

# bird's eye view

**STOP**  
**ILLEGAL**  
**SPRING**  
**HUNTING**

issue 25 • spring 2008

  
**BirdLife**  
MALTA

## a spring in our step

Dear BirdLife Member,

The founders of BirdLife Malta, since its set up in 1962, have worked in a highly hostile environment, unlike their fellow conservationists in Europe. Threats, physical attacks on birders, vandalism on their properties and conservation sites have been the order of the day, especially since the 1980s. For many years the hunters' lobby was perceived by many as a strong force that could bring down governments that did not deliver their never-ending demands. In a bi-party political system with floating voters representing a small group of the electorate, the hunters held the country at ransom for a very long time.

Yet, despite these serious obstacles, BirdLife Malta has continued to be the voice of wildlife and the countryside that were being abused by poachers and contractors. This "stubbornness" of the conservationists started to bear fruit as politicians realised that these "bird lovers" and "tree huggers" had the support of most of the Maltese public who wanted to win back their countryside.

But the attacks on BirdLife volunteers did not stop, as the authorities were incompetent or reluctant to bring these criminals to justice. Despite recent attacks at Ghadira and L-iRdum tal-Madonna, and the destruction of 3000 trees at Foresta 2000, nothing has happened, apart from empty promises that the criminals would be caught. This inaction from the government was probably one of the main reasons why criminals dared to torch the cars of three BirdLife volunteers at Buskett last February (see pg 3).

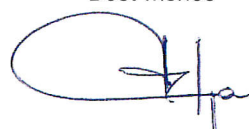
Nevertheless, NGOs get their power from their members, volunteers and others who support them, and giving up is not an option. Many interest groups and some politicians close to these groups wish to see us give up, as they know that the genuine NGOs and organised community groups are the biggest obstacles blocking their personal agendas.

BirdLife's commitment to stop spring hunting in Malta eventually bore its fruits. People from different walks of life joined BirdLife's campaign and more people became vociferous about matters of nature conservation, forcing both main political parties to hold the environment among their top electoral priorities. And, perhaps for the first time, the hunters' lobby did not receive the usual promises from the leaders of the two major parties.

This is the first spring that everyone will enjoy the countryside and witness bird migration without running the risk of being showered by lead pellets or being forced from public land by aggressive occupiers. There will surely be illegal activity and this is why BirdLife is organising the first ever Spring Watch Camp (see pg 6) in order to ensure that the first spring without a "legal" open hunting season is respected and the ban enforced.

I would like to thank you, all of our members, for your commitment and support to BirdLife's work. The first spring without "legal" hunting and trapping in Malta is your achievement. So, we can now all be proud of this and celebrate by going out to the countryside with our families, pets and friends.

Best wishes



Tolga Temuge  
Executive Director

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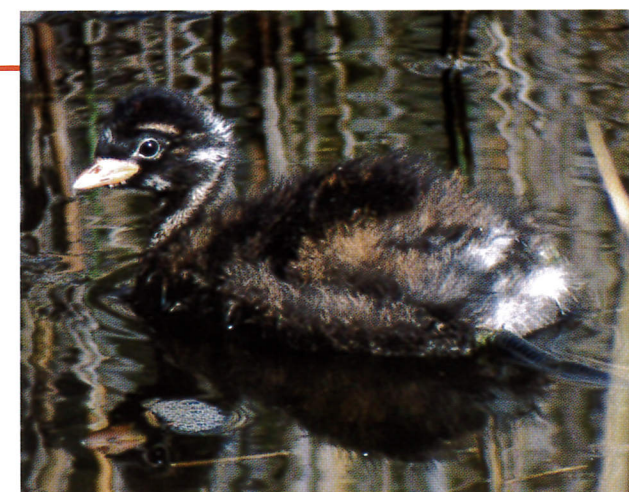


## little grebes breed again at is-simar

For the second time on record in the Maltese Islands, Little Grebe (Blongun Żghir) has been confirmed breeding at Is-Simar nature reserve, in Xemxija. A single chick was observed in early January 2008, and was seen being fed regularly by both adults. Later, in mid-February, four new chicks were spotted, probably the brood of a second pair of Little Grebes.

The first breeding record of Little Grebes in Malta was in February 2006, also at Is-Simar.

Footage of this year's first chick can be seen at [www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org) and clicking on the videos under Highlights.



This year's first Little Grebe chick at Is-Simar  
photo Raymond Galea



All three cars were totally destroyed.  
photo John J. Borg

## upcoming events

### • spring watch camp 2008

date **Sunday, April 19, 2008** • time 2pm  
meeting place **Porto Azzurro Hotel** (Xemxija)

BirdLife invites members to take an active part in Spring Watch Camp happening this April (more details on pg 6). BirdLife volunteers will meet you in the hotel lobby and provide you with binoculars and spotting scopes. We will explain the aims of the camp, the scientific research that we carry out, and information about the species you are likely to observe. The group will then proceed to one of the camp's main observation posts, to be determined on the day. Booking essential. Please contact Nicholas Crockford at [nicholas.crockford@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:nicholas.crockford@birdlifemalta.org) or call 21-347644/5 during office hours to reserve a place.

### • two talks - birding in the orient

date **Wednesday, May 7, 2008** • time 6pm  
venue **National Museum of Natural History** (Mdina)

Members are invited to attend two presentations: WILDLIFE IN INDIA and BIRDING IN NORTH VIETNAM. Veteran birders Joe Sultana and John J. Borg will speak about their recent wildlife trips to eastern Asia.

### • connect with nature - fundraising dinner dance

date **Saturday, May 24, 2008** • time 8pm  
venue **Argotti Botanic Gardens** (Floriana)

Join us for a fundraising dinner dance in support of BirdLife Malta's work for the designation and protection of more areas of countryside. For more information please contact Theresa Cremona at [theresa.cremona@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:theresa.cremona@birdlifemalta.org) or call 21-347644/5 during office hours.

## birdlife volunteers' cars torched

In the early morning hours on Sunday, February 17, 2008, three cars belonging to BirdLife Malta volunteers were torched by unknown individuals in Buskett. All three cars were totally destroyed. Two of the cars belonged to BirdLife Council members while the third car - which exhibited diplomatic plates - belonged to an American who had recently started volunteering with the organisation. The three personnel were carrying out bird-ringing studies in Buskett. Messages of support for BirdLife and the victims, and statements of condemnation about the attack poured in. The criminals are still at large.

## birdlife portugal wins award



SPEA (BirdLife Partner in Portugal) won Portugal's National BES Biodiversity award in January 2008 for identifying Marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The award, worth €75,000, was presented in Lisbon by the Minister of Environment, Dr Francisco Nunes Correia. The award aims to support innovative research initiatives, conservation and management of biodiversity. Minister Nunes Correia said this award acknowledges the work of SPEA as one of the most relevant NGOs in Portugal. SPEA is also one of the partners on Malta's EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater Project.



SPEA officials with the award.  
photo SPEA

# 46 years on

Joe Sultana

BirdLife Malta has come a long way from its humble beginnings. But the way was - and still is - difficult.

The struggle for birds and other wildlife has been uphill all along. We have faced prejudices against new ideas for bird protection in a country where the killing and trapping of wild birds has been a way of life. We have faced habits that are hard to die. We have faced authorities whose policies were dictated by the votes of hunters and trappers. And we face a section of the population who, even in the 21st century, still want to live in the past and preserve their pleasure of the kill. even during the breeding season, and to ignore the harm inflicted on one of nature's fascinating phenomena - bird migration - and deny the islands a healthy breeding birds population. In this scenario it was beyond imagination that, way back in 1962, a small band of dedicated people should form a Society for the protection of birds. But they did.

In those early years, the small member-based Malta Ornithological Society (BirdLife Malta since 1995) run by voluntary amateurs was at worst ridiculed or ignored. But a few years later this same small society, which was once subjected to derision and mockery, became a target for insults and threats. Those whose rhetoric describes the killing of birds as a "socio-economic cultural activity" felt that their hobby was being threatened.

## a way of life

For thousands of years the harvesting of migratory birds for food was common practice in the Mediterranean, and Malta was no exception. Bird-shooting and trapping have always been very popular across the classes of Maltese society. Hunting of birds was such a way of life that even village churches used to organise a special early mass - called "the shooters' mass" - for hunters during the spring migration.



1963  
The very first exhibition was set up by MOS in Xaghra, Gozo.  
photo Joe Sultana

But shooting birds for food is now a thing of the past. Today it is carried out for leisure and for "fun", and the number of licensed bird shooters has increased to about 11,900. One of the main reasons for bird shooting nowadays is to supply specimens for the numerous collections of stuffed and mounted birds, which are still very popular, mostly with the hunters themselves. In a raid at an illegal taxidermist's workshop in 1994, the police confiscated nearly 2000 birds of about 100 protected species. It is estimated that there are about 5000 stuffed-bird collections holding in all some 400,000 specimens.

## legislation and enforcement

In the 1960s bird protection laws were inadequate and very rarely enforced. In recent years legislation has improved greatly and brought in line with the regulations



1981  
Youth members help set up a fence around the fledgling Ghadira nature reserve.  
photo Joe Sultana



1991  
Colourful street demonstrations calling for adequate law enforcement became an annual September event in the 1980s. Pictured above are MOS youths calling for an end to the slaughter of raptors.  
photo Joe Sultana

of the EU Birds Directive, although hunting and trapping of quail and turtle dove in spring were, until last year, allowed. Unfortunately, laws are still not respected by many hunters and although the police have tried to cope with this problem, there is still a lack of human resources and equipment to deal with the many infringements.

Furthermore, there are very few areas where hunting is not allowed in Malta. Apart from Buskett (well known for roosting birds of prey on migration), Kemmuna (important for migratory birds) and Luqa airport (funnily enough, one of Malta's biggest bird sanctuaries!), the other bird sanctuaries are small and scattered. The two small wetlands at Ghadira and Is-Simar are also bird sanctuaries and are managed by BirdLife Malta to afford protection for migratory birds and to serve as an educational medium.



1994  
A haul of bird carcasses confiscated from a taxidermist's workshop. All the birds pictured above - they are mostly raptors - are protected.  
photo Joe Sultana

Much of the progress made in legislation and enforcement was brought about, against great odds, by BirdLife's dedication to this cause and by raising awareness in the Islands.

In a survey carried out by Malta Polls in October 2002 an overwhelming 63.8% agreed with stiffer measures against illegal hunting, while 44.3% actually claimed that all hunting should be declared illegal, with the 17-24 age-group strongest in the latter regard.

## taking to the streets

Apart from its main role of conservation through education, BirdLife spared no effort to make the public aware of the precarious situation of birds. Along the years, campaigns to curb illegal bird shooting and especially birds of prey, started being organised annually. To highlight wildlife problems in the Islands, BirdLife also took to the streets.

For a number of years, just before autumn bird migration season, street actions were organised, mostly at Buskett - the main illegal killing grounds of migrating birds of prey - and at Valletta's main entrance, a convenient place to hit the media and the public. These peaceful demonstrations increased public awareness against the indiscriminate killing of birds in Malta and instilled in many members, especially the younger ones, a sense of responsibility towards the conservation of nature. But it also brought down the wrath of bird shooters who felt their hobby threatened, and so they too took to the streets.

And so, threats to BirdLife activists became the order of the day. During one street action in Sliema in September 1984, BirdLife members were beaten up and one was even hospitalised. These and similar attacks are still happening today - only last February three cars belonging to BirdLife members were burnt down at Buskett.

## hunting and politics

Along the years hunters and trappers have always used their

## Dear Dr. Gonzi & Dr. Sant,

2008



Back Row: Sarah Puntan-Galea (Journalist), Alan Montanaro (Actor/Teacher), Prof. Edward Mallia (Physicist), Renzo Spiteri (Musician)  
Middle Row: Maurice Tanti Burlo (Artist/Cartoonist), Joseph Mangion (BirdLife Malta President), Winston J. Zahra (Hotelier), Andrew Borg Cardona (Columnist), Kenneth Zammit Tabona (Artist)  
Front Row: Celia Borg Cardona (Artist), Gianni (Entertainer), Moira Delia (TV Presenter/Animal Activist), Pauline Agius (TV Presenter), Ray Calleja (TV Presenter/Actor)

Photo by Ben Borg Cardona

[www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org)

Thirteen well-known personalities join BirdLife to call on the highest authorities to end spring hunting.  
photo Ben Borg Cardona

vote to hijack the political parties. Threatening and offensive slogans were scribbled in large letters on the walls. The mantra *20,000 Kaċċatur = 20,000 Vot* (20,000 hunters = 20,000 votes) became one of the most common threats splashed around on the eve of elections.

It was this scenario that motivated BirdLife to become a stronger movement and to acquire the backing of the public, following an ever-increasing outcry against the illegal shooting of birds. The March 2008 general elections were the first one ever where hunting was not made an electoral issue by the main political parties. This has finally broken the myth that the hunters' lobby has any significant influence in Maltese politics.

### the struggle goes on

Forty-six years on - years of dedication and hard work, plus a significant number of achievements - illegal hunting is still high on the agenda and will remain so until it is totally stamped out. The imminent hurdle is to eliminate spring hunting from the islands.

In February this year, thirteen Maltese personalities from all walks of life joined BirdLife's call on Government and the Opposition, on the eve of election, to end spring hunting in Malta once and for all. These personalities represent the overwhelming majority of Maltese citizens calling for an end to this shameful practice.

This year will probably be the first ever without an official spring hunting season. It will indeed be one of BirdLife Malta's hardest-fought achievements-in-waiting.

### spring watch malta - come and join!

Spring Watch Malta is a conservation camp which forms an integral part of BirdLife's fight against illegal spring hunting. This camp is being organised from April 12-29, which in Malta is peak spring migration period for turtle doves, and thus the period with the highest expected hunting intensity. It will follow hot on the heels of the very successful Raptor Camp run by BirdLife in September 2007.



Participants during Raptor Camp 2007.  
photo Marija Schranz

During this camp BirdLife will maintain a strong presence in the countryside to act as a deterrent to illegal hunting and trapping activity. At the same time camp participants will be recording data on migratory birds.

BirdLife invites members to join the international volunteers in making a genuine contribution to wildlife conservation in our Islands. If you want to play a part in our fight to stop illegal spring hunting, please write to Marija Schranz at [marija.schranz@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:marija.schranz@birdlifemalta.org). For more information visit [www.birdlifemalta.org](http://www.birdlifemalta.org).

## dinja wahda in full swing

Desirée Falzon Education Coordinator

Six months ago BirdLife, together with our partners in education Bank of Valletta, launched our year-long education campaign: Dinja Wahda. Today the campaign is going strong in 54 primary schools.

Environmental education has been one of BirdLife's three weapons in the conservation battle. Together with advocacy and research, it has played an integral role in helping BirdLife forge the green agenda of our present society. Dinja Wahda is the culmination of years of one-off education projects and campaigns we have carried out since the 1980s.

Dinja Wahda is a campaign run in all primary schools and it comprises 30 green activities that are carried out in the classroom, school grounds or green hotspots in our islands. Teachers are free to choose the activities they would like to carry out. Every completed activity wins the school points, which are added up at the end of the year and schools win a gold, silver or bronze trophy.

According to Sandra Mifsud, our schools coordinator, Dinja Wahda is popular with teachers and kids alike. Sandra visits schools regularly to smoothen glitches, answer queries and facilitate the running of the campaign.



Kids making bird tables - Our Lady Immaculate School

"Teachers took an active part in the project and they could relate the various activities to subjects in the curriculum. Most activities encouraged creativity and a continuous display of their work enhanced the students' self esteem." (Irene Abela, Siggiewi Primary)



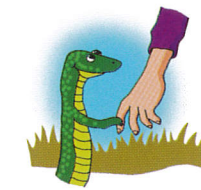
Nature Board - Floriana Primary

"Hands-on activities motivate a lot of children. Everybody enjoyed himself and learnt about the environment in an active, more hands-on way. We think it was worthwhile." (Teacher, Żebbuġ A Primary)



Dinja Wahda activities incorporate different aspects of environmental education, but all have a strong fun-quotient. At the basis of our campaign is the message that protecting nature and our world is about action. This could take the form of making nest boxes for birds or designer recycling bins, carrying out energy surveys, taking nature pictures, making bird mobiles, fostering trees, writing to authorities, and a host of other activities. As the scholastic year unfolds, four activities emerge as being the most popular. Here's a snapshot of the ones that top the charts:

#### I Promise!



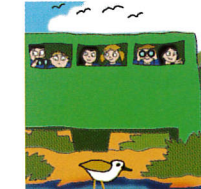
Children colour-in and cut out a card dedicated to 'The Lizard'. They invent and recite a little poem that contains a promise not to harm lizards. Traditionally, this reptile is often at the receiving end of children's violent streaks, or at best ignored.

#### Robin Roundup!



This activity gets kids to observe that robins come to Malta in autumn, stay the winter and leave in spring. Teachers read a story on how to attract robins to the garden with a bird table rather than a cage, after which kids make robin pom-poms for a class display.

#### On Reserve!



Teachers take their class to Ghadira or Is-Simar for a guided tour of rare Maltese habitats - lake, reedbed and saltmarsh - and their unique flora and fauna. After the visit, children can win bonus points for creating a display on what they learnt at the reserve.

#### Green Christmas!



In December, children were asked to deck up their classrooms with objects they made from reused materials. This not only fuelled children's creativity, but got them to apply two of the 3 Rs: Reuse and Reduce, as they avoided packaged decorations in favour home-made dangles.

The Action Guide carries appendices that provide background information, as well as handouts, graphics and tips which teachers may require for specific activities.

As the third scholastic term gets into gear, the Dinja Wahda team is preparing for a children's hearing in connection with the activity *Dear Minister*, where children will read out their opinions and queries on environmental issues to the Minister of environment himself. This term will be a final push by BirdLife to bring more schools into Dinja Wahda, in a bid to create as many junior green activists as possible.

For more information on Dinja Wahda and the activities in the Action Guide, please visit [www.birdlifemalta.org/teachers/dinja\\_wahda/](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/teachers/dinja_wahda/)

# analysing the effect of climate change on birds

**Marija Schranz** Communications Coordinator

BirdLife International and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), in conjunction with Durham University, issued a seminal international scientific publication this January entitled *A Climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds*. This *Atlas* marks a major advance in our understanding of the potential future impacts of climate change on wildlife.

The publication illustrates how in the course of the 21st century the changing climatic conditions will force most species to move into new areas, while losing much of their former range. For many species this will prove difficult and, combined with other threats, it will increase their risk of extinction in Europe.

The projections presented in the *Atlas* are based on the effects of a likely 3.3°C increase in average global temperature above pre-industrial levels. Should warming be less or more than 3.3°C, the projected range changes would be respectively less or more extreme. These projections are not predictions of actual future range, but show where suitable climate conditions are likely to be present. The survival of many species will depend on the availability of habitat in these new areas.

The *Atlas* combines field data with climate simulation modelling to map the potential geographical ranges of most European breeding birds at the end of the 21st century. It does this by describing the current breeding range of each species in Europe in terms of three measures of climate: summer warmth, winter cold and water availability. This describes the typical 'climate space' occupied by each species. The *Atlas* then combines this climate space information with models projecting the late-21st-century climate of Europe, under a moderate greenhouse gas emissions scenario.



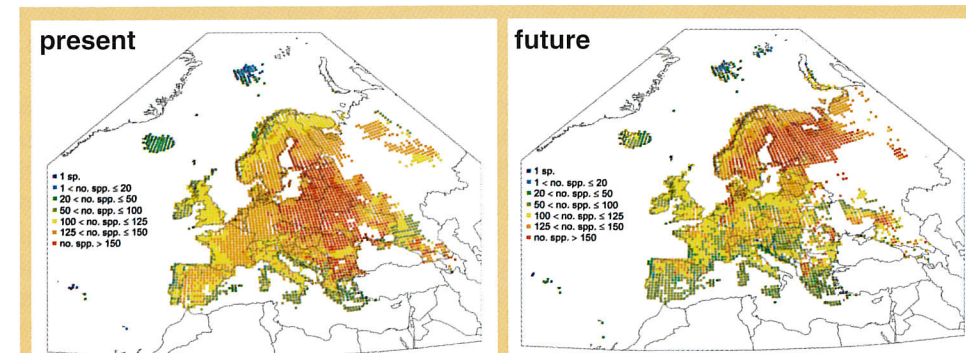
The study predicts that without vigorous and immediate action against climate change, the potential future range of the average European bird species will shift by nearly 550km north-east by the end of this century and will reduce in size by a fifth compared to the current range. For some species, the potential future range does not overlap with the current range at all. Arctic and sub-Arctic birds, and some Iberian species are projected to suffer the greatest potential range loss. Projected changes for some species found only in Europe, or with only small populations elsewhere, suggest that

climate change is likely to significantly increase their risk of extinction. Species that will face particular problems include those specially adapted to cold northern climates, like Snowy Owl, and rare, range-restricted species such as Dupont's Lark, with the latter predicted to become extinct in Europe due to climate change.

On the local scene, *Atlas* predictions point to the loss of Yelkouan Shearwater and European Storm-petrel by the end of this century.

The *Climatic Atlas* not only shows maps of the potential range of each species breeding in Europe at the end of this century, but also provides ways of responding to this challenge. Foremost among them is the strengthening of *Natura 2000*, the European network of protected areas, currently covering almost a fifth of EU territory.

BirdLife International presented the *Atlas* at a high-level event at the European Commission in the presence of the Commissioner for the Environment, Mr Stavros Dimas, who congratulated BirdLife for this major advancement in the understanding of the expected impacts of climate change. He underlined the need for a higher priority for biodiversity conservation, emphasising that healthy and diverse ecosystems are essential for any climate-change strategy.



Present and projected species richness across Europe. Note the north-easterly shift in concentration.  
source: *A Climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds*

To order a copy of this publication please visit BirdLife's dedicated page at [www.birdlifemalta.org/publications/books/ClimaticAtlas/](http://www.birdlifemalta.org/publications/books/ClimaticAtlas/)

# conservation of the manx shearwater in madeira

**SPEA** Madeira

The Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*) is one of the least known seabirds that breed in the Macaronesian archipelago, made up of Madeira, the Azores and the Canaries. This is due to its breeding habits, as its nests are excavated in inaccessible places.

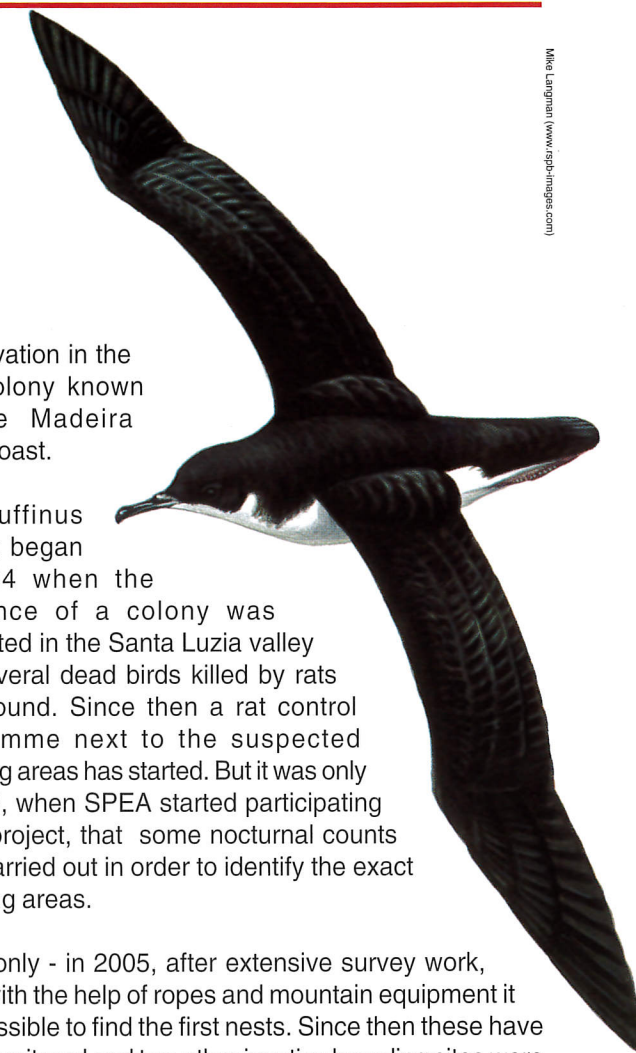
On Madeira Island the nests of the Manx Shearwaters are found in steep cliffs, usually with waterfalls and dense vegetation. Some nests are found at altitudes higher than 1200m. The Puffinus Project has been developed by Funchal Ecological Park in partnership with SPEA (Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds - BirdLife in Portugal) and aims to discover more about the Manx Shearwater's breeding ecology and work for the species's

conservation in the only colony known on the Madeira south coast.

The Puffinus Project began in 1994 when the existence of a colony was suspected in the Santa Luzia valley and several dead birds killed by rats were found. Since then a rat control programme next to the suspected breeding areas has started. But it was only in 2003, when SPEA started participating in the project, that some nocturnal counts were carried out in order to identify the exact breeding areas.

It was only - in 2005, after extensive survey work, when with the help of ropes and mountain equipment it was possible to find the first nests. Since then these have been monitored and two other inactive breeding sites were found. SPEA is sure more nests exist and will continue monitoring the area.

The prefix Manx - meaning from the Isle of Man - originated from the once large colony of this species found on the Calf of Man, a small island just south of the Isle of Man (UK). The species had declined there owing to the accidental introduction of rats from a shipwreck in the late eighteenth century. The rats have, however, recently been removed from the Calf of Man, allowing shearwater numbers to recover.



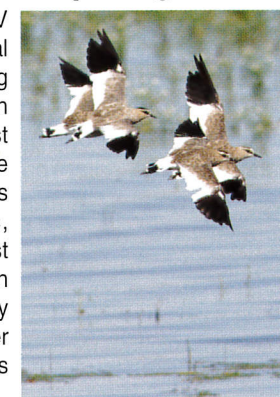
Rat control on Madeira is giving positive results.  
photo PECOF



BirdLife Malta has a project to better protect and enhance the breeding site of a cousin of the Manx Shearwater, namely the Yelkouan Shearwater. This project sees the collaboration of four NGOs and three government entities. One of the project partners is in fact SPEA. For more information on the EU LIFE Yelkouan Shearwater project, please visit the dedicated website [www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt](http://www.lifeshearwaterproject.org.mt)

## update on the sociable lapwing

You may recall that in the last BEV edition we dedicated our international page to the news that a 3000-strong flock of Sociable Lapwing had been discovered in Turkey - the largest seen for more than 100 years. The latest news on this species now tells us that two Sociable Lapwings, satellite tagged in Kazakhstan last summer, have flown more than 8000km to central Sudan, where they have spent the winter. This is another significant rise in fortune for this Critically Endangered bird.





Salina is already a bird sanctuary - with a sound habitat restoration plan its value for birds and other wildlife will multiply.  
photo Victor Falzon

## restoring salina to its former glory

**Charles Coleiro** Managing Warden, Is-Simar nature reserve  
**Dr André Raine** Conservation Manager

Dating back to the early Knights of St John era, the Salina salt pans were created from a larger area of natural saltmarsh and today represent a unique and important saline habitat.



Built in the 16th century, the salt pans at Salina were known as "the new salt pans".  
Detail from a fresco by Matteo Perez D'Aleccio (1547-1616)

Salinas form part of a mosaic with natural wetlands in estuaries and other coastal systems, and provide refuge for a number of flora and fauna species specially adapted to high and variable salinities.

Salina is not just about the salt pans, however. The pans themselves are bordered on the west side

by a small remnant of the original marshland which, although much degraded, includes an important area of reedbed. There is also a stretch of garrigue above the marshes, with its own characteristic flora and fauna. This mix of habitats provides an ideal stop-over site for various bird species to rest and refuel during their annual migrations between Europe and Africa.

Waders are the most common group of birds seen at the Salina salt pans in both spring and autumn and include Common Sandpiper, Little Stint, Dunlin, Little Ringed Plover and Curlew Sandpiper. Herons, cormorants, grebes and ducks also frequent the area and often spend several days feeding in the salt pans and canals. The adjacent small marshland with associated tamarisk and reedbeds also attracts various migrants and wintering passerines. And of course, it is not just birds that makes Salina special - the area is also important for a wide range of biodiversity, and many of the plants and invertebrates found there are rare and of national significance. The flora of Salina includes Slender

Sea Hard Grass and Saltmarsh Alkali Grass, both rare saltmarsh and coastal species. Salina is also one of just four sites in Malta where the Mediterranean Killifish occurs.

Recognising the importance of Salina, BirdLife Malta - together with the government and a private enterprise - has submitted an EU LIFE+ project proposal that seeks to restore the area to its former glory. If accepted, the first phase of the project will start in 2009. It will involve habitat restoration and management, including the extension of the reedbeds and the creation of a series of shallow pools and islands between the garrigue and the salt pans. There will also be a birdwatching hide, a birdwatching tower and a boardwalk, to allow people to fully enjoy the beauty of the site.

A separate project is being developed for the full restoration of the salt pans which will further enhance the cultural and natural importance of this important habitat.



Dunlins occur regularly at Salina.  
photo Juan Ellul Pirota

## rehabilitation of wild birds

**Marija Schranz** Communications Coordinator

The rehabilitation of injured wild birds is a crucial aspect of BirdLife's work here in Malta. Through this commitment the organisation helps return birds to their natural habitats after they have been nursed back to health by one of our volunteers.

Injured birds are regularly brought in to our offices, where they are first documented through photography and live footage, and then taken to the vet by a volunteer. The vet, who also volunteers her time and resources, then determines whether or not the bird has a chance at survival, based on the injuries it has sustained. If the injuries are severe and clearly visible - for example, the bird's bones are sticking out - the vet immediately euthanizes the bird. If the injuries are less obvious, an X-ray is taken so that the vet can determine where the fractures are, the number of fractures, the presence of embedded lead shot and so forth. In the case of protected birds, around 90 percent of the cases are a direct result of illegal hunting, as the X-rays clearly show. The X-ray determines whether rehabilitation of the bird can go ahead or not. If the bird cannot be rehabilitated it is euthanized by the vet and handed over to the National Museum of Natural History. On the other hand, should the vet decide that the bird has a fighting chance, Ian Balzan steps in.

Ian took up birdwatching at the age of 11 and joined BirdLife's young section, never missing out on any of the activities. He is today one of BirdLife's most dedicated volunteers and is personally responsible for the



Ian shortly before releasing a rehabilitated Scops Owl back into the wild.  
photo Matthew Borg Cardona

rehabilitation of the injured wild birds that BirdLife receives, for which he has a special license. Ian explains that the care of injured birds should not be considered a hobby as it requires great responsibility together with a great deal of time and co-ordination.

Once the bird is transported to Ian's rehabilitation centre, the first step here is to provide a suitable box for the bird and to keep it in a warm, dark and quiet room. This will be necessary until the bird's injuries are healed and also as a treatment against shock, which is crucial since shock can be the Number One cause of death. After the fractures have properly healed, the bird is transferred to a large aviary where it will spend time flight training. This normally applies for birds which hunt on the wing, such as raptors. During this stage, birds start regaining their flying abilities which is extremely important before releasing the bird.

Once a bird has completely healed, arrangements are made to allocate a suitable release site to return the bird to the wild. The location chosen depends on the species of the bird. Ian highlights this part of the process as being his most exhilarating experience, as watching the bird go back into the wild is where all the hard work pays off.



X-ray showing multiple fractures in the wing bones of a Lanner Falcon. The embedded lead pellet was the cause of the injury.  
image Ian Balzan

### vol call

BirdLife needs your help. If you're willing to give some of your time towards our conservation efforts, write to Marija Schranz at [marija.schranz@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:marija.schranz@birdlifemalta.org) to see how you can get involved, and at the same time build up an archive of wonderful experiences and memories.

BirdLife Malta  
invites you,  
your family  
and friends  
to an enjoyable  
evening under  
the stars,  
at the unique  
Argotti botanical  
gardens in Floriana.

Join us for this  
fundraising dinner  
in aid of the  
*Connect with Nature*  
campaign, promoting  
the work undertaken  
by BirdLife Malta  
for the designation  
and management  
of more protected  
areas of countryside.

date: **Saturday, May 24, 2008**

time: **8 pm**

price: **€35** Three-course dinner  
and half a bottle of wine

dress: Lounge

The renowned  
**William Mangion**  
will provide the musical  
entertainment.

Principal sponsors include  
**Citadel Insurance plc**  
and the  
**Ministry for Resources and  
Rural Affairs.**

# Connect with Nature

For more information and bookings, please contact  
Theresa Cremona at [theresa.cremona@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:theresa.cremona@birdlifemalta.org)  
or call **21-347644/5** during office hours.