Bird’s Eye View
Editorial

I had to take some display boards down to the RaptorCamp base at Buskett last September, to have them ready for a press event later on in the day. I get there at 8am, early for most, so for a few minutes I have the woodland to myself. A weak sunlight slowly invades the valley as I wait.

A hobbyist strolls across my view, lands in a dead mulberry tree. I lift my binoculars, but other urgent movement crushes my attention. Four bee-eaters on a wire are stretching their wings and preening their psycodelic livery. I feast on the spectacle. Then the marsh harriers begin.

First one female sweeps across the valley, shearing the terraced fields. Then three more, flapping heavily, metres above my head. Others are lifting out of the pines where they have spent the night. Seven, eleven. I rapidly lose count so I push numbers from my mind and enjoy the magnificent male specimen now soaring overhead. Slowly the harriers gain height, join ranks, then glide away squadron-fashion towards Dingli cliffs, the sea, Africa. A hoopoe flashes past, and a Cetti’s warbler echoes down in the valley...

I wrote a similar description about Buskett some years ago. On that occasion I had finished it - pathetic, I know - something to the tune of “Then I woke up; it was a dream…”

But this time it was no dream. This was actually Buskett in September 2000. Buskett - the very name that rings horror to anyone even remotely connected with bird protection. So what happened? Has the Maltese mentality finally had a change of heart?

Hardly! Not with millions of birds still dying over this land. But Buskett 2000 was the delicious fruit of massive effort by BirdLife Malta over the year, effort with government, ministries, departments, efforts with the Police and with the hunters themselves. And sometimes it wasn’t exactly the kind of effort that made BirdLife Malta very popular either. But in spite of what has been said, written and done against its good name, BirdLife Malta has survived to see another year.

As did the four thousand raptors that safely passed over Buskett last autumn.

Victor Falzon
Editor

BirdLife Malta was set up in 1962 as the Malta Ornithological Society (MOS) and is today the largest environmental group in Malta, with over 3000 members.

BirdLife Malta’s mission is the protection of birds and their habitat, and through this to work for biological diversity. With this directive in mind, the organisation has over the years used various approaches to achieve adequate bird protection. Such activity has ranged from the creation of nature reserves to street protests against wanton bird killing. Għadira and In-Simar nature reserves are direct results of the sight and sheer hard work by BirdLife Malta volunteers.

BirdLife Malta publishes various educational material, such as books, posters, leaflets and stickers, for use by schools and other institutions. It also publishes Il-Merlijn (a scientific bulletin), Bird’s Eye View (the members’ annual magazine), Il-Ħagtuna (the young members’ magazine), Woodchat (the birdwatchers’ magazine), BirdTalk (the members’ newsletter), and a Ringing Newsletter (for bird ringers). The organisation is also active in the press, especially during the migration seasons. BirdLife Malta is a charity and depends on subscriptions and donations.

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FunDay

For the second year running, BirdLife Malta organised BirdFest, a day-long family event at Buskett. Board games, face-painting, a jumble sale, jigsaw puzzles, a raffle, information boards, plaster plaque painting, even a snack and drink counter all helped to draw the crowd. And, for winners and participants, small prizes all around. BirdFest 2000 also coincided with World Birdwatch Day, so our birdwatchers were on hand to help the public make the best of what feathered visitors were around.

A success story, thanks to our ever-helpful volunteers.

Some sick mind did try to mar the event by visiting the area early in the morning and littering the ground with tacks. It takes rather more than nails to puncture BirdLife Malta, but several car tyres did change shape...

Not game-harvesting, an electric magnet, poachers collect metal traps and nails from the area after traumatic raids. A pathetic test to deter BirdLife Malta’s activities.
Birding Malta!

Joe Sultana
Ornithologist

In the past, the cropping of migrant birds was an important source of food in the countries bordering the Mediterranean. Today of course there is no more vital need for catching birds in this part of the world. Yet birds around the Mediterranean shores are still hunted and still caught in their millions. Traditions are apparently much harder to kill than birds, so the killing is now carried out for the fun of it! This self-centred mentality has precluded that other, much less intrusive culture - the gentle art of birdwatching.

In a country as densely populated as Malta, birds are under severe pressure from human activity. Hunting and trapping are widespread, but so also are building and road development, quarrying, agriculture, the use of chemicals, marine pollution and so many other human factors which daily encroach on what little countryside is left. Still there are pockets of natural beauty, especially in the west and north of the country and in the sister islands of Gozo and Kemmuna. Here one finds steep rocky ridges and maquis slopes, guava areas and small valleys choked with vegetation. Characteristic mild winters mean that nature never shuts off for the cold season, so plants proliferate and flower early. Insects move in for the feast, and these in turn bring in the birds!

In the first days of March the widespread Sardinian warbler is already busy, singing and building its nest. Cetti’s warblers vent their staccato outbursts of song from densely-vegetated valleys, while blue rock thrushes display their songflight along the limestone seaciffs.

The clay crop is all full of the inescapable call of sitting cisticolas, which frequently stoop above their nesting site in the tall grass, where one of their harem busily weaves the purse-like nest. By contrast the shy, scarce spectacled warblers are less evident. Their presence in the remote treeless parts of the countryside is betrayed by a low churr, and a careful scan should soon show up one or two perching on a low bush. For a birderwatcher from the north on his first visit to the Mediterranean, this bird (and probably the Sardinian warbler too) could easily be a new tick.

There are more new species to see. In March short-toed larks start arriving. They occupy every part of the open Maltese countryside and mate all the time, high up in the sky above their territory, from early morning. They are summer visitors to the islands, where they remain until September. Then they flock and move south again. Cory’s shearwaters are also summer visitors. For these birds, one has to look out at sea, especially in the evening before it gets dark. Post yourself at any spot above the high southern and western cliffs of the islands, particularly in Gozo, and you may see the shearwaters rafting in large groups two or three kilometres out at sea, waiting for darkness. At nightfall they fly to the cliffs, where they sail around wailing before settling on the ledges in front of their cliff face burrows.

The good thing about birdwatching in Malta is that you don’t need to travel far to get to the diverse habitats of all these birds. Different habitats are close to each other, providing contrasting scenery, with different bird species in relatively close proximity. This advantage is more in evidence with migrant birds which may appear all over the countryside irrespective of habitat!

In the Maltese Islands, more than anywhere else, the ornithological calendar is dominated by bird migration. Of the 375 species recorded in the islands, about 50 are winter visitors, about 112 regular migrants and another 180 rare and irregular migrants or vagrants. While the summer months are rather quiet for birdwatching, you cannot be in the field enough in spring and autumn. Although there is a consistent migration of birds throughout the islands in both seasons, weather conditions greatly affect quantities. On one day the migrant stream may be flooded with migrants, while at other times there may be very little movement in evidence.

Migrants include species which winter south of the Sahara as well as those which go no further than the Mediterranean basin. By late summer, one may already spot herons, raptors, waders, hirundines, tree and tawny pipits, several warblers, chats and many others, which increase dramatically in September and October. In November the migration of trans-Saharan birds is replaced by influx of the wintering species, like plovers, finches and other passerines. In spring a similar progression happens between early March and late May, but in reverse order.

Hoopoes, marsh harriers, grey and night herons and swallows and martins in transit are among the first to appear in spring. They are followed by small passerines like subalpine, great reed and icterine warblers and later by golden orioles, bee-eaters, woodchat shrikes and the occasional roller. Several waders occur along the coast, at the few remaining waterpools in the valleys or in the marshy areas at Ghadira and the recently restored Is-Simar. What is sometimes lacking in quantity is well made up for in quality!

Successful birderwatching in the islands depends largely on knowing when and where to look. While there is generally no lack of suitable habitat for birds of the open countryside, there is very little woodland and wetland. Where these exist, such as at Buskett, Ghadira and Is-Simar, they always provide good birdwatching sites. So do the overgrown valleys, like Wied il Luq and Wied il-Lunzjata. During migration, birds tend to funnel through these valleys.

Hunters and trappers are unavoidable in the countryside, and birdwatchers should always avoid clashes with these people. It is always best to know what is legal and what is not. Several good sites for birds, such as Kemmuna and Buskett, are protected bird sanctuaries, but in most parts of the countryside hunting and trapping of a number of species is legal. It is always best to keep to the footpaths,
Looking Ahead!

Desirée Falzon
Council chairperson

As the world turned its eyes to the new millennium, BirdLife Malta took a look at the past: what had 38 years of campaigning for birds achieved? A list of successes chalked up bird protection laws, widespread awareness, bird sanctuaries, nature reserves etc. Not a bad show at all. But birds? Why were birds still being massacred all over the place?

Banners, letters of outrage and protest marches had left an indelible mark on the Maltese nation and its legislation, but apparently this was not enough. Why weren’t the bird laws doing their job?

It was time to tackle the very people who could translate written law into action. It was time to tackle the government.

When in government, both PN and MLP had given concessions to hunters in face-foisting efforts to win their favours (and their votes). Never mind BirdLife Malta’s outcry at the shameless U-turns and inroads into the bird protection laws. No amount of protest was reeding any faces - the government washed its hands of the problem.

So BirdLife Malta decided to take another, much tougher route: talk to the hunters themselves. If we could get the hunters at least to agree on the need to abide by the law, then BirdLife Malta would have cooled a very hot potato scorching government’s hand, and scored a victory for law enforcement.

Easier said than done! BirdLife Malta knew that talking to the traditional enemy would take courage and a great deal of calm. But BirdLife Malta was never one to give up. In August 1999 BirdLife Malta began informal talks with FKNK, the main hunters’ federation.

A year of discussion later, BirdLife Malta and FKNK had agreed on one principle: the law is there to be enforced. In June 2000, the informal discussions were given the stamp of an official body, the Foundation for Wild Birds Conservation.

Hell broke loose! It came mainly from other environment groups, who are used to the traditional strategy of confrontation. Needless to say, the press vultures also hopped in! BirdLife Malta had to weather storms of disagreement, misinformation and outright slander. At the same time it had work to do.

The Foundation next discussed a package that would be acceptable to both groups. This package would then be presented to the government for implementation. Top priority for BirdLife Malta was persuading government to implement a strategy for the control of hunting abuses. The Foundation obtained the approval and some financial backing from the government, and BirdLife Malta was now hopeful that any resulting agreement should be for the better. Yet it was under no illusion that there would be drastic overnight changes.

In July, the agreement between BirdLife Malta and FKNK was made public. The two organisations would supervise three projects:

a) the government would set up a monitoring board to ensure that hunting regulations were respected.

b) BirdLife Malta would work on a project to reintroduce the barn owl, a species which had been exterminated from Malta.

c) FKNK would start farming quail as a game bird to ease pressure from wild populations.

As the news made headlines, BirdLife Malta once again had to take the flak from other environment groups. This was too avant-garde for some to be comfortable with, and many accused BirdLife Malta of throwing away its principles. But once again our organisation pushed on, keeping the longterm goal in sight through this difficult period. The future would prove whether dialogue was a more effective strategy than head-on collision.

In July, the government launched the Environment Monitoring Board (EMB), BirdLife Malta, the hunters and the Environment Protection Department would sit on the EMB together with the Police and the Armed Forces to discuss a strategy for law enforcement. The Board was not only detailed to plot a strategy for enforcement but also carried the responsibility of seeing it through.

The EMB was soon to face its first test: the imminent autumn migration. The place: Buskett, notorious for the annual mass slaughter of protected birds. That the woodland was a bird sanctuary had never stopped hunters from shooting down entire flocks of honey buzzards, marsh harriers and other “manly” trophies.

This time, however, we were promised that things would be different. BirdLife Malta’s birdwatchers waited anxiously as the first trickle of raptors appeared over the treetops.

No shots!

Eventually, wave after spectacular wave of raptors settled in the trees every evening, taking off the following morning to continue their migration. Marsh harriers, bee-eaters, honey buzzards, kestrels, short-toed eagles, swallows - not a feather touched. And no wonder: the police were patrolling Buskett from dawn to dusk, the Armed Forces were throwing road blocks in the evenings and BirdLife Malta’s activists were constantly present to see that the watch was kept up. The effort paid off! We had saved the lives of at least 4000 birds of prey! The Board had done it!

The story isn’t over, of course. This was only one migration season, and there are several other hunting hotspots in Malta and Gozo. A permanent strategy will have to be drawn up for future seasons. Will the forces of law and order show the same commitment?

The work of the EMB last autumn has given BirdLife Malta hope. It is a clear indication that dialogue can yield results. But it is much too early to cry victory. Before the kind of action becomes the order of the day, BirdLife Malta cannot for a moment relax its vigilance. Its work on the EMB will get harder as it moves towards turning its first victory into a watertight enforcement plan that no lawless hunter will slip through.

Left: Hunter feeling hunted! Below: Police officers on patrol at Buskett last September
Watching a flock of marsh harriers circling over the aloe pines at Buskett in the gathering dusk is one great spectacle for any birdwatcher, and a pity if enjoyed by only a few people! Watching these birds being blown apart by trigger-happy riflemen is equally unforgettable, and sheer shame that it is allowed to happen! Hence BirdLife Malta’s raptorcamps!

Raptorcamps have two main aims. One is to get foreign birdwatchers to share with us the wonder of raptor migration over Buskett; the second is to do something about the annual bird massacre in the Buskett area.

In 1998 we gave it a try. Attendance then was not too high, but the enthusiasm shown by those few who came for the seed for RaptorCamp 1999 and beyond!

We publicised RaptorCamp 2000 on a special website on the Internet (raptorcamp.birdlifemalta.org) and the response was good...

Based at the YTC premises in the very heart of Buskett, we started off on 6 September with the German participants, sponsored by Naturschutzbund Deutschland NABU (BirdLife in Germany). Over the next few days the rest of the 23 participants had arrived and settled in. We got to know each other rapidly, and one thing became evident - we weren’t here just to have fun birdwatching, but we were also here for the birds' sake!

Enforcement within Buskett looked good from the beginning. The presence of Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) personnel was very evident, and a number of local police were also being daily posted in, and around the woodland to help the ALE officers. A core of BirdLife Malta’s birdwatchers were keeping up a daily vigil on high grounds overlooking the valley. In the evenings, the Armée forces were also making several road blocks.

Seeing that the situation in Buskett was under close scrutiny, we moved with the foreigners to watch from other posts, starting with Dingli Cliffs. A very different picture awaited us then - since the cliffs did not fall within the range of the Buskett sanctuary, hunters there apparently felt more at ease, and were shooting raptors with relish!

We kept records of the birds we saw, but were not too sure all of them were leaving the Maltese shores. At Dingli the hunters rarely dared shoot while we were there. They did so once early on during the camp, but we called the police at once on our mobiles, and within minutes they were on the spot, checking licenses and looking for hidden bird carcasses. Of course, once the hunters realised what we were doing there, we were thereafter subjected to daily insults, and on one occasion actually shot at. But once again called for assistance and the hunter was promptly arrested. We knew we were running a bit of a risk here, denying these men what they believed was their god-given right. But then, to see a flock of honey buzzards sail over unscathed thrilled us all and made it all worthwhile. Once we felt that Dingli was secure, we moved on to the next post - Gargantija. A tough nut indeed. Hunters black out over Buskett. One raptor that made it...

“...we weren't here just to have fun birdwatching - we were also here for the birds' sake.”

have been killing honey buzzards since they were boys, so now no amount of education would change them. There was really no other way to control these people but to hunt them down in return.

Girgenti has several valleys around it, and the density of hunting huts here is much higher. This made it hard for us to tell who was shooting, and harder to see what the hunters were doing with the dead birds. We called the police to this area several times, but to little avail. One evening, during the peak period, we saw 23 protected birds (including an osprey) being killed in just one hour. But returning to camp that evening it was heartening to learn that in Buskett over 200 raptors, mostly marsh harriers, had settled without one shot being heard. Things unheard off we were getting there, slowly.

Every evening, camp activities and bird records were emailed to interested people all over Europe. During their stay, the camp participants had important meetings with various bodies and people in authority. These included the Minister of Tourism, the Minister of Environment, the Opposition spokesman for the environment, the Assistant Police Commissioner and the chairperson of Alternattiva Demokratika (Green Party). A stand was set up to explain Malta’s importance on the migration route, and several dignitaries who visited the birdwatching station experienced the spectacle and majesty of raptor migration as honey buzzards glided low over their heads!

The camp participants didn’t miss a chance to tell these people how raptor-watching at Buskett could be the perfect source of eco-tourism, and how hunting was the only problem standing in its way!

Thanks to the co-ordination between BirdLife Malta activists and the enforcement people, bird protection at Buskett in September-October was virtually completed! Coupled with the fact that it was a magnificent migration, with over 4000 raptors logged, we all agreed that this camp was one unforgettable experience.

Environment minister Francis Zammit Dimech and MLP environment spokesman Joe Mizzi visited Buskett’s birdwatching station, with camp co-ordinator Joseph M. Mangan (left) and BirdLife Malta president Antoine Vella (right).

The Calabria experience

In holding with BirdLife Malta’s belief in environmental education, BirdLife in February 2000 organised a visit for 22 Jersey College students to spend a week at the bird protection camp in Calabria, Italy. Accompanied by three teachers and Justin Vassallo for BirdLife Malta, the group experienced the beauty of migration and saw how long-term dedication by the Italian police forces has virtually wiped out the once widespread illegal hunting in the region. The students’ visit was funded by Federazione Mediterranea Falchi (FMF) HMF.

BirdLife Malta also believes that enforcement of the environment law is vital. So two weeks after the students’ visit, BirdLife organised a second visit, this time for enforcement officers. Assistant Commissioner of Police Jose Brincat and two ALE sergeants were hosted by FMF HMF and NABU at the same camp in Calabria, accompanied by Joseph M. Mangan for BirdLife Malta. The Maltese delegation was shown how co-operation between birdwatchers and the Italian Police helped both parties, reducing illegal hunting on one side and facilitating law enforcement on the other. The Maltese delegation also met various officers of the Italian police and were taken for a patrol of the area on one of the Guardia Forestale helicopters.
Many who visit Ghadiria and Is-Simar are surprised at how rich Maltese nature can be. Some reasons are obvious: wetlands are generally richer in wildlife than dry habitats. Moreover, our tiny nature reserves are sheltered from disturbance and exploitation. But there’s another reason. The two sites are managed in such a way as to offer maximum biodiversity. And this always entails work - of the hard, manual kind!

**The right stuff**

Little bittern began breeding at Is-Simar in 1997. Why not before? Easy, you might say: because the area is now hunter-free and protected. That is true and vital, but still this tiny heron species would never have moved in just because the area was fenced off and guarded. The main reason was that there just wasn’t the right habitat for the bird. Little bitterns need a reedbed where to hide, and pools of water where to fish - such habitats did not exist at Is-Simar a few years ago. But foresight and management has seen to that. Careful excavation remodelled the site into a patchwork of ditches and depressions, which are now filled with rain and seawater. Phragmites rapidly took over and proceeded to colonize!

**Reed riot**

Reeds, however, tend to overdo it. Left to its own devices, Is-Simar would in a few years become one uniform reedbed, with no open water. Dead reed material would slowly pile up into a bed of sediment which would eventually push out all the water and the entire wetland would dry out. To keep water present, one has to manually check the spread of reeds - the single most daunting job for the warden at Is-Simar.

Charles Coleiro, the managing warden, has the unenviable task of clearing entire stretches of reeds to maintain areas of open water. Not only is open water an extremely rare habitat in Malta, but in such areas, water-loving plants and animals can feed and grow. Not least birds like moorhens, ducks and herons. Open water also attracts plenty of insects, something which doesn’t go unnoticed, if the autumn hordes of yellow wagtails, swallows, house martins and sand martins are anything to go by. Wagtails and hirundines roosting in large numbers at Is-Simar have become an annual autumn spectacle.

**Trail blazer**

Another task that has taken a great deal of the warden’s time was preparing a nature trail to allow visitors to make a tour of the reserve while keeping disturbance to a minimum. The trail at Is-Simar is different from the one at Ghadiria in that it lies on the outside perimeter of the embankment. This was done purposely to keep the pool area as people-free as possible. Along the trail the visitor can make use of three birdwatching hides. Each hide looks over a different habitat: reedbed, deep pool and a mixture of shallow pool and reedlump. The trail will also run through the olive grove, very popular with wintering starlings and thrushes, and over the canal - a magnet for squacco herons - that links the wetland to the sea.

The basic trail will be completed in 2001, when the reserve opens for school visits.

**Daily visits**

At Ghadiria, life has been equally busy for managing warden Charles Gauci and his assistant Mark Vella. Daily visits by schoolchildren means that the tranquility of the nature reserve is daily exposed to a potentially disruptive group, which can be very harmful to wildlife. School groups are therefore carefully supervised and never left alone by the reserve personnel. The students are immediately made aware of this disturbance factor - learning to harmonise with wildlife is an education in itself. In 2000 Ghadiria was visited by no less than 2926 students.

Weekend visitors were not in short supply either. A total of 4424 people visited Ghadiria at the weekends. As usual this was made possible thanks to the commitment of a group of BirdLife Malta guides who show visitors around the site.

Since the reserve is visited every day, the nature trail has to be kept safe and fully accessible, while screening it off from the core area. Screening is done either by reed fences or by planting vegetation along the trail. All plants are indigenous species grown on site in a well-tended nursery which today houses 3000 young trees and shrubs.

**For LRP’s sake!**

The little ringed plover is a special bird for Ghadiria, not only because the reserve has typical habitat for this small wader but also because a pair have annually nested at the reserve since 1995. A new breeding species is a major achievement for biodiversity (and for Ghadiria’s reputation), but one pair is still much too tenuous a foothold for a new breeding bird. In 2000 the reserve management started preparing the way to create some other areas of shingle, very much favoured by the plowers for nesting.

In our hands

The year 2000 was a landmark year for BirdLife Malta. After literally creating Ghadiria and giving more than 20 years of voluntary work at the site, (and a decade at Is-Simar) the Society’s contribution has at last been acknowledged. In July BirdLife Malta signed a contract with the Environment Protection Department through which the management of the two nature reserves passed into BirdLife Malta’s hands, with an annual grant of Lm5000 to spend on the upkeep and development of each site. A part-time supervisor was immediately employed to coordinate all present and future works at the two reserves.
When the heavy excavation machinery moved out of Is-Simar, where a wetland was being re-created, nature began to take over. It did not take long for the site to be enhanced with a mosaic of thick clumps of common reed, thickets of tamarisk, brackish-water pools and flooded ditches. Birds moved in too - moorhens soon settled down and migrating reed warblers, attracted by a perfect habitat, stayed on and bred. The little bittern did that too!

The little bittern is a reed-haunting species, breeding in overgrown reedy pools, ponds and ditches. It is a European summer visitor that winters in Africa. It was therefore surprising to catch frequent glimpses of this bird and hear its muffled croaking calls at Is-Simar throughout the winter of 1996-1997. Two pairs eventually nested there the following spring, the first breeding record of this species for Malta.

There is no exception; give adequate habitat and some protection, and birds will respond! The little bittern is the smallest heron in Europe. It is very secretive - its nasal calls are usually heard at night, but the bird itself is rarely seen. During the day it hides in the reeds, feeding in the overgrown ponds, but it also walks out to forage at the edges of reed clumps. If disturbed, the bird will more likely retreat into the vegetation than fly off. When it feels exposed, it often assumes the "bittern stance"; sitting motionless with its beak pointing upwards to look as reed-like as possible! If it does fly off, the whitish wing patches on the adult's dark wings are unmistakable. The adult male has black upper parts and a black crown, which contrast with the cream neck and buff-white wing patch. The female is duller, while the juveniles are streaked.

Food is mainly small fish, frogs and insects, which the bird picks from the waterlogged reedbeds. Its nest is usually a compact platform of reed stems and leaves built just above the water surface among the reeds. The little bittern is the latest addition to Malta's breeding birds.

The young birds hatch after two weeks of incubation, and grow quickly. Note bittern's instinct even at this early age.

A rustle in the reeds
The secretive little bittern

The nest, which may contain 5-6 eggs, is well hidden in the reedbed

The male little bittern's colour scheme make him easy to identify

Joe Sultana
Klabb Huttafa

The BirdLife Malta juniors... in pictures!

From March 2000, the popular club magazine Il-Huttafa began sporting a colour cover.

Not just birds! Klabb Huttafa is about all the environment, not only birds. This activity, for instance, dealt with things like solar power as a clean source of energy and threats from UV rays. The game above is part of a quiz. After the game, it was hot dogs and drinks for everyone! (June 2000)

Pride winner, Ġuri Ġważer, was one of the winners of the Huttafa of the Year 2000 award. The award encourages members to be active in as many club activities as they can and to help the club by getting new members. This award is given every year during the Christmas party. Above, Council chairman Davide Falzon has just presented the award to the bearing youth who club chairperson Jason Aboblos looks on. (December 2000)

Job for the big boys! The club has a precious section that caters for teenagers. For this group, the 13+ section of Klabb Huttafa organises special activities. Special because they are more adventurous or more demanding, like bike rides, night hikes, camps and manual work at nature reserves. The group above is giving a much-needed helping hand in clearing excess vegetation at Għadira. (July 2000)

On 24 October 2000, Dinja Wahda 1999-2000 came to a close in the very same hall where it had been launched a year before. As the neatly uniformed delegation from De La Salle College walked up to collect its gold trophy, the members of BirdLife Malta’s Education Unit let out a deep breath: another year-long campaign was over, and it was worth every effort.

Dinja Wahda (meaning One World) is BirdLife Malta’s idea of environmental education. It’s varied, it’s action-packed, and most of all it’s good, clean fun! It is a big event: big because it spans an entire scholastic year, and big because it’s a national event. This was the second edition of Dinja Wahda (the first was held in 1994-95) and for the 1999-2000 edition, 31 schools took active part.

The campaign revolved around 20 environmental activities with varying degree of organisation - the harder the project, the more points. Activities included collecting used batteries, producing vegetarian recipe books, promoting solar energy, writing to the press, organising fundraising walks, making bird tables and nest boxes, clean-ups, writing to the press, petitioning for the protection of narcissus, growing oaks for afforestation and putting up a nature board. Through all this, we hope that Maltese children will grow out of the idea that environment just means keeping the floor spotless!

BirdLife Malta is hugely grateful to Nos Oiseaux, a Swiss bird protection organisation, for footing most of the costs, as well as to the other sponsors, namely HSBC, Sunkist and Fuj Film.

Ma Shearee! Shearwater adoption campaign

The idea was to get people learning about shearwaters and helping out in their study and protection. The scheme was set up to encourage groups or individuals to sponsor research of Cory’s shearwaters. Nothing new really - similar schemes are popular overseas, where groups raise funds for tigers, elephants, rhinos, chimps, orangs, whales etc. The question was: how popular was this going to be in Malta?

We needed a mascot! So BirdLife Malta had a shearwater chick specially made for this campaign by renowned Dutch soft-toy makers Anna Club Plush. Shearwater expert John J Borg chose a number of shearwaters which he had been individually monitoring for a number of years. Little did these birds know that their life was soon to be the focus of families, classes, entire schools!

BirdLife Malta produced factsheets and life histories of every bird selected, plus photograph. Each “parent” was given a special adoption certificate, with promise of future updates about what “their” bird was up to. And of course a shearwater soft toy! All this for a one-time payment of Lm6.

BirdLife Malta also produced a colour leaflet and a poster to promote the scheme.

Response was most encouraging, and requests for info and adoptions had poor Liz Curmi at the office besieged - one school alone adopted 36 birds! The soft-toy was particularly magnetic, and we had children hanging on to the chicks on display at the BirdLife stalls, and refusing to let go!

So far, more than 500 adoptions have been made. With the profits, BirdLife Malta is upgrading its research of Maltese breeding birds, with special focus on shearwaters. They deserve it!

Promotional poster used in shops and in publications.

A special leaflet was produced to promote the adoption scheme and to highlight Malta’s seabirds and their problems.

The Mediterranean woodland area includes several types of woodland. In fact the typical Mediterranean climate vegetation is evergreen wood dominated by species of oak and pine. Also very typical of the Mediterranean area is the maquis (makija), a low woodland characterised by an assortment of small trees and shrubs and a rich undergrowth of large herbs and woody climbers.

In addition, there are riparian woodlands and shrublands which skirt rivers and water courses, as well as highland woods in the mountainous areas.

The Maltese islands lost most of their woodlands over the past few hundreds of years, cleared to make place for agriculture, pastureage and urbanisation; trees were also felled for fuel and construction material.

The typical Mediterranean evergreen wood is represented by remnants where some evergreen oak still survives. Some of these trees, such as those at Wardija, are several hundred years old. Other wild oaks can be seen at Mgiebah, Wied Rattrun/Ta’ Baidu and at Buskett. Most of the Wied Rattrun trees were destroyed about a decade ago in order to clear the land for agriculture. The native Aleppo pine was wiped out by the 19th century, though the species has been planted for afforestation and embellishment purposes; and there are numerous cases of regeneration. A magnificent Aleppo pine at Mgiebah may be a survivor of the original population since it is almost certainly several hundred years old.

In the Maltese Islands the maquis is characterised by familiar trees like carob and olive, of which some very old specimens exist at Birżebbuġa - both are archaeophytes. True natives include the lentisk (or mastic tree), the rare myrtle and bay laurel, which is on the increase. Also on the increase is Mediterranean buckthorn, which may not be a true native. This increase in several maquis species is due to the drastic decline of agriculture and pastureage over the past two decades, allowing maquis to regenerate where soil and shelter is sufficient.

A very peculiar maquis is that dominated by Malta’s national tree, the arar (or sandarac) of which only one sizeable population remains, in addition to a few scattered trees. Medieval Arabic accounts suggest that it was...
much more widespread. The arar is a conifer rather like the juniper (which may once have been native) but is more closely related to the commonly cultivated cypress. The arar is most widespread in NW Africa where it grows on hillsides, often forming open woodland. In Europe it only occurs in southern Spain (Murcia and Andalucia) and Malta.

The maquis trees mentioned so far are all evergreen and sclerophyllous (leathery-leaved, in order to conserve water), but deciduous trees also coexist with these. Where deciduous trees dominate, the community is known as pseudo maquis. The most common deciduous dominants of the maquis are fig, almond and occasionally pomegranate and jujube, all arthrophores. Native species include hawthorn, the rare terebinth, and Chert's thorn – last seen in Gozo in the mid-1970s, and therefore possibly extinct.

Maquis trees and shrub generate very nutritious leaf-litter so that their undergrowth is often rich and includes lianas (woody climbers) such as ivy, spiny asparagus, bramble, madder, sarsaparilla (common smilax) and evergreen traveler's joy, uncommon but on the increase.

The maquis undergrowth also includes a species of often large herbs (non-woody plants) with a high nutrient requirement like bear's breeches, lords and ladies, friar's cowl, alexanders and stinging nettle.

Exotic species frequently invade themselves in maquis and pseudo maquis communities, often carried by birds or water. Such exotics include the false pepper from South America, the invasive castor oil tree from southern Africa and the prickly pear from the Americas, also very invasive. Undergrowth lianas may include exotics such as the old world grapevine and American grapevine.

Riparian woodlands are all but extinct in the Maltese Islands. These are found lining the banks of water courses (winds and permanent springs. Most trees of this community are deciduous and include white poplar, two species of willow (both very rare) and alder, also very rare. Non-native elm species such as Ulmus minor and Ulmus glabra occur, as well as the possibly arborescent ash. Other exotics include pecan nut, walnut and the invasive tree of heaven.

In water courses which open into the sea and in saline marshes, there is another community with small trees like African tamarisk and crape tree, this last particularly in Gozo. Elsewhere in the Western Mediterranean they are joined by oleander which in Malta only occurs in cultivation and the occasional escape, but which may have been a true native in the past.

Finally, these communities are dominated by more or less recently introduced exotic species which have run wild. Examples are the blue wattle on sand dunes and sweet thorn along water courses, the tree of heaven along valley sides and roadsides and the tobacco tree on disturbed ground.

The Maltese Islands may have lost most of their tree cover. But the fact that woodlands existed in the roto-pastoral past suggests that, given the will, it is possible to re-establish these communities, particularly on abandoned agricultural land where, as stated above, maquis communities are regenerating at their own speed.

A little nudge on our part will help no end!

American grapevine – Didacia Americana Vitis vinaea

Mediterranean buckthorn – Alakumus Rhamnus alaternus

Arar or sandera – Ghergarth Teucrium articulatum

Juniper – Juniperus communis

Cypress – Cephalotis alpinae

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A little nudge on our part will help no end!
To ring birds you need good sites. Some places, like Busket, Ghadira, Is-Simar and Wied il-Lunzjata are well-known hotspots and are regularly "worked" by BirdLife Malta's ringers. Other sites are less often visited, either because they are not very fruitful or else because reaching them is too much of a hassle for a half-day ringing session. For many years Kemmuna fell into this latter category, and was only visited haphazardly. But all that changed in 1991, when BirdLife Malta joined the Italy-based Piccole Isole Project, a pan-Mediterranean study, during which ringing sessions lasted rather more than a few hours!

The annual Piccole Isole (Small Islands) bird ringing project (see p.19) is a month-long continuous effort to study migration of birds over small islands. This project spans from 16 April to 15 May, after which all data collected is sent to Bologna University for analysis and subsequent publication. For this project BirdLife Malta needed a regular site to use every year. Being a small island, Kemmuna was the natural choice. Moreover, the island has been a bird sanctuary since 1970 and is relatively safe for birds, except for some illegal hunting by the local farmer.

The site chosen on Kemmuna is Wied l-Ahmar, a shallow valley roughly in the middle of the island. Almond trees afford some shelter, while garigue species have colonised the stretches of abandoned fields lining the slope of the valley. Due to the largely bare and windswept nature of the rest of the island, Wied l-Ahmar acts like a funnel and birds tend to move through it in large numbers during migration.

For the past 10 years, ringers and helpers volunteering for the project have had to live in spartan conditions, sleeping out in tents, with little protection from strong wind, rain and an inquisitive rodent population!

In 1994, BirdLife Malta leased part of Wied l-Ahmar from the government. In the area there is an old, derelict pumpkin house, made up of three small rooms. An idea began to take shape in the minds of the Kemmuna working group: what if we converted this small building into a ringing station? It would be tiny, but permanent and all-weather: a base from where local and foreign ornithologists could pursue bird studies all year round.

All that was needed was a plan, some money and plenty of hard work! Financial help came in May 2000 when Vogelbescherming (BirdLife in the Netherlands) agreed to fund the project. A plan and budget were drawn up. Work kicked off in June. Summer temperatures soared to 40°C, but volunteers sweated it out and gave their very best. Organising the trips and carrying the material was a mammoth task in itself, as the only transport was the hotel ferry - the rest had to be carried on foot, were their tools, sacks of cement, tiles - and all the water!

The rooms were first cleared of huge mounds of rubble. The rough-stone walls were then cleared of the old earth "plaster" and properly sealed and re-plastered from both sides, though not smoothed or whitewashed. The roof too was cleaned and treated with sealer and compound. The floor, originally compacted earth, was installed with anti-damp plastic sheeting, cemented over and is now in the process of setting.

Future plans include afforestation of the abandoned fields to act as shelter and forage for incoming migratory birds.

The Kemmuna working group is composed of Mark Gaucci, Joseph M Mangion and Manuel Matta. The group would like to thank all helpers who are making this dream come true, namely Valentina Bincog, Norman Chetcuti, Aubrey Cachia, Franco Farruga, Jean Paul Farruga, Stanley Gott, Carmen Gauci, Charles Gauci, Tina Hali, Marie Louise Mangion, Caldon Mercieca, Arnold Schembri, Saviour Spiteri, Simon Suds, Justin Vassallo and Christian Zepf.

Getting the mix right (below) and ting the floor (button).
The people... The members who manned the various BirdLife Malta sections and positions in 2000

HONORARY PRESIDENT
Joe Attard

PRESIDENT
Antone Vella

SECRETARY
Norman Cachia

TREASURER
Denis Cachia

Conservation Committee
Chair: Joseph Mangan
Secretary: Audrey Chetcuti
Alex Casha
Raymond Galea
Saviour Spiteri
Justin Vassallo
Antone Vella

Finance Committee
Chair: Anton Abela
Secretary: Norman Chetcuti
Desiree Falzon

Education Committee
Chair: Angelina Puls/Sandra Mifsud
Secretary: Victor Fritz/Chris Puls
John J Borg
Anthony Cardina
Arina Maria Gatt
Victor Falzon
Michael Grima
Flora Lulfa
Gloria Pace

Birdwatchers Club
Chair: Michael Sammut
Edward Bonavia
Marc Sammut

Bird Camp
Chair: Jason Aloisio
Secretary: Desiree Falzon
Audrey Chetcuti
Norman Chetcuti
Victor Falzon
Janet Vassallo

Research Group
Chair: Joe Sultana
Ringing Sec: Charles Gauci
Assist Ringing Sec: Mark Gauci
Ringers: John Attard, Montsalvo, John J Borg, Denis Cachia, Victor Cika, Charles Colema, Raymond Galea, Charles Gauci, Mark Gauci, John Ginch, Manuel Mifsud, Joseph Mangan, Joe Sultana

National Committee: Caldon Mercieca

International
Co-Chair: Joe Sultana
John J Borg
Ian Mifsud
Justin Vassallo

The list is far from complete. Many other volunteers have done their bit so that birds and nature may know a brighter day. BirdLife Malta is indebted to them all.

30 Raptor Camp working group mtg

September 2000
09 BirdLife’s Raptor International Camp begins at Baskett (ends 26 Sep) 07 PRI.Ow Raptor International Camp 12 Environment Minister, MLP env spokesman, (Ital. Ambassador rep), visit Baskett birdwatching station 13 Azt Police Commissioner visits Basket birdwatching station 14 Brit High Commissioner, Economic Services Parliamentary Secretary visits Basket birdwatching station 14 PRI.Ow Raptor International Camp 15 Tourism minister, Alternative Chaimperson, German Ambassador visit Basket birdwatching station 15 Klabb Muttal 13+ camp day 1 16 Klabb Muttal 13+ camp day 3 17 Klabb Muttal 13+ camp day 3 18 Press visit Basket birdwatching station 18 PRI.Ow Raptor Camp 24 End of Raptor International Camp 25 Environment Monitoring Board mtg 28 Raptor Camp working group mtg 27 BirdTalk 61 published 27 BirdLife meets new ACE chief 29 Klabb Muttal on NET TV

OCTOBER 2000
01 BirdLife’s BirdFest at Baskett - World Birdwatch Day 03 Raptor Camp working group mtg 04 BirdLife meets EPD re Foresta 2000 04 Klabb Muttal committee mtg 05 Raptor Camp working group mtg 06 6 Muttals 40 published 12 Conservation committee mtg 13 Klabb Muttal indoor activity

The plot gives a simplified account of how BirdLife Malta allocated its funds. It is published January-December 2000. A detailed financial account is available on request.

Spending money!

ADMINISTRATION 15% RESEARCH 19% CONSERVATION 21% EDUCATION 29% OTHER 10% PROFESSIONAL SERVICES 11% MARKETING 12% COMMUNITY projects 10%
The ghost of wetlands past

Salina was once a great Maltese wetland, teeming with birds and biodiversity. Today it is an exploited, abused, degraded and polluted ghost of what it once was, hemmed in by development and threatened with total obliteration by megaprojects. But if we care enough, Salina could again rise from the ashes...