editorial

Very early on in its struggle for bird protection, BirdLife Malta (then MOS) realised that lobbying the authorities for adequate laws was going to take way too long. The Society therefore embarked on a parallel front: raising public awareness.

But there were the Sitas and the communication age was decades away. Desktop technology was typewriter, wax stencils and gallons of ink. Corrector fluid. No computer, no digital cameras, no Photoshop. So it was a humble sticker here and a leaflet there. Working on a shoestring budget, MOS spread the environmental gospel. But it worked, and today, more than a generation later, everybody is aware of at least some of the problems facing the natural environment. And that’s good.

People have formed an opinion and practically all agree that yes, something needs to be done for the environment. But many stop there, and get on with their lives. This is why litterbugs, land grabbers, wasters of resources and bird killers are still with us.

This is why we still get politicians measuring progress by the annual increase of cars per capita, or declaring that having more roads is beneficial to the environment; and why we still get hunters bragging that they are the ultimate predators and that bringing down a bird is an exciting new sensation every time. And that’s not so good.

But, thankfully, we detect a modest sector of society that has started making decisions based on an environmental ethic. It seems that concern for the environment has made it to these people’s list of personal values. Very good. BirdLife’s job now is to keep pushing the environment further up their priority ladder.

And so it is no wonder that BirdLife targets schools a lot. With projects like Dinja Wahida, the Society tries to make green living second nature with young people and their educators. We are glad to see more schools taking up green habits. Quite a few heads of schools proudly tell us that waste separation, water conservation, feeding garden birds, visiting nature reserves, using recycled paper, growing trees and sponsoring green projects are nowadays as much school policy as giving homework.

Yes, we are definitely getting there!

Victor Falzon
Editor

BirdLife Malta was set up in 1982 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 Għadira and I-See-Mar.

BirdLife Malta publishes: B-Medit (a scientific bulletin), BirdLife Malta (the members´ annual magazine), BirdLife Malta Annual Report, newsletters, Il-Mattafa (the junior monthly magazine) 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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BirdLife Malta is a charity organisation, and depends on subscriptions and donations. Membership is Lm30 (overseas €50) per annum for adults, Lm15 for juniors and Lm10 for families. Online subscriptions, renewal and donations can be made on the website.

Victor Falzon
Editor

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Land for Birds
A look at Malta’s Important Bird Areas

beginnings

In 1989, BirdLife International (then known as the International Council for Bird Preservation) launched the first inventory of Important Bird Areas (IBA) in Europe. The main aim of this exercise was to identify and form a protection network of sites critical to the conservation of birds. This first inventory provided key information to 2444 high priority sites in 39 countries or autonomous regions.

The IBA programme targeted four categories of birds, whose dependence of a particular site would qualify the area for inclusion as an IBA. These were:

- species that occur regularly, concentrate at and are dependent on particular sites for breeding, migrating or wintering
- species that are globally threatened (at risk of extinction)
- species and subspecies threatened throughout their range but not globally
- species that have small world ranges, with important populations in Europe.

With the passage of years, BirdLife increasingly recognised the importance of IBAs in bird protection. It was also becoming increasingly evident that many of the sites were not just important for their birds, but also harboured ecosystems with a high degree of biodiversity. Although the IBA network is defined by its bird fauna, the conservation of these sites would ensure the survival of a correspondingly large number of other animals and plants.

In 2000, BirdLife Partners from 51 countries in the European region updated the inventory, increasing the list to 3619 sites.

The IBA programme was extended to most regions on the planet. More than 9800 sites in over 170 countries have so far been identified as IBAs.

natural selection

BirdLife International follows three levels of IBA selection criteria: global, regional and sub-regional. Within Europe, the sub-regional level corresponds to the EU’s geographical territory.

Sites are selected according a number of set criteria. During the preparation of the 2004 Malta IBA inventory, the selected sites were approved, as they satisfied the following C level criteria:

- Criteria applied to Malta IBAs
  - C2. Concentrations of Annex 1 species
    - Under this criterion, 2 species are used as qualifying species: Cory’s Shearwater and Yelkouan Shearwater
  - C5. Migratory bottleneck
    - Under this criterion, 4 species were used as qualifying species: Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Common Kestrel, Hobby and Eleonora’s Falcon
  - C6. Best breeding sites for Annex 1 species
    - Under this criterion, 3 species were used as qualifying species: Cory’s Shearwater, Yelkouan Shearwater and European Storm-petrel.
**Il-Kullana**

After years of field research, data collation and analysis, BirdLife Malta identified and proposed 11 sites for inclusion as IBAs of international importance. Five of these are of Global Importance and six are of EU Importance.

The sites cover a total area of 480.2ha, which is about 1.5% of the surface area of the Maltese Islands. This small percentage is due to the fact that most of the sites are seabird colonies located along vertical cliff faces. However, even when designating these sites, the foraging requirements of the species breeding on these sites were also taken into consideration. If one were to include an area appropriate to satisfy the ecological requirements of the seabird colonies, the area of IBAs will be considerably bigger, as it would include a great deal of sea.

A further six sites have been identified as IBAs of National Importance.

**M001 Ta’ Ċenċ Cliffs**

Ta’ Ċenċ cliffs support a large breeding colony of ca.1000 pairs of Cory’s Shearwater, ca.150-300 pairs of Yelkouan Shearwater, and a small colony (ca.25 pairs) of European Storm-petrel.

**M002 Kemmuna**

The cliffs and caves along the shoreline of Kemmuna support colonies of Yelkouan Shearwaters (50-80 pairs) and a bottleneck site for trans-Saharan passerine migrants.

**M003 Filfla**

The offshore islet of Filfla holds a large colony of European Storm-petrels (5000-8000 pairs) and 100-200 pairs of Cory’s Shearwaters.

**M004 Buskett**

The only non-seabird site. Buskett is an important flyway and roosting site for raptors, mainly Honey-buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Hobby and Eleonora’s Falcon during the autumn migration.

**M005 L-Aħrax tal-Madonna**

The cliffs support one of the largest known colonies of Yelkouan Shearwater in the Mediterranean, with an estimated 500 pairs.

**M006 Bengħis to Wied Maqbul**

The seacliffs from Bengħis to Wied Maqbul hold colonies of Cory’s Shearwater (500-800 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (ca.150 pairs).

**M007 Hagar s-Sawda to Ix-Xagha**

This stretch of seacliffs holds colonies of Cory’s Shearwater (150-200 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (80-100 pairs).

**M008 Il-Kullana to Ta’ Ġlenn**

Popularity known as Dingli Cliffs, these natural bastions support breeding colonies of Cory’s Shearwater (200-300 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (100-200 pairs).

**M009 Il-Crus to Ta’ Ġlenn**

These cliffs west of Ta’ Ċenċ are important for Cory’s Shearwater (100-300 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (ca.30 pairs).

**M010 Xlendi Bay to Wardija Point**

Seabird colonies located just outside the mouth of Xlendi Bay westwards to Wardija Point. The breeding population includes Cory’s Shearwater (300-350 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (30-50 pairs).

**M011 Dwejra Bay to San Dimitri**

The seacliffs along the northwestern coast of Gozo holds Cory’s Shearwater (100-300 pairs) and Yelkouan Shearwater (30-50 pairs).

**M012 Ghadira**

A managed, partly man-made saltmarsh wetland. An important feeding and resting site for waders. The only breeding site in Malta for Little Ringed Plover.

**M013 Is-Simar**

A managed, partly man-made wetland with tracts of common reed that provides habitat for water birds. The site holds nesting Reed Warbler and Moorhens. Little Grebe and Little Bittern have also nested here.

**M014 Is-Salina**

Abandoned saltpans that provide feeding and resting habitat for waders and herons.

**M015 Great Siege Square - Valletta**

An unlikely place for an IBA. The mature focus trees in this square support the only known winter roost (several 1000s) of White Wagtails in Malta. A smaller roost exists in Gozo.

**M016 Wied ir-Ramla and Wied il-Manqar**

These two valleys facing the north coast of Gozo are important bottlenecks for passage migrants, namely raptors, warblers and hurdirunades (swallows and martins).

**M017 Wied il-Lunzjata**

The largest vendt area in Gozo, with mature trees and permanent water stream. Important feeding and resting site for a variety of species throughout the year. Exceptionally good during the migration seasons.

The year 2005 was dominated by tree planting. After a successful previous season, a green carpet is already beginning to show on what was formerly a bare and eroded area at Il-Ṭaflija. Another 3100 trees went into the ground this year, bringing the total of planted trees and shrubs to over 9000.

Most of this year’s trees were planted in January and February, sometimes with help from groups like Klabb Hulfa (BirdLife’s junior members) or by schoolchildren through events like Arbor Day. Such involvement gives not only a physical helping hand but, more importantly, it gives the participants a sense of belonging to the project and generates a love for trees.

Planting gave way to grass control in March-May, which is done to minimise damage in case of fire. From June onwards, irrigation of the young trees was top priority. The older pines and lentisks are now established and need no further watering to see them through the summer period. Irrigation was therefore concentrated on the vegetation planted in the last two years. In summer, almost 1km of new water mains was laid to prepare for the new saplings. This extension will ensure that the new trees and shrubs are now all within a water reach.

Tree planting resumed in November. With the help of six employees from PARK, one of our project partners, most of the trees were put in the ground in the crucial eight-week period when most of the rain falls. When planted in autumn, the young trees have time to acclimatise and will need less watering by the time the rainy season wanes.

This year the Corpo Forestale d’Italia donated another 3000 trees, namely aleppo pines, kermes oaks, strawberry trees, lentisks and Mediterranean buckthorns. A further 50 pines were donated by Dr Joe Azzopardi, and the remainder were holm oaks from our own nurseries.

PARK staff continued building rubble retaining walls and also helped in maintaining the erosion control barriers, which took up most of December. These barriers have now eliminated soil loss and erosion, and the deep gullies which used to result from years of four-wheel drive and motorcycle activity are no more.

As the young trees grow, more wildlife is attracted to the area. Weasels, wild rabbits, chameleons and western whip snakes are commonplace.

Western strawberry tree Arbutus unedo and kermes oak Quercus coccoeca are species of Mediterranean woodland and maquis. Both are strangely missing from the Maltese flora. With botanical advice, it was decided to introduce these species at Foresta 2000.

Problems

Problems this year amounted to a few stolen trees, some small-scale vandalism and one or two hunters intruding in the area. Several instances of unauthorised camping were noted further west along the slope. If this becomes a regular habit, we may encounter problems when we come to planting those sectors.

Kids on site

Through Dinjia Wahda 5, launched in October in primary schools (see pg 15), many children fostered trees at Foresta 2000. This tree-adoption scheme raises much-needed funds for the running of the project. Fostering trees has also had another effect: schoolchildren who adopted trees were asking to see the project with their own eyes. BirdLife had foreseen this and offered free guided tours in the Dinjia Wahda Action Guide. Several schools have taken up this offer, and a number of school visits to Il-Ṭaflija were organised. Din-I-Art Helwa, our project partner, also organised a number of visits. A total of 440 children visited Foresta 2000 by the end of the year.

1. Haz-Żebbug primary school kids visiting.
2. New water mains being laid.
3. Arrival of new trees from Italy.
4. Timber pole thanking a big benefactor.
5. Tree-planting by First Insurance Brokers.
6. Italian Ambassador Dr Alcide Memmo and EN Minister George Pullicino pay a visit.
If 2004 was the year Malta joined the European Union, 2005 was the year that Malta felt the first effects of EU membership. BirdLife Malta did not lose time before using the mechanisms at its disposal to fight for conservation.

**Hunting**

The Maltese government's dogged insistence on retaining spring hunting, thinly disguised as a derogation, did not go down well with locals and foreigners alike, and received much criticism. In April, the EU Commission sent to Malta a monitoring mission of its Nature and Biodiversity team, headed by Nicholas Hanley. Despite obstacles laid by the civil service, BirdLife Malta managed to have an exclusive meeting with the delegation. In anticipation of the visit, BirdLife Malta wrote to the EU Commission highlighting the flaws in Maltese bird protection legislation. The BirdLife EU office sent over its Policy Manager Konstantin Kreiser to join Society President Joseph Mangion in the meeting with the delegation.

Meanwhile, BirdLife Malta and BirdLife International drew up a formal complaint about the issue. The document laid out in detail BirdLife's objection to the faulty transposition of the Birds Directive into Maltese legislation. BirdLife's objection was backed by scientific evidence based on analysis of many years' ornithological data. The complaint was lodged with the EU Commission in July. In September, the President had a follow-up meeting with the cabinet of the Environment Commissioner Stavros Dinas. For this meeting, Joseph Mangion was accompanied by Claire Papazoglou, head of BirdLife EU Office, and Konstantin Kreiser.

These moves have led the EU Commission to seriously contemplate starting infringement proceedings against Malta for breaching the Birds Directive. Barely six weeks after BirdLife lodged its complaint, the Maltese government issued a set of proposals in a bid to bring Maltese law closer in line with the Birds Directive. The proposals included shortening of the night-trapping season by two months and cutting the hunting season by a month. These were all steps in the right direction, but far from what BirdLife is asking for, namely a blanket ban of hunting in spring. BirdLife submitted its comments on the proposals and other pressing issues within a 4-week consultation period and in due course also met the Minister to discuss the issues, but by the end of the year the said proposals had still not become law. The struggle is clearly still not over.

Meanwhile, illegal hunting was again prevalent throughout the year. Despite Malta's hunting situation being more in the limelight than ever before, law enforcement actually took a nosedive in 2005, and despite laudable effort from Administrative Law Enforcement officers, the year ended with just 289 arraignments (as opposed to 476 in 2004). When upheld for more resources and commitment, the authorities conveniently blamed the lack of resources on the problem of illegal human immigration.

**Ornis**

BirdLife Malta sustained its participation in the Malta Ornis Committee, through Norman Chetcut and Joseph Mangion. The committee met 13 times in 2005. Among the issues discussed were the registration of trapping sites, a survey of captive-bred birds, a country code for hunters and trappers, and a request to trade in wild birds. The committee also organised a workshop on airfield bird strikes following complaints of large numbers of starlings at Malta International Airport (MIA) in winter 2004-05. The committee had authorised a culling exercise of starlings at MIA in February, which proved that shooting the birds was not the solution to the problem. Unfortunately no real progress was achieved on the timetable of deadlines set by the EU in the accession negotiations.

**IBAs**

It is useless to protect birds without protecting their habitat. For this reason, it is important that every country identifies the areas most crucial for its birds, better known as Important Bird Areas (IBAs). In 2005, BirdLife Malta published Important Bird Areas of EU Importance in Malta. Compiled by John Borg and Joe Sultana, the document is an inventory of sites that satisfy the EU criteria for inclusion (see pp3-5, 22). The inventory was launched in May along with IBA inventories of several other BirdLife Partners from the new EU states. BirdLife Malta also launched the inventory in Malta.

In August, BirdLife Malta welcomed the scheduling of the cliffs at Ta' Ċenċ by MEPA. Ta' Ċenċ is one of Malta's IBAs of national, EU and global importance.

**Land use**

The spectre of development on natural land raised its ugly head again. Large-scale development proposals at Ta' Ċenċ are back, including a golf course on this site and another at Xagħra, Hlamar near Manikata. BirdLife Malta denounced both projects at once, and later teamed up with other NGOs to work on a common opposition front. In July, BirdLife Malta witnessed gross landscaping abuses at Birkett by the Environmental Landscapes Company, which immediately raised the alarm. The consortium had been using heavy machinery to clear the valley floor, and was felling large trees for all the wrong reasons, heedless of the woodland ecology. BirdLife's reaction put an immediate stop to further felling of trees, and the Society called for the setting up of a supervising body to prevent further damage. The Environment Ministry eventually did set up a committee for this purpose. BirdLife Malta is represented on this body by Alex Cesa.

**Meetings**

BirdLife Malta's advocacy in 2005 involved meetings with members of parliament and participation in other meetings and events relating to environmental issues. Among these were the public consultation meetings on Structural Funds held by the Prime Minister, various meetings with Environment Minister George Pullinco, and a meeting with Malta Labour Party leader Alfred Sant at the party's environment manifesto.

In March, the RSPB Country Programmes Manager Mark Day visited BirdLife Malta to discuss various operational and funding issues. Also in March, Adri de Gelder, Director of VBN visited Malta and witnessed the work carried out by BirdLife Malta with VBN funding. For several years, VBN has been helping the Society in various projects, including the employment of a marketing person, and will be increasing their support in 2006 and beyond.

In May, while in Cyprus on a private visit, President Joseph Mangion was invited by BirdLife Cyprus to meet the head of the Game Fund of Cyprus. Cypriot hunters are following closely Malta's spring hunting issue. Cyprus would readily adopt the Maltese Government's stand were it not for fear of infringement proceedings.

BirdLife Malta also attended the May and December meetings of the BirdLife Europe Task Force dealing with the Birds and Habitats Directives.

In November, BirdLife Malta participated in the BirdLife European Directors' Meeting in Bratislava. Such meetings provide an excellent opportunity for networking with other Partners and are useful to update our supporters of development and progress on ongoing projects.

Other meetings in 2005 included a workshop on seabird conservation in June, with help from RSPB's Jane Devitt and Susan Robinson, and Ivan Ramirez from SPEA. In October, Ken Smith from RSPB organised a strategy development workshop for BirdLife Malta's committees, staff and volunteers.

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Heavy staff. Falling of century-old trees, drastic pruning and mechanical buckets raising the valley floor make a mockery of proper woodland management.

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Injured Birds Unit

Another year of rampart hunting unfortunately meant that the Society's injured bird unit was again kept busy. The unit co-ordinator Ian Balzan handled and rehabilitated many injured birds, several of which were eventually returned to the wild. The unit functions thanks to a dedicated group of volunteers who transport injured birds from various places, homes, often at very short notice, and thanks to invaluable support from the veterinary surgeon Eurydice Kovacs.
Mark Gauci

Reserve Resume

The Reserves Committee's top priority for 2005 was to keep the positive momentum at the reserves going. Be it for physical work, educational activities or meticulous planning, the year can be considered a successful one, with all the goals set out for 2005 more or less achieved.

At Work

Several new projects kicked off in 2005. The new 5-year (2004-2008) plans contain no fewer than 60 actions/tasks. These include the regular, daily management, but also a number of one-off projects with specific targets. One such project materialised at Għadira in summer 2005. An artificial nesting site was set up in the west pool area, with the aim to encourage kingfishers to breed. A small number of kingfishers regularly spend six or seven months at Għadira, showing up as early as late August and staying through the winter. Come March, however, they migrate to Europe to breed.

As kingfishers are known to have used man-made nesting holes, and as Malta is within their breeding range, managing warden Charles Coleiro thought it worth a try. The construction is basically a wooden box with a number of round holes cut into it. The board was erected vertically, close to the water's edge, and packed behind with sand. The round holes look like kingfisher nest entrances - kingfishers nest in holes dug horizontally into river banks. Similar nesting sites for sand martins are planned for 2006.

Concurrently, work on the removal of shrubby orach from the north embankment ran into its fifth year, as yet another stretch was cleared of the highly invasive species and replaced with native shrubs and trees. Meanwhile, the vegetation planted in the "old" sections is fast maturing and filling out. The other, regular jobs, like tending the tree nursery, watering, removal of alien trees, trail maintenance etc were sustained. Managing warden Alex Cachia assisted in all this work.

Over at Ir-Simar, managing warden Charles Coleiro continued clearing acacia trees from the pool area. In summer, a grove of 17 acacia was cleared from one of the islands. Apart from having freed the island of alien vegetation, the newly cleared foreshore on the island attracted good numbers of moorhen and coot to forage on the low grass now dominating the island. The target is 80% acacia clearance by 2006.

The reedbed was given due attention, with reed-cutting in March, May, July and August.

Throughout the second part of the year, the warden was busy applying the finishes touches to our biggest project for the year: the new Ir-Simar visitor centre. Following excavation and the laying of a deep concrete platform to stabilise the soft ground, building proper started in late summer. Once this was completed, the centre was plastered, tiled, whitewashed and had fittings and furniture installed. The centre was opened on 30 October, in the presence of Environment Minister George Pullicino and Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech. Visiting schoolchildren now have a proper venue where to begin their reserve experience. The centre will also enable BirdLife to open Ir-Simar regularly to the public.

After years of effort and fundraising, another dream had come true, thanks also to financial support from the project's main sponsor APS Bank, as well as the Malta Tourism Authority, Vodafone and UNESCO.

Problem Solved

A strip of dune running between Għadira's east perimeter and the main road had been an embarrassing eyesore for many years. Every summer the area had been used as a convenient latrine by many beach-goers too lazy to walk to the public toilets. The place was also a perfect litter trap every time a strong north-east grigial blew all garbage inland from the beach and road.

BirdLife obtained the necessary permits and, with funding from the Malta Tourism Authority and HSBC Earthwatch, fenced off the area. Once off-limits, the place was given an intensive clean-up, and several alien trees were removed. The area will be gradually restored and allowed to revert to typical saltmarsh and sand dune vegetation.

Logging

The scientific work at the reserves now includes daily logging of flora and fauna observations, bird ringing, keeping weather records and regular recording of water levels and salinity. All records, studies and findings are published in the annual Reserves Reports, now in their third year of issue.

A new project, began in mid-2004 with the Marine Ecology Research Group (University of Malta Department), made a comparative study of the aquatic macrofauna at Għadira. The study, which was the basis of a Bachelor of Science dissertation, was concluded in 2005. The results will be published in a forthcoming reserve report.

For the Kids

Bookings at the nature reserves were constant, although a dip became evident towards the end of the year, as the world braced itself for the avian influenza pandemic. Field teachers Jason Aloisio and Victor Fafzon were busy with new ideas to make the visits ever more interesting.

One initiative at Ir-Simar saw students doing a half-day manual work at the reserve in order to help the warden. Tasks varied from painting of benches to cleaning of birdwatching hides - a novel way of teaching nature appreciation!

Agreed

The year ended on a high. After two years of meetings, the new agreement for the management of Għadira and Ir-Simar was concluded and signed by the Nature Protection Unit (MEPA), the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment, and BirdLife Malta. Through this agreement, BirdLife will continue managing the reserves, with MEPA as adviser, with MRAE funding the running of the reserves.

Mark Gauci is BirdLife's nature reserves supervisor.

Earthwatch率先在2004年启动了一个项目，与马耳他大学的海洋生态学研究小组（University of Malta Department）合作，对Għadira的水生宏量生物进行了比较研究。这项研究是基于一个学士学位的科学论文，于2005年完成。结果将在一个即将到来的保护区报告中发表。

鸟瞰

自然保护区的预订非常稳定，尽管一年中的最后几个月出现了一次下降，因为世界正准备应对禽流感的爆发。教师Jason Aloisio和Victor Fafzon正忙于新的想法，使访问变得更加有趣。

Ir-Simar的一次活动让学生成为了志愿者，在保护区做半天的自愿工作，以帮助园丁。任务从涂漆长椅到清洁观鸟亭，这是一种新颖的方法来教授自然欣赏！

同意

这一年以一个高点结束。经过两年的会谈，Għadira和Ir-Simar的新的管理协议已经签订，由自然保护署（MEPA）、农村事务和环境部以及BirdLife Malta签署。通过这个协议，BirdLife将继续管理这些保护区，MEPA作为顾问，MRAE资助该保护区的运行。
Secretive seafarer from the Levant

The yelkouan shearwater Puffinus yelkouan is a typical seabird of the tubenose family, a group that includes shearwaters, petrels, fulmars and albatrosses.

Joe Sultana fills us in on the yelkouan shearwater

Yelkouani! The strange name derives from a Turkish word that means "wind-chaser", a fitting name for this streamlined wanderer of the high seas.

The yelkouan shearwater is a Mediterranean bird. And since Malta is in the middle of this Sea, our shores are graced with this beautiful, mysterious seafarer.

The yelkouan (garnija in Maltese) is endemic to the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Breeding surveys from the eastern Mediterranean and from North Africa are lacking, but it appears that this bird’s main colonies are in Greece, Italy and Malta. Malta’s share is about 5% of the total population. There are probably less than 30,000 breeding pairs of yelkouan shearwaters in existence.

In the Maltese Islands, the species is widely scattered along sea cliffs, with the largest concentration of at least 500 pairs nesting at Rдум il-Madonna. For this reason, this site is an internationally recognised Important Bird Area (see pp 3-5).

The yelkouan shearwater has blackish upperparts, white underparts and a wingspan of up to 90cm. It is smaller than the similar Cory’s shearwater, with whom it often shares the same cliff habitat.

Yelkouans are mostly breeding visitors to the Maltese Islands. The adults are present all year round in the surrounding waters, but are mainly seen from December to July.

The first birds arrive at the colonies from mid-November, sometimes even as early as October.

The birds come to land only after dark, and locate their burrows in the cliff face. The birds communicate by emitting loud, hoarse coughing calls. They are especially vociferous on moonless nights from late January to mid-February, and again from March to early April, when the non-breeders arrive.

Due to its secretive nature and the inaccessibility of the colonies, very little is known about the breeding biology of this mysterious bird. It breeds in caves, crevices and burrows of varying depth in sea cliffs and on offshore islands. The laying period extends from late February into March, when the female lays a single, chalky-white egg. The young fledge and fly from mid-June to early July. Ringing data indicate that some first-year birds of the central Mediterranean population disperse into the Aegean and the Black Sea after fledging. After about two years at sea, the young birds return to the colonies, but do not breed until their fourth year.

The main threats to yelkouan shearwaters are predation of nests by rats, loss of breeding habitat, human disturbance (particularly by hunters out hunting and ferreting for rabbits), entanglement in fishing nets, light and sound pollution (both onshore and offshore) near the colonies and, possibly, oil pollution.

Such threats pose a danger to the survival of this bird. They are all a result of human activity (yes even the rats were introduced by man!). It is therefore our responsibility to take measures to protect this species, especially its breeding haunts. If not, this pelagic wanderer may soon chase the wind no more.

Face value: At least 250 pairs of yelkouans breed in the cliffs at Rдум il-Madonna.

Joe Sultana is an ornithologist.
Band of Watchers
Mark Gauci

Nowadays the battles for the environment are not won on sentimental arguments alone. Scientific backing is increasingly becoming indispensable to give credibility to the struggle for environmental protection. This is why research has become so vital to our campaigns for bird protection.

watching

Although very much a hobby, birdwatching and monitoring can be much more. Birding today is getting more organised, as birders select the best sites according to the time of the year and "work" those areas intensively. A typical year would be as follows:

Jan-Feb: to Buskett to check wintering birds like dunlins, possibly redwings.
March: duck migration in full swing - the usual pools in ċirkewwa are bustling with eager birds courting females or ducks passing through the channel. Spring: birders spread out, logging many species migrating across the country on their way north.
Summer: the first waders arrive. Salina and Ghadira focal points.
Sep: the raptor month - all birders converge on Buskett or Dwejra (Malta).
Autumn: focus on ġis-Simar, as cots, black-winged stilts and kingfishers steal the show.

Bird records are nowadays stored on a computer birdlog database, which is very helpful for efficient data analysis and access.

rare thing

The Rarebirds Committee is a core of experienced birders who go through the descriptions of the very rare and scarce birds in order to verify their occurrence. The group meets regularly, as the list of pending species awaiting verification is never poor or dull!

worth a ring

The Ringing Group had 14 licensed ringers and three trainees in 2005. Ghadira and ġis-Simar were worked as constant effort sites (daily ringing sessions), weather permitting. Other sites regularly manned included Buskett, Rabat, Mellieha and Lunzata Valley (Gozo). Several rare species were ringed, including our first palieder harrier and sparrowhawk; other interesting species included rufous-tailed scrub robin, ring ouzel, semi-collared flycatcher and yellow-browed warbler.

Ringing is of course at its most rewarding when analysing retraps, i.e. ringed birds that are re-caught. A blackcap ringed in 1999 in Buskett was back at the same place in 2005! A moorhen ringed in 1997 at Ghadira was still there eight years later.

Most exciting of all is when ringers handle retraps with foreign rings. Such birds (known as controls) always reveal another little secret about that most mysterious of bird activities: migration! The table below gives some of the more interesting recoveries and controls from 2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>species</th>
<th>ringed</th>
<th>retrapped</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>robin</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Buskett (Feb 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackcap</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Buskett (Feb 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackcap</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Rabil (Mar 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackcap</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Rabil (Apr 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swallow</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Tunisia (Apr 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eighyngale</td>
<td>ġis-Simar</td>
<td>Italy (Apr 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moorhen</td>
<td>Ghadira</td>
<td>Italy (27 Apr 05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swallow</td>
<td>Rabil</td>
<td>Delimara (Oct 06)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marsh harrier</td>
<td>ġis-Simar</td>
<td>Finland (Jun 06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>garden warbler</td>
<td>ġis-Simar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* by hunters

indicative. A selection of the more interesting retraps in 2005.

New bird. Pallid harrier was new to the ringing list.

Educationally speaking...
Victor Falzon

Education takes time but its effects are long-lasting. BirdLife believes that through a sustained educational campaign, people will learn to appreciate the intrinsic value of the natural environment and its diversity.

Of course

As teachers are the dominant players in a child's formal education, it is important to ensure that teachers themselves have a healthy environmental ethic. For this reason, the end-of-year in-service course for teachers has become an annual event on the Education Committee's agenda.

BirdLife's aim in this course is twofold: to inject a dose of green values in its participants, while at the same time introducing them to Maltese biodiversity - an initiative aimed to dispel the widespread impression that Malta is very poor in nature.

The theme this year was, as in previous years, Sharing Nature With Children. Talks included natural habitats, invertebrates, popular misconceptions about various fauna, and creating nature areas in schools.

The third morning was devoted to fieldwork at Buskett, where teachers played several games aimed at developing children's perceptions of nature through the use of various senses. Lecturers were Jason Aloisio, Michael Grima and Joe Sultana, Michael Grima, chairperson of the Education Committee, co-ordinated the course.

One World the Fifth

Meanwhile, the Committee worked on a new edition of Dinja Wadda (DW). This was going to be the fifth edition, again sponsored by APS Bank.

Desiree Falzon produced a set of green activities, which were expanded into a detailed 36-page Action Guide (see p22), produced by Victor Falzon. The Guide is the main tool to help teachers through the 18 activities. In past editions, BirdLife printed one or two Action Guides for every school. This year we printed copies for all primary school teachers.

Once again, the running of DWS was placed in the hands of Theresa Cremona, who had co-ordinated DWS with great success.

DWS activities included a number of old favourites (like putting up nature boards, bird tables and setting up nests to Ghadira and ġis-Simar) and some new activities, like having an ecoweenet slot in class, and taking part in a children's hearing.

By the end of 2005, over 30 schools were participating in DWS.

Dinjwa Wadda 5 and visits to ġis-Simar featured simultaneously on www.skola.gov.mt (above, arrowed), which is the Education Department's website. This gives our activities good exposure.

Play, Pembroke Primary kids playing a Dinja Wadda 5 game.
Field day. The in-service course included nature study at Buskett.
the juniors...

désirée falzon

Klabb Huttafa's 2005 was a mix of outings for all Under 18s, with special activities for the Over 13s (see Falko opposite) and with the magazine Il-Muttafa arriving regularly at 1000+ junior members' homes.

the activities

Following the success of last year's tree-planting activity, our juniors were once again taken on site to plant saplings at Forresta 2000. As outings have become popular with the whole family, it was great to see up to three generations working side by side sowing a greener future.

Another highlight was the marathon hike in March, attended by over 100 members. With the proceeds from the walk, BirdLife bought a much-needed generator to power the irrigation system that waters the young trees and shrubs planted at the Kemmuna Ringing Station.

Supporting these and other club activities, leader training continued with outings designed for improving leaders' field knowledge.

the mag

In all our outings we don't just show nature to the members - we also try to make them conservationists at heart. Most activities are attended by 30-odd members. So how do we reach the rest?

The answer lies in 12 pages of nature conservation-packed information that is sent to all club members and their family every two months. Edited by Victor Falzon, Il-Muttafa has been in print since 1994, and hence was in its 71st issue by the end of 2005. The magazine is the backbone of the club, reaching into our members' homes with the BirdLife conservation message.

Il-Muttafa doesn't simply talk or teach birds. BirdLife's education arm integrates birds with their habitats and the other creatures they share a world with. The magazine thus contains green local news that ranges from habitat destruction to the discovery of new species of minibeasts. Green news goes worldwide on the foreign news page, with snippets about environmental highlights or outright disasters happening around the planet. A new hotspsots section describes a nature haven abroad, while the activity pages talk about outings to local places of interest and give details of forthcoming events. The magazine's interactive section contains members' letters and drawings, as well as information about child-oriented websites about the natural world. Full of illustrations, Il-Muttafa carries a strong conservation message throughout. It aims to touch the green centre of our members' hearts and remain embedded until, as adults, it can change the world we live in.

Text contributors to Il-Muttafa in 2005 were Jason Aloisio, Stefan Azzopardi, Matthew Borg Cardona, Alison Bultigie, Oliver Cardona, Sean Caruana Webster, Elisabeth Conrad, Mark Anthony Falzon, Victor Falzon, Janet Gerardi, Denise Grima and Justin Vassallo.

...and the youths

stefan azzopardi

The year 2005 was another hectic year for Falko, BirdLife Malta's youth section, with several changes taking place during the course of the year. Justin Vassallo, who for several years practically ran Falko single-handedly, began involving some of the longstanding members, namely Matthew Borg Cardona, Simon Sullivan and myself, to help co-ordinate the teenage section. This was an important move since it combined experience with the energy and mentality of a younger generation within the members' age range.

Last year Falko's activities were as varied as they were interesting. These included several annuals that have become a tradition and also some innovations. Although birds and birdwatching aren't Falko's only focus, bird-related activities take priority during the migration period. During this time we join the more experienced birders at places like Gammieh for sea-watching, or Buskett during the Raptor Camp so that we can learn from their expertise. Other activities during migration were an outing to Kemmuna to watch and help in ringing, and an outing to Ta' Cenc by boat and by land to watch and listen to Cory's shearwaters. Outside the migration period, there were always the night hikes, country hikes and bike hikes to keep us occupied, along with a winter camp in Gozo to enjoy the greenery. In autumn Falko also organised a survey of lichens in Buskett, and free-planting at Forresta 2000. Such activities involve members in hands-on experience to give a feeling of concrete contribution.

All in all it was a very rewarding year. Although many new faces appear and disappear for the activities, it is encouraging to see that there is a group of interested members who are committed, and who we hope will take their place in our ranks as volunteers and activists.

Just like we did really, when you think about it...
Shady characters

Malta may be short of woodland, but not of woodland birds. Mark Anthony Falzon explains.

The Maltese Islands are hardly renowned for their woodlands. As happened in other Mediterranean islands, that supported agricultural populations and construction-related activities, most virgin growth was felled several centuries ago. Grazing further contributed to the longterm decline of woodlands.

With a very few notable exceptions, such as the venerable holm oaks of Wied il-Għasri, there is nothing natural about our contemporary groves. The patches of woodland at Ġnejna, Attard, Bżberras, Ġnejna, and Marsa, have been an amalgamation of various elements, often the result of historical events or natural occurrences. These groves are described as 'staging posts' and in the sense our woodland, albeit small, are ecologically very significant. To a substantial number of migratory birds, they make the difference between life and death.

Migration being both seasonal and largely unpredictable, successful woodland birdwatching in Malta is very much a matter of being in the right place, at the right time. The spring migration holds much promise, not least since birds are usually in their best plumage. Hoopoes, turtledove, cuckoo, nightjar, scopes, owl and woodchat shrike are among the more spectacular candidates, while the various species of warbler (Phylloscopus sp.) and Sylvia warblers make life interesting for the birdwatcher. Willow warblers, wood warblers, whitebread and a lesser extent, sedge warblers may all be found in wooded areas. In densely wooded areas such as Wied il-Gżeijraħ at Buskett, dawn often breaks to the hauntingly beautiful song of nightingales.

Some include the Bovesa's warbler - a prized, rare find - and the more frequent serin warbler. From late April to mid-May garden warblers and golden orioles feed on the opening fruits of the fig, white mulberry and logan. I have observed as many as eight goldfinches in one particularly beautiful mulberry tree at Wied il-Gżeijraħ.

Various species of flycatchers are commonly seen during both the spring and autumn migrations. Autumn migration comes from mid-August onwards. November is the period in which we come across the same species as in spring, with autumn specialties such as red-backed shrike, red-breasted flycatcher and lesser whitethroat always a possibility.

From November to early February, our groves provide a haven for many of our wintering species. Conifer-dominated areas are preferred by goldcrests and firecrests, whose flabellate calls are a common feature of woodland birdwatching in winter. Blackcaps and starlings tend to prefer olive groves, partly because of the dense cover afforded, and also to feast on the ripening fruit. The song thrush is another common winter woodland resident; blackbirds, fieldfares and redwings may also be encountered in places like Buskett. Wintertime flocks of jays and siskin roost in the groves of the Harbour area, and chaffinches often graze beneath the trees in places where trampling is absent. Winter woodland specialities include wryneck, woodcock and wren.

Some of our common residents are strictly speaking woodland birds, even though species like Sardinian warbler are regularly breed in the various forested patches. Spotted flycatcher, collared dove and woodchat shrike are rare and localized breeding species, and sometimes the odd pair of surviving turtledove can be seen. It is hoped that the various afforestation projects will attract new breeding species.

Woodland birdwatching requires particular skills; the element that attracts birds in the first place - foliage - also makes it difficult to spot. As clear views are compromised in woodland, sound takes priority, so knowing the various calls and song becomes essential. It takes years of patience to master this skill but it is all part of the fun really. The Internet is of great help in this respect since many sites provide downloadable birdsongs that can also be stored on portable mp3 players, and call-guides on CD are also available. Nothing, however, beats the company of an experienced local, or learning by trial and error. The best way to 'work' woodland is to sit quietly and become part of the landscape. The birds will soon approach and go about their business, as you sit and enjoy them close up.

Mark Anthony Falzon has been interested in birds and natural history since 1982.
2005 Calendar A handy desk flip-calendar with bird and fact file for every month. Photography by Denis Cachia, Raymond Galea, John Borg, Victor Falzon, Charles Gauci and Joseph Mangion.

Reserve Reports The second in the series of annual reports for Ghadira and Is-Simar. Compiled by the Nature Reserves Committee.

Kitchen Apron A two-colour cloth apron. Artwork by Victor Falzon, production by Pauline Gauci and Doreen Camilleri.

Dinjaa Wahda 5 Action Guide The fifth Action Guide in the series (see also pg 15) by Desirée Falzon.

IBAs book and CD Details, criteria and maps of all 11 IBAs of international importance identified in Malta. Compiled by John Borg and Joe Sultana, printed by RSPB.

Membership Form Made for use at the British Birdwatching Fair. Photograph on front flap by Ian Balzan.

Bird poster Another poster in the Afies, Haj u sabih! series, featuring a little bittern. The poster is sent free to Junior members on renewing their membership. Photograph by Denis Cachia.

Conservation Committee Chair: Joseph Mangion Secretary: Aldo Caluza Miki Cassar Raymond Galea Simon Sultana Justin Vassallo

Financials Anna Aloiso Norman Cachia Desirée Falzon

Education Committee Chair: Michael Grima Secretary: Vitor Fortis Jason Aloiso Ray Bonnici Anthony Corinda Victor Falzon Felix Gerardi

Falco Committee Chair: Justin Vassallo Secretary: Steven Azzopardi Andrew Caluza Matthew Borg Cardona Simon Sultana

Nature Reserves Committee Chair: Mark Gauci Jason Aloiso Alex Cachia Charles Coleto Vitor Falzon Charles Gauci

Ornis Committee (for BirdLife) Norman Cachia Joseph Mangion

Kibb Huttal Committee Chair: Jason Aloiso Secretary: Simon Azzopardi Norman Cachia Desirée Falzon Vitor Falzon Justin Vassallo

Kemmuna Working Group Co-ordinator: Jean Paul Farrugia Ian Balzan Mark Gauci Emanu Mela

Forest 2000 Steering Committee (for BirdLife) Desirée Falzon Victor Falzon

Injured Birds Unit Co-ordinator: Ian Balzan

Volunteers Co-ordinator: Desirée Falzon

Website Webmaster: Denis Cachia

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

rural horrors

Those of us who like to walk in the Maltese countryside, especially in coastal areas, often come across bird-trapping sites. This is no surprise, as there are over 5000 of them presently scouring our diminishing countryside. Since part of the trauffer's grisly game is to hide in wait for his feathered victims, a shelter of sorts is always in order. Largely built of a mix of dressed and rough stonework, these dums are often roofed or reinforced with hideous scraps of metal scavenged from a variety of sources - no prizes for guessing where the dums pictured here got its roof!

It is hoped that, come 2009 - when bird trapping becomes illegal - all such monstrosities presently gracing our ridges and hillsides will eventually go the way of the dodo.
objective:

restoring lost habitat

The wetland that was recreated at Is-Simar encourages more birds of reed and lake to visit and to stay longer, long enough perhaps... to breed.