

# Bird's Eye View



  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA

Annual magazine 2004



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. To achieve its mission, the organisation has used various approaches, ranging from anti-hunting street protests to the setting up and management of nature reserves, such as Ghadira and Is-Simar.

BirdLife Malta publishes *Il-Merill* (a scientific bulletin), *Bird's Eye View* (the members' annual magazine), *Il-Huttafa* (the young members' bimonthly magazine) *BirdTalk* (the members' bimonthly newsletter), and a newsletter for school delegates. The Society also produces educational material including books, teaching aids, posters and leaflets for use by schools and other institutions. The organisation is also active in the press.

BirdLife Malta is a Partner of BirdLife International.

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## editorial

It's no secret. If it were for us to decide, we would outlaw ALL hunting and trapping of birds in Malta. No quotas, no hairy close-season-for-this-but-open-for-that, no transition periods. One sudden, glorious blanket ban to seal this medieval chapter of slaughter. Let's face it: with their habitat destroyed or polluted all over the planet, birds already have enough on their plate, and can certainly do without a bunch of dudes insisting on their "right" to enjoy the thrill of the kill or the catch or whatever.

But unfortunately it's not for us to decide, so we must win the war against bird-crime battle by battle. And, thanks to EU membership, one battle that is hopefully drawing to the final struggle is the one against trapping.

Now several people (while harbouring no love for trapping) often ask us: But why trapping? Isn't hunting more barbaric? Shouldn't the EU be more concerned with hunting?

The answer is that in many European countries, hunting is really no big deal, as several animals in Europe are hunted regularly to supplement the food market. These include mammals like elk and deer, and birds like goose, duck, partridge and grouse. The hunter, however, is severely regulated and usually does no more damage to wildlife than your average predator like wolves and eagles. This is why many people in Brussels are ready to tolerate hunting.

On the other hand, trapping wild birds for their "song" is something no civilised mind can accept. In this day and age you cannot justify slamming a wild bird into a cage just because you fancy its voice! It is nothing but a selfish habit which betrays total disregard of animal dignity. Maltese trappers were probably lucky to even get a transition period to phase out their so-called sport.

BirdLife Malta has for years been teaching children about the cruelty of catching wild birds, in an effort to kill out the habit from the young generation. But education is notoriously slow, so a little boost - like making bird trapping illegal - should go a long way to help us reach our goal.

And our goal (one of them) is to walk in the countryside and watch linnets and chaffinches catching grubs for their young in the nest.

Victor Falzon  
Editor

# Catchin' 'em young

Highlights from the Education Unit

Victor Falzon

## One World Four

BirdLife Malta's educational year in 2004 was dominated by Dinja Wahda 4. Dinja Wahda is BirdLife's green campaign which awards schools for environmental action.

Dinja Wahda (= One World) is based on action. Along with urging schools to go green, we must also show them how to go about it. Too many people are still under the simplistic impression that going green simply means Keep Malta Clean, so we must ensure that more environmental issues are addressed.

Dinja Wahda 4 (DW4) consisted of 18 activities which tackled issues like habitat restoration, the Three Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) and animal misconceptions. The information supplied often served as a launchpad for action, e.g. from discussing habitat-restoration, children moved on to sowing acorns and growing oak trees for BirdLife's afforestation project.

DW activities also carried points according to the degree of commitment it required. Some activities set very easy tasks, like Activity 6 (Talk Naturally), which involved calling BirdLife to visit the school and give the children a talk about nature. Others needed far more preparation, like Activity 15 (Nature

Day), which meant organising an open day of activities with a nature theme.

The activities and supplementary graphics and information were provided in a 36-page Action Guide, which was distributed to all primary schools.

DW4 ran from October 2003 to May 2004. It was co-ordinated by Theresa Cremona, whose main task was to ensure the smooth running of DW4 in the participating schools. No less than 83 primary schools (= 22,000 students) took part in DW4 - a record number!

Over summer, the Education Committee evaluated the project and published a 16-page report. DW4 came to a close at the award-giving ceremony on 28 October 2004. More than a third (30) of the schools received the gold trophy, meaning they had notched at least 1000 points. The highest ranking schools were St Joseph Blata l-Bajda (3715 pts), Siggiewi Primary (2619 pts) and De La Salle College (2515 pts).

BirdLife Malta is grateful to APS Bank for sponsoring DW4.

## Course of nature

For the third year running, BirdLife Malta offered the course *Sharing Nature with Children* for kindergarten assistants. The course was listed in the Education Division's national in-service training programme, and was held on

7-9 July 2004. It was attended by 22 participants, mostly KAs but also a number of peripatetic teachers. The course included talks about biodiversity, habitats and animal misconceptions; an art-and-craft activity; and a fieldwork session at Buskett, which introduced the teachers to a number of games with a nature theme.

The course was organised by the Education Committee and co-ordinated by Michael Grima. The committee is grateful to guest speakers Michael Falzon and Joe Sultana.

## Bird book

The Committee oversaw the issue of a Maltese bird guide for children. Although many excellent bird guides exist, these are usually too detailed for young beginners. The new book, *Ghasafar Madwarna* (= Birds Around Us) is composed mostly of pictures with very little text, and covers 100 of the more common or colourful species which occur in Malta. The book was launched in October 2004 and BirdLife donated a copy to all schools.

The book was sponsored by SOF, our BirdLife partner in Sweden. See also pg 23.

Victor Falzon is a teacher and member of the Education Committee



Soaking up. Children from Żejtun primary tending young oaks.

Playtime. In-service teachers learning a nature game at Buskett.



Going uphill from Ghadira towards Ċirkewwa one looks left and sees a large open area where, up to three years ago, noisy 4WD vehicles used to drive madly up and down the slope, eroding the clay and obliterating vegetation. All that is now history...

In 2003 BirdLife Malta teamed up with Din I-Art Helwa and PARK to rehabilitate the area and start a massive afforestation project that will one day stretch from the main road westward to Qammieh. The entire area covers 104ha of land (about 3 times the size of Buskett) and in part of this area we are creating the project known as Foresta 2000.

### power plant

The project is coming along well. In autumn and winter of 2003-4 around 2000 trees were planted, and another 4000 saplings went into the ground in the corresponding period of 2004-5.

Trees planted are largely aleppo pine and holm oak, the latter being often the dominant species of typical Mediterranean woodland. It is not just trees, however. Among the trees, we are planting many shrubs of various carefully selected species typical of Mediterranean forest and maquis. These include lentisk, Mediterranean buckthorn, western strawberry trees, kermes oak, myrtle and wolfbane. These and other, smaller perennials such as the rare narrow-leaved rock rose and hoary rock rose, will eventually create a shrub layer which will provide important year-round food and shelter for birds and insects. In areas where the ground retains water for a longer period, chaste tree and narrow-leaved ash are being planted

to create one or two groves typical of damper areas. Areas where large amounts of narcissus grow wild are being kept free of planting, as these flowers do not grow well in the shade. The same goes for steppe and garigue areas.

### summer jobs

Planting is easy, but to keep the trees alive one has to think about solving the problem created by Malta's long, dry summers. For this purpose, 500m of irrigation pipe have been added in 2004 to over 800m already in place. Watering in the summer months is done manually, using about 10 000 gallons of water weekly. Every tree gets irrigated about

once every two weeks, which is enough to tide them over the dry spell.

As the vigorous annuals like crown daisy seed and die, they form thick mats of dry vegetation. These pose a very real fire hazard, and so the clearing of this material is given top priority, as fire can destroy all the work done so far! This problem should diminish as the trees and shrubs spread - perennial plants inhibit the growth of annuals.

### rubble matters

Besides the tree-related jobs, landscaping work continued. More stretches of rubble wall were built or restored (about 4km of rubble wall are to be built in the first two phases of the



**Picnic.** The picnic area was purposely sited just off the access road (December).



**Green growth.** Young trees starting to show above the dry vegetation (May).



**Lentisk** - a typical maquis species.

project). Such walls help retain the soil, but they are also excellent habitat for reptiles like skinks and snakes, and shelter for mammals like weasel and hedgehog.

A small picnic area has also been laid out and enclosed.

### thanks

BirdLife is grateful to all the volunteers who have given a hand in the project by putting on their gloves and helping with the planting. These included members of Falko (BirdLife's teenage section) and Klabb Huttat (BirdLife's youngster section), a student group from Mondy school (France), staff from PARK, Mellieha Local Council and First Insurance Ltd, and many schoolchildren who took part in Arbor Day 2004. The national Arbor Day committee selected Foresta 2000 as one of its focus sites in 2004.

We are also grateful to all 157 (by Dec 2004) schools, organisations, companies and individuals who are supporting Foresta 2000 by "fostering" one or more trees and helping us finance the project. Special thanks to Italy's Corpo Forestale who donated thousands of young trees.

### one year on

In just one year, the difference is already visible. Many of the pines have grown 50cm and are now visible from the road. In 5 years' time they should be at least 2m tall, as the roots reach the moist soil which often lies just half a metre down.

BirdLife's dream millennium project will one day be complete, and will be something which future generations of humans and wildlife can enjoy!

Ray Vella is the ranger at Foresta 2000



**Holm oak** - typical tree of Mediterranean woodland



**Day of the trees.** Schoolgirls planting lentisk on Arbor Day (January)



**The wall.** A team from PARK restoring rubble wall (March)



**Support.** Environment Minister George Pullicino planting myrtle (March)



**Clearance.** French students clearing the east embankment (November)

# on the battle front

Joseph Mangion outlines a year of Society activity on the conservation and public awareness front

## fieldwork

The year started with a bang. On 10 January the warden at Ghadira nature reserve found signs of intrusion, various acts of vandalism, bloodstained feathers... and two missing spoonbills! It was not difficult to piece together what had happened. BirdLife Malta brought in the police, and ensured that the killing of the two spoonbills, which had spent



several press releases to highlight the unacceptable situation. Despite this, illegal hunting went on unabated, although some improvement was

Left: Illegal mistnets confiscated by the police, with help from BirdLife Malta  
Below: Dead birds of protected species, all shot down in spring 2004.



days resting and feeding at the reserve, received media prominence. Thus was the issue of illegal hunting brought into the limelight in the very first week of the year. Unfortunately it didn't stop.

As spring migration unfolded so did the cases of illegal hunting. The number of injured birds brought in for emergency care soared, and BirdLife volunteers were busy collecting casualties from members of the public (see also pg 16-17). BirdLife issued

registered in Gozo with the setting up of a Gozitan ALE team.

On 24 April, a large influx of honey-buzzards was virtually wiped out. Following this, BirdLife gave a press conference, at which the media saw and filmed several dead birds of protected species. The Society also wrote to the EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström complaining of the situation - just days before Malta joined the EU!

Illegal hunting was again prevalent well before the start of the autumn hunting season (1 Sep). The bulk of the raptor migration occurred around 10 September. Thankfully, weather conditions favoured high altitude flying, which meant that many birds of prey were migrating out of shotgun range, and so were spared. However, a number of short-toed eagles migrating on 2 October met a different fate. The incident was promptly reported to the police by a BirdLife member, and a hunter was caught with a fresh eagle carcass.

On 14 October an osprey landed on the Laferla Cross and was shot instantly (so much for the spiritual meaning of its perch!) This incident happened on the same day that the courts handed down hefty fines and jail terms to three hunters who had shot nine mute swans in Marsascala in January 2002. The court also confiscated the hunters' firearms and speedboat. BirdLife is grateful to the person who had passed the Society the photographs which led to the conviction of the culprits.

On 29 November, BirdLife personnel almost physically stopped a hunter from shooting a rare booted eagle on Marfa ridge. The police were called in and the hunter apprehended.

Dead hobby, shot down just outside Buskett, a protected zone.

A total of 31 press statements were issued by the Society in 2004, as well as several press interviews and comments.

## lookout

The sixth International RaptorCamp was organised in September with financial assistance from NABU (BirdLife in Germany). Markus Nipkow (NABU) was also in Malta for some days during the camp to get a feel of the local situation. The camp was attended by 14 participants.

With financial help from SOF (BirdLife in Sweden), a small team of BirdLife Malta volunteers continued mapping mist nets being used illegally by trappers around the country. This surveillance led to several mist nets being confiscated by the police.

More help from SOF came in the form of two Swedish birders - Linus Blomqvist and David Kihlberg who two months in autumn monitoring illegal hunting from three locations, namely Delimara, Migra Ferha and the airport area. The monitoring project included five other areas - Buskett, Dwejra, Qawra, Mizieb and Ċittadella - which were manned by BirdLife Malta watchers. A further site, Girgenti, was added for the duration of the RaptorCamp. Data from this project was fed daily into a website. Many instances of illegal hunting were observed and recorded, and much valuable migration data collected.

## EU et al.

The political highlight of 2004 was Malta's accession to the EU on 1 May. Conservation-wise, this event will also have its repercussions, particularly with respect to Malta's obligation to implement the Birds Directive.

From an EU perspective, 2004 marked the 25th anniversary of the Birds Directive, which was commemorated by three events in which BirdLife Malta actively participated.

In March, BirdLife Malta attended the BirdLife International World Conference and Partnership Meeting in Durban. The meeting, one of the largest ever to be held by BirdLife International, had the theme "Empowering people for change" and brought together BirdLife Partners from all over the world to discuss strategies and share experiences in bird conservation. BirdLife Malta's participation was made possible with help from VBN (BirdLife Netherlands) and BirdLife International.

In October BirdLife Malta organised nature walks at Buskett for the public, one of which was attended by Environment Minister George Pullicino. At this event, Society volunteers wore a special occasion T-shirt. This activity also coincided with the World Birdwatch.

In November, BirdLife Malta attended an EU conference about the Birds Directive in Bergen op Zoom. BirdLife International used the occasion to launch *Birds in Europe (2)* and *Birds in the European Union*, both of which give an updated assessment of the present status of wild birds in Europe.

In December, BirdLife Malta helped organise a seminar in connection with the Birds Directive. Among the speakers were Claire Papazoglou (BirdLife International EU office) and John Swift (Hunting & Conservation -



Big family. Group shot of the 2004 World Conference participants.



Watch out. Monitoring birds and hunters from Dwejra, Gozo.

UK). The seminar was also attended by Mark Day and Dave Dick (RSPB-BirdLife UK). The seminar was held at Floriana, under the auspices of the Ornis Committee and MRAE.

BirdLife Malta continued to participate in the BirdLife's Task Force on the EU Birds and Habitats Directive, attending both meetings held in February and November.

The Conservation Committee was made up of seven members.

Meanwhile two BirdLife members represented the Society on the Malta Ornis Committee. The Ornis Committee also met seven times in 2004.

Joseph Mangion is President of BirdLife Malta and chairperson of the Conservation Committee



## Face to FACE

A historic event in 2004 was the signing in Brussels of a charter between BirdLife International and FACE, the Federation of Hunting Associations in Europe. In this charter, both organisations recognised the EU Birds Directive as the appropriate legal instrument for the conservation of wild birds and their habitats. They also agreed not to take initiatives to amend the Birds Directive, committed their support for the Natura 2000 network, and agreed to establish a bilateral dialogue for consensus seeking. The signing was presided by the outgoing EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström.

FACE is a 7,000,000-strong federation of European hunters associations, of which FKNK, the main hunter group in Malta, is a member. The signing of the Charter binds all members of FACE to uphold the dictates of the Birds Directive.

# Reserves Resumé

Mark Gauci

## plans and agreements

Running a nature reserve needs careful planning and strategy. It is the only way to avoid making decisions that can prove detrimental to wildlife and habitat. To this end, BirdLife's Reserves Committee has prepared a new 5-year management plan for each reserve.

A management plan outlines all activity projected for the site. It includes ongoing tasks like recording flora, fauna and meteorological data, as well as short-term projects like tree-planting and other specific habitat-related activity. The plans span from 2004 to 2008, by which time a new plan for the next five years will be prepared. The exercise appeared interminable, however the plans have finally received the approval of MEPA's Nature Protection Unit.

Another tedious task was the drafting of a new agreement through which BirdLife Malta will continue to be entrusted with the running of Ghadira and Is-Simar, with financial backing from the government. At the time of writing, this document is in its final stages.

## plans in action

Translating the management plan into tangible work is a tough challenge. Top of the priority list in 2004 for Is-

Simar managing warden Charles Coleiro was the clearing of acacia, now that the reedbed is under control. Fast-growing acacia trees had overgrown and choked several of the small islands in the reserve. Being alien species, they are targeted for systematic and complete removal. Every area that is cleared of this invasive plant draws in a fresh breath, and the ground allows native wetland vegetation to start spreading.

Acacias are removed in steps. The tree is first cut back to a stump, after which the roots are dug up, in this way preventing the tree from sprouting again. The resulting holes are enlarged into small canals and ponds, where birds like Eurasian bittern and other herons love to feed.

Other works at Is-Simar in 2004 included the screening of the entrance to the middle hide, and planting of more trees in the main entrance area.

Over at Ghadira, the clearing of shrubby orache from the NW embankment entered its fourth year. There is still a long way to go before the vigorous *Atriplex* is brought under control, but the areas managed in the first year are now showing signs of a more diverse vegetation - excellent encouragement for managing wardens Charles Gauci and Alex Casha to put in another summer of hard work!



Removing swaths of highly invasive *Atriplex halimus* is back-breaking work

BirdLife Malta Pictures

One spoonbill  
at Is-Simar.



Schoolchildren doing fieldwork at Ghadira

BirdLife Malta Pictures

Other jobs included maintenance of the nature trail and the tree nursery

## education

The education side was in the hands of field teachers Jason Aloisio and Victor Falzon. School groups flowed regularly at both reserves, with a total of just under 4000 students visiting the sites. As part of our effort to improve output, a questionnaire was mailed to all teachers who led groups to the reserves. An overwhelming majority confirmed that the environmental message was reaching the children very well.

Jason also paid several visits to schools giving slide talks about wildlife at the reserves. Besides their intrinsic value, these talks also encouraged more schools to visit the wetlands.

## research

In 2004, the Reserves Committee decided to step up study of the natural history at the reserves in the coming years. While a great deal of bird-related data has been amassed for many years (for Ghadira, since the mid-1960s), other areas of knowledge have been

much less researched. These lacunae need to be addressed, as Ghadira and Is-Simar are not places exclusively for birds. They are living nature spots with a dynamic ecosystem.

A digital image library of reserve flora, fauna and fungi was the first move in this direction, with particular emphasis on invertebrates. Such images are invaluable for investigation and identification, and thanks also to help from experts in entomology, botany, mycology, arachnology etc, the gaps are starting to be filled. This research has already resulted in the discovery of at least one new species of spider for the Maltese Islands.

Meanwhile, a year-long investigation into the ecology of aquatic macrofauna was begun at Ghadira by a university biology student. This study will be compared to a similar project done 20 years ago in the same site, and trends studied.

Another study undertaken in 2004 was a soil analysis exercise by researchers from the Agriculture Department. Soil samples were taken to determine the composition and quality of the soil at the reserves.

Much of the information that results from this research is gathered and reproduced in BirdLife's annual reserve reports, of which the second issue has now been published (covering 2003).

## thanks

A word of thanks to the nature reserves personnel for their sheer hard work and initiative. Thanks also to the weekend wardens without whose commitment Ghadira would not open for the public to enjoy. We look forward to another year of work, improvement and satisfaction.

Mark Gauci is the Society's nature reserves supervisor



The Banded Argiope *Argiope trifasciata* was discovered at both reserves

...and two more  
at Ghadira!

# They prefer wide open spaces

Garrigue is one of the richest habitats for flora in the Maltese Islands. **Mark-Anthony Falzon** shows that garrigue is good for birds as well.

The word *garrigue* (Maltese: *xaghri*) refers to a habitat associated with a particular type of vegetation. Its main feature is a community of dwarf evergreen shrubs, many of which are highly aromatic and produce colourful flowers. It is also very rich in orchids, annuals, and bulbs.

Garrigue may look barren to the uninitiated, yet the people of the Mediterranean have always appreciated and made use of its richness. Plants are put to various uses, like adding flavour to dishes (e.g. thyme and rosemary), as herbs in popular remedies, or as reservoirs of nectar, which is the basis for honey. In the past, garrigue was used for grazing (mostly by goats) and bakers regularly used dry shrubs collected by locals to fire their ovens. Nothing was wasted and even the tiny pockets of red soil were sometimes used to plant crops; such a patch was known as a *mintqa*. Garrigue is also high in aesthetic value, its rocks, empty spaces, and dwarf shrubs combining in a composition reminiscent of East Asian gardens.

Garrigue is a fairly frequent habitat in the Maltese Islands (see map). In Malta there are good stretches along the northwestern and eastern coasts and sizeable patches on hilltops in places like Wardija and Dwejra. It is rare in Gozo but the relatively undisturbed and beautiful Ta' Ċenċ is a shining exception. Kemmuna is also mostly garrigue. It is no coincidence that these places are also among the most frequently visited by local birdwatchers.

The species richness of garrigue attracts birds throughout the year. Of the 15 or so species that breed in the Maltese Islands, five regularly nest and/or feed in garrigue areas. The zitting cisticola and Sardinian warbler are common year-round residents, while the corn bunting (see also pg 12-13) and spectacled warbler are now somewhat rare and localised. The

short-toed lark, a summer visitor and breeder, is frequent but not common. To these one could add the blue rock thrush which nests in sea cliffs and uses adjoining garrigue as a feeding ground. Ta' Ċenċ in Gozo and Il-Gudja in Malta, the latter a sizeable and lovely stretch of garrigue that lies between Ghadira nature reserve and Iċ-Ċumnija, are good places where to see all six species. Sadly both places are now seriously threatened, Ta' Ċenċ by a holiday resort and Il-Gudja by a sewage recycling plant. Other species that have on occasion bred in garrigue habitats include tawny pipit, quail and stone curlew.

Birdwatching in garrigue areas during the spring and autumn migrations can be very rewarding. Species of chats such as whinchat and northern wheatear are common from March to May and are frequently seen perching on shrubs and feeding on the ground. Turtle doves, hoopoes and some species of warbler are likewise commonly seen, although their colours tend to blend very well with their habitat. Raptors, hirundines, common swifts, larks and yellow wagtails are also regulars. From time to time one comes across gems like black-eared wheatear, rock thrush and quail. All these species regularly feed on the abundance of insect life, which means that Mediterranean garrigue is an important habitat for birds migrating between Europe and Africa.

Being an open space with all-round visibility, garrigue is excellent for observing migrating birds as they fly over the islands. The sky is literally the limit, but bird migration is most unpredictable and numbers can fluctuate from a total dearth to a



Garrigue areas marked in green

BirdLife Malta Maps



A flock of common starlings takes to the air in open country at Dwejra (Gozo). Photo by Denis Cachia

birdwatcher's dream in a matter of hours. In any case, in spring there are so many flowers to see and smell, that the eye is easily absorbed by this spectacle alone.

As winter approaches, garrigue areas get greener and attract different birds. From late September to early December several interesting species appear. Finches, thrushes and larks frequently fly over garrigue areas and sometimes stop to rest or feed. Greenfinch, linnet, chaffinch, song thrush and sky lark are among the more commonly seen birds in these families. With luck, one may spot goldfinch, short-eared owl, woodcock and such prized finds. Were it not for the hordes of shooters and trappers, most of these birds would probably winter in Malta. Every year birdwatchers come across one or two short-eared owls or woodcocks wintering on Kemmuna or some other undisturbed area.

Garrigue offers wonderful terrain for rambling in the winter months. Ghajn Tuffieha to Ċumnija, Mistra to Selmun, and Mgarr to Xlendi, are three long walks that wind through some of the best garrigue on the Islands. From November to February watch out for robin, black redstart, white wagtail, starling and sky lark as you make your way through the white patches of ghostly asphodel.

You will never again think of *xaghri* as barren wasteland.

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**Mark-Anthony Falzon** is a long-time birdwatcher and former bird-ringer

northern wheatear  
photo by Ray Galea



blue rock thrush  
photo by Denis Cachia



zitting cisticola  
photo by Denis Cachia



hoopoe  
photo by Denis Cachia





Corn bunting at its nest, in this case built in golden samphire. Ghadira. Photo K Strosberg

# Losing Ground

## Will the corn bunting stop breeding



Typical breeding habitat for corn bunting, here at Ta' Ċenċ in Gozo. Photo Joe Sultana

The song of the corn bunting was once synonymous with Maltese countryside. Nowadays, that once-familiar jingling call is rarely ever heard.

The corn bunting (*Emberiza calandra* = durrajsa) is a rather featureless, streaky, grey-brown bird, roughly the size of a large sparrow. The bird was once a widespread resident in the Maltese Islands, commonly seen and heard singing on exposed perches in open countryside. In summer, following the breeding season, flocks of up to 500 birds used to converge at water holes. It is still frequently seen on migration. Small flocks occur regularly in autumn, less so in early spring. The resident breeding population, however, has declined drastically and has disappeared from most sites where it formerly bred. In recent years barely a handful of pairs fledged their young.

The corn bunting occurs mainly in open, semi-cultivated areas, particularly in steppe habitat with scattered bushes. The breeding season starts in February, which is when the polygamous males start singing their unmistakable song - a acceleration of successive staccato notes ending in a jingling rattle. Favourite perches are electricity cables and scattered bushes. Males patrol their territory in short, fluttering flights with shallow wing-beats and dangling legs. The nest, which is built by the female, is fairly large but neatly constructed with roots and dry grass on or near the ground, and well concealed among the vegetation. Three to six purplish-white eggs are laid, which are speckled with purple and dark markings for camouflage. The female incubates for 12-14 days and the young fledge about 10 days after hatching.

## in Malta?



Eggs are usually purplish white with various dark markings. Photo Joe Sultana



The nestlings are well-concealed and camouflaged. Photo Joe Sultana



Young birds often leave the nest before they are able to fly. Photo Joe Sultana

The reason for the corn bunting's decline is a combination of various negative factors, mainly habitat destruction or degradation, changes in agricultural methods and most of all human disturbance. Intensive bird-hunting and trapping, particularly during the breeding season, contribute significantly to the abandonment of breeding sites and to nest failure. Records of singing males are now confined to the least disturbed areas of the country: a few sites in Gozo and in the northwestern part of mainland Malta.

Considering the continuous onslaught of urban sprawl and development projects on what little remains of the countryside, it is not easy to hope that we could someday reverse this trend and save the corn bunting from losing its foothold in Malta.

Joe Sultana

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist and chairperson of the Malta Ornis Committee

# Year of Activity

BirdLife Malta output in 2004

## January

- 03 Vols get-together
- 06 BLife on PBS radio
- 08 Council mtg
- 10 PR icw killing of spoonbills @ Ghadira
- 10 Talk (Gozo Conservation) @ PN seminar
- 13 PR icw nature reserves management
- 13 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 14 Education committee mtg
- 15 Conservation committee mtg
- 15 Ornis Committee mtg
- 16 Arbor Day @ F2000
- 16 Ringers mtg
- 17 Falko committee mtg
- 19 SOF mistnet project mtg
- 20 First aid course for field teachers
- 22 BLife on University radio
- 23 BLife on PBS radio
- 24 PR icw spoonbills killing
- 24 F2000 committee mtg
- 30 Falko social event

## February

- 02 Rarities committee mtg
- 03 Ornis Committee mtg
- 03 Talk (Biodiversity) to Tourist Guides
- 06 Birds & Habitat Directives Task Force mtg
- 08 *Il-Huttat* 60 out
- 09 Falko leadership lecture
- 11 Education committee mtg
- 12 Council mtg
- 12 *BirdTalk* 81 out
- 17 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 18 Falko leadership lecture
- 22 Falko hike
- 24 Conservation committee mtg
- 29 Falko seawatch
- 29 Annual General Meeting

## March

- 02 Council mtg
- 05 Falko nighthike and seawatch
- 07 Junior members sponsored walk
- 07 BLife Int World Conference (Durban)
- 08 PR icw Klabb Huttat sponsored walk
- 09 ALE + recruits @ Ghadira
- 09 Nature Reserves committee mtg
- 10 Falko leadership lecture
- 14 PR icw Wied Ghollieqa
- 16 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 17 Falko leadership lecture
- 17 Education committee mtg
- 19 PR icw law enforcement round Ghadira
- 19 Mtg icw F2000 funding
- 20 Falko committee mtg
- 22 PR icw robin awareness campaign
- 24 Falko leadership lecture
- 24 PR icw opening hunting season
- 31 Din I-Art Helwa tour of F2000

## April

- 02 Falko nighthike
- 10 *Il-Huttat* 61 out
- 10 *BirdTalk* 82 out

- 12 PR icw *Il-Huttat*
- 13 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 14-09 May Piccole Isole Project @ Kemma
- 14 Education committee mtg
- 15 PR icw Dinja Wahda migration campaign
- 18 Junior outing to Kemma
- 18-19 NGO Dialogue Process mtg (Brussels)
- 20 Council mtg
- 21 PR icw widespread illegal hunting
- 26 Ornis Committee mtg
- 27 BLife press conference icw hunting
- 28 Falko leadership lecture

## May

- 01 Falko nighthike
- 05 Delimara project mtg
- 08 Talk (Sites & Habitats) to Tourist Guides
- 12 Falko leadership lecture
- 12 Education committee mtg
- 13 Council mtg Arnold Cassola (AD)
- 15 Falko committee mtg
- 18 Conservation committee mtg
- 19 APS Bank Dinja Wahda treasure hunt
- 20 Alfred Sant (MLP) visits Ghadira
- 22 CNN visits Ghadira and Is-Simar
- 26 BLife @ Fgura primary sch Open Day
- 21 BLife @ Church national env conference
- 27 Council mtg
- 28 PR icw Ghadira closing for summer
- 29 BLife @ AD mtg for NGOs
- 30 BLife @ SPCA Spring Fair
- 30 PR icw tree-fostering @ Foresta 2000

## June

- 01 Book *Ghasafar Madwarna* published
- 01 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 02 Ringers mtg
- 03 *BirdTalk* 83 out
- 05 Falko nighthike
- 08 Nature Reserves committee mtg
- 09 Education committee mtg
- 10 APS Bank contract signed @ Is-Simar
- 10 F2000 committee mtg
- 04 Talk (Management of Coastal Sites) @ Foundation for International Studies
- 17 Council mtg
- 21 *Il-Huttat* 62 out
- 22 F2000 committee mtg
- 24 EU Commissioner's reaction to BLife's spring massacre report
- 25 BLife website wins Datastream Community Voluntary and Non-Profit Award
- 30 MEPA Kemma committee mtg

## July

- 01 Rarities committee mtg
- 02 Nature Reserves committee mtg
- 06 Junior outing to Ghar Hasan
- 07-09 BLife in-service course for teachers
- 10 PR icw Ghar Hasan outing
- 12 Falko Sweden exchange mtg
- 13 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 14 BLife @ MEPA biodiversity strategy mtg
- 14 Education committee mtg
- 15 PR icw mismanagement @ Buskett

- 17 Falko outing to Ta' Ċenċ
- 19 Ornis Committee mtg
- 20 F2000 financing mtg
- 21 Falko boat trip to Ta' Ċenċ
- 21 Conservation committee mtg
- 22 Council mtg
- 26 Forest Ranger employed
- 26 Falko mtg icw Sweden camp
- 26 Injured Birds mtg
- 27 F2000 mtg
- 29 PR icw barn swallows breeding in Malta
- 30-08 Aug Falko group at camp in Sweden

## August

- 04 F2000 committee mtg
- 06 *Il-Huttat* 63 out
- 10 Conservation committee mtg
- 11 Education Committee mtg
- 17 Klabb Huttat Committee mtg
- 19 PR icw littering in Ghadira area
- 20-22 BLife @ British Birdwatching Fair
- 22 Start of 2-month joint BLife-SOF bird migration/hunting monitoring
- 26 Council mtg
- 27-30 BLife @ Honey Buzzard Day (Sweden)
- 30 Mtg @ F2000 icw Dinja Wahda
- 31 PR icw opening of hunting season

## September

- 01 PR icw vandalism @ F2000
- 02 PR icw windfarms
- 06 Conservation committee mtg
- 08 *BirdTalk* 84 out
- 08 Mtg with ALE
- 08 Education committee mtg
- 10 Mtg with MEPA icw reserves
- 10 New *Malta Bird Checklist* out
- 11-22 BLife Malta RaptorCamp
- 11 Volunteers barbecue
- 14 Mtg with architect @ Is-Simar
- 15 F2000 presentation to Din I-Art Helwa
- 16 Mtg @ MEPA icw nature reserves
- 16 Mtg with Markus Nipkow (NABU)
- 17 Ringers mtg
- 20 Conservation committee mtg with NABU
- 25 Marketing mtg
- 27 PR icw Falko camp in Sweden
- 28 Conservation committee mtg
- 28 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 29 PR icw World Birdwatch
- 30 Council mtg

## October

- 01 Ghadira + Is-Simar open for school visits
- 02 PR icw shooting of short-toed eagles
- 03 World Birdwatch & Birds Directive Anniversary event @ Buskett
- 05 PR icw 6th BLife RaptorCamp
- 08 Falko committee mtg
- 12 Ornis Committee mtg
- 13 Education committee mtg
- 14 PR icw BLife International + FACE
- 14 PR icw killing of osprey @ Tas-Salib
- 15 PR icw hunter's prison sentence
- 16-31 Autumn ringing project on Kemma
- 17 Falko activity @ F2000
- 18 End of SOF-BLife bird monitoring project
- 18 *Birds Eye View* 2003 out
- 19 Council mtg with SOF
- 21 PR icw Dinja Wahda 4 Awards
- 23 *BirdTalk* 85 out
- 26 Ornis Committee mtg
- 27 *Il-Huttat* 64 out

- 28 Dinja Wahda 4 awards-giving event
- 29 PR icw Dinja Wahda 4 awards event

## November

- 02 BLife presents *Ghasafar Madwarna* to Minister of Education
- 03 PR icw book presentation to Education Division
- 04 PR icw Ghadira re-opening
- 04 Council mtg
- 06 Ghadira re-opens at weekends
- 07-09 BLife @ Birds Directive conference Bergen op Zoom (Netherlands)
- 07 Falko activity @ F2000
- 08-10 French students @ F2000
- 09 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 10 BLife places 2nd in F Salt Environment Award
- 10 Education committee mtg
- 11-14 BLife @ Malta Book Fair
- 15 Nature Reserves committee mtg
- 16 Ornis Committee mtg
- 17 F2000 committee mtg
- 18 PR icw shooting of lanner falcon
- 19 Falko nighthike
- 19 PR icw French students visit
- 21 Leader outing to Selmun/Mgiebah
- 22-25 Talks @ Gozo Seminary Sec School
- 27 Falko committee mtg
- 28 Junior outing to Selmun/Mgiebah
- 28 Tree-planting on Kemma
- 29 BLife @ Birds & Habitat Directive Task Force mtg (Brussels)
- 30 Mtg with MLP

## December

- 01 Book *Where to Watch Birds* published
- 02 Council mtg
- 14 Klabb Huttat committee mtg
- 18 Birds Directive (Ornis) seminar
- 19 Council mtg with RSPB
- 23 Mtg @ Environment Ministry
- 24 *Il-Huttat* 65 out
- 28 *BirdTalk* 86 out



The BirdLife Malta website won the 2004 Datastream Community, Voluntary and Non-Profit Award

Abbreviations  
AD = Alternattiva Demokratika  
ALE = Administrative Law Enforcement  
BLife = BirdLife Malta  
BLife Int = BirdLife International  
FACE = European Hunter's Federation  
F2000 = Foresta 2000  
MEPA = Malta Environment and Planning Authority  
MLP = Malta Labour Party  
NABU = Naturschutzbund (BirdLife in Germany)  
PBS = Public Broadcasting Service  
PN = Partit Nazzjonalista  
PR = Press Release  
RSPB = Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in UK)  
SOF = Sveriges Ornitologiska Förening (BirdLife in Sweden)  
SPCA = Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Annual General Meeting



CNN reporting from Ghadira



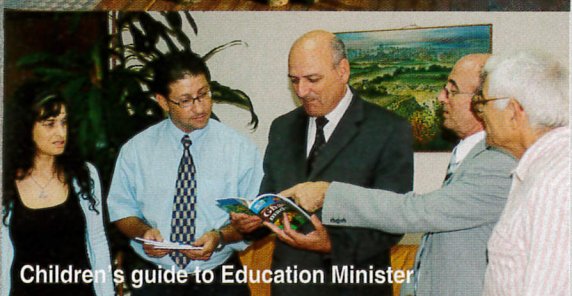
Meeting with Malta Labour Party



Talks in schools



Trees for Kemma



Children's guide to Education Minister



Falko camp in Sweden



Youth leader outing to Mgiebah



Din I-Art Helwa visit to Foresta 2000



Stand at British Birdwatching Fair



RaptorCamp at Buskett



Bird and hunting monitoring project



Meeting with Alternattiva Demokratika



Six more issues of BirdTalk

Every year hunters shoot down thousands of birds. Many of these birds die instantly or on impact with the ground. Many others, however, are only wounded and are forced to land. These birds wander helplessly on the ground suffering from shock, dehydration, fractures and open wounds. This is where BirdLife often comes to the rescue.

# The Rescuers

Ian Balzan

## Rescue

Most injured birds are found by members of the public walking in the countryside, who rescue them, take them home and call BirdLife. Most of these calls come in spring and autumn, which is expected as these are periods of massive bird movement across the Mediterranean. This concentration of activity around a few extremely busy weeks renders the job of caring for injured birds very difficult. Injured birds are collected from callers by a team of

dedicated volunteers, each of whom work a specific area in such a way that minimises long trips and speeds up the response to calls. These volunteers have a MEPA permit to collect and handle injured birds, as these are often protected species.

## Rehab

The collection of injured birds is only the first part of the process. Treatment and rehabilitation comes next, and it is no easy task. Freshly-injured birds are often in a state of shock, which alone can cause death. For this reason, gentle handling and a calm environment are imperative. Warmth, water and proper food must be made available to the bird at once.

Each bird collected is taken to a veterinary clinic and treated by a surgeon trained to deal with these casualties. In most cases, X-rays of the birds are taken to look for fractures and for lead shot embedded in the body. The result of the examination will determine whether to proceed with the entire rehabilitation process or whether the patient is beyond help. In the latter

case, the bird is put to sleep by lethal injection.

If injuries are not severe, then proper nourishment and undisturbed rest may be all that the bird requires.

However, since over 95% of birds recovered are victims of hunters, most casualties sustain severe shotgun pellet injuries, and these require specialist treatment. Birds have a relatively high metabolic rate, which means that the healing process begins rapidly. Unless injuries are treated at once, improper healing may occur, e.g. broken bones will set incorrectly. With injured birds, it is almost always a race against time.

Of all birds with serious injuries, those with broken or fractured wings are most likely to make it through. It is, however, not just a matter of fixing the fracture and waiting for the bones to heal. Birds which have had wing injuries have to be exercised in order to rebuild strength in their flight muscles and regain all their flying abilities. Prior to release, such birds are kept under observation in large training rooms for a varying number of days, depending on their progress rate. Although this means that the bird stays longer in captivity, this phase is crucial, especially when involving birds that hunt on the wing, such as raptors. Releasing such a bird without all its flying abilities intact makes no sense, as it will not be able to hunt, and will die of starvation.

One of the challenges in rehabilitation is ensuring that the bird's

flight feathers (wing and tail) are not damaged. Special tail sleeves, for example, are used to minimise damage to tail feathers since they are most prone to damage when birds are kept in confined spaces. Damaged feathers cannot be restored, so they are removed at once, as this stimulates new growth. Growing new feathers takes time, however, and this may considerably extend the bird's period in captivity.

Releasing a bird back into the wild is where all the tough work pays off. Watching a fully-recovered bird wing of into the sky gives a kind of satisfaction and achievement that is hard to describe.

Although injured birds face many odds on their way to a full recovery many birds of a variety of species have to date been successfully released by our birdcare unit. The most common species are marsh harriers, honey-buzzards, common kestrels and herons like little egrets and night herons. The rarest bird treated so far was a juvenile lanner falcon, rescued in 2004. X-rays revealed a broken right wing, caused by a single shotgun pellet. The bird was nursed back to health and thankfully made a full recovery. However the risk of releasing the bird in Malta was felt to be too great, the lanner being an endangered species. For this reason, arrangements were made to airlift the bird to Sicily, where it was released.

BirdLife is grateful to its dedicated rescue team, especially David Attard, Jean Paul Fiott and Ray Vella. Special thanks to veterinary surgeon Dr Eurydike Kovacs, who invariably gives our feathered patients free service and priority attention.

Ian Balzan is co-ordinator of BirdLife Malta's birdcare unit

## Release

When the bird is fully recovered, it is released back into the wild. Depending on the species, release sites and periods are carefully selected. This is easier said than done. Malta has a terrible hunting situation, with hunting often taking place in close seasons and even inside bird sanctuaries - this renders safety measures tricky. To increase the chances of survival, birds are usually released during the relatively less intense hunting periods, even if this means having to keep a bird longer.

## Guidelines to bird rescue

Have ready a cardboard box (preferably not a cage) large enough to accommodate the bird. Make sure the box is well-ventilated.

Obtain a towel or blanket large enough to completely cover the bird

Approach the bird slowly, corner it and place the towel or blanket over it. Expect the bird to struggle when first covered.

Quickly restrain the bird under the covering. Using both hands, pick up the bird gently but firmly.

Place the bird in the box. If the bird has gripped the cloth, do not try to remove it but leave it with the bird in the box. Take care, however, not to leave the bird covered or wrapped up in the cloth, as this may lead to suffocation.

Close the box and place it in a quiet, dark and warm room.

Contact BirdLife Malta

Do NOT try to feed, water or in any way try to examine or treat the casualty. You will end up causing the bird more harm than good.



**Post-op.** Following treatment, the vet bandages up a purple heron's injured leg.



**Operation Freedom.** Trekking to a secluded release site



**The big moment.** Release time for this marsh harrier



# Wings and Rings

Research Group round up

Mark Gauci

It was another busy year for the various groups forming the core of the BirdLife Malta Research Group. The group incorporates the Ringing and the Rarities committees; a number of birders who keep regular records of their sightings and observations; and those researchers involved in specific projects.

## Ringing

The ringing group comprised 13 licensed ringers and three trainees. The group focused on maintaining Ghadira and Is-Simar as constant-effort sites where, weather-permitting, ringing is carried out daily to monitor bird numbers and trends more effectively.

Other sites given special attention included Buskett, which is a very important area especially for wintering and breeding birds; and Lunzjata Valley (Gozo), which in spring and autumn attracts large numbers of hirundines to roost in the extensive reedbed.

Another much-awaited annual appointment was the Piccole Isole project, which is held on Kemmuna in spring. This was the 15th consecutive year of our participation in this European project. Encouraged by the positive spring results, the group has for

the past three years also organised a parallel activity in autumn. Autumn 2004 produced the best results so far, with unusual species like short-eared owl and hawfinch being ringed.

In 2004 we also re-activated our participation in the Euring Swallow Project, the aim of which is to study the breeding and migrating populations of barn swallows. For this project, BirdLife ringers used Lunzjata and Buskett as the roost study areas.

Filfla was visited on three occasions in 2004. The first (by helicopter) was a day visit to the plateau part of the islet to ring yellow-legged gull chicks. The other two were night visits to ring and study breeding European storm-petrel and Cory's shearwater.

The total number of birds ringed in 2004 was 14,077, the best months

being April and October. Two new species were added to the ringing list: Siberian rubythroat (also a new species for the Maltese Islands) and black kite. Other rare birds ringed included dusky warbler, yellow-browed warbler and river warbler.

The re-trapping of birds already carrying a ring is the whole point of bird ringing. Most of the birds with Maltese rings get re-trapped in Malta, but some end up in foreign ringers' mist nets. In the same way, a number of foreign-ringed birds are re-trapped by Maltese ringers. The table below shows a selection of such retraps in 2004. Perhaps the most interesting was a great reed warbler ringed as a chick in a nest in Sweden, and re-trapped a month and a half later by a ringer at Lunzjata.

species	ringed in	retrapped in
reed warbler	Malta (Is-Simar)	Croatia
great reed warbler	Malta (Is-Simar)	Italy
blackcap	Malta (Mellieha)	Italy
sand martin	Czech Republic	Gozo (Lunzjata)
woodchat shrike	Italy	Malta (Kemmuna)
garden warbler	Italy	Malta (Kemmuna)
barn swallow	Italy	Malta (Buskett)
barn swallow	Germany	Malta (Buskett)
great reed warbler	Sweden	Gozo (Lunzjata)

**Cross-border.** Birds that were ringed in one country and retrapped in another

## Monitoring

Birdwatching can be just a hobby but when done with a certain regularity and recorded, it becomes science. The sighting records sent in daily by a group of dedicated birders form a very important database for the Research Group. Now more than ever such data is invaluable should BirdLife decide to submit an official complaint to the EU about the bird situation in Malta. Claims on the need of tighter bird protection measures have to be backed by extensive and accurate data. To simplify the inputting, retrieval and analysis of records, the birder group began using a computer programme created specifically for this purpose.

Birding was conducted in many parts of the country not least around the coast. There were, however, a number of main focuses, such as the monitoring of birds of prey at Buskett and Dwejra (Malta) in autumn and duck migration in March along the coast.

An exercise which has become an annual event is the white wagtail roost count organised in Valletta, which holds the biggest sleeping quarters in the country for this species. A total of 4324 white wagtails were logged flying into the city on a single January afternoon. This was the highest count ever achieved for this species.

Another birding project was a two-month marathon that daily monitored bird migration from several sites around Malta. The project was organised by BirdLife Malta jointly with SOF (BirdLife in Sweden) and ran from mid-August to mid-October

## Rarities

The Rarities Committee is a team of experts in ornithology who meet to decide whether or not to accept claims of sightings of very rare birds in Malta. Their decision is taken after going through detailed descriptions submitted by the birdwatchers. The committee held two meetings in 2004 to deliberate on several claims. Of these, two species were accepted: kittiwake and broad-billed sandpiper. Both birds are vagrant for the Maltese Islands (vagrant = a wanderer outside its normal migration range).

## Swallow surprise!



In early summer 2004, sharp-eyed birders spotted a pair of barn swallows building a nest (picture) in a small room at Buskett. The pair raised two broods, which fledged in July and September. This was the third confirmed breeding record of barn swallow in the Maltese Islands. The previous two records come from Mqabba (1974) and Bidnija (1995). If it weren't for hunters who shoot thousands of swallows for target practice, this species would no doubt breed more regularly.

Black kite



Siberian rubythroat



Dusky warbler



Hawfinch



**Star parade!** Birds that made ringing news in 2004.

Mark Gauci is a bird ringer and Ringing Secretary of the Research Group

# Raptor watching... alla Siciliana

From our vantage point at Dinnamare, at 1127m, the view is breathtaking. Snow-covered Etna rises majestically to the southwest, while the Eolie islands, as far west as Panarea and Alicudi loom out of the sea. Further to the east, Stromboli belches white smoke from its active crater. Below us, the thermals start to rise in the valleys along the Peloritani mountain range, and with them... the honey-buzzards!

Flocks appear every two minutes or so, from a few individuals to groups of a hundred birds, rising rapidly as they catch the strong updrafts. Caught

up in the flocks, black storks, black kites, marsh, pallid and Montagu's harriers soar through the fast-rising masses of birds. This is Sicilian birdwatching in spring at its best.

Just 250km south, it is a different world, as Maltese hunters blast every feather from the sky. But here we hear no shots, and no bird pelts down in a bloody heap. Yet this was not always the case.

Up to the early 1990s bird-shooting here was rampant too. Hunters from the mountain villages of Castanea and Salice used to sit in their concrete 'bunkers' on the

hillsides overlooking the valleys, and pray for the 'scirocco' winds. Birds were at their most vulnerable as the strong southerlies pushed the birds into the range of the waiting guns. Birds were shot not for food but for pleasure and 'tradition' (familiar story!). Hunting in spring had been abolished in 1969, but the shooting persisted. And it wasn't just turtle doves and quails that were being shot down but also, and especially, those majestic raptors - eagles, vultures, ospreys, kites, harriers, buzzards and falcons - winging their way north to breed in Europe, and flying unknowingly into the trap.

**Ray Vella** writes about his experiences at the raptor monitoring camps organised every spring on a mountain range in the north of Sicily.

In the late 1970s a young Sicilian birdwatcher, Anna Giordano, was up in the mountains and witnessed the massacre. She decided there and then that one way or another this was going to be the end of the poachers' fun.

It was not easy, but she gathered like-minded people from Italy and the rest of Europe, and the real work started. Pressure and letters to government, to the Italian press, to the Corpo Forestale (environment police), who often seemed to be in league with the hunters, slowly turned the tide. The press and documentaries highlighted the outrage. Danger was never far. Anna and other activists were threatened all the time, had their cars burnt and dead birds thrown outside their homes. But they never gave up, and 25 years later, the situation has turned in favour of the environmentalists. And in favour of birds!

Today one can sit and enjoy the spectacle from the very spots where up to 10 years ago the hunters used to park and take pot shots at the migrating birds. What is even more rewarding is when an ex-poacher walks up and actually thanks you for giving him the chance to enjoy what would have been a massacre, but is now a celebration of wildlife!

Today, up to 35,000 raptors pass through the area, a striking contrast to the few thousands logged during



BirdLife Malta Maps

those first camps way back in 1980s. A single day can bring 5000 honey-buzzards streaming through. Up to 1000 red-footed falcons migrate annually. In 2005, a 'new' migrant appeared: booted eagle. A total of 150 booted eagles have been spotted, of which I personally logged over 30 in the space of a week. Peregrines are also frequent, many of the northern *calidus* subspecies, with their robust size and almost white underparts. The sharply-declining Egyptian vulture is still a regular migrant. On the other hand, griffon vulture has now bred again in Sicily (after an absence of 60 years) thanks to a release

programme five years ago. White storks and black storks frequently mingle with the soaring raptors, and black kites are common on some days.

The numbers are nowhere near the massive migrations seen at the Bosphorus, Gibraltar or Israel. But all

the same, north Sicily is still a great area to visit, and particularly convenient for us Maltese, being so close and with no real language barrier. Besides, the scenery and the hospitality of the locals are awesome. For anyone wanting to experience raptor migration up close and

personal without the hassle of complicated travel arrangements, raptor watching alla Siciliana is the sure answer!

**Ray Vella** is a veteran birder and regular participant of the Sicilian raptor camps.



**Point of view.** Across the Straits of Messina, the Aspromonte mountains blend into the misty distance.



**Not just raptors.** White storks frequent migrate along this route.

Michael Sammut

# a year with the kids

Desirée  
Falzon



Six new  
issues of  
*Il-Huttafa*  
magazine

## Klabb Huttaf - BirdLife Malta juniors

Watching seabirds, night hikes, birding in Sweden, raptorcamp, sleep-out at Ta' Ċenċ, tree-planting at Foresta 2000... these activities were all in a year's work for the Falko committee. Falko caters for Klabb Huttaf's teenagers, the youth group run by youths. The year 2004 saw an injection of energy in Falko with a spurt of activity and three committee members attending a leader training course.

For the younger members, the club organised nature walks, such as the one to Selmun-Mgiebah, a sponsored walk from Rabat to Xemxija, and an evening at the shearwater colony near Ghar Hasan.

The aim of Klabb Huttaf is to create young environmentalists and guide them to grow up with greener values than the previous generation. There is nothing like hands-on experience with nature to make a child sensitive to its beauty and complexity. Today's computer-oriented kids are spending more time indoors, so having this contact is more important than ever. However, as the need for outings grows stronger, leaders unfortunately get harder to find. Still, a dedicated core of leaders continued with a training programme designed to increase their confidence in the field.

With 1000+ Under 14s alone, however, outdoor activities are not enough to ensure that each member gets exposure to nature, its beauty and its problems. The club's secret weapon is *Il-Huttafa*, the bi-monthly magazine packed with nature news and fascinating facts, information, fun, competition, drawings and lots more. Six more issues were published in 2004.

Desirée Falzon is a member of  
the Klabb Huttaf Committee

## 2004 who's who

**Honorary President**  
Joe Attard

**President**  
Joseph Mangion

**Secretary**  
Denis Cachia

**Treasurer**  
Norman Chetcuti

**Council**  
Chair: Desirée Falzon  
Secretary: Denis Cachia  
John J Borg  
Norman Chetcuti  
Raymond Galea  
Emanuel Mallia  
Joseph Mangion  
Ian Mifsud  
Joe Sultana  
Justin Vassallo

**Nature Reserves Committee**  
Chair: Mark Gauci  
Jason Aloisio  
Alex Casha  
Charles Coleiro  
Victor Falzon  
Charles Gauci

**Research Committee**  
Co-ordinator: John J Borg  
Ringing sec: Mark Gauci  
Denis Cachia  
Raymond Galea  
Joe Sultana

**Conservation Committee**  
Chair: Joseph Mangion  
Secretary: Audrey Chetcuti  
André Callus  
Alex Casha  
Raymond Galea  
Simon Sultana  
Justin Vassallo

**Finances**  
Anita Aloisio  
Norman Chetcuti  
Desirée Falzon

**Education Committee**  
Chair: Michael Grima  
Secretary: Victor Fiott  
Jason Aloisio  
Anthony Cordina  
Victor Falzon  
Jean Paul Fiott  
Sarah Jane Pulis

**Falko Committee**  
Chair: Justin Vassallo  
Secretary: Stefan Azzopardi  
Graziella Grech  
André Callus  
Carl Camilleri  
Matthew Borg Cardona  
Denise Grima  
Caldon Mercieca  
Simon Sultana

**Ornis Committee**  
(for BirdLife)  
Norman Chetcuti  
Joseph Mangion



Ghadira's weekend assistant wardens, sporting the Society livery!

**Klabb Huttaf Committee**  
Chair: Jason Aloisio  
Secretary: Sylvia Falzon  
Audrey Chetcuti  
Norman Chetcuti  
Desirée Falzon  
Victor Falzon  
Justin Vassallo

**Kemmuna Working Group**  
Co-ordinator: Jean Paul Farrugia  
Ian Balzan  
Mark Gauci  
Emanuel Mallia

**Foresta 2000 Steering Committee**  
(for BirdLife)  
Desirée Falzon  
Victor Falzon

**Volunteers**  
Co-ordinator: Desirée Falzon

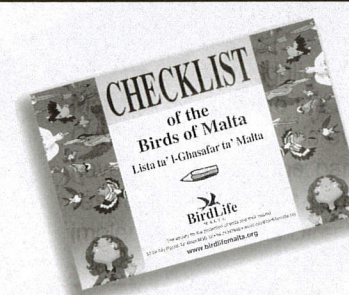
**Website**  
Webmaster: Denis Cachia

**Publications editors**  
Bird's Eye View: Victor Falzon  
BirdTalk: Victor Falzon  
Delegates Newsletter: Tony Cordina  
Il-Huttafa: Victor Falzon

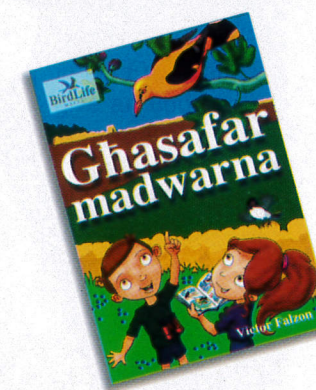
**Staff**  
Marketing: Audrey Abela  
Administration: Victoria Caruana  
Field teachers: Jason Aloisio  
Victor Falzon  
Reserves supervisor: Mark Gauci  
Dinja Wahda: Theresa Cremona  
Foresta 2000 ranger: Ray Vella

These are the people who occupied the main BirdLife Malta posts. There are many other helpers, youth leaders, birdwatchers, ringers, photographers, assistant wardens, school delegates etc to whose commitment the Society is very grateful.

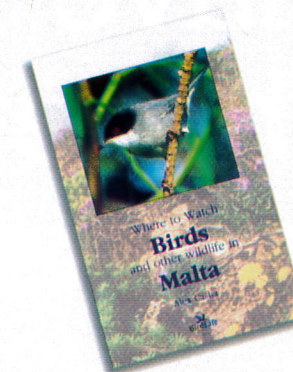
## new books



**Checklist of the Birds of Malta** lists all 381 birds recorded so far in the Maltese Islands. The booklet gives the Maltese names of birds as recently revised by BirdLife Malta, and follows the latest taxonomic order. It also gives the English (also recently undated) and scientific names, as well as the local status of every species.



**Ghasafar Madwarna** (Birds around us) is a bird guide for young birdwatchers. It focuses on 100 species, each illustrated in colour with helpful tips on spotting and identification. The book was written and illustrated by Victor Falzon, and its printing was sponsored by Sveriges Ornitologiska Förening (SOF, BirdLife in Sweden).



**Where to Watch Birds and other Wildlife in Malta** looks at the natural attractions of 20 sites in Malta, from popular birding places like Buskett to less known spots like Dwejra. Most sites have maps, checklists and helpful access tips. The book, written by Alex Casha, was sponsored by Ornithologische Gesellschaft Basel OGB, a Swiss bird organisation.

# Wildlife of the Maltese Islands



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## Bil-Bejta!

Ghasafar li jbejtu f'Malta



## Ghasafar madwarna



### Where to Watch Birds and other wildlife in Malta

Alex Casha



Do you  
have  
these  
books?

We do!

These books and other Society material are available from the **BirdLife Malta office** in Ta' Xbiex and from **Ghadira** and **Is-Simar** nature reserves