidates
Yes	31.8%	16.2%
No	63.6%	81.1%
Don't know	4.6%	2.7%

In January this year the *Malta Independent*, a local weekly, surveyed Members of Parliament and candidates who contested the 1992 elections. The questionnaire was answered by 35% of MPs and 40% of candidates. The results (table above) speak for themselves.

Joe Sultana



Will we ever see the back of them?

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The juveniles are brownish with darker primaries and tail, and a blackish bill  
(Photo: Richard Cachia Zammit).

Formerly regarded as the Mediterranean form of the *argentatus* group and commonly known as herring gull, the yellow-legged gull of the Mediterranean sea is now placed with the *cachinnans* group and considered a "good" species. Whatever its name, this bird, which has been on the increase in the Mediterranean (to the detriment of some other less robust seabirds) can hardly survive in Malta. It is confined to one colony on Filfla and to a few small dwindling colonies which are sparsely scattered along the south-western coastal cliffs. In the past fifteen years the largest colony of this species at Ta' Ċenċ Cliffs, with about 100 pairs, has been reduced to a handful of birds. This decline is a direct result of shooting at sea from motor-powered dinghies.

The yellow-legged gull is also a common winter visitor and up to 1000 birds have been counted seeking refuge in the harbours during exceptionally stormy days. By the end of January when most of the visitors are moving out, the local adults start assembling at the colonies and may be heard uttering their laughing calls (hence the name *cachinnans* meaning laughs aloud).

Courting usually starts in mid-February and the clutch of 2-3 eggs has been laid by early April in a rather loosely-built, crude nest on the ground, among vegetation or on bare ground. When they hatch, the ever-hungry young peck at the red spot on the parents' heavy yellow beak, an action which stimulates the adults to regurgitate the partly-digested food. By the end of May the first young are ready to fledge. They are different in plumage and may take up to four years to reach maturity.

Joe Sultana

## Increasing in the Med... but not in Malta



Adult in flight (Photo: John Borg).



The silvery white adult yellow-legged gull *Larus cachinnans michahellis* has pale grey upper-parts, black and white wingtips, a heavy yellow beak with a red spot and yellow legs. Sexes are alike (Photo: Joe Sultana).



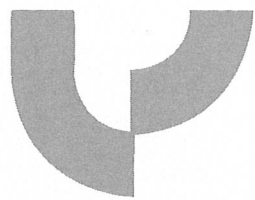
The two to three eggs are of an olive-grey colour, heavily blotched with varying shades of dark brown (Photo: Joe Sultana).



A newly-hatched young, still showing egg-tooth. Other eggs hatching  
(Photo: Raymond Galea).

*Focus on the yellow-legged gull  
Malta's largest breeding bird*

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## A labour of love with injured birds

Thousands of shooters with an objective to kill and a migration season make a deadly combination in the Maltese Islands. The resulting massacre is laid open for all sensitive eyes to see. Still many eyes fail to notice the frantic throes of wounded birds which fell but escaped the search of the shooter. Their fate frequently comes to depend on a team of volunteers determined to fight for what remains of the injured bird's life.

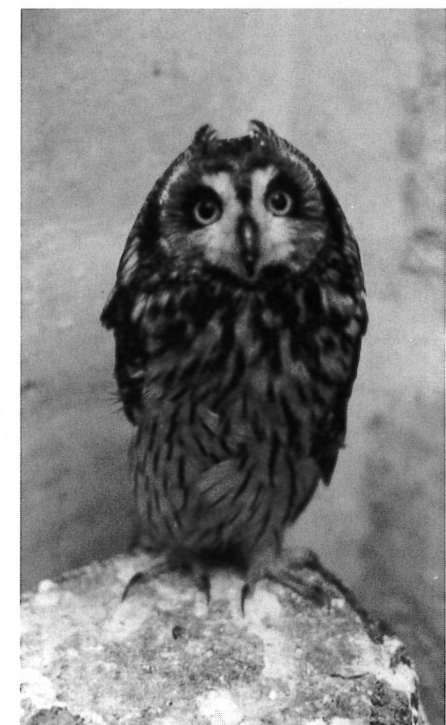
A phone rings: news of a casualty. Hosts of calls are received every year by the MOS office. More phonecalls, and a volunteer rushes off to collect the bird from its wide-eyed saviour. Most callers are usually people previously uninvolved in the hunting polemic, and hail from all walks of life: hikers, schoolchildren, civil servants, doctors, MPs! The bird is passed on and anxious questions asked about the possibility of its recovery. More often than not, such encounters shock the callers out of previous indifference, and they join MOS.

The injured bird is then taken to the private residence of one of three volunteers specially

### Injured birds treated in the period Jan-Dec 1991

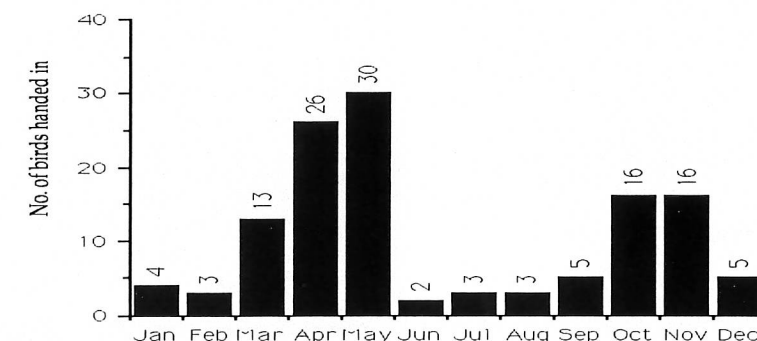
Cory's shearwater	13
bittern	1
little bittern	1
glossy ibis	1
night heron	11
honey buzzard	3
kestrel	29
hobby	5
merlin	1
gull species	6
owl species	3
swifts and swallows	17
	<hr/> 91

trained in dealing with injured birds. Depending on the nature and extent of the injury, the bird undergoes treatment, frequently involving surgery. If the bird is saved, it will spend a period of time in captivity recovering from its injuries. Eventually it is released back into the wild.



A short-eared owl, one of the inmates at Max Farrugia's bird hospital, awaiting eventual release. In 1991, 75 birds were successfully treated by Max and released.

Data gathered by Max Farrugia



Highest numbers coincide with peaks of migration.



Ready for lift-off! John Borg doing last-minute inspections of a female kestrel, as all eyes await the big moment.

## New staff at MOS

This year MOS will be better able to meet the demands of conservation with the employment of two new personnel. Adrian Muscat Inglott was employed as Education Officer, sponsored by ICBP (International Council for Bird Preservation). His main task will be to co-ordinate MOS work in schools and will produce educational material with the assistance of the Education Unit. The post of Marketing Co-ordinator, sponsored by the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), was filled by Peter Paul Camilleri. Peter will be responsible for making the Society stronger financially, for spreading MOS image and increasing membership.

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The Eden Century Film Centre, St. George's Bay, St. Julian's. Tel: 341191

# Cliffs

Edwin Lanfranco



Victor Borg

The rugged precipitous cliffs framing several kilometres of coastline are possibly the most breathtakingly beautiful feature of the Maltese landscape. Their savage beauty appears hostile to all life forms. Yet the cliffs are arguably the most important and interesting of Maltese habitats since they are home to many endemic species, that is, species which are confined to the Maltese Islands and which are not found in their natural state anywhere else in the world.

The relative inaccessibility of cliffs has protected them to some extent from human interference so that, of all Maltese habitats, they are the most untouched. We must not, however, be complacent since this immunity is fast being challenged.

I feel that the fact that our cliffs are mainly exposed towards the south may partly explain their unique flora and fauna. During the Quaternary period (i.e. the last million years), Malta's northern seaboard has experienced several episodes of connection with south-eastern Sicily: the so-called "land bridges" which have given rise to successive

invasions by Sicilian flora and fauna. However the southern seaboard was probably last connected with northern Africa some five million years ago during the Messinian salinity crisis when most of the Mediterranean dried up. This possibly means that for about five million years our southern cliffs have remained relatively unchanged. During the Quaternary the continent was subject to a succession of ice ages, the last one ending about 10,000 years ago. It is possible, however, that the efficient thermostatic effect of the sea has sheltered Malta from extreme cold.



Edwin Lanfranco

Maltese cliff-orache

Thus our cliffs have become a refuge for species which existed before the ice ages.

In the Maltese Islands we have about twenty taxa (species, subspecies, varieties, forms) which are endemic. Many of these are confined to, or occur also on, cliffs. The most important are two species (which are alone in their genus) - the Maltese cliff-orache and the Maltese rock centaur. The former is a medium-sized shrub covered with narrow whitish leaves which are somewhat fleshy - all adaptations for water conservation. It flowers in September and fruits in November. The numerous flowers are minute, but the fruits



Joe Sultana

Maltese stock

are provided with wing-like floral leaves to facilitate wind dispersal. These become a bright purplish-red when exposed to strong sunlight. The Maltese rock centaur is Malta's national plant. It is a small to medium-sized shrub with smooth green fleshy leaves which bears lilac thistle-like flower heads from May to July.

The Maltese salt-tree is the most widespread cliff endemic, found also on Globigerina cliffs and often on earthworks and fortifications which act as cliffs. In Gozo it also occurs inland as at the Citadel. It is a shrub, densely covered with short fleshy leaves. The largest plants are found in Gozo with a height of some three metres. Dense populations occur along both sides of the Delimara peninsula, a slice of which has been sacrificed to make way for the new power station.

The cliffs of western Gozo support what is possibly the rarest and most beautiful of our endemics. This is the Maltese everlasting, a medium-sized shrub with whitish leaves and bright golden flower-heads which appear in April/May. There is a record from Malta but is probably extinct or hiding effectively. Gozitan cliffs also support the Maltese stock of which a population also exists on Malta. This plant should not be confused with the common or garden stock which has spread to the fortifications between Sliema and Valletta.

Possibly the most widespread and characteristic plant of our cliffs is the caper. Besides draping almost all the cliffs it can also be found very commonly in other vertical or sloping situations such as valley sides and, where it is very familiar, fortifications. The Maltese fleabane is probably the commonest of our endemic species. This was actually the first plant to be recognized as being

endemic to the Maltese Islands (in 1674, by the Sicilian Paolo Boccone and to whom the modern scientific name of the plant is dedicated) and is the plant represented on the current 50 cent coin. It is not confined to the cliffs.

Plant species with North African affinities are of special importance since they probably existed before the glacial period. Thus plants such as the wolfbane and southern tea-tree existed on our cliffs at least 10,000 years ago. Amongst these species, the Egyptian St. John's wort bears small attractive yellow flowers in spring.

The cliffs offer refuge to several animal species. Apart from

the various birds which breed on our cliffs, the most important animals are certain land snails especially those of the genera *Lampedusa* (door snails) and *Trochoidea* (top snails). A large proportion of these are endemic and some are very rare. Their study can yield much information about the past of the Maltese Islands.

While cliffs are better protected from human interference than most other habitats, they are becoming increasingly vulnerable. One serious threat is the establishment of adventive (non-native) species with the result that competition with the native species may upset the community structure and lead to the depletion or extinction of

## Souls of the sea-cliffs



Joe Sultana

Beat Ruegger

Cory's shearwater

Blue rock thrush

The Maltese sea-cliffs, unlike those of the northern hemisphere, may not hold large colonies of several species of seabirds, but they have a charm of their own and support an interesting set of bird species. Were it not for the destructive birdshooter they would be much richer in species. Take for instance the peregrine, the barn owl and the jackdaw, which have been exterminated from the islands. In spite of human interference the blue rock thrush still makes its presence, flitting among boulders and playing hide and seek among the crevices of the limestone cliffs. The male's blue colour matches that of the sea beneath and its melodious song echoes along the cliff face. When its last notes die down with the fading rays of sunlight, the shearwaters take over. They arrive from their sea-feeding quarters to spend the night sailing along the cliffs, uttering their weird calls before resting down amongst the boulders or in the crevices. These cliffs provide them with valuable nesting sites, safe from human reach.

the less competitive endemic life forms.

Another serious threat is the quarrying which has broken through cliffs in some places as at Il-Mara in the southeast of Malta. In other places, the tipping of derelict vehicles, rubble, oily effluents and other material has spoiled the cliff faces. Development of sites in the proximity of cliffs (such as the notorious proposed tourist project at Ta' Cenc in Gozo) would have a disastrous effect on the cliff communities. Much harm has already been done to the inland cliffs of villages, such as Xagħra, Nadur and Żebbuġ in Gozo, where buildings have been allowed to descend the cliff faces.

**It is therefore imperative that effective steps be taken now to ensure the protection of this unique habitat.**

Edwin Lanfranco



Some cliffs have been ruined by building development

#### Scientific and Maltese names of plant species mentioned in text

Maltese cliff-orache - *Cremnophyton lanfrancoi* - Bjanka ta' l-Irdum  
 Maltese rock centaury - *Palaeocyclus crassifolius* - Widnet il-Baħar  
 Maltese salt-tree - *Darniella melitensis* - Xebb or Siġra ta' l-Irmied  
 Maltese everlasting - *Helichrysum melitensis* - Sempreviva ta' Ghawdex  
 Maltese stock - *Matthiola incana* subs. *melitensis* - Giżi ta' Malta  
 Caper - *Capparis orientalis* - Kappar  
 Maltese fleabane - *Chiliadenus bocconei* - Tulliera Salvaġġa  
 Wolfbane - *Periploca angustifolia* - Siġra tal-Harir  
 Southern tea-tree - *Lycium intricatum* - Ghawseġ  
 Egyptian St. John's wort - *Hypericum aegypticum* - Feriex ta' l-Irdum

## Thousands of wild birds saved by *airline embargoes*



The German Airline Lufthansa was renowned as the world's biggest carrier of wild birds for the pet trade. But a high death rate aboard their planes led management to initiate a voluntary ban on the carriage of wild birds. Their example has been followed by over 70 others, including all major US, European and Japanese airlines.

This embargo has already had a major impact on the wild bird trade. Investigations have shown that hundreds of thousands of wild birds have been directly saved from certain death and that the international trade has declined by at least half. Importation of wild birds in the USA fell dramatically between 1989 and 1991, while traders in Europe and in the exporting countries all point to a decline in trade. Traders in the two principal African exporting countries, Senegal and Tanzania, admit that their trade has at least halved, while those in Indonesia, Guyana and Argentina are no longer able to transport birds on most routes.

The legal and illegal trade in wild birds are closely linked. Smugglers of rare and valuable species have always used the legal trade as a cover. They use false documentation, declare only a portion of the shipment and conceal rare birds among large numbers of common ones. As the bird trade shrinks with the airlines embargo, this type of smuggling will become more difficult.

Air Malta does not figure in the list of airlines which have joined the embargo. Bird's Eye View urges the management to take this humane step immediately.

**When is  
*AirMalta*  
going to join?**

## *The Environment Protection Act in action*

The recent Environment Protection Act (BEV no.13) has been put to immediate use through four new Legal Notices.

### General's Rock - a new nature reserve

Legal Notice 22 of 1992 designates General's Rock at Dwejra (Gozo) as a nature reserve. Climbing and access to the plateau surface of the islet is now legally prohibited and all its flora and fauna strictly protected. This automatically ensures the conservation of the islet's endemic lizard and the famed "Maltese Fungus" (Għerq Sinjur: *Cynomorium coccineum*).

accordance with CITES. Furthermore these regulations state that the importation of any species which is protected in its country of origin, even if such species is not covered by the Convention, shall need an export permit from the country of origin. The latter should help to curb the mass importation of finches to Malta from countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy and Tunisia, where they are protected.

### Reptiles and Sea Mammals...at last legally protected

It seems that we are at last going to be spared pathetic scenes of sea turtles thrown on their backs flapping helplessly at Marsaxlokk and other fishing villages. Sea turtles, as well as all other reptiles and sea mammals are now legally protected. Two Legal Notices (76 and 77 respectively of 1992) have just been published in August in the Government Gazette detailing



The Chamaeleon, along with the other eight species of land reptiles occurring locally, is now a protected species.

regulations for the protection of reptiles and sea mammals. An educational campaign by the environmental societies supported by the enforcement of these and other wildlife protection regulations will go a long way to bring about a culture of nature appreciation.



### Malta in line with CITES

In April 1989 Malta signed the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* (CITES) but until now there had been no local legal regulations conforming with this Convention. The publication of the *Trade in Species of Fauna and Fauna Regulations* in Legal Notice 19 of 1992 now provides for the necessary administrative setup to ensure that proper control is exercised on all trade in endangered species. The importation, exportation and re-exportation of all specimens have to be carried out in



Aerial view of General's Rock, off the coast of Dwejra in Gozo. The Rock with all the life that it supports now enjoys full legal protection.

# Recreating a wetland Is-Simar

Twelve years ago MOS embarked on a project to convert a degraded saltpan into a nature reserve. The place was known as Ghadira. Today the place is a nature reserve and a centre for educational visits from thousands of schoolchildren. At weekends the reserve welcomes the public to take a look at the results of collective manhours of constructive conservation.

Now, as we go to print, a second reserve is in the making. Works are in progress at Is-Simar in St. Paul's Bay, where MOS is recreating a wetland habitat in collaboration with the Secretariat for the Environment. The main objective of the project is to create adequate habitat for birds and nature in a safe environment, to be enjoyed and used as an educational medium. Plans for the site include a visitors' centre and birdwatching hides, which, when fully functional, will cater for an even larger number of visitors, school children in particular.

Last summer, under the supervision of MOS President Joe Doublet and with the help of several MOS members, heavy machinery was in action for two whole months creating ditches, canals, pools and islands. Now that the heavy engineering works have been completed and the machines have moved out, MOS members will move in to carry out hundreds of odd jobs including the planting of trees which will replace foreign species, such as *Acacia* and *Eucalyptus*.

Is-Simar is situated on the coast at the mouth of Pwales valley in the northern part of Malta. In 1830 the area was drained and since then uncon-



Herbert E Axell MBE, the original designer of Ghadira nature reserve, revisited Ghadira after several years and was impressed by the results. He is seen here with Joe Doublet, Paul Portelli and Charles Gauci discussing MOS plans for the reserve at Is-Simar.



Heavy machinery at Is-Simar creating ditches, pools and islands.

trolled and intensive human activity progressively degraded the area and its ecological system. This MOS project will not only preserve the features of the site but will enrich the whole ambience of the locality.

The Swiss League for the Protection of Nature has contributed an initial sum of 20,000 Swiss Francs which helped MOS to launch the project, while the Secretariat for the Environment in Malta has paid several bills of heavy engineering works. The Dansk Ornitologisk Forening of Denmark will be contributing 250,000 Danish Kroners through ICBP while the Swedish Ornithological Society is raising money for the project.

Photos: Joe Sultana



Aerial view of Is-Simar in August 1992 when the heavy engineering works were halfway through.

## Bird Tables

"Feeding the robin" was the theme of the latest two robin campaigns organised by MOS. Launched by the Education Unit, the campaign is an annual struggle to curb the destructive habit of robin trapping.

After taking stock of six years' campaigning for the robin (BEV no.14), the Unit shifted the project's emphasis from discouraging robin trapping to encouraging robin feeding. Thus the autumn campaigns of 1991 and 1992 revolved around bird tables, an idea previously unheard of in Malta. The Education Unit promoted the idea of creating a feeding spot where robins and other garden birds could gather. This would make birdwatching easier. Primary schoolteachers were supplied with posters, stickers and infosheets to help them pass on the message that birdtables allow you to enjoy a robin without having to catch it.

MOS is grateful to all those teachers who have adopted these campaigns as a personal crusade.



A class from Laura Vicuna School in Gozo pose proudly near their bird table upper left.

*Itmaghni ... u  
fil-ġnien tarani!*



A full colour poster of a robin at a birdtable encourages children to take up the habit of feeding birds in winter. The slogan says: "Feed me...and see me in your garden!" This poster was part of the Autumn 1991 robin campaign, and sent to all Primary schools.



A Maltese birdtable will most definitely attract the Sardinian warbler, a common visitor to Maltese gardens and frequently also a garden breeder!



A colour-by-number poster was one of the visual aids produced by the Education Unit for the Autumn 1992 robin campaign. All primary school classrooms were given one of these posters.

The stickers which launched the 1991 and 1992 Robin Campaigns. MOS has been producing different robin stickers for eight years running. They have become something of a collector's item with many schoolchildren.



Slogan says:  
"Will you feed me this winter?"



Slogan says:  
"Thanks for the feast!"



## A new image for ICBP

On Wednesday 3 March 1993 several bird protection societies in Europe, including MOS, launched BirdLife International, the new name and image of the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP). They also announced their partnership with this organisation which represents some ten million people in more than one hundred countries.

ICBP, now BirdLife International, pioneered the cause of nature conservation worldwide and has always been devoted entirely to the conservation of birds and their habitats. It lately began changing its structure, allowing leading bird protection organisations to join it as partners. The Memorandum of Agreement between ICBP and several bird protection societies was signed in May 1992 in Aachen, Germany.

### 18th ICBP European Conference

Bird conservationists from all European countries assembled at Aachen to discuss problems facing birds and to seek solutions. MOS was represented by Paul Portelli, MOS Director and Joe Sultana, who was chairperson of the conference. The meeting was launched with a presentation on bird conservation in Europe, followed by a symposium on Europe's Important Bird Areas.

At the end of the conference Alistair Gammell of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was elected Chairperson of BirdLife International European Section succeeding Joe Sultana of MOS, who had been serving since 1985.



The logos of the first fifteen European partners of BirdLife International

### Conserving migratory birds

BirdLife International has always been concerned about the conservation of migratory birds. This concern grew, particularly in Europe, to such a degree that a specific conservation programme for migrants of the West Palearctic-African flyways was started in 1976. The twelfth Technical Publication of ICBP *Conserving Migratory Birds* was published in 1991. It provides an overview of the problems facing migratory birds and includes accounts of the scale of human persecution at migration bottlenecks in the Mediterranean. It also highlights selected conservation activities by presenting various case studies, including a 10-page paper entitled *Malta Ornithological Society: A Bird Protection Society in a Hostile Environment*.

### Putting Biodiversity on the Map

BirdLife International has also been working on its biodiversity project. A magnificent result can now be seen in its new 96-page colour publication *Putting Biodiversity on the Map: Priority Areas for Global Conservation*. This is a blueprint for environmental decision-makers worldwide, providing a framework for action to conserve the earth's biodiversity. It reveals for the first time the startling fact that over 25% of the world's bird species are restricted to just 221 sites, occupying a mere 5% of the earth's land surface. These hotspots, or Endemic Bird Areas, are also critical for the survival of unique species from other life-form groups.





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P.O. Box 498  
Valletta MALTA

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

\* PLEASE TURN OVER LEAF



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# How Lufthansa helps protect the environment.



The more modern an airline's planes are, the more it contributes to protecting the environment. Compared to most of its competitors, Lufthansa operates

an extremely young fleet. And it's getting younger all the time. In this way, Lufthansa helps to keep clean-air standards high.

