Bird’s Eye View 2001

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Editorial

Every nation should guard the things which make it unique. This is especially important when a nation is precariously small and very restricted in territory, such as is the case with us Maltese. But protecting one’s culture and national identity does not translate into freedom to destroy nature!

Birds have no political frontiers: a kestrel shot down in Malta is a kestrel lost to the world. This is one situation where we can’t wave the national flag and shout sovereignty at any who dare criticise what we do.

So hunters need not protest nor statesmen bristle when foreign flak blows holes in our country’s image. This is no skeleton-in-the-cupboard, no family matter. Birdcrime is an international matter, birds don’t just belong to us.

Yet, incredibly, instead of coming down strongly against the wasters of wildlife, key politicians still choose to wax lyrical and describe the killing of birds as part of our culture and tradition!

Authorities would do well to stop being nice to these environmental vandals, and show some serious alarm at the mounting criticism that is levelled at Malta from all over the world - isn’t it disturbing that so many people nowadays first hear of Malta through our dismal bird protection record! How long will our postcard image of sea, sun and friendly people outshine the reputation we’re getting for what we do to birds?

Surely this isn’t the best strategy for the survival and well-being of any self-respecting nation.

Victor Falzon
Editor
Embracing the Birds’ Directive
Saviour Bazzan

It is not difficult to understand why the Birds’ Directive remains one of the more charged issues in the European Parliament. For over 20 years the Directive has served as the basis for eradicating age-old traditions. Changing is always a tough cookie, as the rookies say.

Singular aim

The Directive was introduced in 1979 with the singular aim of bringing some order to the indiscriminate killing of birds during their migration and breeding season.

It was not to be an easy task - indeed many member States within the European Union still flout the Directive. But the vast majority have fallen in line. Others choose to interpret the Directive in their own bizarre way. Some take ages to present their annual reports, while others are more respectful to the spirit of the Directive.

Demands protection

But what does the Directive really ask for?

First and foremost it affords full protection to some of the more threatened birds, and this also includes their habitat. More importantly, it controls the methods used in hunting birds. And, very significantly, it bans the taking of wildlife in the period which directly precedes the breeding season.

The Directive has the support of the majority of the Members of the European Parliament but a small but significant minority vociferously opposes the Directive, calling it an imposition from Brussels.

This opposition has led to many political shifts in European countries, so one should not be too surprised that the same has happened in Malta.

The annexes

The Birds’ Directive contains four important annexes.

Annex One refers to all those birds that are afforded full protection (including their habitats) in the geographical region of the EU.

Annex Two is subdivided into two sections. The first lists those species that can be hunted in any of the member states of the EU.

The second section includes only those species, which have been requested by the member state and subsequently accepted. For example if Malta wishes to hunt the turtle dove it must specifically request this.

Annex Three relates to the trade of species.

The Birds Directive bans the taking of wildlife in the period which directly precedes the birds' breeding season.
Annex Four lists the methods which may be applied in pursuing hunting activities.

Local context

In many ways Malta does not have major or significant problems with the annexes, though there are one or two points which probably need clarification. But again, one must distinguish the commitment Malta has on paper from what happens in reality, which is often a far cry from the real thing.

The crucial issue which concerns Malta and all interested parties is Article 7, which outlines clearly that hunting in spring goes against the Directive.

On this matter, Article 9 is seen as a probable solution, since it allows for the judicious taking of animal species under supervised conditions. This comes as an exemption, does not need to be requested but has to be notified to the Commission.

This is obviously open to interpretation and monitoring. The process is undoubtedly a transparent one and one cannot simply fool around with figures and facts.

Understandably both the Commission and BirdLife Malta are concerned that the real issue is that many hunters and trappers have no respect for the present laws, and therefore it may be too much to expect "judicious" taking of birds! The hunters' representatives are aware of this, and one must admit that they have been trying hard to change their image.

The truth is, that despite the strong commitment by the EU towards nature conservation and protection, the abolition of hunting practises is not on the cards of the Commission (or the present administration).

Key tool

The Birds' Directive allows for the monitoring of Malta's conservation implementation in an international framework. It provides for checks and balances. This has been the tool that brought to an end so many illegal hunting activities in Spain, Italy and other European nations.

The directive allows for hunting but not in the unrestricted form it is presently practised in Malta.

All naturalists and bird lovers have good reason to embrace the realisation of this Directive in Malta and Gozo. Likewise, hunters who have little respect for the laws have good reason to worry!

Saviour Balzan is technical advisor to the government on the EU Birds & Habitats Directive. He is an environmentalist and a former BirdLife activist.

On the education front...

Roving Exhibition

The year 2001 saw the start of a new project: the School Roving Exhibition. In January, an animator was engaged to tour primary schools. Armed with new exhibition boards and a new set of visuals, Marvic Attard Giallanze met different classes and led discussions about birds and the natural environment. The discussion was illustrated with large laminated pictures, and followed up by a quiz- and jigsaw-puzzle game. The project also partly served to recruit more members in Klabb Huttal. This project was sponsored by Sveriges Ornitoligiska Förening (SOF - BirdLife Partner in Sweden).

Environment Day et al

For World Environment Day, the committee prepared a leaflet about the little ringed plover to distribute to students who visited the BirdLife stand at Valletta. In July, members of the Education group gave talks to summer-school children visiting the Imax theatre. BirdLife also participated in the Science and Technology Fair at Bay Street.

One World Three

During the summer months, the education working group started preparing for another launch of Dinja Wahda (One World), scheduled for October. This was going to be the third generation of this popular environmental action award scheme in schools, and work was under way to make it even more successful and popular than before. Dinja Wahda is a collection of environmental activities that can be done by students and teachers in and around the school. The activities are compiled in the form of a competition whereby schools can win an award depending on their level of participation. Dinja Wahda is being sponsored by BirdLife International, Nos Oiseaux and SOF.

Project co-ordinator Cecily Rizzo began distributing the Action Guide (see page 8) to all primary schools in the country - by the end of October, Dinja Wahda had taken off well.

School response wasn't long in coming, but the real momentum was expected in the second term. That would be in 2002...
A year in the life...
BirdLife's calendar of events for the year 2001

January 2001
09 Start of field teacher at Ghadira
10 Education committee mtg
11 Conservation committee mtg
13 Pied wagtail Valletta roost count
16 Klabb Huttafa committee mtg
18 Council mtg
20 Falko bike hike
22 Start of Roving School Exhibition
23 RaptorCamp mtg
24 Education committee mtg
25 Council mtg

February 2001
02 Wetlands Day - Open day at Ghadira
12 Rarities Committee mtg
12 Wild Birds Conservation group mtg
13 Meeting with ALE
17 Work at Kemmuna ringing station
20 Klabb Huttafa committee mtg
21 Education committee mtg
22 Council mtg
23 BirdTalk 63 out
27 Annual General Mtg - new Council
28 Education committee mtg

March 2001
01 Conservation committee mtg
02 Rarities committee mtg
03 Il-Huttafa 42 out
07 Mtg with architect icw Is-Simar
10 Falko outing to Qammieh
11 Falko outing to Qammieh
14 Foresta 2000 committee mtg
15 Council mtg
18 Klabb Huttafa marathon hike
20 Start of field teacher at Is-Simar
22 Council mtg
25 Falko outing to Ghawdex
27 Klabb Huttafa committee mtg
28 Education committee mtg
30 Research Group mtg

April 2001
06 Talk to BirdLife school delegates
09 Mtg with Environment Minister
10 Council mtg
16 Donation from Environment Ministry
17 Conservation committee mtg
21 Il-Huttafa 43 out
24 Mtg with Min of Interior, Min of Env and Police Commissioner
26 PR icw law enforcement
27 Mtg with EU Env Commissioner
29 Klabb Huttafa outing to Ghadira
29 Falko outing to Kemmuna

May 2001
01 Klabb Huttafa outing to Ghadira
02 Klabb Huttafa committee mtg
03 BirdLife at Greenweek 2001
04 BirdLife at Greenweek 2001
05 BirdLife at Greenweek 2001
06 BirdLife at Greenweek 2001
07 PR icw Ghadira break-in
14 BirdTalk 64 out
14 Research Group mtg
17 Council mtg
18 Research visit to Fliffla
18-21 ALE + BirdLife in Calabria
21 Work starts on Is-Simar workshop bldg
23 Education committee mtg
29 Research Group mtg
31 Research visit to Fliffla

June 2001
05 BirdLife stand at Env Day event
05 Klabb Huttafa committee mtg
08 Adult members outing to Hal Far
10 PR icw police visit to Calabria
14 Council mtg
18 Course for enforcement personnel
19 Course for enforcement personnel
20 Course for enforcement personnel
21 Course for enforcement personnel
21 PR icw enforcement personnel course
22 Il-Huttafa 44 out
25 Talk at MTA ecotourism seminar
25 EMB mtg
28 Research visit to Ġebbia tal-Ġenral
28 RaptorCamp mtg

EMB is short for Environment Monitoring Board
July 2001

02 Dinja Wahda II report out
03 BirdTalk 65 out
04 Conservation committee mtg
05 Adult members info meeting
07 Falko work at Ghadira reserve
09 RaptorCamp mtg
11 Education committee mtg
12 Council mtg
18 Research visit to Filfla
19 Council mtg
21-22 Falko nightout at Ta' Ċenċ
24 Talk at Imax Theatre
25 EMB mtg
27 Work at Ghadira
30 RaptorCamp mtg

August 2001

01 Nine new bird postcards out
01 Meeting with ALE
03 Falko talk at Imax theatre
06 RaptorCamp mtg
08 Conservation committee mtg
11 Talk to Marsa Scouts Camp
17 Il-Huttafa 45 out
21 Meeting with MLP personnel
22 Meeting with MLP personnel
23 Council mtg
27 Conservation mtg

September 2001

01 Bird's Eye View 2000 out
03 Nature reserves wkg group mtg
04 Foresta 2000 Group mtg
05 Conservation committee mtg
06 BirdTalk 66 out
07 Volunteers barbecue
08-25 RaptorCamp 2001
16 Meeting with Euronatur
21-23 Falko camp
24 Meeting with Env Minister
27 Council mtg

October 2001

01 Is-Simar re-opens for school visits
04 Education committee mtg
09 Foresta 2000 Group mtg
11 School delegates newsletter out
17 Mtg with Env Minister + Police Assistant Commissioner
17 Falko talk at Imax Theatre
17 Education committee mtg
19 Il-Huttafa 46 out
21 BirdFest 2001
22 Dinja Wahda III Action Guide out
23 Research Group mtg
23 Dinja Wahda III launched
25 Council mtg
26 Klabb Huttaf slide talk

November 2001

01 Falko social activity
02 BirdLife on TV - Baraxx
06 Klabb Huttaf committee mtg
07 BirdLife on Channel 12 TV
09 Talk to school delegates
10 BirdTalk 67 out
11 Two new bird posters out
13 BirdLife meets President of Malta
14 Education committee mtg
16-21 BirdLife delegation to Brussels
17 PR icw Is-Simar open day
18 Is-Simar open day
25 Youth Leader outing to Mtaħleb
29 Council mtg
30 New set of greeting cards out

December 2001

05 BirdLife at St Theresa Junior Lyceum
06 New President for BirdLife
07 Il-Huttafa 47 out
12 Parents' outing to Is-Simar
12 Education Committee mtg
13 Falko outing to Ghawdex
19 Klabb Huttaf Xmas Party
Sometimes words are just not enough to get the beauty and variety of birds across to an audience, especially a young audience. These are some of the educational/promotional products that BirdLife Malta issued in 2001.

**membership form**
A much-needed membership form for the recruitment of junior members was printed in 2001, thanks to financial assistance from BOV Young Savers Club. The robin in the picture says: “Hey there! Would you like to join Klabb Huttaf?”

**all-occasion cards**
Two great photographs by Michael Sammut grace the front of this set of all-occasion cards. BirdLife hopes to produce more of this series in the future.

**more postcards**
A set of nine new bird postcards were issued to resume the collection started way back in 1984. The new set include some of the more colourful and popular species such as robin, goldfinch and kingfisher. Bird pictures are in great demand especially by children who use them for their school projects. This is why BirdLife decided to retain the original price-tag of 5c!

**Green Guide**
The third edition Action Guide was produced by BirdLife’s Education Unit to be the main teaching aid in the running of Dinja Wahda III. The 32-page guide is packed with ideas, projects, tips and other useful information to render Dinja Wahda a truly environmental education experience. The Action Guide was distributed free to all primary schools in the country.
The fifth and sixth in the *Hieles, haj u sabih!* bird poster series were issued in 2001 with financial assistance of the EPD. The posters featured the chaffinch, a songbird unfortunately very popular with trappers; and the hoopoe, a protected bird much sought-after by hunters. These posters are used mainly as incentive for junior members to renew their subscription in Klubb Huttaf. The other four posters in the series feature kingfisher, blue rock thrush, little ringed plover and robin. *Hieles, haj u sabih!* means: Free, alive and beautiful!
Sustainability has become a household word. It is fashionable nowadays to stick the sustainability label to a variety of human activities, especially the kind that normally have a negative impact on the environment. Development, tourism, agriculture, forestry, land management, fishing etc: they are all potential monsters which can (and too often do) cause unfathomable environmental damage if left unchecked. Sustainability involves rigorous monitoring of an activity to ensure not only the future of the activity, but also the well-being of the natural resource. Too often, however, the sustainability factor is simply pasted on to sweeten a bitter pill. And if you try to apply sustainability to Malta-style hunting, it becomes ridiculous.

**Bad joke**

In a place where uncontrolled camaie of migrant birds takes place every spring and every autumn migration, talk of sustainability makes no sense. For those of us who witness the regular slaughter of raptores, herons, golden orioles, hoopoes, beeeaters and many other non-game species, the very idea of sustainable hunting is a very bad joke.

**A law for one and all**

In a continent where most birds are migratory, and where the resident species have ranges extending into several countries, legislation at national level can never be sufficient for effective bird protection. You need pan-continental legislation.

In Europe there are two main international laws governing the shooting and trapping of birds. One is the Council of Europe’s Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, better known as the Bern Convention; the other is the European Community Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds, better known as the Birds Directive. The overall aim of these two legal instruments is to ensure that all wild birds are afforded some basic protection wherever they occur across the European territory. To achieve this they try to:

- regulate legitimate game shooting
- ensure that key habitats are protected to safeguard the more threatened species
- minimise activity that would impair or degrade important bird areas
- outlaw all methods of large-scale killing of birds
- ban the exploitation and trade of most species

Governments wishing to comply then have an obligation to adapt their own national laws to the above international legislation.

**Ratify... and retreat!**

Malta has ratified the Bern Convention and is in the process of accession negotiations to get in line with the Birds Directive. Following the relatively “good” bird protection laws that came into force in 1993, the EC avis on Malta stated unequivocally that “even though the Maltese authorities have enacted regulations to control bird hunting more strictly, these are not sufficient to comply with Community legislation. Considerable efforts will therefore have to be made by the Maltese authorities to implement Community provisions.”

“We have today more hunters shooting more birds in more places and for longer periods than we had nine years ago.”

But incredibly, the exact opposite happened! Subsequent governments repeatedly gave in to the hunters’ aggressive (and sometimes violent) lobby: the hunting season was lengthened, trapping was reintroduced in spring, the minimum age to acquire a hunting licence was lowered, the list of huntable species was increased, and land formerly off-
limits to hunting was opened up to hunters. In short, we have today more hunters shooting more birds in more places and for longer periods than we had nine years ago! It is a dismal package, but more outrageous and shameful is the fact that not even such hunter-friendly laws are sufficient for most Maltese hunters! Indeed, for many hunters, the law doesn’t even exist.

Add this to the fact that Malta has the highest hunter density in Europe, and it’s no wonder that millions of birds reach a dead end in Malta.

**No residents**

But let’s for the moment forget about the mass slaughter that knows no control nor method.

Even if all else were perfect, sustainable hunting in Malta is just as impossible, for the simple fact that **resident game birds are totally absent**. This is no well-managed deer population on some private moor, where monitoring is almost child’s play and realistic projections easy to make. Nor is it a pheasant-rearing project, where the birds are raised and released on an estate for hunters to shoot down. In such cases, exact numbers of game are known and therefore hunting quotas can be set accordingly. We are here talking migration, a group of birds that appear suddenly on a group of islands, more often than not seeking refuge from adverse weather conditions. Their numbers fluctuate notoriously from year to year. How can you even begin to monitor the exact populations when so many other factors beyond your control or knowledge are in force? How can you set sensible and sustainable quotas when you have no idea what the current populations are?

What we do know for sure is that many birds are seriously on the decline!

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**Game not in progress**

Apart from a few duck species, the main game hunted in Malta are turtle dove and quail. Both species are migratory.

In the last 30 years, and particularly in the last 15, turtle dove has declined throughout most of its European range. Habitat destruction, land mismanagement, changes in its subtropical African wintering grounds and hunting are all to blame for this decline. This is why less and less turtle doves are turning up with every successive migration season.

The quail, Europe’s only migratory galliform, has also declined across its European range. Agricultural intensification in its breeding areas, habitat degradation in its Sahel wintering quarters and excessive hunting and trapping have drastically reduced its population. Hunting in the Mediterranean region has mushroomed over the past 30 years, and surely this has not helped to improve the quail’s situation.

When a species is in decline, you don’t talk sustainable hunting - you talk hunting moratorium! It’s only common sense that when a bird population is dwindling, the only sensible thing to do is to stop killing it, if only for a while, until numbers recover and stabilise. Moreover, you pay particular attention to the protection of that species during its most crucial period - the breeding season. This is of course why BirdLife Malta has always insisted on a total hunting ban in spring.

**No place for Rambo**

Ultimately, true sustainable hunting requires thought, planning, study, monitoring, self-discipline, self-control and a sporting respect towards your quarry. Trigger-happy, mindless, devil-may-care macho behaviour plays no part in it.

Unfortunately this is by far the kind of hunter that still roams the Maltese countryside today.

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Joe Sultana is an ornithologist and author of several bird-related books and papers, coordinator of BirdLife Malta’s Research Group and for many years a member on BirdLife’s Council. He is a past President of the Society.
The adult little ringed plover has a striking head and breast pattern.

The Pied Piper of Ghadira
- The little ringed plover -

The sandbanks and islands at Ghadira, as well as the shelter of the site provided the perfect setting for little ringed plovers.

They sprint eight feet and stop. Like that. They sprint yard (like that) and stop.
They have no acceleration and no brakes.
Top speed's their only one.

They're alive - put life through a burning-glass, they're its focus - but they share the world of delicate clockwork.

In spasmodic
Indian file
they parallel the parallel ripples.

When they stop
they, suddenly, are gravel

Norman MacCaig
Over the years Malta lost several breeding birds, such as jackdaw, peregrine and barn owl - all sad stories. Hunting and trapping and habitat destruction have taken their toll on Malta’s birdlife. So when a new bird begins to breed in these overcrowded islands, it is indeed time to rejoice!

To breed, many birds need special habitats where to find food and shelter. The recreation and revivallisation of the wetland at Ghadira nature reserve provided just these requirements for the little ringed plover. Moreover, BirdLife volunteers and reserve personnel carefully created areas of shingle and gravel on some islands specifically to attract this plover. It was back-breaking work, but the trick worked: what was once just a migrant visitor to Malta is now an established and annual breeding bird at Ghadira. The liquid calls of this cute, petite plover are nowadays a regular feature at Ghadira in spring and summer.

The first pair settled at the reserve in spring 1995. Three eggs were laid, two of which hatched in late June. Since then a pair has bred every year. In 2001 the number increased to two pairs, with a total of 12 young successfully fledged.

The nest is a shallow scrape on bare sand, shingle or gravel, often at lake edges or islands. The bird also breeds in man-made habitats such as saltlans, gravel pits and reservoirs. The male makes a few scrapes during courtship and the female selects one, in which she lays three or four buff-coloured eggs, with dark spots and streaks. The young hatch after about three weeks, and instantly run off to explore! Although protected by the adults for several days, they feed on their own. The female often leaves the rearing of the young to the male so that she can lay a second clutch.

Little ringed plovers belong to the family known as Charadridae, a group of short-billed waders, often with variegated markings. They are quite vocal, particularly in flight and have a characteristic feeding behaviour, running for short stretches rapidly and then standing dead still to peck at the ground, this motion being repeated over and over. The little ringed plover has a striking head and breast pattern of black, white and brown, a yellow eye-ring and a black bill. It has brownish upperparts and wings, shining white underparts and mud-coloured legs.

Little ringed plovers are summer visitors to Europe, returning to Africa to spend the winter. In Malta they are mainly seen from March to May and from late July to early November. They are often seen singly or in small flocks but have been recorded in flocks of up to 50 birds.

Joe Sultana

Three to four eggs are laid in a shallow scrape.

Week-old chick. Chicks abandon the nest on hatching.

At about a month old, the young bird is more or less ready to fly.
Trapping survey

The year kicked off with a survey of trapping sites around the Maltese Islands. The aim was to have an idea of the quantity and distribution of these notorious hotspots of destruction, and start along the way to quantify the damage that is done to our countryside (see box).

The Calabrian way

On the enforcement front, 2001 will be remembered for increased coordination with the police corps, particularly the Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) squad. For the second year running Naturschutzbund Deutschland (BirdLife Partner in Germany) and Fondazione Mediterranea Falchi funded and helped BirdLife organise a four-day seminar for two members of the ALE. The event took place in Calabria, Italy, in May, near the end of the spring migration. ALE Inspector Alex Miruzzi and Sargento Brian Scicluna, accompanied by Justin Vassallo from BirdLife, met the major of the Guardie Forestali in charge of the anti-poaching squad in Reggio Calabria. The 70-strong platoon of police officers is deployed in the area during the migration season specifically to control illegal hunting. The Maltese delegation learned about the history of poaching in the region, which until a few years ago was notorious for the mass slaughter of protected birds, especially raptors. The delegation was taken on patrols of the area both in the Guardie’s land vehicles and helicopters. The patrols helped the Maltese group appreciate the extent of the work involved, and to understand the strategies used by the Guardie in their work. Through the sustained efforts of the Guardie Forestali, illegal hunting in Calabria has been virtually wiped out.

On the last day of the visit a press conference held in the Prefettura of Reggio Calabria was well-covered by the media.

Course for the force

The visit was soon followed up in Malta by two four-day training courses for members of the ALE, the Armed Forces of Malta, Maltese Customs, Environment Protection Department and Malta International Airport security.

BirdLife believes that wildlife law enforcement in Malta cannot be properly managed without a constant flow of information between the various entities involved. One of the aims of the courses was to strengthen relationships for better cooperation and more effective enforcement. With funding and organisational help from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB - BirdLife Partner in the UK), BirdLife made arrangements for Mr. Dave Dick and Mr. Alan Stewart to come over from Scotland to deliver the course. Dave Dick works at the RSPB Investigation Department, while Alan Stewart is a Wildlife Liaison Officer with the UK’s environmental police. Both these officers are

Trapping sights

Trapping sites are well-known for the damage they cause, and not just for the annual harvest of hundreds of thousands of songbirds. Trappers tear out natural vegetation from their rectangle of land and regularly spray herbicide to keep the patch sterile and free of any plant which could entangle their precious nets. Add to this the unsightly huts, poles and pillars, the network of access footpaths, the myriad RTOs splashed on whitened stones everywhere, and the often abusive behaviour of the trap towards any walker in the vicinity.

In January 2001, BirdLife carried out a survey of trapping sites in Malta. The survey was carried out by direct counting of trapping sites from high-definition aerial photographs of the Maltese Islands - trapping sites show up only too well on photographs! A total of 5317 sites were identified, mostly concentrated within 1km of the coast, especially in the west: in some areas they are so densely packed that they form an almost uninterrupted trap for songbirds flying in for food and rest.

This survey was sponsored by BirdLife International.
veterans in the field of birdcrime investigation.

The two courses ran parallel. The morning course had participants from all the entities involved. The themes were surveillance at points of entry (airports, seaports etc), illegal bird trade and CITES issues, with special focus on how co-operation between entities can facilitate monitoring and investigation of related crimes. The aim here was to tackle illegal importation of live song birds and skins of protected species.

The afternoon course was designed for ALE staff and focused on illegal taxidermy, surveillance and prosecution of illegal hunting and trapping. The aim was to facilitate the enforcement of environmental laws and the CITES Convention in Malta.

RaptorCamp 2001

The 2001 International RaptorCamp was held in September at Buskett, with 30 participants from Europe attending the three-week live-in. At Buskett, BirdLife birdwatchers annually record the autumn passage of European honey-buzzards, marsh harriers, common kestrels, lesser kestrels, hobbies, ospreys, black kites and eagles, several of which come down to rest in the trees in the evening. In autumn 2001, a total of 3000 birds of prey were observed from Buskett alone.

A notable improvement was observed at Buskett, but things were far from satisfactory in adjacent valleys such as Girgenti, where illegal hunting was still predominant. Camp participants monitored these sites, much to the irritation of the hunters there. In fact, on two occasions, groups of hunters surrounded our birdwatchers with not the nicest of intentions, but prompt action by the police patrolling the area avoided nasty incidents.

As in previous years, MPs and other VIPs, as well as the press, were invited to visit BirdLife's raptor-monitoring post at Buskett.

Justin Vassallo is a member of the Conservation Committee and sits on the BirdLife Council. He is also a co-ordinator of the International RaptorCamp in Malta.

On course. ALE course participants, with Alan Stewart (1st from left) and Dave Dick (2nd from right).

Site-seeing. EPD and ALE officers inspect a trapping site at Had-Dingli.

Spywatch. RaptorCamp participants monitoring illegal hunting at Wied il-Girgenti.

Another one bites the dust. A hunter caught red-handed at Buskett.
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Coastal dunes
Edwin Lanfranco

A unique type of community which is widespread in the Mediterranean is that of coastal sands, which typically form dunes. In Malta, coastal dunes are rare and highly threatened. The specialised plant communities which thrive in this rare habitat are consequently themselves endangered, and several have already been lost.

To live in sand, plants need particular adaptations. In view of the mobile nature of sand, a well-developed anchoring system with far-ranging roots and often rhizomes are vital. Moreover, since sand does not readily hold water, sand-loving plants (psammophytes) are usually xerophilic: their leaves are small or narrow, often covered in wax or hair, and occasionally succulent - all adaptations to economise on water. Since the water to which they have access is often saline, psammophytes are also halophilic.

Ecologically, the most important plant species are the sand-binding grasses. These are plants with an extensive system of roots and rhizomes forming dense tufts of leaves and culms (stems). These leaves and culms trap shifting sands, thus building a mound. As a result of this, a dune is built and the land behind the dune is stabilized so that other types of plants can grow.

A typical Mediterranean dune consists of the so-called yellow dune (= white dune) which is the highest point of a dune built up by the principal sand-binders of which the most characteristic is marram-grass, which no longer occurs in Malta. In front of the yellow dune is the primary dune, typically dominated by lower sand-binders such as the sand-couch and dropseed grass. In front of the primary dune, closest to the sea is the foreshore community, often characterised by the sea-kale. Yellow dune, primary dune and foreshore community form what are known as the mobile dunes because of the mobility of the sand. Behind the yellow dune lies the grey dune which is dominated by small to medium-sized shrubs such as bushy restharrow, tamarisks and species of juniper (junipers do not occur in Malta). Behind the grey dune is the brown dune which is essentially a Mediterranean evergreen wood with oaks and pines. Grey and brown dunes are fixed dunes.

Because of the nature of the topography, Maltese dunes are very small ("pocket" dunes) and occur in several bays and inlets. No true brown dunes exist any more, though they presumably did in the past. True grey dunes only occur at Ramla in Gozo with some remnant at Santa Marija on Kemmuna. The best Maltese dunes are those of Ramla in Gozo and Ramla tat-Torri, the latter fast declining. Other dunes which still carry some typical psammophyte vegetation are Mellieha Bay, Armier and adjacent inlets, Ramla tal-Mixquqa (Golden Bay), Santa Marija in Kemmuna and Xatt l-Ahmar in Gozo.

Since marram-grass became extinct in the 1970s, the dominant sand binder which forms the yellow dune is the sand-couch, with the dropseed grass being the main binder in the primary dune. The more characteristic species of Maltese dunes, besides those mentioned above, include the sea-kale, the sea daffodil, sea holly, yellow thistle, coast spurge, sand...
storksbill, sand fern-grass, sea knotgrass and sea medick. Although these species may be found in more than one of our remaining dunes, by their very nature they are rare species and most of them are declining. There are also several species which are not exclusive to dunes but may occur also in other, usually saline, habitats. Among the commoner species are coastal medick, red campion, bulbous hawksbeard, saltwort and a sand dwelling variety of the grey birdsfoot trefill.

Coastal dunes are the most seriously threatened of all Maltese natural communities. They all occur in sites of great recreational value, a situation which has put great stress on this habitat. The full development of dune ecology has been destroyed by the construction of roads and paths at the back of the sandy beaches, as well as reclamation for agricultural purposes of the fixed dunes. Most damaging of all are the so-called “boat-houses”, all of them illegal but tacitly sanctioned, which have grown into permanent settlements such as has happened at Armier and Ramla tat-Torri. In summer, cars are driven onto the dune at Ramla tat-Torri, with the result that the dune vegetation in the area fails to develop, or grows stuntedly. The sand dune system at Mellieha bay was once one of the best developed in the country, but has been severely degraded since the present main road bisected the area; subsequently, reeds and planted acacias have overrun what remained of the dune, which is now less than a shadow of what it used to be. Scrambling and camping on the dunes, now illegal, have also caused considerable damage, and beach establishments have encroached on the dunes. Dune vegetation has been bulldozed, as at Ramla tat-Torri, to plant non typical trees, and spiny plants have been deliberately removed from the sand by government employees.

Numerous species have had their populations drastically reduced or have gone extinct in the past 25 years as a result of these interventions. Thus marram grass, the importance of which was stressed above, is now extinct from its previous two remaining haunts: Armier and Ramla tat-Torri. Also extinct is the small-fruited cornsalad. The sand carrot and sand restharrow which used to grow at Ramla in Gozo, have not been seen for the past few years and may be extinct. The purple spurge, sea spurge, spiny echinophora, sand gallinago and cottonweed now occur, as few individuals, in one or two sites.

Most remaining dunes are now legally protected and efforts have been made by the government departments and NGOs to try and reverse the degeneration process.

One hopes that such efforts are not too late to save the last remnants of this special habitat.

Tamarisk is typical of coastal sandy habitat, here pictured at Santa Marija Bay, Kemmuna.

Ground dweller

Since sand dunes are a threatened habitat in Malta, all species restricted to this ecosystem are vulnerable. One such species is the burrowing sand cricket (Brachytrupes megacephalus Grillu tar-ramel), which according to the Red Data Book (1989) is restricted to the Qadidra area, although it has also been recorded from Ramla l-Hamra. The species is frequent at Qadidra nature reserve.

The animal has a characteristic continuous call which it emits at dusk while stationary itself in front of its burrow entrance, possibly for sound amplification purposes.

Scientific and Maltese names of flora mentioned in text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Maltese Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marram grass</td>
<td>Ammophila littoralis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand-couch</td>
<td>Elytrigia juncea, Sikrama tar-ramel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropseed grass</td>
<td>Sporobolus arenarius, Njeg tar-ramel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea-kale</td>
<td>Cakile maritima, Krobo l-bahar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bushy restharrow</td>
<td>Ononis nativa, Brokka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamarisk</td>
<td>Tamarix spp, Bruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniper</td>
<td>Juniperus spp, Gnijru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oaks</td>
<td>Quercus spp, Ballut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pines</td>
<td>Pinus spp, Znuber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea daffodil</td>
<td>Pancratium maritimum, Pankraju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea holly</td>
<td>Eryngium maritimum, Xewk ir-ramel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow thistle</td>
<td>Scutumus hispanicus, Xewk isfar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coast Spurge</td>
<td>Euphorbia tirucalli, Xewk tax-xatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand storksbill</td>
<td>Erodium lacinatum, Most tar-ramel*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand fern-grass</td>
<td>Cutandia maritima, Kutandja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea knotgrass</td>
<td>Polygonum maritimum, Lezza l-bahar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea medick</td>
<td>Medicago marina, Nefel tar-ramel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal medick</td>
<td>Medicago littoralis, Nefel tax-xatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red campion</td>
<td>Silene colorata, Lilen l-gashfur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulbous hawksbeard</td>
<td>Asterhioz bulbos, Zigland l-basla*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saltwort</td>
<td>Salside kal, Haizoa ta l-himed xewwikija</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey birdsfoot</td>
<td>Lotus cypholoides, Ghantu tar-ramel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Maltese name newly coined for this article by the author.

Small-fruited cornsalad - Valerianella microcarpa, Valerianella tar-ramel
Sand carrot - Pseudolaya pumila, Zurmarija tar-ramel
Sand restharrow - Ononis variegata, Brokka tar-ramel*
Purple spurge - Euphorbia peplus, Genmugha tar-ramel
Sea spurge - Euphorbia paralias, Tenghur tar-ramel
Spiny echinophora - Echinophora spinosa, Busbeiz xewwieki tar-ramel
Sand gallinago - Cyperus capitatus, Bordi tar-ramel
Cottonweed - Onarthus maritimus, Santolina tar-ramel*
Curbing the dropout was the challenge taken up by the Klabb Huttaf Committee in 2001. Klabb Huttaf (meaning Swallows Club) is BirdLife’s under-16 membership. The main aim of Klabb Huttaf is to teach as many young people as possible to love and understand nature. Through the club, BirdLife strives to create a generation of adults with a positive mentality towards birds and nature. So naturally, the committee bends over backwards to recruit and retain as many young members as possible.

In 2001 this effort was stepped up.

**Swallow of the Year**

The first job was to improve the Huttafa of the Year Award. Club members have the opportunity to win points for a variety of actions, such as attending club activities, recruiting members, writing in their magazine or doing environmental action in their school. From having just one winner as in previous years, the scheme was broadened to award the top ten members. The idea immediately gained popularity and by the end of the year 180 members had joined the points race!

**Falko revival**

Next on the agenda were the over-13s. For several years, separate activities were being organised for the Klabb Huttaf youths but something more exciting was needed. It was time to give the group an identity. The name Falko was revived from the past when BirdLife had an active teenage group. The idea was to re-awaken Falko with a new team. A core of active teenagers was picked for the job of forming a new youths’ committee to look after their own activities. The effort paid off, and by the end of the year, a group of youths was meeting regularly and helping out with a programme of birdwatching, conservation and social activities which bonded the group with new strength. Falko was once again up and running!

**Mags and more**

Back at the main committee, more ideas were thought up for keeping non-active members interested in Klabb Huttaf. The magazine, Il-Huttafa, now with colour cover, was in its eighth year of arriving bi-monthly on the doorstep with unfailing regularity. Members’ letters, emails and parents’ comments confirmed that the children really looked forward to their mag.

A new poster in the Hieles, Haj u Sabih series had also to be produced - a different poster is sent out every year to Huttaf who renew their membership. The chaffinch was chosen as the bird of the year and the poster was printed (see page 7) with sponsorship from the Environment Protection Department.

**Scope for a walk**

Halfway through the year a club activity boosted morale, as well as funds! It was an 11km marathon walk, and the very good turnout had collected Lm314! Klabb Huttaf could now buy a spotting scope and donate it to the Ghadira Visitors’ Centre.

It is very encouraging to see one’s efforts paying off. A bigger, stronger Klabb Huttaf can mean only one thing - a brighter future for nature.

Desirée Falzon is Chairperson of BirdLife Malta’s Council, and a member on the Klabb Huttaf Committee.
It is late on a Sunday afternoon. After accompanying the last group of people out of Ghadira nature reserve, I return to the hide to enjoy the last rays of sunlight on the pool. My eyes rest on a male little ringed plover, busily defending his territory on a new patch of shingle. I recall that day in summer 2001, when a group of volunteers spent an evening carrying shingle to one of the islands in the main pool. Yet, such a job is only a small fraction of the work which running the reserves involves in order to create the habitat we are so proud of today.

**field teachers**

Education-wise, the year 2001 at the reserves was a milestone: full-time teachers Victor Falzon and Jason Aloisio were posted at Ghadira and Is-Simar respectively with the aim of educating school children visiting the reserves. Teaching children to care about our fragile environment is of primary importance to BirdLife Malta. For this purpose, the educational potential of the reserves has now been increased, with Ghadira taking primary school visits and Is-Simar catering for secondary schools. Students are briefed about the reserves with special reference to their importance as unique habitats for birds during migration and breeding. They are then guided along a nature trail along which they have the opportunity to see various species of flora and fauna. Finally the most awaited moment of the tour arrives and the children enter the birdwatching hides. The reaction is always the same: a sense of wonder at the variety of birds.

**site managers**

The presence of the teachers has also meant that the managing wardens have more time on their hands for manual work, which is all summarized in a five-year management plan of the reserves drawn up in 2001 by BirdLife. Down at Ghadira, Charles Gauci has now turned his attention to controlling the spread of the highly invasive shrubby orache.

Way back in the early 1980s the northwestern perimeter embankment of the reserve was planted with this bush, which was the only species that could thrive on the then hypersaline soil. The bush grew thick and created a semi-natural barrier to help deter intrusions from hunters, which back then were quite frequent. Now, however, the shrub is spreading everywhere and threatening other, less hardy flora. So stretches of orache are being removed manually, a pretty arduous task despite the use of a hedge-cutter - some of the roots are so thick that nothing short of a pick will budge them. The newly-cleared areas are being replanted with other native shrubs, which can now grow on the much less hostile soil.

Other jobs included the laying of a new patch of shingle on an island, in a bid to augment the number of breeding pairs of little ringed plover. For the first time since the species started breeding, two pairs of little ringed plover nested at the reserve and successfully fledged twelve out of the twenty chicks which hatched. Encouraged by this success, a group of twenty volunteers met at the reserve to help the warden in this task. A human chain was formed in the muddy water (picture at top) and in a matter of hours the job was well and truly completed. The rest is now up to the little ringed plover...

Over at Is-Simar, the organized cropping of the reedbed, being undertaken by warden Charles Coleiro, is fast having the desired effect. Many more bird species, such as grey heron and little egret, which were finding the pool too densely overgrown with reeds, are now spending more time fishing and resting in the newly-cleared areas. This task

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Field teacher Jason Aloisio with biology students from St Theresa Junior Lyceum at Is-Simar

Field teacher Victor Falzon with a class from St Edwards Junior School at Ghadira.
required intensive activity and hours of sweat since the warden was armed only with pruning scissors and thigh boots.

Also in summer, with all the necessary permits in order, heavy machinery was brought in to build a much-needed office and store. So far, one of the three birdwatching hides has been doubling as office, workshop and store, but it was now overflowing with all kinds of tools. This is now being seen to, and 2002 should hopefully see this problem solved and the hide returned to its original purpose - birdwatching!

weekend guides

One cannot fail to commend the great effort made by the group of weekend guides who, week in week out, are making sure that Ghadira opens for the public to enjoy the place. In summer the visitors’ centre at Ghadira was given a long-overdue re-wiring, re-plastering and re-painting as part of an effort to make the place as visitor-friendly as possible.

The nature reserves hit the television screens on various occasions during 2001. An episode of the popular programme Naturambient was filmed entirely at Il-Simmar while another programme Ahna Nghinu, featuring BirdLife Malta’s role as a voluntary organization, was shot at Ghadira. Several press releases were issued during the year, mainly to announce closing and opening times, but also to highlight special events such as Wetlands Day.

Mark Gauci is BirdLife’s nature reserves supervisor, a qualified ringer and assistant ringing secretary of the Research Group.

People who count!

BirdLife Malta Research Group

BirdLife’s Research Group is a nucleus of birdwatchers and ornithologists who carry out bird-related studies including ringing, seawatching, raptor migration counts and nest recording.

Ringing

During 2001 the Ringing Scheme had twelve licenced ringers, although some were active only sporadically. On average eight ringers were out in the field at least once in each month. Ghadira and Is-Simar were manned as constant effort sites and, together with Lunzjata Valley (Gozo) and Buskett, were the main ringing sites. Kemmuna was again used for the Small Islands Project, with ringing taking place daily from 1 April to 13 May 2001.

Daily Logging

As in past years daily sightings were collected and computerised. Qammieh Point and Qawra were again well covered during the duck and seabird migration periods, as was the raptor migration, monitored mainly from Buskett and Dwejra. There was daily coverage of Ghadira and Is-Simar.

Nest Recording

This activity is a specialised study undertaken by only a few individuals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>species</th>
<th>year ringed and country</th>
<th>year recovered and country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yellow-legged gull</td>
<td>2000 in Malta (Filfla)</td>
<td>2001 in Sicily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesser black-backed gull</td>
<td>1996 in Norway</td>
<td>2000 in Malta (Zejtun)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sedge warbler</td>
<td>1999 in Croatia</td>
<td>2000 in Malta (Kemmuna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barn swallow</td>
<td>1999 Germany</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Lunzjata)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common chiffchaff</td>
<td>2000 in Malta (Ghadira)</td>
<td>2001 in Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sedge warbler</td>
<td>2000 in Hungary</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Is-Simar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>garden warbler</td>
<td>1997 in Hungary</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Kemmuna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sedge warbler</td>
<td>1999 in Sweden</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Is-Simar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pied flycatcher</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Kemmuna)</td>
<td>2001 in Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackcap</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Kemmuna)</td>
<td>2001 in Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common whitethroat</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Kemmuna)</td>
<td>2001 in Slovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sedge warbler</td>
<td>2001 in Malta (Rabat)</td>
<td>2001 in Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dunlin</td>
<td>1999 in Malta (Ghadira)</td>
<td>2000 in Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common chiffchaff</td>
<td>1999 in Malta (Rabat)</td>
<td>1999 in Czech Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>greenfinch</td>
<td>2000 in Slovenia</td>
<td>2000 in Malta (Ta’ Cenc)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Charles Gauci is managing warden of Ghadira nature reserve, a qualified ringer and Ringing Secretary of the Research Group.

Recent recoveries of ringed birds

Workshop, store and office compound taking shape at Is-Simar.
It was their doing...

The people who made BirdLife tick in 2001

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**President**
Antoine Vella (till Nov)
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Charles Coleiro
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Charles Gauci

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**Staff**
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**The financial picture**

The piechart gives a simplified account of how BirdLife allocated its funds in the period January-December 2001. A detailed financial account is available on request.

- Membership: 16%
- Administration: 26%
- Research: 6%
- Conservation: 16%
- Education: 36%
Buskett? No, it’s...

a Forest for the Future

It is believed that by the time the Phoenicians reached Malta in the 8th century BC, the islands had already lost all their original forest cover, except perhaps for a few scattered groves. Since then, the land surface has suffered the onslaught of sun, wind and rain without a shred of protection, eroded and bleached to the bone in several areas. It’s time we tried to reverse the process.

In May 1996 some BirdLife people came up with a dream: what if we take a stretch of barren land and turn it back into forest? Not a dull, regimented plantation of monospecific trees, but vibrant evergreen oak woodland, which is the climax ecosystem of the Mediterranean region.

In 1997 a steering committee was set up and a site selected: Il-Talija (the hill slope just north of Ghadira). An MSc dissertation conducted a case study of the area, which included a detailed vegetation map. Ideas were discussed and refined, and plans drawn up. Approval and support were sought while meetings were held with key people, departments and groups.

Meanwhile, another kind of preparation began in earnest. Through collection and resale of used stamps, Klabb Huttat raised funds to buy plant pots and to establish a tree nursery at Is-Simar. Through club activities and especially through Dinja Wahda in schools, hundreds of oak seedlings were grown, transferred to the nurseries and now await replanting on site as soon as the project is given the green light.

However, oak is not the only tree to be planted in the area - far from it! A range of habitats is envisioned, one merging into the other to form a patchwork of ecosystems to encourage maximum biodiversity. Clay steppe, garrigue, maquis and oak/lentisk woodland will be the main habitats, the rest will be allowed to intersperse and nature ultimately given a free hand.

The whole idea is not to have a place shut off to humanity. On the contrary, several footpaths will wind through the different habitats for walkers to enjoy.

The project is still years from completion - when nature is one of the main contributors, you can never really rush! But if the idea succeeds, it will be BirdLife’s living gift to the millennium.

Which, incidentally, is why we named the project Foresta 2000!

Top: Artist’s impression of what the forest could eventually look like.
Right (top): aerial view – dotted line shows general area of the project site.
(middle) oak saplings, fresh from schools, arrive at Is-Simar.
(bottom) Klabb Huttat members repotting saplings at Is-Simar nursery.
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